Overcoming ruptures: Zande identity, governance, and tradition during cycles of war and displacement in South Sudan and Uganda (2014-2019)

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1 Introduction

1.1 ANOTHER BEGINNING

> I have to be honest with you. We are not fine. Since dawn there have been heavy gunshots in Yambio ... People have fled town. There is total confusion ... People are just carrying their belongings to areas they presume to be safer ... I am really compelled to at least take madam and the kids to Uganda.[1]

Peter, a development worker, called me in distress from Yambio, South Sudan. He told me about his decision to bring his wife and children to Uganda, and requested my support. It was November 2016 and it had been over a year since the first violent skirmishes had taken place. At first it had been unclear if these were 'just' violent incidents, or the beginning of something bigger, a war. Yambio had weeks of relative calm when town was 'cool' and people went about their business, and then there had been spells of violence. Usually, the reasons for the fighting were unclear to my contacts and to myself. In first instance it would be perceived and recounted factually as 'the sound of gunshots'. Later, rumours and tentative analyses would start circulating. It was the same on that Thursday morning in November when I called with Peter. People in Yambio had awoken to the sound of gunshots, some were killed, and many more panicked in response. Later, Western Equatorian State's Information Minister and the opposition forces' spokesperson traded accusations over who started (Atit 2016). The general state of affairs became one of uncertainty, leaving many people confused and fearful about the future. Again. Because most South Sudanese had lived with war and displacement, with confusion and uncertainty, before. For some, flight to refugee camps abroad was also a 'return' to the place they were born or had spent formative years.

At least a third of South Sudan's estimated 12 million pre-war population were 'displaced' during this civil war (2013-2020). Some 2,2-2,5 million sought refuge abroad, while an estimated 1,6 were categorised as 'internally displaced people' (IDPs) (UNHCR 2021). The biggest refugee group – some 867.000 South Sudanese people – went to neighbouring Uganda, the largest refugee-hosting

1 Phone call with South Sudanese development worker in Yambio, South Sudan, 10 November 2016.

country in Africa. Among this group were Peter and his family. We met there again in February 2017 when he had found a plot of land in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. The mood was surprisingly upbeat: The family was relieved to be safe and happy to be in Uganda. They hoped that the children would enjoy the good quality education of Uganda, leaving them better equipped for life when South Sudan would return to peace and they could go home. While Peter's wife and children stayed in Uganda, he returned to Yambio for his work. He would travel back and forth, and also set up a branch of his NGO in Uganda. Like so many South Sudanese people, he sought to navigate the realities of war and displacement so that it would not just mean deterioration. This book is about people like Peter.

1.2 A MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY: FOCI, SITES, AND METHODS

This multi-sited ethnographic study analyses how South Sudanese Zande,[2] as individuals and as a group, have navigated the turbulent recent history of conflict and displacement. The main question that guides this study is: 'What were the consequences of the long histories of violent conflict and displacement (1500-2014) on the South Sudanese Zande, in particular on governance and identity in Western Equatoria State (2014-8) and in refuge in Uganda (2016-2019)?' At the root, this study is about people's sense of belonging, their changing ties with others and with land, and on competing efforts to 'govern' or control those relations (Shipton 2009; Lund 2011). These three foci relate to proto-legal questions that underpin human society: Who are we? To whom and where do we belong? And who has authority over us? Each of these questions is subject to change and contestation, and interfaces with war and displacement.

This book results from displaced research. After earlier stays and visits to Khartoum and Juba, I had been hired by Leiden University's Van Vollenhoven Institute to lead a socio-legal study on 'primary justice systems' and family and land disputes in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan.[3] It was a joint study with aid organization Cordaid, and the Justice and Peace Commis-

2 Anthropologist Evans-Pritchard followed the Zande logic of writing 'Zande' (singular person, adjective), 'Azande' (plural people) and 'Pazande' (the language). I write 'Zande' for all three, unless in citations.

3 Western Equatoria State was one of South Sudan's ten states when I started my research in 2014. From 2 October 2015 those ten states were subdivided repeatedly. Western Equatoria State was divided into Gbudwe, Amadi, Maridi and Tambura States. But on 15 February 2020 the constitutional 10 states (plus 3 administrative areas) were reinstated. This was a major step in the peace talks between President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Riek Machar (Machol 2020). These decisions were controversial. The decentralisation was only ever partially implemented, and throughout many people from the area continued to speak of 'Western Equatoria', so that is the name that I use in this thesis.

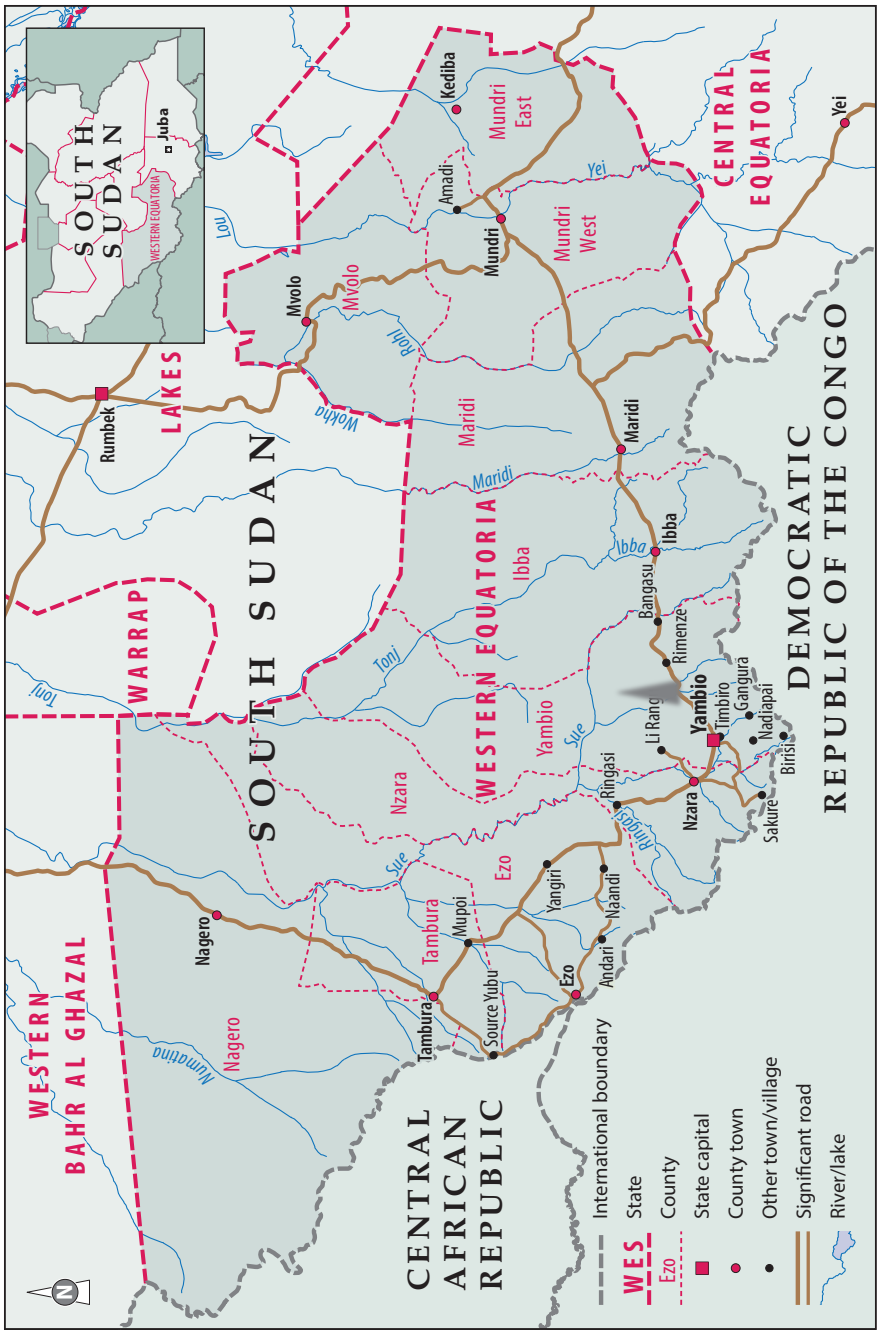
sion (JPC) of the Catholic Diocese Tombura-Yambio. Their long-standing and fruitful cooperation, and Western Equatoria's relative safety motivated our choice to conduct the study here. The area experienced a hopeful period of peace – both 'post-' and 'pre-conflict' – characterized by return migration and reconstruction.

When I first arrived in Yambio in September 2014, I felt immediately attracted to it. It was a green and sprawling state capital, poor but brimming with hope for positive change. The city centre boasted markets, government offices, churches, banks and NGO and UN compounds. Most people lived on relatively large plots, with mostly unfenced homesteads typically including a number of grass-thatched clay huts (*Zande: bambu, Juba-Arabic: tukul*) around a courtyard.[4] Some people upgraded their houses with brick walls, corrugated roofs and small solar panels. Often, people had planted some vegetables around the courtyard and maintained bigger gardens outside of town. The many rivers, high annual precipitation, moderate temperature, and good soils rendered Western Equatoria State suitable for farming.[5]

4 In 2009, a survey found that some 85 percent of the population of Western Equatoria lived in tukuls (clay huts, often with grass thatched roofs) (National Bureau of Statistics 2012). Many homesteads would have a separate kitchen hut and a granary.

5 Yambio was estimated to receive an average 1,142 millimetres of rain each year, with most falling in the rainy season from April to December (RoSS Ministry of Agriculture & Forestry 2013).

Map 1: Western Equatoria State. Cartography by Jillian Luff, MAPgrafix.



I trained and led a research team with eight local researchers from Yambio's Justice and Peace Commission. Between January and April 2015, we carried out 338 semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and discussed our findings daily.[6] We started to understand what caused land and family disputes, and how various attempts at resolution worked. Many institutions that existed on paper were absent or weak in practice. While institutions were weak, personal networks were strong. We found that local 'justice providers' were working and cooperating, so that many disputes *were* being resolved peacefully (Braak 2016). In the temporal and geographical proximity of war, people here went about their daily lives, and were mostly preoccupied with family affairs and work. Even though there were some worrying rumours about trouble further east, it was hard for me then to imagine Western Equatoria at war.

Yet later in 2015 the nightmare begun, and war 'started again' in Western Equatoria (see Chapter 6). Some of our team members were still able to do 37 interviews with increased caution (see Annex 3: Methods). However, things went from bad to worse in 2016, especially after violence escalated in Juba in July (see Section 6.2.1). Faced with the impossibility of returning to Western Equatoria and the renewed displacement of many of my respondents, I designed a 'plan B': To study how people were reconstructing social life in Uganda. This was a completely new topic, that required a new approach. Instead of the socio-legal emphasis on family and land disputes and their resolution (with various courts and offices being obvious geographical foci), I now had to find Western Equatorians across the scattered and sprawling refugee settlements of Uganda (see Chapter 7). The vast majority of my respondents in Western Equatoria had been ethnic Zande, and so were most of my contacts in Uganda. I was interested in community reconstruction and social life, and so I shifted my focus to Zande respondents (see Annex 3: Methods). When, where, why and how this facet of people's identity mattered, became one of my key foci. I acquainted myself with new libraries, too: specifically, those on Uganda and its history of hosting refugees, refugee studies and (forced) migration.

6 Western Equatoria State had 10 counties. We did the lion's share of the research in Yambio and Nzara counties, and made several day-visits to Ezo, Tambura, Ibba, Maridi and Mundri-West counties. Due to distance and insecurity, we did not reach Mundri-East, Mvolo and Nagero counties. Within our selected counties, we mostly focused on towns, not villages or countryside.

Map 2: Relevant areas of South Sudan, DR Congo, and Uganda. Cartography by Jillian Luff, MAPgrafix. Source: Braak and Kenyi, 2018.

Between November 2015 and July 2019, I spent 15 months in Uganda (see Annex 3: Methods). I divided my time between Entebbe, Kampala, Arua and Bweyale, with regular visits to the refugee settlements (see Map 2). Many Zande refugees lived in Kiryandongo RS and nearby Bweyale town, so those areas became a focus (see Chapter 7). I conducted my own research, and worked on two sub-projects (on 'customary authority' and 'resilience' among the refugees) with South Sudanese colleagues.[7] Together we organized some 138 semi-structured interviews, oral histories and focus group discussions. Meanwhile, two research assistants were able to conduct 81 semi-structured interviews with 'stayees' and IDP's in Western Equatoria (Yambio and Nzara) from 2016 to 2018. Yet as often with anthropology, the line between research and life itself was blurry. I learned a lot from informal encounters: roadside small-talk, church services, shared teas or dinners, Whatsapp or Facebook-chats, football matches (watched and played) and through the poetry and paintings of some of my interlocutors. All these different experiences and impressions inform the present book.

By adapting my research to a multi-sited ethnography, I sought to rework the weakness of my research – not being able to reach 'ethnographic depth' in a single place – into an advantage: Having a longitudinal and multi-sited perspective on the social lives of my interlocutors, and how they navigated this tragically familiar episode of war and displacement. This 'plan B' enabled me to see social life among Zande in various phases and places, and the connections between them. I know see it as an indispensable way to understand contemporary Zande society.

1.2.1 'The Zande', reading Evans-Pritchard, and change overlooked

The Zande were divided by colonial boundaries across present-day South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic (see Section 2.4). Like many anthropology students worldwide, I had read about 'the Zande' in British anthropologist Evans-Pritchard's 'Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande.' Published in 1937 (and researched in 1926-30), this landmark in classical anthropology demonstrated how Zande beliefs in the occult were logical from a Zande perspective. Anthropology students are required to read his book to this day.[8] When I arrived in Yambio, I learned that many Western Equatorians, too, had heard of 'Evans' but that his books

7 These sub-projects were respectively: 1) For the 'South Sudan Customary Authorities'-project of the Rift Valley Institute, funded by the Swiss Government; and 2) For the 'Deconstructing Notions of Resilience: Diverse Post-Conflict Settings in Uganda'-project of the London School of Economics' Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

8 I read it at Leiden University when I studied cultural anthropology (graduated in 2010), and BA-students still read it in 2019-2020 for the module 'Culture and Comparison'.

were rare here. I carried various Evans-Pritchard books with me, and would read and discuss them with my research team there.

It was odd to read Evans-Pritchard's work in Yambio in 2015. His use of the present tense suggests that Zande lived and continue to live beyond time and change. And yet clearly things had changed. Zande people had travelled across the world for refuge and religion, education and employment. Some had settled 'outside', many returned 'home' with new ideas. Western Equatoria State by 2014 also hosted global churches, international aid organizations, transnational teak companies, US forces, East African migrant laborers, Congolese and Central African refugees, and of course thousands of people from elsewhere in South Sudan. People had mobile phones, satellite TV, and Facebook accounts.[9] We would watch Premier League-football on the weekends, enjoy Ethiopian coffee in the market, and listen to Ugandan pop music. Yambio was, in other words, connected increasingly and intrinsically to the wider world.

Such change and global connections were not new. In prefaces and footnotes Evans-Pritchard, whose research took place in the late 1920s, had acknowledged the changes that followed colonialization (from 1905), and that his picture was more coherent than (contemporary) reality (Evans-Pritchard 1971, 69). Conrad Reining, a student of Evans-Pritchard, conducted research in 1952-55 in the aftermath of the Zande Scheme, one of the most ambitious development schemes in colonial history which had involved the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Zande (see Section 3.2). He described how:

> Confusion, irregularity of day-to-day behavior, and lack of organization characterized the modern Zande scene at the time of my study. Because of the transitory nature of the Zande way of life, no one was sure about his social role. No Zande, whether chief or commoner, felt that he had control over the behavior of those who influenced him politically, and no one could predict what would happen next. (Reining 1966, 12)

If change had caused 'confusion' and 'irregularity' in the first half of the twentieth century, the second half would prove at least as turbulent. A person born in 1955 would have experienced two independences (Sudanese in 1956, South Sudanese in 2011), three prolonged civil wars, and associated displacements and return (see Chapters 2 and 3). Reading Evans-Pritchard in Yambio in 2015, led my Western Equatorian colleagues and myself to discuss how things had changed.

9 A 2013 survey in the Western Equatorian counties of Ezo and Tambura found that on average 32 percent of the households had a mobile phone (Rigterink, Kenyi, and Schomerus 2014). I would estimate that this number would be higher in state capital Yambio and may have increased in recent years.

1.2.2 Conflict, salvage anthropology, and constructivist/essentialist quagmires

Debates about change and continuity would gain new urgency after civil war started again in 2015 in Western Equatoria, and thousands of people fled to Uganda (see Chapter 6). Many people worried about their families' and communities' 'confusion' and 'scattering'. They feared their children would 'get lost' as they learned foreign languages and ways (see Chapter 7). Would they still want to go back 'home' after peace? Would they still know how to speak, think and behave? Would they still be 'Zande'? My research in Uganda took place in this context. Some Zande there saw in my presence (as in Evans-Pritchard's a century before) an opportunity to preserve what they feared was rapidly being lost. A former Western Equatoria State minister with whom I met frequently in Kampala put it this way:

> You know the Zande were the first to know that one day our culture will be eroded. So, they cooperated with Evans-Pritchard to document the culture for our children. That was the agreement: they allowed him access in return for his documentation of the culture ... We allow access on the condition that it will help our children.[10]

Researchers have their interests, but interlocutors do too (see Annex 3: Methods). This man's explanation about access and reciprocity and his fears about cultural erosion, relate to the confusing context of conflict and displacement which this book explores throughout. Yet his view of anthropology echoes the 'salvage anthropology' of before (Berliner 2014), when the discipline produced the notion that people 'essentially' belong to fixed and clearly-delineated groups (e.g. tribes, ethnic groups or races), 'native' (or incarcerated) to set places (L. Malkki 1992, 29; S. Hall 1994; Murray Li 2007; Appadurai 1991). Some ethnographers were more attentive to change and contestation than others, and Evans-Pritchard was interested in the historical formation of the 'ethnic, cultural, and social conglomeration we speak of today as 'Zande'' (Evans-Pritchard 1963a).

Yet like so many other anthropologists at the time, Evans-Pritchard's work was often paid for by the colonial government which sought to control colonized people 'on a shoestring' – often opting for indirect rule through 'traditional authorities' (Berry 1992; Mamdani 2004; Ntsebeza 2005). Where anthropologists and administrators did not find suitable 'traditional' authorities and identities to work with, they would strengthen existing ones or even 'invent' new ones (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1982; Leonardi 2013; Oomen 2005). Colonial, ethnographic and 'local' knowledge production around tradition and history would interact in complex ways (Spear 2003), and it has now become impossible to separate 'insider' and 'outsider' versions (Hamilton 1998). In

10 Interview with former state minister, Kampala, 1 August 2017.

various places and cases, this process has had disastrous consequences. For example in Rwanda and Burundi, with Malkki writing: 'there is a chilling traffic back and forth between the essentialist constructions of historians, anthropologists, and colonial administrators, and those of Hutu and Tutsi ethnic nationalists' (Liisa H. Malkki 1995, 14). Put mildly, ethnographers, even when they aspire merely to 'document', are likely to affect their subject (see Annex 3: Methods). I will further analyse some of the quagmires around history, historiography and 'invention' in relation to 'the Zande' in Chapter 2.

Postcolonial anthropologists have tried to emancipate themselves from this troubled inheritance. The old anthropologists' bread and butter – the ethnographies of whole 'peoples', 'cultures' or 'nations' – were regarded by their disciplinary offspring at best as 'exonostalgia' (Berliner 2014), or worse as (colonial) constructs or tools (Mamdani 2004; Ntsebeza 2005; Hoffman 2021). Constructivist anthropologists in the age of globalisation observed how 'groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unself-conscious, or culturally homogenous' (Appadurai 1991, 191). They argued instead how, 'Identities are not an essence but a *positioning* ... Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power'' (S. Hall 1994, 226). Identity, in the eyes of anthropologists, became many things but not fixed: 'Identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, etc' (L. Malkki 1992, 37). Whereas classical anthropologists had stressed the 'idem' of individual people's identities (their likeness to others in a group), the constructivists shifted attention for their 'ipse' (what set them apart) (Heinich 2019) or the multitudes everyone contains (Berliner 2014). The constructivist critique made an imperative correction to the essentialist views on cultures and peoples of before.

And yet the constructivists struggled with two paradoxes around identity. First, already in the aftermath of the Cold War, Gupta and Ferguson alerted us to: 'The irony of these times, however, is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 10). People's unprecedented movements across our planet seem to sometimes have invigorated notions of essential ties between people and places, and the appeal of identities 'rooted' in the past. Indeed it may be precisely in times of lost control that processes of (re)construction – of identities, histories, traditions – may themselves present ways 'to redress marginalization and to continually rebuild society and regain agency' (Cormack 2014, 17). The second paradox concerns how identities may be constructed and simultaneously be experienced as powerful and, sometimes, 'essential'. As Ake put it:

> Ethnic groups are, to be sure, inventions and constructions in some measure ... [but they are] no less real for existing intermittently, for having fluid boundaries,

> for having subjective or even arbitrary standards of membership, for opportunistic use of tradition or even for lacking a proprietary claim over a local space. They are real if they are actual people who are united in consciousness of their common ethnic identity however spurious or misguided that consciousness may be ... Nonetheless, ethnicity is not a fossilized determination but a living presence produced and driven by material and historical forces. (Ake 1993, 1)

In Africa and beyond, the constructivist insight that social identities are multi-faceted, multi-interpretable and changeable constructs, should not be taken to mean that they cannot take on more essentialist form, and be experienced as real and consequential (Heinich 2019). This ostensible tension – between identities' constructed nature, and their essentialized experience – is a paradox in theory, but an often-lived reality. The challenge in writing about 'identity', then, is to devise 'a concept 'soft' and flexible enough to satisfy the requirements of relational, constructivist social theory, yet robust enough to have purchase on the phenomena that cry out for explanation, some of which are quite 'hard' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 12). This book will try to analyse both how particular identities are constructed, and when, why and how they mattered to the people concerned.

1.2.3 Constructed essences: Reaching across time

This book builds on a rich and growing scholarship on people's subjective experiences and perceptions of war and displacement, and their renegotiations of facets of cultural and social life (Leonardi 2013; Finnstrom 2008; Lubkemann 2008; James 1979), and the role of 'history' therein (Liisa H. Malkki 1995). I was inspired in particular by Lisa Malkki's work on Burundian refugees in Tanzania:

> [This is] not an ethnography of any eternal place or 'its people,' nor is its aim to give a comprehensive account of the social life of a 'community.' [Instead] it is concerned to explore how displacement and deterritorialization – condition which are 'normal' for increasingly large numbers of people today – may shape the social construction of 'nationness' and history, identity and enmity (Liisa H. Malkki 1995, 1).

Similar ethnographies of displacement and social (re)construction have been conducted in South Sudan. Most have focused on particular groups: Dinka (Cormack 2014), Nuer (Hutchinson 1996; Grabska 2014) and Murle (Felix da Costa 2018). Zande history, politics and economics has been somewhat distinct from these groups: Zande had pre-colonial kingdoms (not 'acephalous societies'), lived mostly from agriculture (not cattle keeping), and have played different – less prominent – roles in the last two wars and the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (see Section 2.5). On one level, these differences

and their consequences have caused friction between South Sudanese people and groups. On another, they have meant that general statements made about South Sudan often apply better to Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities than to Zande and other 'Equatorians'.

It is against this history – of Western Equatoria and 'the Zande' on the one hand, and the anthropological discipline on the other – that this book aims not to write a 'salvage ethnography' like Evans-Pritchard, but consider how things have changed. Additionally, I want to account for people's pursuit of continuity or order, including through rather essentialist conceptualizations and practices around identity, tradition and governance. This book finds that in times of violent conflict and displacement, people's conceptualizations of 'identity' and 'tradition' may become more *essentialized.*

1.3 Conceptual keys and contributions

The insights from South Sudan and Uganda presented in this book, lend themselves to thinking about similar situations elsewhere. I will draw out these connections beyond time and space in this section, in the chapter introductions and conclusions, and in the concluding chapter (see Chapter 9). This section introduces the key concepts – war, displacement, identity, governance, and tradition – drawing on the relevant academic literature and on peoples' own terms. As Alex de Waal writes, 'Academicians whose analytic starting points are general models, are recurrently confounded by events [in South Sudan] ... The standard terminology for such analyses includes 'anarchy' and 'state breakdown', indicating analytical voids or serving as flags of intellectual surrender' (De Waal 2019a, xix). Partly, I intend to avoid this pitfall by staying close to Zande peoples' own language and analyses. In the words of Durkheim, 'things must be explained in terms of themselves' (Bohannan et al. 1973, 370). However, by staying too close to the empirical material – the specific and concrete – one risks exceptionalising the case. Generalizing and theorizing about 'Africa' alone carries a similar risk (Macamo 2020). So, then, of *what* is this book a case(s) (Lund 2015)? The following conceptual notes help to situate this 'case' in various broader literatures.

1.3.1 What kind of war?

The kind of war that has engulfed Western Equatoria periodically, was similar to 'new wars' elsewhere. Classical conceptualizations of war focus on large-scale 'organised violence in the service of political ends' (Kaldor 2013, 6). Various definitions require of war that at least one government is involved; that it results in over a thousand deaths per year; that it starts with a 'declaration' and ends when peace is signed. Mary Kaldor and other critical scholars

have pointed out that 'new wars' differ both in means and ends. Beyond armies, they often involve numerous non-state armed groups with varying organizational make-ups. Indeed, before fighting erupted anew in Western Equatoria, there were already dozens of loosely connected community-based militia (collectively called 'Arrow Boys') from previous conflicts (Schomerus and Rigterink 2016). From 2015 these groups engaged in complicated diplomatic and military engagement with South Sudan's two dominant factions: The ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), and its adversary the SPLM-In Opposition (IO) (see Chapter 6). New wars often involve identity politics. Political elites often promote and activate those sub-national identities (be they regional, sectarian, religious or ethnic) that allow them to mobilize recruits and resources. In South Sudan this happened, too (see Section 1.3.3).

Rather than a Clausewitzean 'contest of wills' over politics or ideology, new wars may become profitable 'mutual enterprises' (Kaldor 2013) where 'waging war is more important than winning them' (Keen 2012). This is partly because new wars are often not (just) funded by state resources, but also by the spoils of economic activity that becomes accessible to armed group members and leaders in war (e.g. natural resource extraction, taxation, extortion). South Sudan's most abundant natural resource is oil, and control over oil-rich territories and revenues has been a crucial factor in the civil wars, even if producing and exporting it requires relative stability. Various armed groups have also profited from the war-time exportation of teak from the Equatorias (Neumeister and Cooper 2019). For some youth, military work for an armed faction (and 'Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration'-packages) are the only or best route to survival (Kindersley and Majok 2019). Some (aspiring) elites 'rebel' violently only to be co-opted with 'positions' by the Juba-based government through subsequent peace negotiations (Braak 2020). Beyond the devastation, some people did very well for themselves in South Sudan's wars.

It can be difficult to tell when wars in South Sudan start or end, although most people agree that 'peace on paper' is a meagre indicator. Wars appear rather as periods 'of prolonged and heightened uncertainty, punctuated by violent events' (Lubkemann 2008) or 'no war, no peace' (Mac Ginty 2006). They drag on or relapse quickly, as most contemporary civil wars do (Hewitt, Wilkenfeld, and Gurr 2016; World Bank 2011). My older respondents lived through the First Sudanese Civil War (aka 'Anyanya 1', 1955-1972), the Second Sudanese Civil War (aka 'the war of Garang' or 'the SPLA war', 1983-2005), the Lord's Resistance Army-incursions (2005-2013); and the most recent South Sudanese Civil War (from 2013 elsewhere, from 2015 in Western Equatoria). These dates reflect the official lines of 'Khartoum' and 'Juba,' rather than the locally-specific experiences of people in Western Equatoria or elsewhere. Contemporary wars are often localized and fragmented (Allouche and Jackson 2018). For example, during official 'wartime' in the early 2000s and 2015, Western Equatoria was relatively peaceful (see Section 2.5). And yet in the years after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005) which brought peace-

on-paper to the Sudans, Western Equatoria saw two periods of elevated conflict (see Section 2.6). This illustrates just how fragmented South Sudan's civil wars have been.

War often dominates writing and reporting on countries like South Sudan (Lubkemann 2008). Foci then include political elites and armed factions (D. H. Johnson 2003; Ruay 1994; Øystein H. Rolandsen and Daly 2016; Ø.H. Rolandsen 2005; de Waal 2014; Kindersley 2016). However, it is important to see how for many people in 'warscapes', war does not always define everything: 'appear[ing] as a context for people's life stories, rather than as the focus in itself of their narratives' (Leonardi 2013, 144). As the Sudans have experienced repeated war, some scholars go so far as to say that 'disorder and violence are the norm, not the exception' (De Waal 2019a). In this book as in real life, war takes centre stage periodically and inescapably (see Sections 2.5 and 6.2), but more often it figures as context (see Annex 1: Portraits). I reflect on the 'normality' of disorder and violence in the conclusion.

1.3.2 'Oto vura': Cyclical displacement along the voluntary-forced continuum

The cyclical and opaque character of war has countless ramifications for people's lives, including their choice (not) to migrate. Like Peter, the man whom I opened this book with, nearly everyone in my research sites in South Sudan and Uganda had 'ran from war'. Even before the war of 2015, most Western Equatorians had lived elsewhere due to various wars (see Section 1.3.1). The area also hosted refugees (from Congo and CAR) and 'internally displaced people' from elsewhere in South Sudan. In parts of neighbouring DR Congo, some people have 'oscillat[ed] between displacement, refuge, and return' (Rudolf, Jacobs, and Nguya 2015, 107). It has been similar in South Sudan. Rather than a straightforward sequence of events from 'normal life' to 'rupture' to 'exile' and an eventual 'return,' people went through this process repeatedly. For some of my respondents, their coming to Uganda was their fourth experience of 'protracted displacement' which is sometimes defined as over three years (Crawford et al. 2015), and sometimes over five years (UNHCR Executive Committee, 2009). In Uganda, too, many of the 'local' Ugandans had been refugees in South Sudan before, or were (the children of) people who had been displaced from north Uganda by the Lord's Resistance Army in the 1990s. This book will show how past experiences with war and displacement shape present decisions and future imaginings (see Chapter 3, 6, 7 and 8). I see displacement as a form of migration, and define it as the process through which (groups of) people are compelled by conflict to leave their habitual place of residence. This is what Zande call '*oto vura*' (running from war). This is close to IOM's definition of 'forced migration': 'A migratory movement in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes'

(International Organization for Migration 2020). I follow Lee's classical definition of migration as 'a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence' indifferent of the distance travelled, borders (not) crossed, or the (in)voluntary nature of the act (Lee 1966, 49). This wide conceptualization alerts us to the many forms of (conflict-related) migration beyond the classical conceptualization of a direct move from country A directly to country B to stay there for years, decades or generations. Whereas other scholars also consider displacement caused by natural disasters, dispossessions and development projects (Li 2009), my focus is (like 'oto vura') on displacements in the face of man-made violent conflict. I consider both 'internally displaced people' (IDPs) and people who cross the border and, typically, become 'refugees', although I will also reflect on the limitations of these categories (see Section 6.1).

I use the verb 'compelled' rather than 'forced' to leave. This relates to two central dichotomies in migration and refugee studies – between 'migrants' and 'refugees', and 'voluntary' and 'forced' migrants – with enormous legal, discursive and academic significance (Erdal and Oeppen 2018). The United Nations Refugee Convention (1951) reserves the term 'refugees' for people who were 'persecuted'.[11] Many rich countries strive to keep the refugee-definition narrow, to limit who is eligible for protection (Bloch and Dona 2019). This categorisation has inspired scholars to view 'refugees' as especially vulnerable people (Kenyon Lischer 2014), to whom conventional migration theories do not apply (Bakewell 2010, 1690) as their migration is thought to be sufficiently explained by persecution or 'violence' (Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003, 29).

This book will show that this picture of refugees is problematic. First, the legal categorisation of refugees is different in many African contexts (Zetter 2019, 20). For instance, the Organisation for African Unity's Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (1969) also includes people who are 'compelled to leave [their] place' by a host of reasons, including 'events seriously disturbing public order' (Article 1: 2). The Ugandan Refugees Act (2006) adds 'gender discrimination' and further stipulates that the Minister responsible for refugee affairs may declare 'a class of persons to be refugees.'[12] South Sudanese people were given 'prima facie' refugee

11 Article 1A (2): 'For the purposes of the present Convention, the term 'refugee' shall apply to any person who ... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it' (United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951).

12 See Article 4: 'Qualifications for refugee status' and Article 25: 'Group recognition, mass influx and temporary protection' (The Refugees Act, 2006).

status in Uganda (UNHCR 2015).[13] They did not need to demonstrate 'persecution' or having been 'forced' out' (see Chapter 7). Resultantly, the South Sudanese people who were all categorized as 'refugees' in Uganda were extraordinarily diverse: They included former ministers in stone houses in Kampala, and destitute single mothers in tarpaulin huts on the rocky soil of Rhino Camp. Whereas the former fled individual persecution, the latter was arguably more vulnerable.

A second reason that the classical 'refugee-migrant' distinction is problematic, is that the 'voluntary-forced' dichotomy on which it is based fails to capture 'the complex relationship between political, social and economic drivers of migration or their shifting significance for individuals over time and space' (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). There is often considerable overlap between various forms of migration on the continuum from 'forced' to 'voluntary' (Bakewell 2008; Erdal and Oeppen 2018; Hammar et al. 1997), and all migration 'involved both choices and constraints' (Carling 2002, 8). Wartime displacements often map onto (and merge with) pre-existing migration patterns (Lubkemann 2008), and may present ruptures as well as continuities (Kindersley 2017; Liisa H. Malkki 1995). In recent years, scholars have embraced 'mixed migration' and the existence of spectra rather than binaries (Van Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa 2009; Czaika and Kis-Katos 2009). For most of my respondents, war was a prominent factor in their decision to leave, but it was rarely the only one (see Chapter 6). Peter's family were 'pushed' away by insecurity in South Sudan, but they were also 'pulled' to Uganda by factors beyond safety, including the promise of good education for the children.

Given the salience of 'spectra' of migration, this book draws not just on 'refugee studies' or 'forced migration' literature, but also on general migration scholarship (see Chapter 6). This literature teaches that individuals' *aspirations* and *abilities* to migrate vary (Carling 2002; Haas 2021), and that mobility may be embedded in broader systems of meaning and structures of economic and political power (Cresswell 2010). Drawing on this literature, I will offer an in-depth analysis of the manifold consequences of civil war in Western Equatoria (see Section 6.2), people's deliberations to stay or go in response, and their often prolonged 'displacement pathways' (see Sections 6.5 and 6.7, and Annex 1: Portraits). This book will demonstrate how in wartime, too, people have agency, and that *oto vura* is often not an automatic response to conflict but instead subject of elaborate decision-making within longer lifetimes and histories of repeated movements. I will show how these deliberations prominently involve household tactics and moral frameworks, to decide when and for whom mobility is acceptable and desirable.

13 This was done in part because the reason for the refugee influx was clear, and because of the size and speed of the influx (in February 2017 it peaked at more than 6,000 arrivals in a single day) and the inability of the Ugandan government to handle cases individually.

The term 'displacement' has received sustained critique from anthropologists of war. Malkki questioned the 'sedentarist bias' and 'botanical thought' implicit in our thinking about displacement: as if people ought to stay 'rooted' in place, and movement always equates 'uprootedness' (L. Malkki 1992, 33). Subsequently, various anthropologists have argued to disconnect 'displacement' from migration and geographical place altogether, and critiqued automatic associations of 'migration with change and sedentarism with stasis' (Lubkemann 2008, 214). In South Sudan, Akoi and Pendle wrote that: 'Assuming that forced displacement equates to total social rupture, in some circumstances, will be as misconceived as assumptions that 'home' is unchanged' (Akoi and Pendle 2021). And so Lubkemann defined 'displacement' as 'the transformation of lifescapes in ways that render essential life projects harder to achieve and that, in the extreme, place life strategies at risk of ultimate failure' (Lubkemann 2008, 193). He adds that some of those who move the least, experience 'the most dramatically consequential displacement of all' (Lubkemann 2008, 194). In a similar fashion, Ramsay defines displacement 'as an existential experience of contested temporal being, in which a person cannot reconcile the contemporary circumstances of their life with their aspirations for, and sense of, the future' (Ramsay 2019, 4).

Yet stripping the term 'displacement' from its migratory aspect, as these anthropologists propose, in my view makes 'displacement' more akin to war-induced relative deprivation. We will see how in Western Equatoria, too, some of the poorest were unable to leave – the 'involuntary immobile' (Carling 2002) – and their lives changed dramatically (see Section 6.5.3). And South Sudanese stayees and refugees alike saw the gap between the present and their future visions and aspirations grow. Still, to my Zande interlocutors and myself, *oto vura* still deserves its own term: running because of war. Further (experiential) consequences, I feel, ought to be treated not as a priori elements of the definition of 'displacement', but rather as lines of empirical inquiry.

1.3.3 Identifying 'ethnicity'

So war and displacement mark the context for people's lives. What then happens to people's identities – their sense of self, their presentation to others, and their identification by others? Which parts of people's complicated identities become more salient, and which drift to the background? 'Identity', like 'culture', is an equally ubiquitous as problematic staple in the social sciences. It has been used for such a wide variety of phenomenon, that some have argued to abandon the term altogether for more precise and active terms (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Initially, I had not intended to research 'identity' as such, instead focusing on the resolution of disputes in Western Equatoria State. However, I found that questions around identity pervaded my research,

and influentially interfaced with war, displacement and (traditional) governance.

In thinking about identity, Heinich usefully distinguishes three 'moments' of identity: self-perception, self-presentation, and identity-designation by others (Heinich, 2019). She makes another important distinction: Between people's 'idem' (their likeness to others in a group, etymologically connected to 'identical') and their 'ipse' (what sets them apart). The people at the centre of this study juggle dozens of identities: South Sudanese, Western Equatorian, Zande, refugee, vulnerable, youth, urban, woman, in-law, catholic, clan, etc. The salience of these terms is not universally or constantly experienced, expressed and recognized. People may perform or hide identities as the situation requests (see Section 7.4.2). The 'self' is also identified and categorized by others, including by the state. The three 'moments' of identity may not align, sometimes with problematic results.

In this book, the 'refugee' category is a good example: People may not self-identify (primarily) as 'refugee' but still present themselves as such to get protection and aid (see Chapter 7). The Ugandan refugee administration, conversely, is mostly concerned with people as 'refugees' – not with their existence before and beyond. In this way, the refugee label 'dehistoricises and dehumanizes' (Liisa H. Malkki 1996; Colson 2003), even as it also offers protection. Ethnicity in South Sudan has a similarly complicated history as a category which arose out of wars and migrations, and then became promoted, invented and/or instrumentalised by anthropologists, (colonial) governments and armed groups (see Section 1.2).

Whether, when, where, how and why it matters to people to be 'Zande', is a key line of inquiry in this book. Again I follow Malkki, who studied how displacement shaped the 'social construction of nationness and history, identity and enmity' (Liisa H. Malkki 1995, 1). Doing so requires a delicate balancing act. I hope on the one hand to elucidate the processes and mechanisms which lead to the 'crystallization' of particular identities in particular moments, while avoiding 'unintentionally reproducing or reinforcing such reification by uncritically adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 5).

Throughout my research and especially after the eruption of war, ethnicity played a crucial role in people's self-identification and identification of others. However, instead of 'ethnic group' most South Sudanese people would refer to the group name (i.e., 'the Azande') or to *aboro* (people) followed by the name. The English words 'community,' 'people' or 'tribes' were also used both in everyday speech and in South Sudanese and Ugandan media. The term 'tribalism' (used by colonial officials as positive) is used in many African contexts for the mobilization of 'tribal' identities for violence or nepotism (Ekeh 1990). Academic scrutiny of the term 'tribe' increased around the decolonisation of most of Africa, when constructivism was also gaining ground in academia. It became associated with colonial and social-Darwinist views of 'primitive

societies' (Sneath 2016; Mafeje 1971).[14] Some academics argued to replace the term 'tribe' with 'nation' to recognize their equality with other such groups, i.e. 'German,' 'British,' 'Korean' (Hirsch 2020).

Yet the use of particular terms does not equate sensitivity. Some scholars seem to have replaced 'tribe' with 'ethnicity', while leaving the primordialist scaffolding unchanged (Barth 1969, 10-11). Others have used the colonial-sounding 'tribe' with empathy, nuance and historical precision (Vansina 1968, 14). Still, broadly speaking the 'ethnicity' literature came with less essential presumptions, and more constructivist questions: e.g. about the historical formation of the 'group' (Nugent 2008), its meaning to the 'members', the politics of belonging (Fontein 2011, 723), the fluidity of its boundaries, etc. Barth argued to see 'ethnic categories' as 'an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio-cultural systems' (Barth 1969). As it invites more empirical inquiry, I use 'ethnicity' over 'tribe', only using the latter when quoting respondents.

Crucially, a scholar's view of 'identity' is likely to be influenced by their positionality and their academic disposition (see Annex 3: Methods). Anthropologist Sharon Hutchinson argues convincingly that Evans-Pritchard had more access to older men, who – like him – were likely more preoccupied with 'issues of 'unity,' 'equilibrium,' and 'order,' viewing culture as something shared and ethnography as the compilation of those shared elements' (Hutchinson 1996, 28). As a white man I, too, was generally better able to speak deeply with people who were either in a senior position or formally educated. Often these were men, as is also apparent from the Portraits (see Annex 1: Portraits). This may have influenced my view of the importance of tradition, history and ethnicity. Conversely, Hutchinson writes that she actively avoided the Nuer elite, focusing her work instead on 'evolving points of confusion and conflict among Nuer – and thus on what was not fully shared by them' (Hutchinson 1996, 28). One of her principal aims in *Nuer Dilemmas* was 'to call into question the very idea of 'the Nuer' as a unified ethnic identity' (Hutchinson 1996, 29). And yet, she also noted that:

> What appears to be happening since the 1991 SPLA split, however, is a gradual sealing off of this formerly permeable inter-ethnic [Dinka-Nuer] divide ... Nuer fighters, in particular, appear to have adopted a more 'primordialist,' if not 'racialist,' way of thinking about their ethnic 'essence' in recent years (Hutchinson 2002, 45).

14 It often comes with stereotypical assumptions about the groups uniformity, leadership structure, ties to the distant past, and a quality 'beyond the state'. Partly for these reasons, That term is sometimes used – including by Evans-Pritchard – in South Sudan in reference to the pre-colonial kingdoms, but not to my knowledge to refer to the contemporary dispersed collective of Zande-speakers.

And so while Hutchinson was actively looking for confusion and contestation, she also found that at least some of her interlocutors' own understandings of their identities grew more essentialist over the course of the war. This relates to the politics and psychology of identity and threat. Hannah Arendt's observation that, 'Jews concerned with the survival of their people would, in a curious desperate misinterpretation, hit on the consoling idea that anti-semitism, after all, might be an excellent means for keeping the people together' (Arendt 1973, 7). In this book, I will argue that precisely when identities are ostensibly 'in crisis' and 'under threat', some people work to (re)invent and construct them, making them often 'harder' (see Chapter 9). In my case, war and displacement collided to stimulate such a process of reconstruction.

1.3.4 Governing authorities

1.3.4.1 An empirical view of the state and beyond

Throughout the cycles of war and displacement, Western Equatorians both sough to govern their own affairs and were subjected to governance by a variety of state and non-state authorities. 'Governance' is often defined, after Plato, in reference to the (city) state and the exercise of authority over the 'ship's course'. One simple definition describes governance as 'a government's ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services' (Fukuyama 2013, 3), another as how 'the [formal and informal] rules of the political game are managed ... [providing] the context in which policy and administration are carried out' (Hyden 2004, 2). These definitions mainly draw focus to the state and its attempts to govern, which is one focus of this book, but not the only one.

James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* argues that states work to make peoples' ties to places more stable, legible and sedentary, as a prerequisite for their utopian schemes for the general advancement of the human condition (Scott 1998). And indeed, this book features four cases of utopian state schemes reminiscent of Scott's work. There were colossal colonial-era resettlement schemes against sleeping sickness and for industrial development (see Section 3.3), a post-independence land formalisation scheme to prepare the land for the state of the future (see Chapter 4), and the reception of refugees in refugee settlements designed to promote rural development (see Chapter 7). The persuasiveness of utopian (urban) planning in (post-)conflict settings has been noted before (Badiey and Doll 2018).

Yet while Scott's work offers an enriching view of the reasoning of governing actors, 'the state' in South Sudan and Uganda was diffracted and far from omnipotent. So this book will also look beyond the visions of governance expressed by elites and in policies, to the day-to-day work of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1969; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014) or more

generally 'what lower-level officials actually do in the name of the state' (Gupta 1995, 376). It will describe how utopian governance schemes are implemented, how people respond, and with what results. Particular foci here include in South Sudan the state-level Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and county-level Land Dispute Resolution Committee (see Chapter 4), and in Uganda the refugee administration under the Office of the Prime Minister (see Chapter 7)

Beyond the state, in this part of the world a plethora of other actors like traditional authorities, NGOs, and armed groups, also 'govern'. That is: They make and enforce rules, and provide services like education, infrastructure, and dispute resolution (Rigterink, Kenyi, and Schomerus 2014; Raeymaekers, Menkhaus, and Vlassenroot 2008; Leonardi et al. 2010). And so scholars have argued not just to look to state 'governance', but to ask instead who has the ability 'to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on members of society' (Lund 2006, 685). Who 'governs'?[15] This book prominently features three groups of not-quite-state actors: Western Equatoria's traditional authorities (see Chapter 5), and two bodies of 'governing refugees' in Uganda: the state-initiated Refugee Welfare Councils and the refugee-initiated Community organizations (see Chapter 8). This book will explore how various authorities interact with one another, and how they relate to different conceptualisations of 'identity'.

1.3.4.2 Traditional authority: Rooted, invented, reconstructed

'Traditional authority' holds an especially prominent position in this book. I use the term 'traditional' rather than 'customary authority' because it is the more common term in South Sudan and Uganda, both in legislation and everyday speech. This book will explore the historic roots of 'tradition' and 'traditional authority' (see Chapter 2), and their reconstruction in the aftermath of war (see Chapter 5). I will also explore how 'traditional authorities' were largely absent among Zande refugees in Uganda, and yet remained remarkably popular (see Chapter 8). In this context of abundant change, traditions – like identities – were reconstructed. Just how much 'tradition' could change and adapt, was a key debate among Zande throughout my time in South Sudan and Uganda (see Chapter 8). The concept 'traditional authority' has received sustained academic scrutiny. So I will set out here how I understand and use the term in this book, and briefly respond to these debates.

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15 To make matters more complicated, non-state authorities often still cultivate links to government institutions, and even use 'the symbolic language and choreography of [state] governance and its props' (Lund 2006, 691). Further, government authorities may 'claim' successful achievements by non-state authorities as theirs. As a result in South Sudan and Uganda it can be hard and largely irrelevant for ordinary people to distinguish when 'governance' is done by government.

'Traditional authority' may bring to mind hereditary rulers and authority wielded over a clearly delineated group of people, using a traditional body of laws or norms. And yet the term covers a dizzying variety of real-world individuals. From the powerful Zulu King, for whom even South African president Ramaphosa kneels, to the South Sudanese 'boma chief' whose power, prestige and wealth does not differ much from 'his' people. Given the diversity of African traditional authorities and their relations to the state (J. L. Comaroff and Comaroff 2018, 11; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1996; Crowder 1978), scholars argued in an overview article not to 'predetermine or essentialize the content of customary authority, but instead focus on its situated, socially constructed nature' (Verweijen and Van Bockhaven 2020, 6).[16] Generalisations are typically induced (implicitly) from limited observations in some societies, and as a result either rather vague or inaccurate elsewhere.

In Western Equatoria, the main 'traditional authorities' are the chiefs and elders.[17] Chiefs' history, form and function differ greatly in different parts of South Sudan. In some areas, colonial officials admitted to '[creating] new kinds of authority, and that their notion of chiefship was alien to the people on whom it had been imposed' (Leonardi 2013, 4). Among the Zande, however, the colonial powers first had to divide and defeat the powerful precolonial Avungara[18] kings, before co-opting their offspring in chiefly positions (see Section 2.4). Many of today's chiefs are descendants of these pre-colonial kings.

This pre-colonial pedigree notwithstanding, this book will show how at the time of my research, all facets of traditional authority were subject to change and debate: who gets to rule, the boundaries between and within 'communities', and the content of customary law (see Chapter 5). Some chiefs had inherited their position, others were popularly elected or selected by their community's elders or by government (see Section 5.2). Since colonial times, successive governments have sought to incorporate chiefs to perform judicial, administrative and security tasks for the state, and chiefs have conversely sought to leverage the power of the state for their own interests (Leonardi 2013). Present-day South Sudanese legislation includes provisions 'recognizing' traditional authorities, customary courts and customary law (see Chapter 5). Still, chiefs remain very much an interstitial position (combining state and non-

16 Ironically, elsewhere in the article they write that 'control over land and people is inextricably interwoven with spiritual capacities such as (collective) healing and rain-making' (2020: 14). This – to induce general statements from limited observations – seems precisely what they argue against.

17 There are other types of traditional or customary authority in South Sudan, such as prophets, oracles or land priests. My research assistants found evidence of oracles still working in association with Zande customary courts, but it was too little for me to write about. Perhaps a South Sudanese scholar could someday explore this.

18 Follow contemporary practice, I write 'Avungara'. Evans-Pritchard mostly spelled it as 'Avongara'.

state, traditional and modern elements) (Verweijen and Van Bockhaven 2020, 10).

'Elder' is also a fluid category of people with cultural knowledge, experience and authority. Elders are often called upon in relation to a particular development or dispute. They are not always elderly and not all elderly people are considered to be elders. The term is relational and reverential, with even young Zande at times calling one another *bakumba* (elder or 'big man'). Whereas chiefs in South Sudan are to some extent incorporated in the state structure, elders typically perform their roles outside of its purview. At the same time, many individual elders have or have had positions of influence, for instance in government, the church or aid organizations. Whereas most chiefs are men, there are female elders who play important roles especially in dispute resolution.

'Customary' and 'traditional' are often used interchangeably, in English and in Zande. Historians and anthropologists have debated some subtle but important differences. Hobsbawm and Ranger write that 'Tradition' has the 'object and characteristic ... of invariance [And] the past, real or invented, to which they refer imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices, such as repetition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1982, 2). Some academics are critical of the term 'traditional,' arguing that 'for all its apparent innocence, [it] dehistoricizes as it essentializes, flattening out active world making into perpetual passivity' (J. L. Comaroff and Comaroff 2018, 8). In the words of Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'How far back do we have to go, to find the stability alleged to be 'characteristic' of the pre-colonial period?' (Mamdani 2004, 39). Many contemporary scholars generally regard claims to 'tradition' as political tools in the service of nation- or community-building (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1982; Anderson 2016). 'Customary,' on the other hand:

> Does not preclude innovation and change up to a point ... [It gives] any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history ... Traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1982, 2).

Choosing to call something 'traditional' or 'customary,' then, is to emphasize respectively its claim to being rooted in a fixed past, or its embeddedness in the present.

The Zande term *sino* can mean tradition, but also culture, quality or custom.[19] *Sino* is not necessarily linked to an 'authority' decreeing what is

19 My colleague Isaac Hillary offered three examples of '*sino*': 1) Sino agumbe ningia sengahe = The tradition of Agumbe clan is to insult. 2) Sino awiri Abdulah gberé wai = Abdullah's children's qualities are so bad. 3) Sino Adinka nga zoga anya = The culture of the Dinka is keeping animals. Personal communication, 6 June 2020.

or is not tradition, neither is it used as an adjective for the authority of chiefs. The term *sangba* (word, proposal, consequence, command) better captures the decrees of a ruler, be they king, chief or minister. Crucially, *sino* and *sangba* are descriptive, not normative. So the *sino* of a group can be regarded by the speaker as quite negative. *Sino* can also be used for practices that are quite new, and can apply to different group levels (e.g., household, clan, ethnic group). Very little of what anyone – in Western Equatoria and elsewhere – regards today as 'tradition', was with their ancestors a thousand years earlier. It is now 'tradition' for Zande to pay bride wealth in money, whereas in 'the days of King Gbudwe' it was paid in spears. Those days were again different from a hundred years prior, before Arabic ivory and slave traders had entered the region, or some centuries earlier when the first Zande-speakers entered what is now South Sudan (see Section 2.2). This book will make abundantly clear that such apparent change has not eroded but rather invigorated people's interest in traditions.

1.4 Portraits: Introducing key respondents

This book builds on my encounters with hundreds of people in South Sudan and Uganda. Yet along the way, I met six people who were especially generous with their time, wisdom and experiences. They became my key respondents and I will refer to them a lot throughout this book. I thought it appropriate to introduce them here. I drafted these portraits based on life history interviews and semi-structured interviews, conducted between 2015 and 2020. In November 2018 at a gathering in Arua, Uganda, I asked them if they would allow me to include a portrait based on their life story in this book. Then I wrote a first draft, and asked them to suggest changes. Full portraits are included in Annex 1.

James (b. 1965, Nzara, South Sudan) is a fine artist and Refugee Welfare Council-leader. His travels – for refuge, education and adventure – led him to the Central African Republic, Sudan and Uganda, and only stimulated his interest in Zande culture and history. His mobility across front lines was frequently suspected by authorities, and led to him being imprisoned and at one point becoming a 'Cameroonian by birth' to avoid trouble in Darfur. During the most recent war James and his family initially stayed in Yambio. But after heavy daytime shooting, they moved to nearby Nzara, then to Dungu (DR Congo) and eventually Uganda. After a few months as 'urban refugees' in expensive Kampala, the family moved to Kiryandongo RS. James works as 'Refugee Welfare Council'-chairperson, and – when commissioned – as a painter. He made the paintings featured in this book upon my commisssion. James spends most of his money on the education of his children: a daughter who studies in Kampala and other children in schools closer-by. From the beginning I found it easy to talk with James, a skilled story-teller with a good

sense of humour and sharp observations. We mostly spoke in a small gazebo that he had built in front of his house in Kiryandongo RS, where he would sometimes tend to other guests.

Charles (b. 1963, Bazungua, South Sudan) is both a priest and a lawyer. He spent much of his life in pursuit of education (theology and law), in spite of the wars and (im)mobility that obstructed his efforts. He spent eight scattered years as a refugee in the Central African Republic. He found help to study and move away from war mostly from South Sudanese and foreigners within the church. Charles graduated with a law degree in Uganda aged 44. Upon his return to Yambio in 2008, he joined the South Sudan Employees Justice Chamber, and later the County Land Authority's Land Dispute Resolution Committee (Chapter 4). He valued the life he had at home, and so when war resumed in 2015, he really did not want to leave. But then in May 2016 he was shot after ruling in a land dispute against a powerful man. He fled to Uganda with his family, where he first tried to live as 'urban refugee' in Kampala, but eventually settled in Kiryandongo RS. That is where I first met him, and would pay him regular visits. We spoke mostly on the porch of his kiosk in Kiryandongo RS, sometimes playing chess. Charles was the ideal respondent for me: He was an 'insider' to the group I wanted to learn about, and yet he was very reflexive of the developments affecting him and those around him. I learned a lot from Charles' observant remarks and his precise, powerful and creative use of language.

Elizabeth (b. 1978, Maridi, South Sudan) is a business woman and Zande Chairperson in Kiryandongo RS. In the previous war, Elizabeth spent 17 years as a refugee in the DR Congo. She is always exploring new ventures, and making money across borders. With the money she makes, she tries to afford her children the education that she as a child could only dream of. To her pride, her first two children have graduated from Ugandan universities. Before the current war started, she was in South Sudan running a hotel, restaurant and second-hand clothes business. When conflict began, she moved then first to Maridi, then Yambio, then DR Congo, Kampala and eventually Kiryandongo RS where she arrived in April 2016. She was then appointed as Zande Chairperson (section 8.4). Elizabeth works hard but recognizes that at critical junctions she was aided by especially female good Samaritans. When I first met Elizabeth, she made an impression: She was running a restaurant in the settlement and chatting with clients in different languages. It took time for me to get to know her. I would mostly visit her at her kiosk in Bweyale's market – where she would handle customers while we spoke.

Albert (b. 1974 Ezo, South Sudan – 2020, Yambio, South Sudan) was a government and later development worker. He grew up in Ezo, and first became a refugee in Uganda in 1993. He received some support from a brother in the church to attend school, and then returned to South Sudan in 2000. There he worked in NGO and government jobs, becoming member of Western Equatoria State parliament and later county commissioner of Ezo. That is where

I first met him in March 2015. After a power shift in August that year, he was threatened. Warnings 'from within the system' and mysterious winds helped him escape. Albert came to Rhino Camp, Uganda. When I met him there in April 2017, I was struck by his stoic handling of his displacement. He would smile and say, 'we were born naked, too'. Albert was an ambitious, sociable, and funny man, and an excellent teacher. We would spend long hours talking at his house, or over a beer in Arua or Bweyale. Albert returned to South Sudan in early 2020 to cultivate and prepare his family's return from Uganda. He had already been coughing for years, but fell sick and ultimately passed in July 2020.

Moses Zaza (b. 1977, Naandi, South Sudan) is a Chief whose life was marked by mobility. In 1990 at the age of 13, his family and he ran from war. He would spend the subsequent 13 years in refugee camps in Dungu, Zaire; Adjumani, Uganda; and in Kakuma, Kenya. Eventually he got a small job with a church in Kampala, Uganda which allowed him to save up for his education. When he returned to South Sudan in 2007 he did not want to go back to the village, Naandi, instead settling in state capital Yambio. Yet when the old *payam* chief of his village passed away in 2012, Moses was elected to succeed him. He was reluctant at first, but eventually accepted. The stayee elders and chiefs taught Moses for months about the customs and traditions he was meant to lead by as a chief. Yet as a chief, Zaza remained especially adept at connecting his village to the outside world. Rather than operating a sort of parallel authority or justice system, Chief Zaza prides himself in his ability to attract the state: to get a prison, police office, and surveyors. He also tried to draw in other powerful outsiders: telecom companies to establish mobile phone antennae; NGOs to improve health care. The chief positions himself as neither state nor people – he is at a distance from both. The development and 'peace' he brings, he presents as 'his'. When the state comes in to do something, he presents it as the state working for him. Things started to fall apart for Chief Moses in 2016, when he tried to practice shuttle diplomacy between local 'Arrow Boys' and the state governor (see Section 5.6). The quintessential chiefly role – to be a gatekeeper and an in-between – made both sides suspicious of him, and eventually lead to death threats and his temporary exile to Uganda after July 2016. Despite hesitations about his safety, the chief returned to Naandi the following year. He left his family in Uganda and visited regularly. I spoke to the chief in Kampala twice, and once by phone. Normally that would not be sufficient to qualify as 'key respondent' but his interviews were exceptionally rich.

Isaac Hillary (b. 1988, Yambio, South Sudan) is a poet and aspiring anthropologist who now attends Bugema University in Uganda. He was a refugee in the DR Congo from 1991-1998, where he lost his father. Upon his return to South Sudan he became active in a church. But eventually he chose to continue his education. He was attending high school in Yei when war started again in 2016. More than 2000 students had started the year, but only some

300 sat for exams – including Isaac. We first met in 2017 through a mutual friend in Kiryandongo RS. Isaac made a tremendous impression on me. While others were 'sitting idle', Isaac tried to see misfortune as nudging him towards his destiny. In the settlement, he was writing children's books and poetry in Zande – among which 'It has started again' (see Annex 2) – and speaking to elders about Zande history and tradition. I appreciated that this was a special man, who was coping with hardship in part by creating art. We worked together on audio-visual recordings for his poems, on his Worondimo-blog, and eventually on a research project on resilience. Isaac is now pursuing a BA in Peace and Conflict Management, and hopes to study anthropology in the future. Isaac and I remain in weekly contact. I have not included a full portrait of Isaac in the Annex.

1.5 Outline and point of the book

The structure of this book stays close to the research process and general idea. It starts, like I did, in South Sudan, and ends in Uganda. The chapters have geographic, temporal and thematic boundaries, albeit porous ones, which follow from the phases of return, conflict and displacement. The thematic foci of the chapters follow in part from my disciplinary background and academic interests, and from the concerns of the people with whom I conducted this research. In both countries, people's central concerns included state and 'traditional' governance, debates about identity and belonging, and land tenure. I use these divisions in time, place and theme to guide my analysis and writing. Reality is more complex, and 'lived experience overflows the boundaries of any one concept, or any one society (M. Jackson 1989, 2). To show how everything is connected in the lives of my interlocutors, friends, and teachers, I have chosen to include five portraits, based on life history interviews (see Portraits, and Annex 1).

The first part of this book explores the turbulent history of 'ruptures' and 'movements' from which the 'Zande people' and the ruling 'Avungara clan' emerged. Chapter 2 analyses the historical episodes which shaped socio-political life in Western Equatoria, notably among the Zande, from around 1500 until 2015, and how they influenced governance and identity. Inspired by Vansina, this chapter draws on archival sources and oral histories, to take a critical look at Evans-Pritchard's authoritative historiography of 'the Zande'. This chronology offers the historical background for the rest of the book. Chapter 3 focuses on the movements of individuals and groups over this same period, and shows how movements interfaced with the formation of traditional authority and identity in Western Equatoria. Western Equatorians had moved so much, that by the start of my research few people were 'continuous resident', and the towns were increasingly cosmopolitan. Exile and return had also brought new ideas, networks and resources which in turn influenced the

post-conflict moment (Chapters 4 and 5). This history of movements would later also inform people's migration deliberations in 2015-6 (Chapter 6).

The second part explores Western Equatoria during the 'moment of peace', which began around independence (2011). Chapters 4 and 5 explore how Zande returnees (especially ministers and chiefs) played prominent roles in imagining the future and reconstructing (traditional) governance. Chapter 4 analyses a land tenure formalisation programme by the Western Equatoria State government, and how this was connected to past and future movements and ruptures. Various kinds of conflict-related migration (return, displacement, refuge) had merged with pre-existing urbanisation, to fuel demand for urban land in Western Equatoria. The state-minister of physical infrastructure (himself a returnee from the UK) set out with donor support to 'demarcate' (formalize) land to resolve and prevent land disputes, and get the land ready for the state of the future. In various counties, the demarcation itself caused renewed conflict. Chapter 5 analyses how traditional authorities, especially chiefs, in Western Equatoria emerged from the long history of war and displacement. It draws on findings from interviews with 44 Western Equatorian chiefs to paint a picture of chieftaincy anno 2015. It finds remarkably that many chiefs were returnees too, who tried upon their return to strike a balance between globalised and 'modern' skills and connections, and 'traditional' pedigree (such as Avungara clan membership).

The third part analyses the latest episode of war and displacement. Chapter 6 analyses the causes and consequences of the war in Western Equatoria (2015-7). It then draws on unique interviews both with refugees in Uganda, and with 'stayees' in Western Equatoria, to analyse why people stayed or left, among other places to Uganda. It uses and modifies Carling's ability-aspiration model to analyse these decisions, and finds a particularly remarkable group of elite stayees who had been able to leave but did not aspire to do so. They either stayed throughout the war, or returned after having brought their families to refugee camps. Chapter 7 analyses peoples' initial arrival and settlement in Uganda, their main concerns, and how their experiences were mediated by their varying encounters with the Ugandan state bureaucracy (2015-9). It found among other things a battle for permanence between refugee authorities – who insist that refugees remain liminal and do not use 'permanent materials' for their houses – and refugees, who in defiance planted trees that would take years to grow, edified their *tukuls* with paintings, and even buried relatives on the land. Chapter 8 analyses how refugees try to reconstruct order and authority in exile and to govern themselves, focusing in particular on two forms of 'refugee authority' ('refugee welfare councils' and 'community organizations'). It finds that competing attempts at authority were underpinned by particular identifies. The chapter analyses the remarkable absence of traditional authorities among Zande refugees, as well as their perhaps even more remarkable enduring popularity.

This book engages with various disciplinary sub-fields and subjects, and each chapter makes particular contributions to, for instance, historical ethnography, forced migration and refugee studies, and to the literature on land tenure formalisation, civil wars, traditional authority and African bureaucracy. However, the trees are not the forest. On aggregate, this book is about a more universal thematic: How people, as individuals and groups, pursue continuity, control and 'future' in contexts of conflict and displacement. My conclusion connects the various chapters and reflects on this larger, more universal question.

The central thesis of this book is that violent conflict and displacement have unsettling, rupturing and 'un-pasting/un-futuring' properties, but that these are being resisted by people who try to maintain the long view of their existence. It is in this context that people often value (increasingly ethnic) identity, (traditional) governance and land, as existential and temporal stabilizers in an uncertain world. This is no thought exercise. Ideas are represented by concrete things that connect past, present and future: both material (e.g. children, land, trees, graves) and immaterial (e.g. education, Zande language, the history of King Gbudwe, ancestors, *Ture* folk tales). These practices and temporal orientations are central to people's quest for survival, meaning and continuity, and to overcoming the ruptures posed by war and displacement.