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

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3 Movements: Im/mobility, violence, and state control in Western Equatoria (1500s-2014)

'We will return to the land of milk and honey'[1]

Amidst the turbulent history marked by wars and political upheaval, the lives of Western Equatorians were often marked by uncertainty and mobility. Before war 'started again' in '2015', many Western Equatorians had already fled from war several times. My key respondent James, now a refugee in Uganda, 'ran from war' as a 2-year-old in 1967, as a 24-year old in 1989, and as a 49-year old in 2016: 'Now we are in the third exile' (see Annex 1: Portraits). Each time James spent several years in exile, often in different places or even countries. For many other South Sudanese, too, 'displacement' was not a singular event, but a recurring theme. A survey in rural parts of Western Equatoria found in 2014 (prior to the recent war) that only 36 percent of the respondents self-identified as 'continuous residents' and 51,22 percent as 'returnees' (Rigterink, Kenyi, and Schomerus 2014).[2] This was true in the countryside, but also among urbanites and elites – such as Western Equatoria State ministers (see Chapter 4) and traditional authorities (see Section 5.4). Mobility pervaded people's lives.

This chapter explores the causes and consequences of various large-scale population movements over the aforementioned periods in Western Equatoria. It argues that people's movements, as individuals and groups (and efforts to control those movements), have been a formative factor throughout the history of Western Equatoria and the Zande. The origin of the Zande, the power of the Avungara kings, colonialism and the successive wars, each interfaced with people's movements (see Section 2.2). Mobility was often conflict-induced, but equally offered new opportunities for education, work and social life. And people returning 'home' were not just interested in picking up their old lives, but brought with them new ideas for the reconstruction of their home society. In this light, we come to appreciate the 'moment of peace' in Western Equatoria (2011-5) as an exceptional time of return and reconstruction (see Chapters 4

1 Conversation with a Southern Sudanese internally displaced person, Khartoum, April 2011. I met this woman when I visited the IDP's on Khartoum's outskirts during an internship with the Netherlands Embassy in Khartoum. The IDP's were waiting for a bus to bring them 'back' to the South after decades in the north.

2 The survey was carried out in in rural parts of Tambura and Ezo counties. The rest identified as 'movee' (did not live in this county previously) at 7,2 percent and 'Unknown non-continuous resident' at 5,91 percent.

and 5). And the eruption of war in 2015 and people's subsequent decision to stay or run (see Chapter 6) and their stay in Uganda (see Chapters 7 and 8), were not only a 'rupture' but also the latest episode in a long history of conflict-related migrations. People's contemporary displacement deliberations were informed by the long history of movements described in the present chapter, which had crystalised into a body of knowledge and set of tactics which was sometimes taught across generations to survive and thrive.

3.1 Pre-colonial movements (1500-1904)

Even in the distant past, mobility marked social life among Zande and in the area that is now Western Equatoria. The very Zande group was formed through a long process of incorporation and amalgamation of diverse people who had been brought together through conquest and refuge. And Zande princes, including Gbudwe, would move to a new area to begin their own kingdom (see Section 2.2). Evans-Pritchard argued that, 'one consequence of these [pre-colonial] wars, movements, and migration seems to have been the growth of power of the Avongara' (Evans-Pritchard 1963b, 136). But what did these movements look like? Classical accounts on pre-colonial history often compile invasions and movements (Baxter and Butt 1953, 20), imagining groups of people moving around 'like billiard balls' displacing one another (Vansina 1968). This image is misleading.

Archaeologists of pre-colonial migration have demonstrated that 'peoples' did not move in unison, as proposed for instance by the 'Bantu expansion'-thesis, but that people, ideas and goods travelled in a more processual, small-scale and agentive manner (Anthony 1990; Vansina 1990; Robertson and Bradley 2000). Like the Luo in Kenya, using 'different routes, evidently following rivers and streams, dividing and recombining, and stopping and starting for periods along the way, some for generations' (Shipton 2009, 62). Some authors have argued that movement was common across pre-colonial Africa, and a fundamental life strategy: 'Africans have always moved' (van Dijk, Foeken, and van Til 2001).

Zande people are likely to have lived relatively sedentary lives in pre-colonial times, as agriculturalists in centralized political systems. Many people lived on the arable land in the vicinity of rivers (S.D.S.D. Siemens 1990; Maurice 1930, 226), and some distance away from one another – perhaps for 'fear of magic' or witchcraft, which was thought to be stronger at close distance (Larken 1926, 8). Still, movement was a distinct possibility. Upon the death of their spouse, a widow or monogamous husband would customarily leave the homestead and move to relatives (S.D.S.D. Siemens 1990, 285, 289). When bad things happened, people could consult an oracle which, among other things, they would ask if they should stay on their land or move away (Maurice 1930, 244).

Crucially, mobility was also a central underpinning of the social contract between Avungara and the people they ruled. As elsewhere, the 'governed' may have been able to 'vote with their feet' if they were dissatisfied with the ruler (Somin 2020; Tiebout 1956). One scholar writes that for the Zande, 'the initiative in establishing a new relationship seems always to have been on the part of the client. The possibility that a household or a group of households could move to the area of another patron, if dissatisfied with the treatment from the current patron, was a strong tempering influence on the behaviour of rulers' (Reining 1966, 16). Movement was thus not just a collective, but also an individual or household affair. The ability of 'clients' to move, should not be overstated and was certainly limited by power differences and rulers' cruelty. This asymmetry between rulers and 'clients' grew towards the late 19th century, as the kings grew more powerful and the surroundings more dangerous due to slave trade and warfare (see Section 2.3).

Slave and ivory traders reached further up the Bahr-el-Ghazal river from 1855-6, establishing *zaribas* (trading stations). In response to their often violent arrival, many people living along the rivers moved further inland, or joined stronger political units, such as the Zande kingdoms (Gray 1961, 62). The same thing happened when the three imperial powers – Anglo-Egyptian, French and Belgian – arrived in the Zande areas in the late 19th century. People 'either fled from the new government forces or sought refuge with powerful patrons or around the latest government stations, after the extensive displacement of the later nineteenth century' (Leonardi 2013, 42). In the decidedly contemporary words of the paramount chief of Yambio:

> King Gbudwe [was] very strong, and [welcomed] other ethnic groups who [were] not part of the Azande. Because by that time, when the British were coming, the Arabis were coming for slave trade. People were fearing. Because they were minorities. Most of the people took refuge [in] Gbudwe's kingdom for protection.[3]

Land here was bountiful, and like in others parts of Sub-Sahara Africa power and wealth were in people rather than territory (Green 2012; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). And so the Avungara kings would welcome 'strangers' as subjects. The movements of the 19th century meant that the already diverse Zande kingdoms became even more so: Hosting a rich variety of people speaking different languages and identifying as separate groups. Pre-colonial movements, in short, did not resemble discrete billiard balls displacing one another, but rather a complex and rich tapestry, weaved from people moving as individuals or groups, and over time negotiating new forms of identity and belonging.

3 Interview with paramount chief, Yambio, 8 April 2015.

3.2 Colonial movements (1905-1955): Sleeping sickness and the Zande Scheme

People's movements and settlement patterns in southern Sudan were radically altered during the colonial era. The area and its people now became integrated into the enormous and diverse political unit of 'Sudan.' Yet in the colonial view of Sudan, southern Sudan was essentially African, an economically insignificant place where 'natives' lived lives that were best kept traditional and under the authority of chiefs and elders (Leonardi 2013; Palmer and Kingsley 2016). Conversely, the colonialists viewed north Sudan as Arab and Islamic, and more susceptible to investments in agriculture and education. The colonial government institutionalized this difference between northern and southern Sudan through 'Closed District Ordinances' (1920s) and the 'Southern Policy' (1930) (Leonardi 2013, 68). This meant, among other things, that movement within southern Sudan, to the north, and to other countries was restricted.

The colonial administration wanted to seal Southern Sudan off from the 'Northern, Arab and Islamic influences' and to protect it against 'future exploitation by the North' (Badal 1977). The administration further suspected that the free movement of people and ideas could 'undermine traditional authority and morality' and cause 'social disruption and civil disorder' in Southern Sudan (D. H. Johnson 1991, 173, 181). Around World War One, 'the government was increasingly anxious about the possible political ramifications of foreign ideas flowing into the Sudan: Turkish and German propaganda ... Egyptian and Arab nationalism, Bolshevism and even ... African nationalism' (D. H. Johnson 1991, 181). And so where the nineteenth century had been a period of intense movements, in the early twentieth century the colonial government sought to make people more sedentary and to control their movements.

In Western Equatoria, the colonial administration governed mobility and settlement most intrusively during two large-scale resettlement campaigns: The first to combat sleeping sickness, and the second as part of the 'Zande Scheme.' From about 1905 – the year in which King Gbudwe was killed – the colonial government feared that sleeping sickness could spread from Uganda and the DR Congo to the southern, densely forested part of Sudan. Until this time the colonial administration had had little interest in southern Sudan, and 'the threat of sleeping sickness is arguably what made the remote south of Sudan matter in Khartoum, drawing administrators 'out of colonial enclaves and into the lives of local people' (Bell, 1999: 29)' (Palmer and Kingsley 2016). Sleeping sickness was first reported in Western Equatoria in Tambura – the town named after the eponymous Zande king – in 1917-8.

The colonial administration responded to (the threat of) sleeping sickness in Western Equatoria with a large resettlement programme. By 1926, people in Yambio and Tambura Districts had been moved away from areas infested

with tse-tse flies – such as streams and forests – and concentrated along roads instead (Larken 1926). The measures were extraordinarily coercive: borders were closed, 'whole populations were moved away,' and treatment camps were transformed into 'model villages' (Palmer and Kingsley 2016).

Sleeping sickness was a real concern, but efforts to combat the disease quickly merged with another colonial agenda: that of 'concentration' or 'villagisation' (Leonardi 2005, 170). In the words of a colonial administrator at the time: 'the moving of the population into groups along roads ... made political and medical administration at once 80% easier' (Philipps 1925, 5). The new settlements were long and rectangular, and 'straggle[d] along both sides of government roads at distances varying from a mile to several miles between each' (Evans-Pritchard 1972, 15). The colonial state was so convinced about the merits of villagization, that it was adopted even beyond the sleeping sickness-affected areas of Mongalla and Bahr al-Ghazal (Maurice 1930, 234). The benefits were expanded on by another colonial official:

> Roads could be more easily kept open throughout the year; inspections could be more frequent; immigrants from the Congo could be more easily detected and returned; chiefs and headmen would have more authority over their people. Indeed the advantages of concentration were so obvious that the principle had been accepted in Khartoum before the end of 1921 and orders issued to the administrative authorities to carry it out (Maurice 1937).

The sleeping sickness campaign interfaced with Zande governance in ambivalent ways. During the initial resettlement, headmen and chiefs had been faced with a dilemma: 'Those headmen who tried to carry out our orders were deserted by half their followers, who joined those headmen who took up an attitude of passive resistance' (Maurice 1930, 227). So initially some people defied the colonial administration and its policies, and continued to vote with their feet. Over time, however, the resettlement is likely to have bolstered the position of government-recognized chiefs. People were settled closer to them, and not allowed to move or 'change allegiance to either headman or chief without permission from the District Commissioner and Senior Medical Officer jointly' (Maurice 1930, 229). In Yei, where a similar campaign was taking place, one district commissioner expressed the hope that, 'the broken down tribal elements may well regroup themselves into a new and vital village life' (Leonardi 2013, 69). It was not just that 'broken down tribal elements' were reconstructed. One district commissioner observed how 'small non-Zande tribes' that had until then lived independently became 'absorb[ed] under Zande chiefs' when they were forced to live in villages and along the roads (Leitch 1954). In this way, the policy furthered the authority of the chiefs, and the growth of the Zande (see Section 2.2).

How the process was received 'from below' is not particularly well-documented. Evans-Pritchard did most of his research in the new villages, but argued somewhat implausibly that settlement living had 'not produced any

great change in the life of the Azande' (Evans-Pritchard 1972, 15). Then again, he was not interested in the effect of colonisation, but rather to reconstruct what Zande society and history had been like before it (see Section 2.1). One wonders whether people spoke to him about colonisation and if not, why not. It seems likely that their very positive evaluation of the 'days of Gbudwe' in the late 1920s may at least in part be due to the disruptive changes that had followed – including the sleeping sickness resettlements.

Two colonial officials offer very different assessments of the public reception of the resettlement. Major G.K. Maurice was working with the Royal Army Medical Corps in Tambura,[4] from April 1922 to May 1923. In a colourful description of the successes and reception of this policy, he wrote:

> There was really no opposition; a few of the older men contended that the move was a preliminary to an extensive slave raid, but no one took much notice. Everywhere the roads became lined with houses and cultivations; everywhere were cheerful greetings from the people; children played on the roads and thronged about our bicycles. Instead of marching through walls of grass we rode through a land of smiling crops and smiling people (Maurice 1937).

Remarkably, the district commissioner of Tambura who served at the same time as Major Maurice held a different view. In 1925, he described the devastating effects of the resettlement as follows:

> The whole population had just been removed from their homes (isolated along shady and fertile river-sides) on to roads and relatively poor and rocky soil that lies between. In the open spaces of their old homes, nature had provided every man with his private fishing, his game reserve, his own pet ant-hill for eating and building, his mushroom beds and bee-hives, without competition. The change of life, so necessary for S.S. [sleeping sickness] reasons, was for them from spacious private estates to a semi-detached villa existence which, they felt, also exposed them to epidemic diseases' (Philipps 1925, 5).

Further, the district commissioner wrote that the resettlement and 'constant employment on unpaid public works' had hindered young men from hunting, which in turn meant they could not gather enough spears to marry (Philipps 1925, 6). The rosy assessment of the resettlement by Maurice is perhaps explained by his focus on combatting sleeping sickness, which was more effective along roads and in the villages. The district commissioner, likely holding a broader view, acknowledged these successes but suggests that otherwise the effects were largely negative.

The view that villagization had more negative consequences than advantages – especially on agricultural productivity – gained popularity over time. Sleeping sickness cases declined, and in 1940 the government no longer

4 Then part of Bahr el Ghazal Province's Western District.

required people to live in villages or along the roads. Based on research in the 1950s, Reining writes that, 'Although the official version was that there was merely a relaxation of regulations, the Azande recall it as an enforced move away from the roads' (Reining 1982). The first cycle of villagization and return was a fact.

The second colonial resettlement was part of the 'Zande Scheme.' In the same year that the sleeping sickness-measures were eased, the colonial administration started to explore the possibility of an industrial cotton-growing venture: the 'Zande Scheme.' The Scheme entailed the establishment of a ginnery in Nzara, and dictated that people would farm cotton. From 1946 the colonial administration reversed the sleeping sickness resettlements which had concentrated people along the roads and into towns. Now, people were settled into thousands of new, smaller villages along geometric lines cut through the bush. The original 'H Plan' outlined that villages would house fifty families with each a 40-acre plot of land, scattered over an H-shaped grid of roads and paths with a headman and 'village green' at the centre. Along the way, that design was simplified (Reining 1982). Between 1946 and 1951 some 200,000 Western Equatorians were 'resettled', which was the majority of the population (Leitch 1954).[5]

As with the sleeping sickness campaign, the Zande Scheme resettlement was about more than economic development. Some colonial officials hoped that over the course of the next thirty years the Scheme would lead to 'the complete social emergence and the social and economic stability of the Zande people' (H. Ferguson 1954, 916). An official in the colonial Department of Agriculture wrote that success of the Zande Project to him, would 'mean the emergence of a happy, prosperous, literate peasant community, able, by its prosperity to obtain, and through its education to enjoy, the good things that civilization can bring to 'the Gentle Savage'' (H. Ferguson 1954, 918). The racist undertones in colonial-era writing about the Zande project betray a paradox: Although the project intended to socially engineer industrialization in Western Equatoria, it simultaneously assumed that there was something in the people that was essentially tribal and beyond change, and it moved people from the urban settings 'back' to the countryside.

The district commissioner at the time, opined, 'The greatest threat and menace to wellbeing and decency in an African community is urbanisation' (Wyld 1949a, 2). The solution for the lack of 'wellbeing and decency' was sought in part by stimulating a sense of 'community' and order, by 'disentangl[ing] the followers of each sub-chief and headman and group them

5 Leitch was colonial inspector of agriculture. I was unable to find other sources to verify this number, but it seems in line with earlier estimates. In 1949, district commissioner Wyld estimated that in the first three (out of six) years from 1946 to 1948, some 27,000 families had been resettled (Wyld 1949b). Reining writes that by spring 1950, some 50,000 families had been resettled (Reining 1982).

territorially' (Culwick and Abbott 1950). The resettlement, in other words, was meant to restore traditional authority and 'tribal discipline' which had been undermined by urbanisation. Village units (*gbaria*) were placed 'under a paid headman who answers to a chief or sub-chief according to previous tribal custom' (Hance 1955). This 'tribal custom' that chiefs were to rule by, appears to have been codified and 'adapted' by the colonial authorities. Leitch, who was the Inspector of Agriculture of the Equatoria Projects Board, wrote that:

> When the resettlement programme had been completed, registers of each village were compiled and handled over to the rural Chiefs' Court. Adaptations were made to customary Tribal Law and printed to guide these Courts in the enforcement of new bye-laws designed to ensure crop hygiene, good husbandry and the maintenance of the resettled structure (Leitch 1956, 282).

The chiefs' prominent role in the Zande Scheme, was cause and consequence of their close ties to the British district commissioners – and simultaneously of the friction between them both and ordinary and educated Zande people alike. Anthropologist Reining writes that the district commissioner, 'did not seem to be aware of the decline of the chiefs' authority, which was further weakened by their role in compelling the unpopular resettlement and cotton cultivation' (Reining 1966). This friction would come to a boil in the Nzara 'trouble' of 1955, one of the events that would contribute to southern resistance to Sudanese rule in the years that followed (see Section 2.4).

How this second resettlement campaign was received from below is contested. Again, there are some optimistic accounts. The district commissioner at the time reported that the Zande 'partook in their resettlement with the utmost cheerfulness' and Badal writes that 'All the achievements of the Zande Scheme were made without incurring the terrible disruptions in the tribal life that was greatly feared in the pre-war years' (Badal 1977, 258). A different impression is offered by Reining, who arrived in the region in 1952 – a full year after the last resettlement – and spent 3 years doing research on the Zande Scheme. He found that people who had been resettled to the countryside complained bitterly of their isolation from relatives and friends with whom they had lived in the villages (Reining 1966).

The colonial period in Western Equatoria involved two massive resettlement campaigns. When officials evaluated their effect in the schemes' own terms – that is, its success in combating sleeping sickness or promoting cotton farming – they wrote gleeful reports. Chiefs and headmen were also often positive about the resettlements when they increased their control over 'their' people. But Reining, who was concerned with the effects on ordinary people and the broader ramifications of these schemes on social life, paints a gloomier picture. The repeated resettlement of hundreds of thousands of people profoundly changed social life, and in particular the relations between people, places and traditional authorities. In contrast to the Zande kingdoms which famously welcomed strangers in their midst and offered land for them to

cultivate, the colonial administration fostered essentialist ideas of ethnicity, land and belonging (Green 2012, 4). It enforced some movements, and forbade others.

3.3 SUDANESE MOVEMENTS (1956-2011)

The massive and often forced movement of people would not end with colonialism. Sudanese independence was dominated by the two subsequent Sudanese Civil Wars (1955-1972 and 1983-2005) (see Section 2.5), each accompanied by large-scale displacement and return. In the First War (1955-1972), some 500,000 southern Sudanese were 'forced out of their homes ... roughly 20 percent of the population' (Kindersley 2017, 212).[6] In the Equatorias, including Western, many fled a 1965 government offensive. By some estimates, 'the population of Juba might have subsequently dropped as low as 5,000 (and to only a few hundred or less in other Equatorian towns)' (Leonardi 2013, 148). Many of my older respondents had in 1964-5 sought refuge in 'the bush' or across the borders of the DR Congo or the Central African Republic. Isaac, a Zande writer and two-time refugee, explained:

> Often during conflict in Zande regions, ethnic Zande seek refuge across modern state borders but within the pre-colonial boundaries of Zandeland ... The Zande still manage to find relative comfort among the host communities through relatives (*agume*) [not] from one's family, but anyone who shares one or more of 'your clan' (*ngbatunga ro)* ... Through clan connections, displaced Azande always find new relatives among the host communities. Those who host fellow Zande refugees or IDPs are always compelled to show 'the duties of a relative' (*manga pagume*) to those who have suffered disaster (Hillary 2021).

This would be a recurring pattern throughout the war-induced displacements that affected South Sudan, DRC and CAR over the coming decades. When war started, many people would seek refuge across the borders but within the Zande area.

As the First Sudanese Civil War came to an end, the first Sudanese post-war return migration changed settlement patterns considerably. After the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement (1972), the Southern Regional Government gained control over the towns.[7] Their populations swelled, as returnees often preferred

6 Statistics about war-related migration are always complicted, and often political. But this figure seems to be supported by Holborn, who draws on Sudanese government statistics, to estimate that 500,000 people 'hid in the bush' (were internally displaced), and 180,000 took refuge in neighbouring countries: 74,000 in Uganda; 60,000 in Zaire; 20,000 in Ethiopia; and 20,900 in CAR (Holborn 1972).

7 In line with the Southern Regional Government, I understand towns to include all settlements of 5,000 inhabitants or more.

town life to their villages of origin. By one estimate, the urban population in southern Sudan by 1973, 'had risen from less than 50,000 to almost 300,000' (Leonardi 2013, 149). The southern Sudanese government and various international aid organizations sought to counteract this urbanisation. They wanted people to return to their 'home villages' or newly-designed 'peace villages,' with a view of tying people to places, ethnic groups and chiefs to prevent 'scattering and chaos' (Kindersley 2017, 216; Leonardi 2013, 216). Elsewhere in southern Sudan, the Relief, Repatriation, and Rehabilitation Commission (RRRC) established a 'villagization programme' much like in the colonial-era. For a long time the RRRC had no offices in Western Equatoria, and had no capacity to implement this policy and 'proper statistics of returnees [had] not been kept' (Kindersley 2017). Whereas before the war, Western Equatorians had mostly lived 'on the lines' of the Zande Scheme resettlement, when Siemens visited the area in 1984-5 he found that many people upon their return had 'settled by roads of their own volition' (S.D.S.D. Siemens 1990).

When the Second Sudanese Civil War erupted in 1983, Western Equatoria was not a theatre of war at first. Still, the consequence of the war and SPLA-mobilizations were felt. For instance, by Charles, who was studying theology in Tambura at the time. Like many of my respondents, he supported the SPLA in principle but his practical encounters with soldiers were often negative. In an interview in 2017, he recalled how when 'the SPLM movement started. They came and captured our lecturers and tutors. So the [school] was closed again.'[8] Similarly, James was in school in 1989 when:

> There was much shelling in Juba, which made me to flee to Khartoum ... with the aim to go for studies. Because there was instability in the place already, I could not stay in Juba. When I reached in Khartoum, I came and found the same mistreatment [by] the Arabs. They could not let you go to the university unless you go for fighting ... with your own colleagues the South Sudanese.'[9]

His quote illustrates a broader point about movement in war-time: People are perhaps 'pushed' by mortar shells, but simultaneously 'pulled' by education and other opportunities. These accounts are a first illustration of a recurring theme in the history of migration in South Sudan, which has increasingly been recognized in scholarship: Even in times of war, migration may involve mixed motives and defy the simplistic dichotomy between 'voluntary' and 'forced' migration (Van Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa 2009; Czaika and Kis-Katos 2009).

The war did not start in earnest in Western Equatoria until 1990. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) had more or less stable control over towns like Tambura, Yambio and Maridi. However, in late 1990 the SPLA launched an

8 Interview with Charles Bangbe, Western Equatorian refugee in Kiryandongo RS, 19 June 2017.

9 Interview with James Waraga, Kiryandongo RS, 5 August 2017.

offensive. Then, hundreds of thousands of people fled to Zaire or CAR, with smaller numbers going to Sudan, Uganda, the UK, Canada, Australia and the US. Western Equatorians today differ in how they look back on the violence of that period. Many insist that civilians, and especially women, bore the brunt of the violence from both sides. My key respondent Elizabeth, for instance, fled from Maridi to the DRC 'because the SPLA were marrying people by force.'[10] Others saw no reason to fear the SPLA. One ethnic Balanda was 5 years old when the SPLA came to Yambio, 'Many people ran. But we didn't run that time. My father said if we go out, we will suffer. And they were more professional at that time. They were not mistreating civilians.' He still joined the refugees in Mboki settlement in CAR, but for a different reason: 'I left in 1998 looking for education. So I went to Mboki and stayed there for three years. Education there was good, but mostly French.'[11] Again, the migration motives were mixed.

The fragmented nature of conflict in South Sudan (see Sections 1.3.1 and 2.5) helps explain the localized timelines of refuge and return. The heaviest fighting in Western Equatoria took place from 1990 and already by 1993 the area was under SPLA control. And so many of the refugees who had fled within the region, returned within a few years (Duffield, Diagne, and Tennant 2008, 12). In 1993, WorldVision first came to Yambio in response to what they estimated to be 50,000 returnees from Zaire. As Western Equatoria was comparatively safe at this time, displaced people from elsewhere in South Sudan also came here during the war. Also in 1993, a large number of mostly Dinka IDPs settled 'outside of Mundri and Maridi following the Bor massacres' (O'Toole Salinas and D'Silva 1999, 4). This migration would later result in disputes over land and belonging (see Sections 4.2 and 4.4).

The dates of running and return do not neatly map on to the political ruptures. There are trends and patterns, but also countless individual stories which run counter to them: Some people only 'ran' from Western Equatoria in 1998, just as others were returning. Part of this is explained by economics. Displacement – as mobility more broadly – is akin to a 'scarce resource,' more accessible to some than to others (Cresswell 2010). As a 35-year-old woman who now lives as refugee in Kiryandongo RS recalls, 'When the SPLA came we were very young. We were still small, so our father had to carry me and we could not run far.'[12] These sorts of constraints shape people's displacement pathways. Conversely, some Western Equatorian continued their life as a refugee even as 'home' became secure. One chief, for instance, was 13 years old in 1990 when he ran from war. In the subsequent 17 years, he travelled between Congolese, Ugandan and Kenyan refugee settlements and towns in

10 Interview with Elizabeth Night, Kiryandongo RS, 15 May 2017.
11 Interview with Western Equatorian church leader, Arua, 17 June 2017.
12 Interview with 35-year-old female refugee, Kiryandongo RS, 13 May 2018.

pursuit of education and opportunities.[13] People made different choices, balancing many different priorities like security, but also education and economics. The pursuit of a fruitful life continues during wartime and in 'warscapes' (Lubkemann 2008), even if the context of war and displacement offers particular opportunities and constraints.

3.4 Running and returning towards independence (2005-2013)

In most of Sudan, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005) sparked an enormous return migration, numbering some 2,3 million people by 2009 (IOM 2006; UNMIS 2009). The 'vast majority were 'spontaneous' returnees who arranged their own transport and resources' (Bennett et al. 2010, xvi), although UNHCR and IOM also organised large-scale returns. Yet Western Equatoria saw only an estimated 72,250 returns between 2006 and 2013 (UNOCHA, SSRRC, and UNICEF 2006; IOM 2014).[14] Most Western Equatorians had already returned years earlier, and not always voluntary. In 1998 for instance, General Samuel Abu John had led a group of SPLA-soldiers into the area around Dungu in the DR Congo, to violently force refugees back into Western Equatoria.[15] This campaign came right before the time of harvest, forcing the farming refugees to abandon their crops and return to South Sudan too late to cultivate. As after the previous war, Equatorian towns saw an in-migration not just of people who had lived there before the war, but also of people whose area of origin remained unsafe or less developed (Sluga 2011). Here, as elsewhere, refugees' post-war return to their country of origin, did not always equate 'going home' (Hammond 2004).

The CPA heralded formal peace at the national level, but many areas remained insecure and so there were many subsequent displacements. By one estimate, 10 percent of the two million Southern Sudanese 'returnees' who came back since the signing of the CPA in 2005, were displaced again before 2010 (Bennett et al. 2010, xvi). In Western Equatoria, the conflict with the LRA

13 Interview with payam chief, Kampala, 16 June 2017.

14 Specifically, some 12,000 returns in 2006 (only from the DRC and CAR) (UNOCHA, SSRRC, and UNICEF 2006), and another 60,250 from 2007-13 (IOM 2014). UNMIS estimated that in 2009, some 14,003 people returned to Western Equatoria State (UNMIS 2009). UNOCHA also wrote that in 2006, 'Reportedly, 380,000 IDPs from Western Equatoria are registered in Khartoum. It is predicted that they will return though the time-frame is unknown.' This is likely to have been an exaggeration. The total population of Western Equatoria by 2010 was estimated at 619,029 (GOSS and SSCCSE 2010).

15 Abu John was one of the first southern Sudanese to join military college in 1955, and then held a variety of senior positions in the Anyanya 1 movement, the Government of Sudan, the SPLA, and Government of South Sudan. He was also Governor of Western Equatoria State from August 2006 until his death in February 2008. See also: (Zindo 2008). The story of the forced return was narrated to me, among others, in: Interview with former Western Equatoria State minister, Kampala, 21 June 2017.

and with Dinka (see Section 2.6) were also linked to population movements. Many of the Dinka involved in the 2005-6 clashes had come to Western Equatoria during the 1990s. Some were SPLA who liberated Western Equatorian towns, others had been displaced by the 1993 Bor massacre and food shortages in Rumbek.[16] Others, still, were in search of suitable and safe grazing grounds for their cattle (I. Robinson 2014). The friction between these various Dinka groups and groups claiming autochthony in Western Equatoria – including prominently Zande and Moru – only escalated after the CPA, when many people and organizations were adamant that everyone – refugee and displaced included – should 'go home'. The violence, although much smaller in scale than the SPLA-war or the LRA-conflict, still caused some people to run away from the towns temporarily.[17]

The LRA-incursions into Western Equatoria were also the result of an earlier 'displacement'. The Ugandan army had forced the LRA out of northern Uganda, and then from northeast DR Congo (see Section 2.6). The roaming and scattered rebel group then came to Western Equatoria where it displaced some 70,000-100,000 people (Danish Refugee Council and Danish Demining Group 2013, 1). In some areas, people were displaced at a similar rate as during the Second Sudanese Civil War. In Ezo and Tambura, for instance, a survey found that 16,9 percent of respondents were displaced or 'made refugee' in 1990 when the SPLA took over the territory, and 14,5 percent in 2009 at the height of the LRA-crisis there (Rigterink, Kenyi, and Schomerus 2014).[18]

The LRA-related migration catalysed the ongoing process of urbanisation, as people living in the rural borderlands with DRC and CAR fled to towns like Ezo, Tambura and Yambio where they also came to appreciate town life (Braak 2016, 50). LRA-displaced people moved from the countryside to nearby towns, where local government authorities directed them to clear and develop the 'bushy' land on the edge of town (see Section 4.4.1). The LRA-crisis also prompted some 7,000-12,000 Congolese and Central Africans, often Zande, to cross the border and seek refuge in Western Equatoria (Danish Refugee Council and Danish Demining Group 2013, 7; FAO, UNHCR, and WFP 2015). Some 7,000 were hosted in camps in Ezo and Makpandu, and an unknown large number also settled in the towns.

Beyond conflict-related migration, the years around independence also saw an influx of migrants from East Africa (especially Uganda, Kenya, Eritrea and Ethiopia), and from further afield for work or trade. And a small and diverse, but wealthy and visible group of people came to Western Equatorian

16 In 1993 large numbers of IDPs settled outside of Mundri and Maridi following the Bor massacres (O'Toole Salinas and D'Silva 1999). In the small town of Nadiagere, some 100 km north of Yambio, an aid organization in 1998 reported at least 800 IDPs had arrived who fled food scarcity in Rumbek (World Vision 1998).

17 Interview with catholic sister from Yambio, Kampala, 23 March 2017.

18 People under 23 years at the time of the survey in 2013, would have naturally not reported being displaced by the SPLA in 1990.

towns from all over the world to work with UNMIS, NGOs, churches, teak companies, as researchers, or with the US Special Forces near Nzara. All these various migrations left Western Equatoria more diverse and cosmopolitan.

Crucially, not everyone who had left came back. A considerable group of South Sudanese refugees had settled elsewhere. Although numbers are hard to come by, my qualitative research suggests that considerable South Sudanese diasporic groups (with much smaller numbers of Zande) continue to live in Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Egypt, the UK, US, Canada and Australia. These groups often remained connected to their relatives and acquaintances in South Sudan, and would especially during the South Sudanese Civil War (2013-2020) often support them through ethnic associations, churches and family networks (Barnes et al. 2018).

3.5 The meaning of return: Innovation and alienation

> 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.' – Heraclitus

So what did all these movements, and especially the return 'home' around independence, mean to the people and their sense of belonging? The answers are complicated and contradictory. Most of my respondents had been optimistic some of the time, but there were also pessimism, trauma and adjustment problems. This section addresses the pessimism first. Charles, for instance, explains his decision to leave CAR in 2000 as follows:

> Because I was asking myself: if I have to continue here [in Mboki Refugee Camp], all my life will finish and I will do nothing. Unless I decide to nationalize myself in CAR, that could help me in the future. But I decided to repatriate.[19]

Charles was pushed away more by the hopelessness of life in exile in CAR, than drawn by pull factors from Yambio. This echoes an earlier finding about the existential nature of migration: 'it is when people feel that they are existentially 'going too slowly' or 'going nowhere', that they are somewhat 'stuck' on the 'highway of life', that they begin contemplating the necessity of physically 'going somewhere'' (Hage 2005, 471). Charles could see no future for himself in CAR, unless through nationalization, and hoped to find his future in South Sudan again.

The return 'home' was often complicated. Returnees, especially those coming back from Khartoum, often faced questions about their loyalty (Kindersley 2016), succinctly summarized as 'Where were you when we were

19 Interview with Charles Bangbe, Western Equatorian refugee in Kiryandongo RS, 19 June 2017.

fighting?' (IOM 2013). In the competition over power and positions, having 'fought' or 'suffered' became currency for post-war reward. Having run away was argued by some to be weak, or suspect. And yet in Western Equatoria by 2014, the governor and many of his cabinet members had all spent considerable time 'outside'. These elite returnees had come back comparatively rich with money, degrees and ideas to rebuild South Sudan (see Section 4.3). Children who were born or raised in exile faced particular difficulties. They had learned languages like French, Sango and Zande, and knew little English and Juba-Arabic upon their return 'home.'[20]

Many Zande were worried that war, displacement and return, had caused their culture to 'erode' or 'disappear' and people to 'scatter' and 'get lost'. Some argued that Zande people were quick to embrace new ideas, instead of honouring their own traditions. In the words of the county commissioner of Tambura: 'Culture should remain as it is. Before globalisation and democracy ... We lose our essence. Youth don't know Pazande. We are quick to grasp new ideas, but we forget our own.'[21] This process of cultural alienation, was also associated with global ideologies and modern technologies (like Premier League-football, Facebook and cell phones). Yet conflict and displacement played the most prominent role in narratives of cultural erosion. One catholic sister from Western Equatoria, now living in Kampala, explained:

> When I was young I only witnessed two people die in the village, and that was due to old age! There was no violence. We were not brought up to lock the door ... But with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement [in 2005] the roads were opened. And those of us who ran came back. We brought the bad and the good things. Also, our neighbours from Uganda, Congo and wherever brought things that messed up in that way.[22]

In the sister's narration, the peaceful old days were disrupted by the ambivalent influences of returnees and foreign migrants. In Yambio in 2015, this friction was apparent especially in land disputes, but also in day-to-day interactions. For instance, the returnees from Khartoum were sometimes accused of being 'arrogant', 'disobedient to the elders,' and 'abusing people in classic Arabic.'[23] Crucially, the source of friction was based not on ethnicity, but on where people had spent the war and how they chose to carry that legacy into 'return.' People had changed, and continued to differ upon their return. People's ability to deal with such differences amicably was not helped

20 Interview with 24-year-old Zande man, Bweyale, 10 April 2017. People who were educated (partly) in CAR or DRC also often complained how their educational achievements were not always recognized in South Sudan.

21 Interview with county commissioner, Tambura, 18 March 2015.

22 Interview with catholic sister from Yambio, Kampala, 1 August 2017.

23 Interview with 41-year-old 'head youth', Yambio, 2015. See also Interview with Charles Bangbe, Western Equatorian refugee in Kiryandongo RS, 4 August 2017.

by the 'mentality of war'. After one of the many customary court cases that we observed (see Section 5.5), one 'returnee' disputant reflected gloomily:

> We are not going to have things in the right order because everybody is just coming from war, and still has the mentality of war. It might take 10 years or more for all the bad things and injustice now to end. Maybe when this generation has perished.[24]

For all this sombreness, there was also a contradictory sense of hope around independence and return. When I interned at the Dutch embassy in Khartoum in 2011, I met some of the countless southern Sudanese who had lived in Khartoum often for decades.[25] Many were keen now to 'go home'. I joined a priest on a visit to a shantytown on the border of Khartoum and the desert beyond. We brought sugar and salt, and spoke with the southerners who had gathered there about their hopes and fears about the future. The conditions were squalid, and the desert sun and dust were beating down on the little settlement. One old woman in a loose-fitting blue dress was lying between her piled belongings, covered with white tarpaulin. To my surprise, she was jubilant: 'We are like the Israelites in Egypt, we will return to the land of milk and honey.'[26] Having cast their displacement in religious terms – as a punishment by God – many returnees equally considered the return as God-given, and were hopeful about His continued blessings. In secular terms the optimism was understandable, too. After decades of war and more than a century of despotic rule, now dawned the prospect of peace and self-determination.

The hopeful atmosphere was helped by the return of exiles and diasporas who had lived 'outside' for many decades, and now returned to help rebuild the world's newest state (Ferrie 2011). In Western Equatoria, these returnees took up powerful governing positions within the government (see Chapter 4), as traditional authorities (see Chapter 5), in churches or NGOs. Travelling elsewhere and returning 'home' with privileged foreign-earned knowledge – be it a degree or *le pouvoir* (the power, magic from Congo) – had long been an established means for social mobility in southern Sudan. Many sources of

24 Interview with 49-year-old returnee disputant, Yambo, 3 June 2015. His dispute was with his estranged wife, and prominently figured their time in Khartoum and domestic friction upon return to Yambio.

25 This was an exceptional period. Southern Sudanese had voted for secession on 9 January, and independence would follow on 9 July. Disbelief over Khartoum's willingness to let the south go peacefully, gave way to frenzied political negotiations and preparations for independence. Among the many subjects, was the status of the huge number of southerners in the north after independence. Exact figures were complicated and political. Munzoul Assal is quoted by De Geoffrey as estimating in 2006 that, 'IDPs in Khartoum make up 40 percent of the capital's current population; they also represent half of Sudan's displaced population' (De Geoffroy 2007). These estimates included IDP's who were not from the South but from Darfur and South Kordofan.

26 See Exodus 3, 17.

power had their centre of gravity outside Western Equatoria, and (colonial) government, churches, higher education and NGOs all depended on mobility and the interaction between local and foreign ideas, people and goods. In this way, the massive return migration also brought new ideas, often also to reconstruct culture and tradition. For instance, a young Zande lawyer living in the UK drew inspiration from Colombia, Uganda and the US to write a constitution for a to-be-reinstated Zande Kingdom (see Section 5.3.2).[27] The paramount chief had visited South Africa, Botswana and Ghana to learn how their governments and customary authorities cooperated.[28] Ordinary people, too, had experiences from elsewhere, either through their own movements or through relatives who had kept in touch. In peace-time, the connections between Western Equatoria and beyond were kept alive. And just as mobility had predated conflict, it outlasted it too.

The hopeful atmosphere was helped by an economic recovery. When the various conflicts subsided, farmers could go back to cultivating.[29] Western Equatoria quickly became something of a bread-basket for the rest of South Sudan: In 2010, 2012 and 2014 it was the only state to produce more food than it consumed (Goodbody, Pound, and Bonifacio 2012; Zappacosta, Robinson, and Bonifacio 2014; Goodbody, Badjeck, and Mukhala 2010).[30] As roads became safer, trade also recovered (Baguma 2013). Government, aid organizations and companies also invested in Western Equatoria at this time. Businesses and hotels were set up, and roads were built or repaired. By 2014, the streets were lined with signs of various aid organizations doing all sorts of projects: health care, trauma healing, agricultural training, gender-based violence reduction, vocational training. International organisations paid well, often in US dollars. The South Sudanese Pound, too, was relatively valuable at this time. And so a sizeable minority could afford to travel to Uganda for medical care, or to send their children to school there.

3.6 Conclusion

Classical ethnographies and romanticized oral histories paint a picture of a stable 'Zandeland', in which the mostly agricultural population lived sedentary lives. This chapter and the last have, instead, shown how incessant change

27 Interview with member of the Constitutional Committee for the Zande Kingdom, Yambio, 2 October 2014.

28 Interview with paramount chief, Yambio, 1 October 2014.

29 The main crops cultivated in Western Equatoria include maize, groundnuts, millet, sesame, cassava, sorghum, sweet potato, banana, yam, pumpkin and pineapple. Profit is also made from timber (teak and mahogany), oil-palm and fruit trees.

30 With one exception: In 2009/10 Warrap State was estimated to produce a surplus of just under 25.000 tonnes. Western Equatoria produced a surplus of just under 75.000 tonnes that year.

and frequent mobility characterize the lives of those who by 2014-5 lived in Western Equatoria. The turbulent history discussed in Chapter 2 at various times forced, persuaded, enabled, or obstructed people's mobility. People moved to join or avoid relatives, friends, Zande kings, *zariba* trading stations, Christian missionaries, colonial government and armed groups. People were forced out by violence, fear and poverty, and attracted by peace, hope and opportunities. Movement was on foot, by bicycle, lorry, or plane. Sometimes people's movements were coerced by colonial state programmes to transform society (see Section 3.2), facilitated by UNHCR, or forced by SPLA-troops (see Section 3.4). And often, even amidst war, people 'ran' and returned on their own initiative. In short: The movements were endlessly diverse (see Annex 1: Portraits). And although the means and specific contexts of movements changed, some of the core dilemmas remained the same: When is it wise to stay or go? Where can a good life be lived? These questions recurred time and again, as also in 2015 (see Chapter 6).

Only a minority of Western Equatorians now identify as 'continuous resident.' Most people have been displaced at least once but often more often. Especially since Sudanese independence in 1956, South(ern) Sudan belongs to a tragic subset of places with near-cyclical conflict and displacement. In Eastern Congo, scholars found that people 'oscillate continuous[ly] between displacement, refuge, and return' (Rudolf, Jacobs, and Nguya 2015, 107). The oscillation is not quite so continuous in South Sudan, but certainly periodical: During the main three wars, people were typically displaced for at least 5 years at a time (fitting the UNHCR definition of 'protracted displacement'). This means that people are now familiar with fleeing from war, refugee life, and the dynamics of post-war return. The resulting elaborate body of knowledge is evident in people's mobility deliberations, and the expressions and proverbs they use to navigate such decisions (see Chapter 6).

War has been a prominent factor in peoples' mobility deliberations, but it has not been the only one. This chapter has confirmed earlier studies which found that a vast continuum exists between 'forced' and 'voluntary' mobility (Van Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa 2009; A. Richmond 1994). Western Equatorians nearly always had some measure of agency – albeit sometimes to choose the lesser of two evils such as between staying in a warzone or running away. People differed in their assessments of the risks and opportunities of mobility and various destinations. People also balanced many different priorities – among which of course prominently security, but also education. Of course, such agency is always curtailed by people's socio-economic resources (e.g. social networks, money, information), and so not everyone had equal 'access' to mobility (Cresswell 2010). In migration terms: Both people's *aspiration* to move and their *ability* to do so, differed widely. These dynamics will be analysed deeper later in this book (see Chapter 6). The complexity of mobility in Western Equatoria, meant that the dates on which people chose to 'run' were scattered, and even more so the dates of 'return' (see Section 3.4).

This chapter has also shown how 'running from war' and return have also affected much-debated changes in Western Equatorian society. New people, ideas and technologies came to Western Equatoria, and people forged connections to people and places far beyond. As Isaac, a young writer, put it: 'One of the positive lessons one can learn during conflict, is how humans are interconnected' (Hillary 2021). Especially toward independence, the return migration brought ambitious returnees who had lived, studied and worked all over the world. This was to have manifold effects on the governance of Western Equatoria State (see Chapter 4). Here, as elsewhere, the 'return home' was far from unproblematic. Returnees had been nostalgic for 'home', but did not find the idiomatic 'land of milk and honey' upon their return. Friction between 'stayees' and (various groups of) returnees arose (Allen and Morsink 1994; Akoi and Pendle 2021; Grabska 2014), often around land (Braak 2016; Justin and Van Leeuwen 2016; Justin 2020). And many Zande worried that conflict-induced mobility had 'scattered' them, and that they had adopted too many 'foreign' things. They worried that their relatives and children who (had) lived abroad would be 'lost', and that Zande culture was 'disappearing' (see Section 3.5). This perceived crisis of cultural change, helps to explain the urgency with which people set about reconstructing tradition (see Chapter 5), and the essentialist terms in which they would conceive of identity and belonging (see Sections 6.2 and 9.6).

The long history of ruptures (Chapter 2) and movements (Chapter 3) gave way to a 'moment of peace' (2011-15), in which Western Equatoria experienced economic recovery and in-migration. The movements described in this chapter, had contributed to the cosmopolitan character of Western Equatorian towns like Yambio, Ezo and Maridi. They would also fuel demand for urban land, increase its monetary value, and increase disputes over land ownership and boundaries (see Chapter 4). This would in turn inspire a utopian land formalisation scheme by the Western Equatoria State government (Chapter 4). Traditional authorities had come out of the long years of war weak and humiliated, and sought now to secure more prominent positions in the future of Western Equatoria, reconstructing 'tradition' in the process (Chapter 5). So by the time of my first research in 2014-5, the atmosphere in Western Equatoria was one of optimism, moon-shot aspirations and varied 'reconstruction' initiatives. People debated the pace and direction of change, finding inspiration both in the pre-colonial past and in the countries where they had been exiled during the wars.