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

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9 | Overcoming ruptures: The pursuit of future

9.1 AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CONFLICT, CONFUSION, AND THE PURSUIT OF CONTINUITY

Whereas classical anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard sought to reconstruct coherent pictures of 'traditional' societies prior to ruptures, this book instead has sought to write conflict, confusion and the search for continuity into the recent historical ethnography of Western Equatoria, and particularly the Zande. It focused particularly on people's sense of belonging, their changing ties with others and with land, and on competing efforts to 'govern' or control those relations. The main question was: What are the consequences of the long histories of violent conflict and displacement on South Sudanese Zande people, in particular on governance and identity in Western Equatoria (2014-8) and in refuge in Uganda (2015-2019)?

Before I go into these countless consequences, a caveat is that the causality presupposed in this question is confused in real life. In South Sudan, conflict begat displacement (see Chapters 3 and 6), and displacement begat conflict (as with LRA-displaced people in Section 4.4.1). Further, conflict and displacement did not only *cause* particular changes in governance and identity among South Sudanese Zande, they also *resulted* from them. For instance, when Western Equatoria State's 'land demarcation' escalated violently in Maridi (see Section 4.4.2). Or when the increasingly ethnic politics at the national level, trickled down to local perceptions of cyclical disputes between farmers and cattle keepers, which resulted again in an escalation of violence in Maridi, Mundri and Yambio in 2015 (see Chapter 6). So it is more accurate to say that conflict and displacement have interacted with governance and identity among South Sudanese Zande.

The book, itself the result of 'displaced research' (see Annex 3: Methods), explored this thematic in three parts. The first presented a historical overview of the ruptures (see Chapter 2) and movements (see Chapter 3) that affected Western Equatoria State, and especially the Zande. The second part explored how this history influenced the post-conflict reconstruction of land governance (see Chapter 4) and traditional authority (see Chapter 5) in Western Equatoria State (2014-5). The third part analysed how conflict started again in Western Equatoria in 2015 and people's deliberations to stay or move (see Chapter 6), followed by two chapters in Uganda where South Sudanese Zande moved as refugees. There, refugees interacted with Uganda's refugee bureaucracy

(see Chapter 7) and sought to reconstruct their own authority structures to resolve practical problems, foster 'unity', and maintain a long view of their existence (see Chapter 8). Each chapter has its own conclusion, pertaining to the chapter's thematic, geographic and temporal boundaries (see Summary).

In this conclusion I revisit the chapters' main conclusions, and relate them to larger issues and ideas, exploring what forest these trees form. Mainly, I highlight here how people sought to create continuity and future in a context of conflict and displacement. This relates to what trauma psychologists term 'narrative rupture': when the 'existing understandings of home and the events occurring there shatter' (Janoff-Bulman 1992). This has in recent years been applied to conflict-induced migration (Schon 2019). The logic is plain: Conflict violently ruptures our narratives of 'home', and the frameworks of meaning that structure everyday life. And so people leave. Forced migration, in this view, means abandoning one crumbling narrative and setting out for the unknown. And so uncertainty – 'imperfect knowledge and the unpredictability of the future' – is seen as central to conflict-induced displacement (Horst and Grabska 2015b).

Yet our understanding of modern wars and crises has changed. Many of today's 'new wars' or 'complex emergencies' might best be understood not as systematic 'failures' but rather as the functioning of an alternative system (Keen 2008). Anthropologists have shown how crises can be intrinsic to societies' social fabrics and orders, and may not be experienced (only) as breakdown but as context (Lubkemann 2008; Das 2006; Horst and Grabska 2015b; Vigh 2008). Cyclical or protracted conflict still produce uncertainties, but they may paradoxically be familiar to people to an extent. This was the case for many of my interlocutors. Western Equatorians born in the 1960s have often been displaced three times or more (Hillary and Braak, 2022). Conflict and displacement remain generally devastating experiences, but after previous wars South Sudanese people have experienced that not everyone comes out of crisis the same. At war's end, some had military ranks, degrees, language skills, diasporic networks, and were better equipped for peacetime opportunities. This longer perspective is often missing from literature on refugees, which often stresses 'futurelessness' and liminality (Agamben 1998; Agier 2002). Whether and how people see a future for themselves, matters in part because that informs 'life choices in the uncertain present' (Turner 2015a, 174) and the everyday (Piot 2010). However, the future is not a given, and instead subject to individual agency as well (Flaherty 2012; Brun 2016). The same is true for the past.

The consequences of violent conflict and displacement on South Sudanese Zande have been countless and varied, as the preceding sections have demonstrated. Overarching, this book has shown that conflict and displacement have rupturing and unsettling properties, but that these are being resisted by people who try to maintain the long view of their existence. While some people deal with turbulence through a stoic focus on the present, many others shift their

temporal focus to the rich past or a more hopeful, even utopian, future. People look to (increasingly ethnic) identity, (traditional) governance and land as existential and temporal stabilizers in an uncertain world. Past, present and future are connected by material (e.g., children, land, trees, graves) and immaterial things (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.

9.2 FOUNDING HISTORY

Even before the recent civil war (2015-ca 2020) captured in this book, most people had gone through the various stages of fleeing from war at least once. And so the present is only the most recent episode in a long history of conflicts and displacements for South Sudanese Zande. When I asked refugees in Uganda about the effects of conflict and displacement on their (social) lives some would start with the war of 2015, but others would start decades or even a century ago. Conflict and displacement played crucial roles in the very formation of the 'Zande' identity from ethnically and linguistically diverse people joined under Avungara rule (see Sections 2.2 and 3.1). This beginning alerts us to the constructive potential of ruptures.

This book has analysed oral histories, and academic and archival accounts of some key moments in pre-colonial Zande history: Most notably the origin of the Avungara ruling clan, and the reign of kings Gbudwe and Tambura. Gbudwe was the last sovereign king and he was killed during an Anglo-Egyptian colonial expedition in 1905 (see Section 2.3). His death remains a watershed moment that symbolizes in Zande historiography the end to the Zande kingdoms and the beginning of colonialism (see Section 2.4). Yet the pre-colonial kings who now symbolise tradition, ruled at the cusp of modernity. They thrived in the late 19th century through trade and diplomatic ties with foreign forces (e.g., colonial powers, slavers, merchants) and other kingdoms. Although some people now speak of a singular 'Zande Kingdom', both oral histories and archival sources record how prior to colonisation, Zande kings fought wars with each other – also using foreign forces to do so (see Section 2.3). So, while Gbudwe's era is today recalled (and used by Evans-Pritchard) nostalgically as a stable golden age of Zande tradition (see Chapters 5 and 8), his was a time, too, of change, division, and contestation.

Colonial powers occupied the Zande kingdoms, forcing a violent break with the past: They killed or subjected former kings, divided the area across three colonies (present-day South Sudan, DR Congo and CAR), introduced Christianity, and forbade facets of cultural life and customary law. The colonial state then launched various schemes for 'improvement' in Western Equatoria, forcing people to resettle on a massive scale: first to combat sleeping sickness

(1920s), then for the Zande Scheme and to promote ‘villagization’ and ‘tribal discipline’ (1940s) (see Sections 2.4 and 3.2). After Sudanese independence (1956) two Sudanese Civil Wars (1956-72 and 1983-2005) (see Sections 2.5 and 3.3) and the LRA-incursions (2005- ca 2012) (see Section 2.6) further scattered and confused people. Still, the lives of people in ‘warscapes’ were about much more than loss and victimhood (L. H. Malkki 1995; Lubkemann 2008; Leonardi 2013). Even as they had devastating consequences, people also learned to live with and despite of war and displacement, even to seize their opportunities (see Chapter 3).

9.3 RETURNING TO WESTERN EQUATORIA, RECONSTRUCTING PAST AND FUTURE

The second part of this book deals with a remarkable period of peace in Western Equatoria’s history, during which I conducted ethnographic research (2014-5). Yambio was one of the first areas securely under SPLM/A control in the 1990s, and people returned from exile in the years since and especially towards the CPA (2005) and independence (2011) (see Section 3.4). Upon their return to Western Equatoria, people longed for more predictable lives. The passing of time was now again marked by the seasons, Christian calendar, and births and deaths.

Land became a first building block for stable peacetime lives, both for returnees and people who were unable or unwilling to go ‘back’ to the part of South Sudan they had lived before the war (Justin 2020; Justin and De Vries 2019; van Leeuwen, van de Kerkhof, and van Leynseele 2018). Ironically, people’s post-conflict longing for stable peacetime lives fuelled the demand for land which in turn led to countless disputes, some of which again escalated violently (see Section 4.4). In the absence of a single formal tenure system, acceptable proof in land disputes often took the form of temporal witnesses: The memory of local elders or chiefs, trees planted by ancestors, and the graves of relatives. In this context of widespread tenure insecurity, people also established time-resistant material markers on contested land: Building with concrete or even burying relatives (see Chapter 4). The future could not be taken for granted.

9.3.1 Propelled governance ambitions: Returnees for a utopian future.

Some returnees took up positions of authority upon their return. In the aftermath of war and towards independence in 2011, their governing ambitions were propelled by the powerful framing of ‘the world’s youngest state’ ‘starting from scratch’, recycled among nationals and internationals (Badiey and Doll 2018). In other post-conflict settings, too, the scope of ambition (the acceptable gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’) tends to be bigger than in peacetime, as coalitions

of international and national statebuilders endeavour to transform society away from what it was prior to conflict often towards a more liberal mould (MacGinty and Richmond 2009; Murray Li 2007, 278). In South Sudan, laws were adopted that did not ‘mirror’ society (or took into account the state’s limited capacity), but that rather offered an aspirational future vision. This applied not just to individual rights, but also to institutions: On paper, there were county courts and County Land Authorities in every county, in practice they were the exception (Braak 2016)b.

Displacement also played a role in propelling governing ambitions. Many South Sudanese returned from ‘outside’ with ambitions to radically transform their home country. As a UK-trained South Sudanese lawyer in Juba put it, ‘Don’t make a plan with someone who does not understand anything! I make a plea for visionary scientists! ... We need a grand vision. Without it you perish!’¹ In Western Equatoria State, the governor and various state ministers had returned from ‘outside’ – Uganda, Sudan, the UK, US, Australia – and brought with them hopeful aspirations and foreign expertise. This book has explored in particular how the Minister of Physical Infrastructure, with international support, sought to prepare Western Equatoria’s cities for the state of the future (see Chapter 4).

On the road to utopia, state agents often announced they would register ‘what exists’ (i.e., land, traditional authority) in order to recognize or formalize it. People often desired state recognition for its associated promises of legality and certainty, which were especially important in uncertain contexts. But state-led formalisation exercises tended to sacrifice the relational and flexible possibilities of the ‘customary’ on the altar of simplicity and legibility. Further, ‘registration’ was always followed by ‘regulation’: reconfiguring plot boundaries; limiting the jurisdictions of traditional authorities; filtering out the ‘bad parts’ of customary law. ‘Recognition’ also included an economic component: The chiefs’ customary courts had to remit a portion of the court revenue to the local government; and once land had been ‘demarcated’ one had to pay for the lease.²

Throughout Western Equatoria’s history, utopian visions were rarely matched with commensurate state capacity to bring ‘is’ and ‘ought’ in line. This resulted in a crucial role for street-level bureaucrats to invent ‘practical norms’ and to decide where to focus their limited means and what part of the vision to implement (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Sharma and Gupta 2005; Hendriks and Boersma 2019). The County Land Authority in Yambio, for instance, remained operational even after donor funding had phased out and local government refused to take over, but it began charging disputants. The High Court judge in Yambio went on ‘mobile court’-visits to

1 Interview with UK-trained South Sudanese lawyer, Juba, 5 October 2014.

2 South Sudan’s Land Act (2009) did not recognize freehold private land, and so all formalized land was turned into a lease (20, 30, 40 years).

counties without courts to resolve pending disputes there (Braak 2016). It appeared that the higher-level government officials excelled at utopian future planning, and the lower-level ones at the everyday bricolage to remain operational.

9.3.2 Returnee chiefs, reconstructed traditions

War and displacement had ‘scattered’ many chiefs, just as they had ordinary people. Many chiefs were returnees, too: 2/3 of the chiefs we interviewed in Western Equatoria had lived in other countries. Upon their return, they had to learn about Zande history, tradition and customary law from the stayee chiefs and Avungara elders. During the wars, chiefs had often been forced by armed groups to mobilize recruits, intelligence and food, or they were humiliated in front of ‘their people’ (see Chapter 5). So in 2014-5, chiefs complained at being weak, and having lost respect. Still, most higher-level Zande chiefs were Avungara, and many traced their origin to the pre-colonial kings. Chiefs cultivated these privileged ties to the legendary pre-colonial past, but those ties did not inhibit future visions. The post-conflict moment of peace, for them, was about reconstructing tradition, being of service (through dispute resolution and brokering) to ‘their people’, and thereby securing a future privileged position in Western Equatoria.

Crucially, ‘tradition’ was not just invoked by the chiefs, but also by churches, NGO’s and local government. Rather than capturing or monopolizing the currency of tradition (J.L. Comaroff and Comaroff 2018), those other actors legitimized it and, in the process, also elevated the prestige of chieftaincy (see Chapter 5). Piot writes that ‘traditional authorities’ in Togo stood for the ‘decentralised despotism’ of the past, and that NGO’s and Churches ‘refigure temporality – away from a past tied to, while also haunting, the present, to a preoccupation with the future’ (Piot 2010, 9). In Western Equatoria State the distinction – chiefs = past, NGO’s and church = future – was not at all as clear. Wheeler noted about how ‘the Zande church’ in the late 1990s was:

Responding to the turmoil and radical upheaval of the present by presenting itself as the defender of the old ways, perhaps turning inwards, and offering a vision of a past world where authority, tradition and order provided security and assurance. How adequate is this vision for a future which is sure to contain further rapid and confusing change? (Wheeler 2005, 72).

My findings in South Sudan confirmed that the churches acculturated and reconstructed elements of ‘tradition’ and history, for example by using the *gugu* drum to call for prayers or setting up a cultural archive. Yet this did not equate a ‘turning inwards’ or ‘offering a vision of a past world.’ When churches and chiefs cultivated connections with the pre-colonial past, this precluded neither change and innovation, nor a distinct vision of the future.

Many of the returnee-chiefs were elected precisely because of their ability to connect to the world outside, and 'bring' government and NGO's (see Section 5.4). In fact, I propose that much of chiefs' persistent popularity comes from their promise to connect past, present, and future, and to bring positive changes in harmony with 'tradition'.

While returnees were often uncertain and confused about Zande tradition, they were also among its most active proponents and used their international mobility to do so. The Minister of Local Government, a returnee from the UK, was working to ascertain customary law together with UNDP (see Chapter 5); the Zande paramount chief went on an exchange to Botswana, Ghana and South Africa to meet 'traditional authorities' funded by the Swiss government; and a young UK-based Zande lawyer drew on inspiration from Colombia, Uganda and the US to write a constitution for a to-be-reinstated Zande Kingdom (see Chapters 3 and 8). Both in the 1990s and 2010s, Zande refugees in Uganda had been inspired by the Buganda Kingdom to envision how development and a revival of Zande tradition could co-exist (see Chapters 5 and 8). Governor Bakosoro (2010-15) had helped found the 'Zande Cultural Association' in Uganda when he was a refugee there in the 1990s (S.D. Siemens 2010). Upon his swearing-in in 2010 he wore the traditional bark cloth and ceremonial knife (*mambere*) over his black suit (see Section 2.6). Tradition lend itself very well to modern times and future visions (Geschiere 1997). And it was through contact with others and elsewhere, that present-day Zande imagined their own traditions and the future of their own community.

9.4 'IT HAS STARTED AGAIN': TO STAY OR GO?

People's biblical hopes and utopian dreams for a peaceful South Sudan, were dealt a devastating blow with the eruption of violence first in Juba (2013) and then in Western Equatoria (2015). There had longer been a sense that at the national level 'government belongs to other people' (de Vries 2015), but that Western Equatoria was a special place where good futures could be envisioned. When war 'started again' with its manifold everyday consequences, that narrative for many was ruptured (see Chapter 6). People who narrated to me their experiences of violent outbursts, recalled exactly when, how, where and with whom that was. As if time slowed down and became precise in those moments. More happened in a few hours than in the week before.

Yet displacement was not an automatic response to conflict, and instead subject of elaborate decision-making within longer lifetimes and histories of repeated movements (Lubkemann 2008). This is not to deny that refugees fled from war (*oto vura*), and that many were individually persecuted. It is rather to draw our attention to the scope for agency – and the way people use it – in devastating structural conditions. While many things were destroyed or erased through war, other things became possible: Refugee settlements in

Uganda opened, and there were UPDF-convoys. When refugees left, displacement pathways were often informed by migration experiences (see Chapter 3) from earlier wars and peacetime (for education, health care, trade). They were also informed by social networks. Some people even returned to the camp where they were a refugee before. Flight was also aspirational: People did not just leave Western Equatoria, they came to Uganda.

Not everyone who was *aspired* to leave the war, had the *ability* to do so. In line with Carling's 'ability-aspiration-model', I found that many of those who stayed behind in Western Equatoria during the height of the war, were *unable* to leave (involuntary immobile) or only able to run to the nearby 'bush'. My research also showed that there are people, even at wartime, may have the *ability* to leave but still no *aspiration* to do so. Many Zande chiefs and Avungara men sent or brought their families to Uganda, but returned to South Sudan to shield their community from the worst shocks of war or, at least, suffer in solidarity (see Section 8.2.1).

Stayees and refugees sometimes disagreed about the meaning and morality of movement, and whether and for whom 'running' was necessary or cowardly, an abandonment or necessary tactic. Such moral debates were shaped, too, by peoples' views of the future. Elderly were often considered 'too old to run', and the children as 'the future seeds of the nation' (see Section 6.6). Precisely because children were seen as vital to the future, people sacrificed to send them to Uganda. There they would be safe from violence and (forced) recruitment, access good English-language schools, so that eventually they would come back better-equipped to take up the sparse 'office jobs' in South Sudan. This tactic was based on earlier experiences of displacement and return, had continued during peacetime, and now fused again with the refugee migration of 2015. When people face significant obstacles on the road to exile, which the better-off or well-connected are better equipped to surmount, displacement is likely to perpetuate social inequalities (Akoi and Pendle 2021). This certainly seemed the case for the displacement of Western Equatorians and Zande to Uganda – as not everyone was able to send children to Uganda and enrol them in schools and universities.

9.5 REFUGEE SETTINGS

Upon their arrival in Uganda's refugee settlements, many people experienced a 'honeymoon'-period of sorts, in which they were grateful to have survived and to now receive food, safety and shelter (DeWolfe 2000). Uganda's refugee policy allowed various negative liberties, which required socio-economic resources to enjoy. And so wealthier refugees enjoyed a wholly different displacement experience from the majority who were poor and dependent on the meagre monthly aid distributions. For them, the future drifted out of focus in the settlements.

Neither the refugees nor the Ugandan refugee authorities were completely at ease with their being in Uganda. The Ugandan refugee administration was only concerned with the refugees because they had crossed the border and were in need of protection and survival. The refugee authorities' mandate over people is limited in time to the period that they are refugees: The periods before and after did not matter. In this way, the refugee label has a tendency to erase history and heterogeneity, and focus all attention on a present, a suspended emergency (L.H. Malkki 1995; Ramsay 2019; Brun 2016). While Uganda's refugee administrators held a longer view of refugee settlements as places that may develop through refugees' presence (Zakaryan 2018), individual refugees were prevented from 'displaying settlement characteristics' and instead frozen in liminality (see Section 7.5). When the Ugandan authorities bulldozed refugees' permanent houses, they were in effect blocking refugees from envisioning and realizing a particular future.

9.5.1 Despair, meaning, and continuity

For many refugees the key to sanity and survival was to maintain the long view of their existence. In the refugee settlements, although incomparable in many ways to concentration camps, some people still experienced a similar sense of future-lessness, living a 'provisional existence' (Frankl 2008, 79). Many of my interlocutors reflected on this predicament of future-lessness. Mary in Kiryandongo RS said, 'I don't know what is between today and tomorrow.' Another refugee in Bidibidi RS said plainly, 'We have taken so long without a certain future.'³ Many refugees experienced time, now, as imprecise and dull, with the future evaporating in a timeless morass of liminality.

To look for meaning in the troubled present, many refugees shifted their focus from the tormented present, to the past or future. These temporal foci held no fixed meaning, and people 'saw' different things. Some were nostalgic about the past, others found in it proof that they were doomed to be born South Sudanese. Equally, the future to some was a continuation of endless suffering – or the biblical End Times – while others dreamt boldly of diplomas, scholarship and businesses. And not all days were the same. For example, sometimes my key respondent Charles was enthusiastic and full of energy. But on other days I would find him looking in the distance at nothing in particular, grumpy and irritable. He would answer my questions curtly, and lament: 'Some of us, we are expiring. Getting old ... Humanitarian aid just salvages the crisis. You can keep us alive, but for what? If we have no education we just sit around waiting to die.'⁴

3 FGD with non-Zande men from Western Equatoria, Bidibidi, 19 August 2017.

4 Interview with Charles, Kiryandongo RS, 9 February 2018.

For Charles and many others, displacement periodically meant existential crisis. Some would suffer depression and take to 'negative coping' like alcohol addiction and domestic violence, and 'going home to die' became a trope for expressing despair at the situation in Uganda (see Section 7.3). The Nietzschean adage applied: 'He who has a why to live for, can bear almost any how'. Yet this 'why' was not binary – found or not – instead requiring constant work. Some refugees sought to make their present in Uganda more stable and permanent by buying land, building with good materials, planting trees that took long to grow, edifying their *tukuls* with paintings, getting a Ugandan ID, sometimes even burying relatives (see Chapter 7). Through these practices they were trying to establish a stable foothold in their turbulent lives, in open defiance of the Ugandan laws, regulations and practical norms designed to freeze their liminal status. A central assumption in land formalisation literature is that people will not invest in land when they are tenure insecure (De Soto 2000). Some refugees agreed. As James in Kiryandongo RS put it, 'Here we cannot invest. When you grow a tree here and you have to move back abruptly, you cannot even cut it. But there, you plant trees for the future. For your children. I have 6 plots in my country. Here we sit like this, idle.'⁵ Like James, many refugees had little faith in a Ugandan future and (also) prepared their children for an eventual return to South Sudan. Yet both in South Sudan and Uganda, other people would invest in land – title, crops, constructions and graves – to solidify their claim precisely because they were tenure insecure.

9.5.2 Refugee authority

The Zande chiefs were remarkably absent in exile in Uganda, and yet they remained popular. My interlocutors explained this in part by referring to the important roles that the 'weak' chiefs had nonetheless played in South Sudan: to resolve disputes, to broker with the state and NGOs (see Chapter 5). However, there were other more elusive reasons, too. First, people blamed the South Sudanese Civil War on self-serving politicians, on the armed groups, and on militarized youth. The chiefs were largely seen to be innocent of the ravages of war, even if they had also failed to protect their communities from the worst shocks of it (see Chapter 5). Chiefs' weakness and suffering in the war, may have increased their legitimacy among the refugees. Second, chiefs were brokers not just between parties, but between past, present and future. They offered authoritative accounts on the past, and visions of the future, and strove for harmony between the two. Such visions represented not a conservative clinging to the past or a resistance to change, but rather a longing to have more control over its pace and direction.

5 Interview with James, Kiryandongo RS, 7 February 2018.

In the absence of chiefs, a variety of other refugee-led authorities came up (see Section 8.4). This book focused on two secular authority structures.⁶ First, the Ugandan state-initiated 'Refugee Welfare Councils' (RWCs) as democratic governance bodies performing minor governance tasks over refugees in particular parts of the settlement. Second, refugee-initiated 'Community organizations' which mostly aimed to counter-act the perceived favouritism of the RWC's, the perceived 'scattering' of 'their people' (defined along (sub)ethnic or regional lines), and to resolve disputes 'within'. These various 'communities' overlapped: Kiryandongo refugee settlement, for instance, had a Zande, Western Equatorian and Equatorian Community. These would cooperate or compete as refugee settlement politics dictated, with ethnic and regional identities situationally emphasized or overcome (see Section 8.4.4). The various authorities also sought to encourage people that this crisis was temporary, and remind them that, 'Tomorrow, next tomorrow we will go back. But let us not go like we came. Let us go with something!'⁷ Such temporal reorientations offered meaning, direction and hope in the present.

9.6 'SCATTERING' AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY, TRADITION, AND FUTURES

Zande: *Ho I de ngua ni, agu azire nadu na bambura ti abehe na ngbataka na agu anya naana sungo ti nzeremehe ki ngbataka du, ono ka i a mukonga taraha ya ti a funo berewe ki da ni bangua.*

English: When they cut a tree, the birds that had their houses on its branches and the animals that lived in its shade all run away, and leave the tree. But if the roots of the tree are not uprooted, it will grow again and become the same big tree.

- Emmy J Yoere, South Sudanese Zande musician based in Uganda, in a song on the reinstatement of a Zande kingdom

I opened this thesis with a paradox concerning identity, sharply observed by Gupta and Ferguson: '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). This book has shown that this holds true for many South Sudanese Zande with whom I conducted my research. Like musician, Emmy J Yoere, cited above. He is a South Sudanese Zande who has lived in Uganda for much of his life, and who sang this song in the Zande language about the reinstatement of a Zande kingdom. Partly due to wars and displacement, 'the

⁶ Churches were among the first to set up across the sprawling settlements, offering again the biblical frames of reference to their constituents. Their important roles are beyond the scope of this study.

⁷ Interview with 58-year-old former chief, Rhino Camp, 12 August 2017.

tree has been cut down'. But after rupture, from the roots a new (or old?) tree is likely to grow anew.

Due largely to conflict and displacement, the already diverse and globalised 'Ringara Zande' (Zandeland) had become even more so, and many Zande now lived 'outside'. The process by which South Sudanese Zande moved to cities, to Uganda, or 'outside' to the Global North – including when it was not in response to war alone – was often labelled by stayees and refugees as 'scattering'. For all the benefits mobility offered, they also saw risks. Older Zande worried especially that the youth would individualise or assimilate, that they would forget 'their' language and learn Ugandan ones, or strike up courtships with non-Zande or Ugandans. As one refugee in Uganda put it: 'Everyone is free and lives on his or her own way'.⁸ People did still draw on cultural knowledge – but they did so to justify opposed courses of action. For example, concerning displacement, people would often invoke one of two Zande proverbs: *Batiriki I so ko puu ni baso, nzapia nzapia I so ko pirapira* (He who sat still was hit by the spear, but the one who ran only got bruised); and *'Yo ngba tini a té'* (Literally 'There is no place which is good,' effectively 'The grass is always greener on the other side'). The former was cited by refugees as urging flight, the latter by stayees as urging staying put. Cultural knowledge and norms, here, did not determine people's behaviour, but were rather used to justify it. In previous times perhaps traditional authorities – chiefs, elders, or kings – would give authoritative readings of tradition and the right of course of action. To many refugees, the present 'freedom' represented a worrying form of individualisation. Without a group to belong to, what would remain of the self? In the words of Charles, 'Once you lose your culture, you are not what you are. If you don't speak your language, you don't know your way of life or the history of your people.'⁹

This fear of individualisation and cultural alienation predated the recent displacement, and related to the widely-noted historical practice (or 'tradition') of Zande to value and absorb 'outsider' things (S.D. Siemens 2010, 6; James 1979, 233). The pre-colonial Zande kings – now seen as the embodiment of 'tradition' – were famous for incorporating foreign ideas, people and technologies (see Section 2.3). And after the previous war, too, 'returnees' derived part of their power from foreign expertise and experience (see Chapters 4 and 5). However, many people now felt that the pace of change had been too swift, and that something essentially 'Zande' was at risk of being lost.

This sentiment of threatened loss, spurred efforts to revive 'the culture', tradition and rediscover history. So *why* and *how* is it, in this particular case, that 'ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places became perhaps even more salient' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 10)? In exploring this subject, I took inspiration from Malkki's seminal 'Purity and Exile' which 'explores how

8 Interview with 27-year-old female refugee, Bidibidi, 18 August 2017.

9 Interview with Charles, Western Equatorial refugee in Kiryandongo RS, 4 August 2017.

displacement and deterritorialization ... may shape the social construction of 'nationness' and history, identity and enmity' (L. H. Malkki 1995, 1). Her ethnography on Hutu refugees in Tanzania found a striking contrast between refugees in town who 'tended to seek ways of assimilating and of inhabiting multiple, shifting identities' and those in the camps who were 'continually engaged in an impassioned construction and reconstruction of their history as 'a people'' (L. H. Malkki 1995, 3). While I admire her approach and analysis, my findings are quite different.

Some of these differences can be explained by the historical, demographic, and geographical specificities of our cases. In Malkki's case, 'the homeland' (Burundi) had been captured by another group, and so to many Hutu refugees living in homogenous camps, 'displacement had become a form of categorical purity' (L. Malkki 1992, 35). In my case, even though many South Sudanese Zande left 'home', a larger number stayed in Western Equatoria (see Chapter 6). What is more, the Ugandan refugee settlements were both sprawling and ethnically diverse. A sense of 'categorical purity' was apparent in my research, too, but rather located in villages in 'Zandeland' where my interlocutors assured me 'pure' or 'real' traditions and history still exist.

Malkki found that the urban refugees 'assimilated' more than camp refugees, and were less pre-occupied with the reconstruction of history and tradition. In contrast, South Sudanese Zande refugees in the settlements were often poorer and could not afford to meet one another across the settlements, let alone organize much. Meanwhile town refugees came together for church services and 'functions', and would be visited by diasporic Zande occasionally (see Section 8.5). When a 'Zande General Assembly' was organized in Uganda, it was held in Kampala. It had been the same in South Sudan: All the romanticism about the unspoiled countryside notwithstanding, the practical work of traditional reconstruction (reinstating the kingdom, codifying customary law, rediscovering traditional dresses) required resources, political clout and new ideas – and so it mostly took place in Yambio, with involvement of returnees and/or diasporas. And so there is a sense that ethno-nationalism with South Sudanese Zande was situated not in the idealized country-side (or the dusty camps), not even just in Yambio, but rather in a transnational realm of possibility.

In Uganda in 2017-9, Zande refugees sought to preserve group unity and also to revive elements of tradition. The two did not always go hand in hand. For instance, the Zande community organisations were focused on Zande unity (see Section 8.4.2), and the Azande Traditional Association was about 'record[ing] in all forms the fading customs, culture and language of the Zande.'¹⁰ Youth found one another on the football pitch – setting up various 'Zande' football teams (including Gbudwe FC) which nonetheless often counted non-Zande players as well – and seemed beyond the names to be not at all

10 Interview with Charles, Kiryandongo RS, 28 May 2019.

concerned with traditions or history. Elsewhere, too, Zande youth were actively organizing in Uganda, and used traditional symbols loosely. The Azande Student Union in Uganda (headed after a democratic election in January 2020 by the son of a chief) also organised traditional dances. Young Zande musicians were recording neo-traditional music videos: Dancers dressed in bark cloth, sometimes with royal themes, filmed with a DSLR on a Steadicam, and uploaded to YouTube and spread through Facebook and Whatsapp. Interestingly, these videos looked very similar to those by Ugandan or Nigerian artists. So the revitalization of localized tradition was embedded at least in inter-African globalisation.

This is no Zande or South Sudan-specific phenomenon. The Comaroffs wrote on Mafikeng, South Africa that, 'The production of the local was always also entailed in the effort to fabricate some measure of existential coherence and closure against the cross-currents of history' (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 2003, 162). And Massey wrote: 'What gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations' (Massey 1993). Through contact with others and elsewhere, the importance of defining the self and the group became more urgent. Seen in this light, perhaps it is not surprising that much of the revitalization of the South Sudanese Zande group identity and tradition, actually began outside 'Zandeland'.

Refugees' interest in Zande history and identity, did not mean that they were not also ably adapting to their environments. The journey to the city or to exile invariable meant meeting 'others' – people who spoke different languages, ate different food, saw things differently, held and performed different identities. Most mobile people learned to hide, exaggerate or perform their various identities – Western Equatorian, Zande, refugee, vulnerable, youth, urban, woman, catholic, etc – as the situation requested (see Section 7.4.2). Each of these terms might become adjective or noun, depending on the interaction (Heinich 2019). Contrary to Malkki's case, this was true also for refugees in the Ugandan settlements, as the 'battle for camp chairman' showed (see Section 8.4.4). So, even as there were initiatives to bolster elements of 'Zandenness', most peoples' everyday experiences with identity were constructivist, performative.

So far, I have mostly explained the *what* and *how* of the salience of Zande tradition and identity: This is how and where it was organized. The *why* is complicated. I propose two main reasons. A first reason relates to people's disappointment with the 'South Sudanese' identity. The politicization of ethnicity (and its connection to 'territory') has a long history in South Sudan: from the colonial 'Zande District' and 'tribal discipline', through Sudan's 'Kokora' and the 2005 Zande-Dinka clashes (see Section 2.6). The promise of independence was, in part, about southern unity across ethnic and regional divides. Yet already by 2014-5 many Western Equatorians considered that the national government 'belongs to other people' (de Vries 2015) who catered

to their own (sub)ethnic groups. Ethnicity and family relations became a shorthand for access to things like land and jobs (Justin and de Vries 2019; Schomerus and Aalen 2016). In this light, it is tragic but perhaps unsurprising that following the division of states of late 2015 and the creation of Gbudwe State, some non-Zande Western Equatorians were reportedly ‘chased away from Yambio’ because they did not ‘belong’ there (see Section 8.5.2). Equally in Uganda, many refugees felt they ultimately did not belong. One Zande woman who had lived as a refugee in Kiryandongo RS for over 50 years since the first Sudanese Civil War, said she still did not feel like, nor was seen as, a local (Zande: *boro kono*, ‘person here’).

This relates to the second reason for the enduring importance of Zande tradition and identity: people’s desire for stability, for a future vision, and for a (hi)story to be a part of. The Ugandan government and its street-level bureaucrats made it abundantly clear that refugees’ welcome was temporary (see Sections 9.5.1 and 7.5.3). And so even as refugees sought to establish a foothold in Uganda, most saw their future back in South Sudan. A Zande expression says, ‘*Kumbo boro kua baramu yo te*’ (A person has no inheritance in a foreign land). The most significant inheritance for most Zande was land. Leaving home – geographically and socially – meant forfeiting that inheritance. Land was not just of increasing economic value (see Chapter 4), it was also an important source for continuity and belonging. It was where the ancestors were buried. Some Zande mothers in Uganda would send their umbilical cords back to be buried in ‘Zandeland’, and people who could afford to do so would rather repatriate their dead than bury them in Uganda (Hillary 2020).

The uncertainty brought by conflict and displacement made it all the more visible that essential connections between people, places and times are, in fact, constructions and hard work. The ostensible friction between *constructivist* and *essentialist* readings of identity, and between *traditions* and *modernity*, appeared not to bother people as much as they have academics. Musing on the appeal of a reinstated Zande Kingdom, my key respondent Albert explained:

A government can come and go and reverse policies of previous governments. But the King is permanent unless he dies. He would help the Azande to develop economically and socially. Once we have a Kingdom, it can give scholarships. In the future, we trace the history of our ancestors.¹¹

9.7 FUTURE RESEARCH

The strength of this book – its multi-sited, longitudinal and interdisciplinary approach – has also been its weakness. Each chapter dealt with a thematic

¹¹ Interview with Albert, Arua, 7 June 2017.

and academic sub-field, which would have merited an entire book. I have barely scratched the surface of the many captivating fields of inquiry I have explored, and then there are subjects which I wondered at but was not able to explore in this book. Here I mention a few possible directions for future research.

In South Sudan, Western Equatoria's customary courts merit a thorough quantitative study to follow up on this book's exploratory findings (see Chapter 5 and Annex 4). For this book we digitized customary court records to get insights into their case load and resolutions. It would be fascinating to do this over a longer period and in more courts, and to analyse the results against locally-specific timelines of conflict and peace and follow-up qualitative interviews. In this way, one could learn how periods of insecurity affect both 'justice seeking' and the functioning of the customary courts.

In Uganda, my research on refugee authority structures took place during the first few years after refugees' arrival. Things were just being set up. The literature on refugee settlements suggests that ethnicity often becomes a more important organising principle over time (see Section 8.1). It would be interesting to research whether that is the case with Western Equatorians in Uganda, partly by looking at the ethnicity- and region-based authority structures. The interaction of these structures with the state-initiated Refugee Welfare Councils also deserves more elaborate research (Vancluysen and Ingelaere 2020).

Future research may also further explore multi-sited ethnographic topics and methods. I would suggest three topics here. First and most practically: the return. When and why will which Western Equatorians return from Uganda to South Sudan? And do their experiences of return match their expectations? Will those who were young and in school in Uganda indeed take up 'office jobs' and chiefly positions after their return to Western Equatoria? And how will the return impact (ethnic) identities? Will 'returnees from Uganda' form groups in Western Equatoria, just as there were 'those from Khartoum' before? What will relations between returnees and stayees be like? And what will all this mean for aspirations for a reinstated Zande Kingdom?

A second multi-sited ethnography could focus on the three Zande-majority areas in the DR Congo, South Sudan and the Central African Republic. The Zande were divided by colonial boundaries (see Sections 1.2.1 and 2.4). But at the same time, people have continued to cross these borders, including to 'run from war' and to seek shelter with relatives on the other side (Hillary 2021). A fascinating multi-sited study could be done across these borders on enduring cross-border mobility and connections, or contrasting and comparing (particular elements of) traditions. Given that the colonial borders have also divided subsequent scholarship on these areas areas, perhaps the best candi-

date to carry out such research would be a Zande-speaker with good knowledge of French and English.¹²

Finally, a multi-sited ethnography could analyse the increasingly globalised Zande community, also in the West. This book has mostly focused on Zande people in South Sudan and Uganda, and I have only glimpsed at the roles of diasporic communities in the UK, US and Australia (Barnes et al., 2018). Anecdotal evidence collected during this research suggests that diasporic communities (and periods) are a significant component of the increasingly globalised 'imagined community' of Zande. A first facet of this global community are the money flows (e.g., trade and remittances) which are significant, but which people are secretive about. A second facet are the social media channels which are often (partly) managed by diaspora in the West but through which Zande everywhere communicate, often in Zande language, about culture, traditions, and politics. A third facet of this global community, are the marital relationships. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some diasporic Zande want their children to marry 'from home', giving life to complicated long-distance courtships with eligible young Zande in South Sudan and Uganda. Why and how this happens, could teach a lot both about life for people of colour in their new countries, and about the enduring salience of the Zande identity and community in times of globalisation and abundant change.

Perhaps more fundamentally, I hope that in the future South Sudanese people themselves will write more about their cultures and histories, asking new questions and finding different answers. Many South Sudanese people have rightfully become sceptical of foreign 'experts' like myself. Most expertise I have is a distilled version of what I was taught by my interlocutors, the real experts. Then again, what is not written, risks being forgotten. I am overjoyed in this regard to have met Isaac Waanzi Hillary, whose writings about Zande culture and history are available on his Worondimo-blog. I hope he and others like him will be given the opportunities to study, research, and write.

9.8 IN CLOSING

This book started with a distressed phone call from Peter in Yambio, prior to his flight to Uganda. A single episode in a single story. The intermittent years and pages were full with the experiences of others who, like Peter, navigated conflict and displacement to the best of their ability. Their lives have been cacophonous and confusing. I have attempted to make this book slightly less so, by inducing more general patterns and trends. However, the map is

12 These colonial boundaries instilled a linguistic and scholarly divide, too: between French-speaking research on CAR and (this part of) the DRC, and English-speaking research on the Sudans.

not the territory. Knowledge is reductive and selective (Hastrup 2004, 456), and 'a text is not the phenomenon we study or the experience of researching it' (Lund 2021, 66). Much less is it the individual experiences of the people on whom this book is based. To acknowledge the perseverance of human individuality and complex ingenuity in wartime, I have included five elaborate portraits in the first annex.