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Zande chieftaincy and kingship: historical memories, future visions and reinstatement of a Zande kingdom

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Zande chieftaincy and kingship

Historical memories, future visions and reinstatement of a Zande kingdom

Bruno Braak and John Justin Kenyi

Introduction

A certain generation may be lost. Those in the diaspora in Europe and the Arab world, they are born there and are really lost. The first point of an identity is the language, but they don't know it... But back home everybody is also lost in one way or another. There has been no stability for one century. First the colonials – Egyptians, Turkish and English – then the conflicts. So people have been moving all over. I thought I knew a lot about the Azande, but then I realized that so much has been lost.¹

The South Sudanese Civil War (2013–present) and the consequent forced migration presented a new chapter in the long Zande history of turbulence. Today, as in the times of the fieldwork of Evans-Pritchard (late 1920s) and his student Reining (1950s), the everyday lives of many Zande people are marked by unpredictability, confusion and change. Many Azande now live as refugees in other countries, and for some this is the fourth such experience.² Some of those people, like the above cited former minister, express despair. They say people are 'lost' and that the Zande language and rites are forgotten. War and displacement are also often seen to have weakened the custodians of tradition and culture, i.e. elders and chiefs.

But on the burnt remains of war and displacement shoots of constructive change have taken hold. 'Zandeland' is now intimately connected to the rest of the world by migration, trade and aid. There are sizeable and well-organized Zande communities in Uganda and Sudan, and smaller ones in the UK, Canada, Australia and the US.³ Some Zande families manage to send their children to good

schools and universities in Uganda. Others are discovering the old books that Evans-Pritchard once wrote about the region, and have begun to write anthropological essays themselves.⁴ Meanwhile, the urban centres of 'Zandeland' have grown more cosmopolitan, attracting Dinka butchers, Darfuri and Eritrean traders, Indian pharmacists and Western loggers, missionaries and aid workers. These global connections are facilitated by modern technologies like Western Union, Facebook and WhatsApp (Barnes *et al.* 2018).

This flux of people, ideas and goods has also had ramifications for traditional practices and institutions, such as chieftaincy and kingship. By some accounts, globalization is alienating particularly the youth from traditional authority structures. But modern technologies and connections can also bolster renewed traditional practices (Geschiere 1997). In Yambio, this was apparent from the discussions about a draft constitution for the envisioned reinstated Zande Kingdom. In October 2014 Bruno Braak interviewed a young man, who was studying law in the UK and was proud of his Zande heritage. He had been involved in drafting this constitution, and explained the various sources of inspiration they had had:

We found that the Colombian Constitution allows for a fair degree of autonomy for ethnic communities. Also, some American tribes have a tribal constitution. We also look toward the Baganda in Uganda. We need a local system of governance to suit our needs. The fundamental question was: What part of history can we maintain, and what part should we improve?⁵

This chapter draws on qualitative research (2014–19) among Azande in South Sudan and in displacement in Uganda, to explore a paradox: Zande traditional authorities

¹ Former state minister in Western Equatoria State now living as a refugee in Kampala, 1 August 2017.

² The Sudanese Civil Wars (1956–72 and 1983–2005) resulted in forced migration. Some people were also displaced by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). See also Hillary and Braak, 2022.

³ For instance, in London the 'Azande Community UK' organized a King Gbudue Memorial Day on 16 February 2018.

⁴ Most notably Isaac Waanzi Hillary has written anthropological essays and poems in Zande and English, which are available on his blog, worondimo.wordpress.com (accessed 11 November 2022).

⁵ Interview with Zande law student, Yambio, 2 October 2014.

were widely seen as weak, and yet they enjoyed widespread public appeal. Visions of a future that more resembles the imagined past – with prominent roles for chieftaincy and kingship – had gained currency, we argue, in large part due to the precarity and uncertainty that many Azande have recently experienced. Traditional authorities' wartime weakness and suffering had not decreased their credibility, quite the contrary. People felt that when traditional authorities had suffered in this way, this had demonstrated their loyalty to 'their people'. By some accounts, cultural erosion has not just resulted from war and displacement but was at the root of it. Bringing back traditional institutions, then, was presented as a way to salvage what remained, and to promote peace and development. We argue that it is in this light that the reinstatement of a Zande Kingdom in Yambio in February 2022 should be seen.

Methods

This chapter draws heavily on *Customary Authorities Displaced*, a report written by the authors for the Rift Valley Institute's (RVI) South Sudan Customary Authorities project (Braak and Kenyi 2018). Most of the research for that report was conducted by the authors in July and August 2017 in Uganda in several refugee settlements (Bidi-Bidi, Kiryandongo and Rhino Camp) and urban centres (Arua, Bweyale and Kampala), where many refugees have settled. We further draw on our research in Western Equatoria⁶ up to 2015, and in refugee settlements in Uganda between January 2017 and November 2018. Our research methods included semi-structured and oral-history interviews, focus-group discussions and video elicitation. Most of what we write in this chapter reflects the situation in those times and places. The reinstatement of a Zande Kingdom in February 2022 fits with the trends we describe, but we have not yet conducted follow-up research on its current form and function.

Evans-Pritchard emphasized that in anthropology findings are influenced by the researcher's background, character and outlook (Evans-Pritchard 1976:240–54). Our work is no different. John Justin Kenyi is a South Sudanese man from Central Equatoria State, who was educated in Norway and now lives as a refugee in Uganda. Bruno Braak is a Dutch man, who first came to (then) Sudan in 2011. Our research assistants were young English-speaking Azande. People we met, explicitly or implicitly, reflected on our backgrounds to decide whether and with whom to speak, and what to speak about.

In one instance in August 2017, Bruno was refused an interview with a grandson of King Gbudue,⁷ whose defeat at the hands of Anglo-Egyptian forces is seen by many as

the beginning of colonial rule over the Azande. The next day, he called Bruno back to his home. During the polite introductions before the interview, he asked: 'Do you know what the white man did to my grandfather, King Gbudue? They killed him! Have you come to kill me?' At times people were more open to speak with our Zande research assistants, at other times they refused to do so and instead only wished to speak with one of us directly. One former minister explicitly linked his willingness to speak to a foreign anthropologist with his concern about the erosion of Zande culture. He argued that Evans-Pritchard was given access under the same terms:

You know the Azande were the first to know that one day our culture will be eroded. So they cooperated with Evans-Pritchard to document the culture for our children. That was the agreement: they allowed him access in return for his documentation of the culture.⁸

There are countless ways in which these sorts of sentiments may have influenced our findings. But we feel that working in an international team has helped us to mitigate for some of these limitations.

In this chapter we write about the 'Azande' (plural) and 'Zande' (singular or adjective), that is, people who self-identified as Zande and typically spoke Pazande as their mother tongue. This 'population' is far from homogenous. Evans-Pritchard describes how from the mid-eighteenth century, the 'Ambomu people under the leadership of their Avongara royal house' had migrated east to what is now South Sudan (Evans-Pritchard, 1971:xi). In the process, they conquered and subjected many smaller groups, amalgamating them into the Zande language group. Over time, this group came to share certain cultural beliefs and practices, and to self-identify as a 'people' – even as differentiation between clans and regions persisted (Evans-Pritchard 1957). Still today, the wider Zande group is subdivided into clans. It appeared to us that these clans mattered more in South Sudan, where they continued to shape the distribution of land; than in Uganda, where clan relatives are fewer and clans anyway cannot offer access to land. In South Sudan, as elsewhere, 'blood-based' notions of identity are common, but in everyday life identities are often fluid and negotiated, emphasized or concealed, depending on the context. Some Zande-speakers today care very little about 'Zandenness' or emphasize other identities – including the new-found Ugandan one. Inter marriages between ethnic groups are not uncommon, and youth groups of friends – especially in displacement – typically include members of other ethnic groups. In Uganda, Zande refugee youth have set up numerous football teams –

6 Especially in the Zande-majority counties of Yambio, Nzara, Tambura and Ezo.

7 Also written as Gbudwe.

8 Interview with a former state minister in Western Equatoria State living as a refugee in Kampala, 1 August 2017.



sometimes with Zande names like 'Gbudue', 'Bakindo' or 'Anisa' – which nonetheless often include non-Zande South Sudanese players.

Most South Sudanese Azande live in the west of Western Equatoria State. That area borders the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central Africa Republic (CAR), where sizeable groups of Azande also live. Some South Sudanese Zande use the term ‘Zandeland’ (*Ringara Zande*) to refer roughly to the area from Tambura in the

north-west to Ibba in the south-east. Yet its boundaries are contested, and the area hosts a rich diversity of people. The notion that land should belong to a certain (ethnic) group of people had been periodically reinforced by state policies. In colonial times, for some time there was a 'Zande District'. And between 2015 to 2020, 'Western Equatoria State' was formally divided into four states, two of which – 'Gbudue' and 'Tombura' – were named after pre-colonial Zande kings. The wars and displacement that affected

the region have increased mobility between the various Zande-dominated areas (Hillary 2021) and beyond it. During the current civil war (2013–present) many Azande have sought refuge in Uganda, especially in Rhino Camp and Kiryandongo Refugee Settlements, and in Arua and Kampala.

Signposts

The remainder of the chapter is divided into three sections. The first briefly explores the turbulent history of ‘Zandeland’ since the first non-African foreigners arrived in about 1858, and the roles of chiefs and kings in it. It highlights five episodes that contemporary Zande narratives often discuss when speaking about this history. The second section describes the state of chieftaincy in the last South Sudanese Civil War (2013–present) – both at home, and in displacement. The third section describes and analyses some of the current debates and future visions about chieftaincy and the reinstatement of a Zande Kingdom.

Historical memories, reflecting on 150 years of turbulence

For many Azande, the story of disruption and decay begins with the death of King Gbudue – a member of the Avungara royal clan – in February 1905. King Gbudue (also known as Yambio, born circa 1835) is remembered for ruling over the Azande during a period of military prowess that included battles with the Dinka, Moru, Arabs, and British. By some accounts, the Azande lived in unity and peace, and together resisted colonial occupation. But both Evans-Pritchard, Reining (1966:7), and Poggo (1992), and oral histories such as told by then-paramount chief Wilson Peni, testify to considerable intrigue and warfare between the various kings and princes.⁹ In fact, the ‘betrayal by King Tombura’ of King Gbudue is still brought up to this day – most recently at a meeting of Azande in Kampala, Uganda.¹⁰

Many Azande still speak of ‘those days of Gbudue’ and associate it with an unchanging order of culture, authority, and identity. Evans-Pritchard wrote that during his field research between 1926 and 1930, ‘[for the Azande] before and after Gbudue’s death is not to them just a difference in time before and after an event. It is a deep moral cleavage.’

9 In Evans-Pritchard’s account, the overthrow of Gbudue himself was facilitated considerably by the cooperation with the Belgian colonial forces of Zande Prince Renzi (son of Wando), and the cooperation with the Anglo-Egyptian colonial forces by King Tambura and the sons of King Ndoruma (Evans-Pritchard 1971:388–9).

10 A Zande friend told Bruno that during this meeting of Azande living in Uganda in early 2019, friction arose between people from Tombura and Yambio. The latter made comparisons between the betrayal by Tombura of Yambio in 1905, and the unpopular governorship of Patrick Zamoi (from Tombura) over Gbudue State (based in Yambio).

(1957:65). Some ninety years later, Gbudue’s death continues to serve as a watershed moment in Zande historical memory: since then, colonization, wars, and displacement have disrupted what once was. But to nuance too neat a periodization, Evans-Pritchard (1971:283, 294) discusses how Arab and European influences in Zandeland date back as far as 1858, and historical records and present-day oral histories suggest that resistance to colonial occupation continued until at least 1914.¹¹

The (colonial) state and chieftaincy

Colonial occupation divided the Zande people into three states: Belgian, French, and Anglo-Egyptian. Many Azande today feel that these divisions were designed by the colonial powers to subjugate them: ‘When the British came in, they saw that these [Zande] people were not easy to handle or convince so they had to divide them in to three countries.’¹² In other parts of Sudan, the Anglo-Egyptian colonial administration empowered or invented chiefs. But with the Azande the colonial strategy was first to divide, co-opt or militarily overthrow pre-existing authorities. After a period of military administration (1905–11), the civil administration recognized or appointed chiefs it could control and regulated their powers. It diminished chiefs’ powers over land but endorsed or created their role in taxation and dispute resolution.¹³ The colonial government also influenced the relations between chiefs, people, and land by resettling hundreds of thousands of Azande – first in the 1920s to combat sleeping sickness, then in the 1940s as part of the Zande Scheme. The coming of colonial authority is still associated with a decay in cultural order: ‘Azande were civilized before the coming of British.’¹⁴

11 The Sudan Archives at Durham University hold a series of letters from R.G.C. Brock, Inspector of Maridi District, to R.M. Feilden, the Governor of Bahr el-Ghazal, ‘concerning unrest amongst the Azande and ... plans to drive the government out of Yambio’ (1914). Three chiefs were found guilty and sentenced to ten years imprisonment by a Mudir’s court. This sentence was later suspended by Governor-General Reginald Wingate, who instead fired the three chiefs and exiled them to Khartoum. T.A.T. Leitch, Letters from colonial officials R.G.C. Brock, R.M. Feilden, and W.R.G. Bond pertaining ‘unrest among the Azande’, Durham University Library, Archives and Special Collections. Reference code: GB-0033-SAD.315/6/1-30, 1914 January 21 and November 30. Evans-Pritchard doubted whether the chiefs – four of Gbudue’s sons: Mange, Basongoda, Gangura and Sasa’ – were seriously contemplating armed revolt given the futility of open resistance (1971:394).

12 Interview with female Zande elder, Makpandu, March 2015.

13 The colonial government incorporated and limited the chiefs’ judicial tasks through the Chiefs’ Courts Ordinance (1931). Among other things, this regulated the kinds of cases they could handle and the sanctions they could enforce. (Leonardi 2013:81).

14 Interview with female Zande elder, Makpandu, March 2015.

The government's incorporation and regulation of the chiefs, leaving them a considerable degree of autonomy, has essentially remained unchanged since colonial times (Rolandsen 2005). Chieftaincy became a gateway position between the state and its people, one that offered risks and considerable opportunities (Leonardi 2013). Some Western Equatorians assert that colonialism has never ended. Whether the government is controlled by the British, Arabs or Dinka is not always thought to matter much, because it still 'belongs to other people' (de Vries 2015).

Chiefs during the Sudanese Civil Wars

The First and Second Sudanese Civil Wars (1956–72 and 1983–2005) profoundly affected life in 'Zandeland' and the position of customary authorities. During the wars, then southern Sudan fractured into various shifting spheres of control and many Azande fled to the DRC and the CAR. In the Second Civil War, the relationship between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and customary authorities in Western Equatoria was ambiguous. In the areas it controlled, the SPLM/A set up civil institutions to rule over local populations, and in some instances SPLA commanders took over chief-like roles (Leonardi 2013). The SPLM/A incorporated chiefs into the military structure and relied on them to 'provide what was needed (recruits, porters, grain, cattle, etc.) in addition to their local conflict resolution capacity' (Rolandsen 2005:69).

Chiefs argue they were instrumental to the war effort, but that their partnership with the SPLA was one-sided. Chiefs who were unwilling or unable to provide the SPLA with what they needed were humiliated in front of their people. A former state minister recounts that: 'Some chiefs were made to carry loads in front of their subjects. Some were lashed ... You know when a chief is lashed in front of his people... He loses a certain dignity.'¹⁵ These malpractices were acknowledged by President Salva Kiir in 2009, when he opened a conference with traditional leaders by thanking them for their contributions during the war, and by apologizing for the fact that 'some of you were manhandled and treated badly by some of our soldiers' (Leonardi 2013:1).

This wartime sense of neglect was further aggravated by the SPLA's inability to protect Western Equatoria State when it faced incursions from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).¹⁶ In response, senior Western Equatorian politicians and customary authorities supported the establishment

of vigilante groups, called 'Arrow Boys'.¹⁷ The South Sudanese central government promised support, but this never materialized.¹⁸ The Arrow Boys proved effective in countering the threat of the LRA – in the process bolstering a sense of pride among Western Equatorians and Azande in particular (Schomerus and Rigtink 2016:17).

Independence (2011) and chiefly relations with the new state

Independence Day celebrations in Yambio on 9 July 2011 began with 'an early gathering including the governor at the grave of King Gbudue' (Siemens 2015). This was perhaps illustrative of the hopes people held for bringing back sovereignty to local society, and for the renewed importance people at this time attributed to pre-colonial history. In 2015, Zande society – through a variety of efforts involving chiefs, the state government, and the church – sought to rediscover and promote elements of its culture that had been lost or suffered due to colonization and war: the language, the clothing, the ways of cultivating.

The years of war and displacement, however, had left many chiefs poor, humiliated, and demoralized. Chiefs were often unable to give resources to those in need, to influence land and labour, or to access state authority, which had helped cement their authority in earlier days. In 2015 a county commissioner summed up this change in status, observing that, 'Many chiefs drink too much. They don't have a reasonable house.... As a leader, you must feed people. You must have wealth!'¹⁹ A grandchild of a pre-colonial Zande king agreed: 'Now the chiefs or traditional authorities just lead a normal life among their people. The names and titles are there, but no real power.'²⁰

South Sudan's chiefs had hoped that upon independence, national government would reward their support for the war effort with more prominent positions. But they were disappointed. By 2015 the main government-endorsed function for customary authorities was to resolve minor disputes in their communities. Often, this was done in state-recognized customary courts, at the lowest three administrative levels.²¹ The higher chiefs were paid salaries by local government, but this remuneration grew increasingly insignificant as inflation soared from early

15 Interview with former state minister in Western Equatoria, Kampala, 13 June 2017.

16 The LRA is a Ugandan rebel group which crossed to South Sudan, DRC, and CAR. It had been making incursions into Western Equatoria since 2005, which intensified after failed peace talks in Juba in 2008.

17 Particularly influential in this regard, was governor Joseph Bakosoro (2010–15) – Braak and Kenyi 2018:26.

18 'Some 5 million Sudanese pounds (more than USD \$2 million) will be spent arming the "Arrow Boys" vigilantes, Western Equatoria State governor Joseph Bakosoro told Sudan Tribune.' (Ruati 2010).

19 Interview with county commissioner, Yambio, 27 January 2015.

20 Interview with grandchild of pre-colonial Zande King, Arua, 9 August 2017.

21 These levels are the county, *payam* (sub-county) and *boma* (village, ward). See also: Government of South Sudan 2009, 2011.

2015. Meanwhile, chiefs were no longer allowed to levy taxes, which had bolstered their wealth in the past.²² Chiefs' roles in land tenure and transactions were equally challenged, especially in urban areas, by the government's land formalization programmes. As in colonial times, chiefs relied on government, which was seen by some to undermine their authenticity and legitimacy.²³

Chieftaincy at war and in displacement (2013–present)

The current civil war started in December 2013, and by 2015 it spread to Western Equatoria.²⁴ The war cost an estimated four hundred thousand lives (Checchi *et al.* 2018), and over four million people fled their homes.²⁵ For many South Sudanese, forced displacement is a familiar condition. For some people who were alive during the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–72), this is their fourth such experience (Hillary and Braak 2022). Some of the people we interviewed had spent more time living in refugee settlements 'outside' than at 'home' in South Sudan.

Chiefs and royalty and the return of war

War spread to Western Equatoria when the SPLA clashed with local armed groups, some of whom were former Arrow Boys. The return of war was seen by some chiefs to stem from their lack of control over an increasingly militarized and undisciplined youth (Miettaux and Garodia 2015; Miettaux 2016). But our research suggests that the mobilization of the youth happened in part through existing (customary) authority structures. As one former Arrow Boy narrated to us, 'Our leaders started the war and pushed it to the youth. Because we do not have education, we do not understand.'²⁶ Whether stronger chieftaincy and a more obedient youth would result in less violence, thus remains contested.

With the resumption of war, the chiefs' uncomfortable dual reliance on government and local communities became more dangerous. When chiefs sought to convince the SPLA and the local armed groups that they were neutral, they were often not believed, especially when they moved

between the government-controlled towns and the rebel-held countryside. Chiefs became vulnerable to suspicion, allegations, and attacks from all sides.²⁷

This precarious situation of customary authorities was perhaps best illustrated by the arrest of then-Paramount Chief Wilson Peni in November 2016. Peni is the grandson of King Gbudue and was at the time heir-apparent for a to-be-reinstated Zande Kingdom. When he was arrested in 2016, there was no trial or explanation. Yet Azande in Uganda interpreted Peni's arrest as retribution for his continuing to speak to the Arrow Boys and for his strained relations with the then governor of Gbudue state.²⁸ Former governor Bakosoro protested his arrest, warning that it could 'destroy the social fabric of the Zande community' (Radio Tamazuj 2016). Some also considered it to undermine Zande visions of a reinstated kingdom. Peni was detained for a month, and after his release was given a position on the National Dialogue Steering Committee. In February 2022, he was crowned King of the South Sudanese Zande.

This points to a contemporary paradox in the power of chiefs in South Sudan. King Peni's legitimacy is in large part based on him being an Avungara-clan member, grandchild of Gbudue, and a good traditional leader for his people. But his formal position, first as paramount chief and later as king, and his personal freedom, are controlled by the South Sudanese government. Of the many sources of power that a chief can draw on, government support and protection remain vitally important. Reflecting this, King Peni has spent much of the recent years in South Sudan's capital, Juba.

Displaced/absent chiefs in Uganda

The war's large-scale displacement further undermined the position of chiefs. Most chiefs stayed behind in South Sudan, because for a chief crossing the border is understood to mean a decline in power. They are highly regarded when they manage to shield their communities from the worst shocks of war or at least suffer in solidarity. One elderly woman living in a refugee settlement said that, 'You die

22 Under the Khartoum regime, the Sudanese government used chiefs to levy a household tax (*kofuta*). The revenue was divided between the chiefs and the town council.

23 Telephone interview with high-level government official in Yambio, 10 August 2017.

24 For a deeper analysis of the South Sudanese civil war and its manifestation in the southern Equatoria region, see Copeland 2016.

25 The 'Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre' estimated that 1.9 million South Sudanese people were internally displaced as of 1 April 2019. UNHCR estimated that 2.28 million South Sudanese people were refugees or asylum seekers as of 28 February 2019.

26 Focus-group discussion with former Arrow Boys, refugee settlement in Uganda, 6 August 2017.

27 Schomerus and Rigterink describe how prior to the conflict 'depending on personal relations', chiefs in Western Equatoria could be viewed as a 'government representative' or 'buffer between government and people' (Schomerus and Rigterink 2016:26). This research suggests that under the Bakosoro administration it had been possible for chiefs to switch between both of these roles, depending on context. As the conflict in Western Equatoria escalated, however, the position of customary authorities became more precarious.

28 Between 2015 and 2020 Western Equatoria State was split into four new states. Major General Patrick Zamoi was the first governor of Gbudue State when it covered Yambio, Nzara and Tombura counties. Later, Tombura became a separate state with Zamoi as its governor. Interview with former government official, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, 19 June 2017.

with your people! ... That is the spirit we appreciate in them!’²⁹

The few chiefs from Western Equatoria that are living in Uganda, have mostly opted to live in towns and cities if they can afford to do so. When interviewed, they generally had a personal story of persecution or other reasons – often health-related – to justify their departure from South Sudan. Most emphasized that they would go back as soon as the war ends. The chiefs in Uganda generally stress that they have no formal position there and that they want to abide by the country’s laws.³⁰ In the refugee settlements chiefs are not actively involved in governance. Instead, the settlement commandant from the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), the UNHCR and a variety of NGOs hold authority. The highest South Sudanese authorities in the settlements are the Refugee Welfare Councils (RWCs) – elected bodies of refugees who are involved in settlement coordination meetings.

In Uganda, South Sudanese refugees from different parts of the country now live as neighbours. One female refugee in Uganda explained that now ‘the people are scattered, including the chiefs in South Sudan. So everyone is “free” and lives in his own ways.’³¹ In some instances, refugees organize community bodies. Kiryandongo Refugees Settlement, for instance, has organized ‘communities’ of ‘the Azande,’ ‘Western Equatorians’ and ‘the Equatorians.’ These structures tend to be very formalized – with a ‘chairperson,’ ‘cabinet’ and so forth – but to date have limited influence (Braak 2022).

Current debates about the future of chiefs and the Kingdom

The previous two sections described some of the changes that ‘Zandeland’ has experienced, and how they are seen to have weakened traditional authorities. Since the Zande kings and princes were defeated or co-opted by the colonial state at the beginning of the twentieth century, they have not played roles of similar importance. In part through displacement, urbanization and globalization, Zande people are living more urban lives, enjoy more education, and are in contact with ideas and people from all over the world. One could imagine such ‘modern’ influences would further weaken the appeal of ‘traditional’ institutions like chiefs and kings. And yet our research confirms the findings of an earlier survey in Western Equatoria, which found that the initiative to ‘reinstate the Zande Kingdom’ enjoyed

overwhelming support.³² And indeed in February 2022, on the 117th anniversary of the death of King Gbudue, a new Zande kingdom was reinstated in Yambio – with formerly paramount chief Wilson Peni as the new king. Why?

The future of chieftaincy

Most Zande people we spoke to in Uganda supported the idea of, once again, having stronger chiefs. What they expected from them, however, varied quite widely, depending on their societal position. It was clear to all, including to chiefs themselves, that their claims to ‘tradition’ and historical rootedness did not rule out future change and reform. When asked about customary authority, people often also spoke of cultural order in a wider sense: about the existential anchoring offered by a body of knowledge encompassing history, culture, morality and identity. In the ideal-typical memory, this knowledge used to be taught by elders to youth around the fires at night, and it was reinforced on significant days (e.g., births, weddings and funerals). War and displacement, with its scattering of people, were seen by many as threats to this order.

People in the camps projected their personal predicament onto the future roles they hoped stronger customary leaders could play. Elderly men often emphasized that elders and chiefs are the custodians of culture, language and law. They hoped that customary leaders could bring youth back into the fold. Women in the refugee settlements often stressed that they were alone in providing for their families. Stronger customary authorities, they reasoned, could provide them with advice, security and money.³³ Youth often expressed different hopes for a restored chieftaincy. First, they hoped that customary authorities would reverse the inflation of dowries. As one former combatant explained, ‘In those days of [King] Gbudue, they helped the youth. Unlike now, where people marry using money.’³⁴ Second, younger people hoped that chiefs would resume their role as conduits between their people and the (central) government. As one former combatant put it: ‘It is the chiefs who know and present issues to the government. Many people are far from the government and the government does not know about them or their challenges. If anything happens, the government will not know... It is the chief who knows.’³⁵ In other words, support

29 Focus-group discussion with elders, female respondent, refugee settlement in Uganda, 12 August 2017.

30 Interview with former Mundu chief, refugee settlement in Uganda, 12 August 2017.

31 Interview with a 40-year-old Moru refugee, Bidi Bidi refugee settlement, 18 August 2017.

32 Some 94.5 per cent of households surveyed in Tombura and Ezo counties agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: ‘I support the coronation of a new Zande King.’ (Rigterink, Kenyi and Schomerus, 2014:60).

33 Interview with 19-year-old Moru refugee woman, Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement, 11 August 2017.

34 Focus-group discussion with former Arrow Boys, Bweyale, 6 August 2017.

35 Focus-group discussion with former Arrow Boys, Bweyale, 6 August 2017.

for chieftaincy in South Sudan did not mean a desire to have a parallel system, but rather to have stronger links to the state.

Whether and how chieftaincy ought to be reformed was debated by Azande in the Ugandan refugee settlements. Three questions frequently resurfaced. First, should chiefs be elected or appointed, or can they inherit their position? Traditionalists argued that the hereditary quality of chieftaincy gave the institution its independence from politics and politicians.³⁶ But reformists argued that chiefs should always be elected, so that good people without chiefly heritage could come to positions of leadership, and so that bad chiefs could be held accountable for their performance.

A second question concerned the eligibility of women for chiefly roles. It appeared that most people supported a stronger role for women. Since the Second Sudanese Civil War, women have played more prominent roles in government.³⁷ Western Equatoria has had female members of parliament and state ministers, and a female governor³⁸ and county commissioner. In 2015 many customary courts also had a female member on their three-person panel of judges and there were also headwomen (the lowest rank of chieftaincy). Stronger positions for women also enjoyed support from, for instance, then-Paramount Chief Peni, who argued that 'Women can sometimes understand some topics much deeper than a man.'³⁹

A third question was whether chieftaincy should be open to non-Avungara. At the time of our research in South Sudan in 2015, most paramount chiefs in Zande-majority counties hailed from the Avungara (royal) clan. Chiefs below the paramount chief, such as executive chiefs, sub-chiefs or headmen, more often came from other clans or ethnic groups.⁴⁰ Some people remained strongly in favour of keeping the Avungara in power, arguing that their right

to rule was 'God-given.'⁴¹ The view that other clans should rule appeared a minority one.⁴²

Reinstating the Zande Kingdom

Efforts were made to reinstate the Zande Kingdom after independence in 2011.⁴³ A committee was formed, in 2014 collections were held, and a sub-national Zande constitution was being written. Although the initiative was widely seen to come from a group of Zande customary leaders and politicians in Yambio, it enjoyed overwhelming support in other Zande-dominated parts of Western Equatoria, with one chief in Ezo saying, 'People are ready! If anything comes from Yambio, we are ready.'⁴⁴ At the time, the church and state government supported reinstatement, too. But, as a senior Avungara clan member explained in 2015, 'Politicians in Juba fear the kingdom. They want divide and rule. The kingdom will create unity among the Azande and they will be very powerful.'⁴⁵ His words foreshadowed the conflict that would come to Western Equatoria later that same year.

Due to the South Sudanese Civil War, the reinstatement was put on hold. The Zande leadership wished to avoid the impression that they wanted to separate from South Sudan and were keen to have state recognition and support for a reinstated kingdom. As the Avungara clan member indicated, 'The launch of the kingdom was supposed to be attended by the president and other African kings. But [now there is] insecurity. How long will we wait?'⁴⁶

Azande in the Ugandan refugee settlements in 2016–18 expressed unanimous support for the reinstatement of a Zande kingdom. But as with chieftaincy, the exact form and function of such a kingdom was debated. Some hoped that a reinstated Zande kingdom would restore peace to Western Equatoria, others said the kingdom would help to maintain Zande culture at a time when, in the settlements as well as at home, it was eroding.⁴⁷

Traditionalists insisted that the new kingdom ought to resemble that of King Gbudue, but everyone acknowledged that it would differ in important respects. A revived

36 Focus-group discussion with men, Arua, 25 August 2017.

37 Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, a twenty-five per cent quota for female representation at various levels of government has been enshrined in a number of laws.

38 Jemma Nunu Kumba, from 2008 to April 2010. Prior to independence she served as Member of Parliament (MP) to the national parliament in Khartoum. After her tenure as governor of WES she held a variety of national ministerial positions in Juba, and became the deputy secretary general of the SPLM.

39 Interview with Paramount Chief Wilson Peni, Yambio, 1 October 2014.

40 For example, Chief Mombasa in Yambio, who was widely respected, was not Avungara. I did not ask about his clan, but another former chief identified Mombasa as being of the Bungo clan. Interview with former chief, Yambio, 25 February 2015.

41 Interview with 31-year-old Zande woman, Arua, 24 August 2017.

42 Interview with 40-year-old Zande woman, Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement, 19 August 2017.

43 We were told that earlier attempts were made in the late 1990s, as a senior politician explained, 'But Tombura also wanted its king and Ezo, too... Then there were the Zande in Khartoum, who had a different way of restoring it.' Phone interview with high-level government official in Yambio, from Arua, 10 August 2017.

44 Interview with chief, Ezo, 25 March 2015.

45 Interview with senior Avungara clan member, Yambio, 16 February 2015.

46 Interview with senior Avungara clan member, Yambio, 16 February 2015.

47 Interview with cluster chairperson, Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement, 7 June 2017.

kingdom was seen by all as a sub-national political entity, rather than an independent one – and people often referred to the Shilluk kingdom in South Sudan or the Buganda kingdom in Uganda as models. Most respondents also opined that some pre-colonial practices should not be revived.⁴⁸ More generally, most Zande refugees rejected the notion that the king would be above the law and could theoretically decide over life and death on a whim. A senior politician in Yambio who is Avungara elaborates:

People were enthusiastic about the kingdom but they want it to be amended. People now consider certain things in our tradition not good – like our way of marriage, interpersonal relations, that a father canes his child. Then they say a right in a convention has been violated. Back then, a person did not belong to himself but to the community. In those days, elders were respected... I am not saying the Zande kingdom cannot be restored but I am saying that it would not be authentic. It's due to globalization and Christianity, which forbid certain things.⁴⁹

For this man, the restoration of 'the kingdom' was about much more than reinstated royalty; it was about societal change towards a more authentic communal and hierarchical kind of social life. The speaker juxtaposed Christianity, international conventions and globalization, on the one hand, with authenticity and tradition, on the other. This speaker considered that modern amendments to the traditional institution would undermine its authenticity. Others saw adaptations to the present time in a more positive light. A non-Avungara former state minister said:

I am in favour of a reformed Zande Kingdom. I am from that community but that does not mean I can support every tradition blindly. The king had absolute power over life and death. Instead there should be an investigation, a case before the court of law and then a formal sentencing. One hundred years back, life was completely different. Forget about 100 years ago in Europe, 100 years ago in Zandeland. There was no telephone, no internet and the [Christian] faith was not there. So of course, these things have to be reformed.⁵⁰

Importantly, there was a broad consensus among non-Zande Western Equatorians in Uganda that they would

stand to lose from a reinstated Zande kingdom. In their historic memory, the golden era of King Gbudue came at the expense of many smaller groups.⁵¹ Some stressed that the Zande ethnic group always dominated Western Equatoria, and that its members also received ample opportunities at the national level.⁵² These non-Zande often express anxiety over the prospect of a stronger Zande community, which they expected to dominate the smaller groups in Western Equatoria. Some said this was already happening when Western Equatoria State was divided into four new states between 2015 and 2020. A Mundu refugee encapsulated the problem: 'My paternal uncle was chased from Yambio to Maridi after the creation of the many states [in October 2015]. Because they said he does not belong there.'⁵³ Some feared that a reinstated Zande kingdom would cause similar dominance and exclusion for non-Zande in the unclearly delineated 'Zandeland'.

In the refugee settlements, identities were often formed or invoked contextually and in opposition to one another. Sometimes ethnicity seemed to matter less in the settlements, where Western Equatorians and Equatorians more broadly, united in community structures. The establishment of those structures was partially driven by the 'scattering' of Western Equatorian ethnic groups over the Ugandan settlements, and by fear and mistrust of other large ethnic groups, such as the Nuer and Dinka. Discussions about the Zande Kingdom, however, revealed that there remained considerable friction and distrust between the Azande and other Western Equatorian communities.

Conclusion

On 9 February 2022, the 117th anniversary of King Gbudue's death at the hands of an Anglo-Egyptian colonial expedition, a new Zande Kingdom was reinstated in Yambio. A festive crowd gathered around the tomb of King Gbudue in Yambio. Then-paramount chief Atoroba Wilson Peni Rikito Gbudue arrived in an SUV and was dressed in bark-cloth

51 'The kingdom was against non-Zande tribes. Reinstating the kingdom means bringing back the bad old system of misrule. They used to speak ill about the non-Zande, abducted children and women, and gave them Zande names, robbing them of their identities through assimilation.' Interview with non-Zande community chairperson, Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement, 17 August 2017.

52 A Mundu elder explained, '[In 1972] the speaker of the southern Sudan parliament was from the Zande – Angelo Beda – who is now the co-chair of the National Dialogue committee. And then later, the president of the High Executive Council was also from Zande, the late Joseph Tombura... And when Western Equatoria became a state, you know? Most of the governors are Zande.' Interview with former Mundu chief, a refugee settlement in Uganda, 12 August 2017.

53 Focus group discussion with non-Zande refugees, Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement, 19 August 2017.

48 The most notorious and widely rejected past practice was that of burying kings and princes with a number of live women.

49 High-level government official in Yambio, from Arua, 10 August 2017.

50 Former state minister in Western Equatoria, Kampala, 1 August 2017.

attire covered in lions, for the rite of passage that would make him king. During the ceremony and out of respect for the new king, three Western Equatorian political leaders reconciled after years of violent political differences (Okuj 2022). This chimed with many Zande people's hope; that after the return of the kingdom a more peaceful future beckoned.

This chapter was researched years before the reinstatement (until 2018), but it helps to explain how war and displacement strengthened Zande people's nostalgia for the pre-colonial days of King Gbudue. He came to symbolize a time of sovereignty, self-determination, stability and cohesion. In the midst of lifetimes of insecurity, displacement and change, that vision was a persuasive one, as the near unanimous support for the restoration of the Zande kingdom indicated.

Support or opposition to the Zande kingdom, as well as for stronger chiefs, shared similarities. They offered people a canvas on which to paint their frustrations about the present and their aspirations for the future. Young men envisioned that customary authorities would ensure reasonable bride prices and engage in dialogues with the government. Parents and older people insisted that customary authorities would help to shepherd the community (in particular the youth) away from malign global influences, and towards respect and responsibility. While the chiefs were weak and the kingdoms defeated, it had been easy to imagine that a restoration would bring all things desired. But now that a Zande kingdom has been reinstated, what will come of it? The present moment calls for new anthropological research into the contemporary reconstruction of traditional institutions.

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