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

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Summary

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Classical anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard sought to reconstruct coherent pictures of 'traditional' societies prior to ruptures. But if ever there was a stable time of coherent traditional life in South Sudan, it is not in living memory. The last century was marked by foreign occupation, prolonged civil wars, and displacements, alongside globalisation and modernisation. This book writes conflict, confusion, and the search for continuity into the recent historical ethnography of the Zande of South Sudan. It focuses on the ties between people, between people and land, and the competing efforts to control those ties. These three foci relate to proto-legal questions that underpin human society: Who are we? To whom and where do we belong? And whose authority do we accept? This book shows that these foundational questions gain new urgency and salience in times of war, displacement, and return.

This book draws on multi-sited ethnographic research in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan (2014-8) and in various towns and refugee settlements in Uganda (2015-9). War made my research area in South Sudan inaccessible, and when nearly a million South Sudanese sought refuge in Uganda I decided to continue my research there. The research material collected includes customary court records and observations; notes on ethnographic 'hanging around'; and hundreds of interviews with refugees and stayees, chiefs and elders, government officials and former combatants, and ordinary people. The book contributes to the literature on South Sudan and the Zande people, and the thematic fields on civil war, forced migration, refugee governance, traditional authority, and land formalisation.

The introductory Chapter 1 sketches the study's geographical, conceptual, and disciplinary contexts. It discusses how its central concepts – 'ethnicity' and 'identity', 'war' and 'displacement', 'governance' and 'tradition' – ought to be understood and researched in contemporary South Sudan. The chapter also reflects on anthropologists' complicity in the construction of 'traditional authorities' and 'tribes', both of which were central components of colonial states' indirect rule-policies. Although anthropologists have tried to move on – seeing identities now as constructed, negotiated, and performed – outside

the academy essentialist ideas about identities live on and sometimes resurge. This book joins a small group of ethnographies of war and displacement, to show how periods of rapid and often coercive change can inspire people's renewed interest in their history, tradition, and identity. The introduction ends by sketching the outline of the book.

Chapter 2 offers a concise historical foundation for the rest of the book, focusing on the origin of the Zande, and the interaction between their authorities and various colonial and post-colonial states (1500s – 2014). Sources on the pre-colonial past – colonial-era archival material, Evans-Pritchard's work, and present-day oral histories – have their limitations and are often at odds with one another. This chapter compares and contrasts the different versions of three crucial parts of Zande history: the origin of the ruling Avungara-clan, King Gbudwe and Tambura's position vis-à-vis colonial government, and King Gbudwe's death (1905). Certain is that the death of King Gbudwe marked a watershed moment in Zande history. Since then, the Zande people have faced two colonial resettlement schemes, two independences, and three civil wars with their associated displacements. Yet beyond destruction, these incessant and often violent changes were also constructive of new ideas about history, tradition, and culture. When South Sudan became independent in 2011, a dynamic moment of peace began for Western Equatoria marked by returns, reconstruction, and a regained sense of Zande pride.

Chapter 3 analyses how throughout Western Equatoria's turbulent history, mobility and immobility were imposed. First by kings, slavers, and colonial forces. Later by states and armed groups. During the colonial time, there were two enormous resettlement campaigns. To combat sleeping sickness in the 1920s and for the Zande Scheme in the 1940s, hundreds of thousands of Western Equatorians were moved. Since Sudanese independence in 1956 there were three civil wars, each of which displaced millions of southern Sudanese. This chapter further shows how 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration were not dichotomous, rather opposite ends of a spectrum. And how exile and return brought new ideas, networks, and resources which influenced the post-conflict moment (see Chapters 4 and 5). By 2014, few Western Equatorians were 'continuous residents' where they lived, and the towns were increasingly cosmopolitan. This chapter's history of conflict-related mobility makes abundantly clear just how much the people of this area had changed since the time of Evans-Pritchard, and it also helps to explain people's responses to renewed civil war in 2015 (see Chapter 6).

Chapter 4 investigates how after this long history of ruptures and movements, people returned to Western Equatoria during a 'moment of peace' and tried to find land to rebuild their lives. Various kinds of conflict-related migration – return, displacement, refuge –merged with pre-existing urbanisation. This resulted in a high demand for urban land, countless land disputes, and a complicated patchwork of tenure arrangements. This chapter details an ambitious and popular plan by the state-minister of physical infrastructure,

himself a returnee, to 'demarcate' (formalize) land to resolve a host of problems. One motive was to get the land ready for the utopian plans of the state: Yambio was to have an international airport, an electric grid, and firetruck services. But these ambitions were not matched with a clear policy framework, or with adequate human and financial resources. And so beyond failing 'conventionally' in line with land formalisation literature, the process caused and rekindled countless disputes and pitted ethnic groups against one another, before eventually grinding to a halt. This chapter shows how land formalisation in a post-conflict setting has to contend with conflict-related migration, and can inadvertently rekindle conflict particulary when there are a variety of normative grounds to claim land ownership. The chapter ends with the dramatic shooting of a government official charged with resolving land disputes, forcing him to seek medical care and safety in Uganda.

Chapter 5 analyses how traditional authorities, especially chiefs, in Western Equatoria emerged from the history of conflict and displacement. In the tumultuous years around independence individual chiefs were weak while the *idea* of 'traditional authority' enjoyed resurgent popularity. This chapter explains this peculiar resurgence by reference to four factors: the *zeitgeist* of self-determination; returnee chiefs' cultivated link to legendary pre-colonial time of sovereignty; the performance of chiefs' customary courts; and chiefs' gatekeeping or brokering roles. Chiefs themselves reflected some of the changes and continuity affecting the wider population. Still, most chiefs were Zande, and members of the Avungara clan. But most chiefs had been elected rather than selected by their fathers. And they had lived mobile lives: about two-thirds of the chiefs had lived in other countries, and only a quarter had never left Western Equatoria. Like the returnee state minister in Chapter 4, returnee chiefs often aspired to bring development and modernization, while also fostering tradition and history. The chapter shows how in Western Equatoria, churches, NGO's and local government also invoked 'tradition'. Rather than capturing or monopolizing the currency of tradition, those other actors legitimized it and, in the process, also elevated the prestige of chieftaincy. The chapter ends by showing how once civil war began anew, chiefs faced a perilous tightrope walk between their different allegiances. Some chiefs were shot, others arrested, and yet only a handful sought refuge in Uganda – and most stayed in perilous South Sudan.

Chapter 6 analyses the new war that broke out in Western Equatoria from 2015, and peoples' subsequent choice to stay or go. The war began in various places at different times, pitting armed civilians against one another and against the state army (SPLA). War was confusing and highly localised, with reliable information about it scarce. Yet in countless indirect ways, it made peoples' lives less livable. This chapter draws on interviews with refugees in Uganda and stayees in South Sudan to reconstruct this early phase of the war, and to trace who stayed or left, and why. It shows how even when migration is 'forced' by war, it still involves choices. In line with Carling's 'ability-aspira-

tion-model', it finds that many of those who stayed behind in war had been unable to leave: 'involuntary immobiles'. But some people who had been able to leave had had no aspiration to do so, often because they had too much to lose or because they were expected to stay as leaders of their communities or families, or protectors of the land. This group has often been overlooked in the literature on forced migration. The chapter discusses the normative and moral frameworks which shaped when moving was acceptable for whom. Conflict-related migration from South Sudan was also informed by past experiences (see Chapter 3) and individual households' tactics, leaving their members split across various countries or even continents.

Chapter 7 explores how South Sudanese Zande refugees arrived and settled in Uganda from 2015, focusing on Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. During the first phase of arrival, refugees sought land, aid, and documents. For all three, they initially turned to the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ugandan state organ charged with refugee management. OPM envisioned the refugee settlements as places of agricultural self-subsistent production and therefore spread refugees across the settlement grid – so that each household could farm enough land. Yet refugees had their own interests, such as proximity to acquaintances, roads, and markets, and the fear for being isolated. This mismatch resulted in a complicated and largely informal renegotiation of land tenure in the settlement. OPM also viewed the settlements as temporary and so insisted that refugees could not use 'permanent materials' to construct their houses. Yet refugees were eager to settle down, and so they planted trees that would take years to grow, edified their houses with paintings, and even buried relatives on the land they hoped would be theirs for long. These practices can partly be analysed as refugees' 'place-making' efforts in exile. But they were also a response to the Ugandan state's insistence on liminality and temporality, and refugees' desire for more solid land ownership and belonging. This illustrates how contrary to land tenure orthodoxy, people may invest in land precisely because they feel tenure insecure (also Section 5.2). The chapter also shows how cycles of war, refuge, and return have interacted with a 'hierarchy of displacement': stretching from the 'involuntary immobile' unable to leave their war-affected homes, to the diasporic or trans-local families in Western countries.

Chapter 8 analyses how South Sudanese Zande and other Western Equatorian refugees in Uganda reconstruct non-state authority. It finds a remarkable absence of chiefs and Avungara in exile. These traditional authorities were expected to stay in South Sudan to shield their communities from the shocks of war, or through their solidary suffering safeguard the social contract that underpinned their right to rule. With chiefs absent in Uganda, there was still an abundance of other aspiring authorities among the refugees. This chapter analyses two. First, Refugee Welfare Councils (RWC) which were initiated by OPM but whose leadership were sometimes elected by refugees. Second, Community Organisations (CO) which were set up by various ethnic and regional

groups, partly to counter-act the perceived ethnic bias of the RWCs. Through CO's people also influenced the RWC electoral process. This chapter illustrates how different authorities competed in the refugee settlements, and how various 'orders' were tied to particular identities. Lastly, this chapter explores how in the absence of traditional authorities in exile, people speak about their future role in South Sudan. It finds a remarkable nostalgia among many Zande for their absent chiefs and even a future Zande Kingdom. This longing appeared as widely distrusted by non-Zande Western Equatorians.

The concluding chapter revisits the chapters' main conclusions, and relates them to larger, more universal, issues and ideas. Confronted with war and displacement many Zande people lost hope in the present, and sought for it anew in the past or future, connecting nostalgia and utopia. People sought for, and valued, those things that promised existential and temporal stability to cope with the instability of their world: both material (e.g., children, land, trees, graves) and immaterial (e.g., education, Zande language, the history of King Gbudwe, ancestors, *Ture* folk tales, the Zande Kingdom). These orientations were central to people's quest for survival, meaning, and continuity, and to overcoming the ruptures posed by war and displacement.

The annexes include a series of long-form portraits of key respondents James, Charles, Elizabeth, Albert, and Chief Zaza, a poem on the outbreak of war by Isaac Waanzi Hillary, customary court caseloads, and the full methodology of this displaced ethnography.