

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract

This introduction describes how this research began in South Sudan as a classical ethnographic study of South Sudanese Azande. The foci were people's sense of belonging, their ties with others and with the land, and the competing efforts to control those relations. But when civil war returned in 2015 and many Azande fled to Uganda, the research continued in exile – making this book also about the way South Sudanese Azande have adapted repeatedly to the shocks of war and displacement. This introduction situates the book in the wider literature, and reflects on the heritage of Evans-Pritchard, the perils of salvage ethnography, and the way in which identities may be experienced as constructed in peacetime but more essential in threatening times of war.

Keywords: South Sudan; Azande; anthropology; Evans-Pritchard; conflict studies; multi-sited ethnography

1.1 Another beginning

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

Peter, a development worker, called me in distress from Yambio, South Sudan. He told me about his decision to bring his wife and children to Uganda, and requested my support. It was November 2016 and it had been over a year since the first violent skirmishes had taken place. At first it had been unclear if these were just violent incidents, or the beginning of something bigger, a war. Yambio had weeks of relative calm when town was 'cool' and people went about their business, and then there had been spells of violence. Usually, the reasons for the fighting were unclear to my contacts and to myself. In the first instance it would be perceived and recounted factually as 'the sound of gunshots'. Later, rumours and tentative analyses would start circulating. It was the same on that Thursday morning in November when I called Peter. People in Yambio had awoken to the sound of gunshots. Some were killed, and many more panicked in response. Later, Western Equatorial State's

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

Information Minister and the opposition forces' spokesperson traded accusations over who started it (Atit 2016). The general state of affairs became one of uncertainty, leaving many people confused and fearful about the future. Again. Because most South Sudanese had lived with war and displacement, with confusion and uncertainty, before. For some, the flight to refugee camps abroad was also a 'return' to the place they were born or had spent formative years.

At least a third of South Sudan's estimated 12 million pre-war population were 'displaced' during this civil war (2013–2020). Some 2.2–2.5 million sought refuge abroad, while an estimated 1.6 million were categorised as 'internally displaced people' (IDPs) (UNHCR 2021). The biggest refugee group – some 867,000 South Sudanese people – went to neighbouring Uganda, the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa. Peter and his family were among this group. We met there again in February 2017 when he had found a plot of land in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. The mood was surprisingly upbeat: the family was relieved to be safe and to be in Uganda. They hoped that the children would enjoy the good quality education of Uganda, leaving them better equipped for life when peace returned to South Sudan and they could go home. While Peter's wife and children stayed in Uganda, he returned to insecure Yambio for his work. He would travel back and forth, and also set up a branch of his NGO in Uganda. Like so many South Sudanese people, he sought to navigate the realities of war and displacement so that it would not just mean deterioration. This book is about people like Peter.

1.2 A multi-sited ethnography: Foci, sites and methods

This multi-sited ethnographic study analyses how South Sudanese Azande,² as individuals and as a group, have navigated the turbulent recent history of colonialism, war, and displacement. The main question that guides this study is: 'What were the consequences of the long histories of colonialism, war, and displacement (1500–2014) for the South Sudanese Azande, in particular on their governance and identity in Western Equatoria State and in refuge in Uganda?' At the root, this study is about people's sense of belonging, their changing ties with others and with land, and on competing efforts to 'govern' or control those relations (Shipton 2009; Lund 2011). These three foci relate to proto-legal questions that underpin human society:

² Anthropologist Evans-Pritchard followed the Zande logic of writing 'Zande' (singular person, adjective) and 'Azande' (plural people). I follow that logic, except for 'the Azande Kingdom' because those are the terms used by most of my interlocutors. I do not capitalise 'kingdom' when referring generally to the pre-colonial Azande kingdoms, but I do capitalise 'kingdom' when referring to the singular 'Azande Kingdom' that was reinstated in 2022.

Who are we? To whom and where do we belong? And who has authority over us? Each of these questions is subject to change and contestation, and interfaces with war and displacement.

This book results from displaced research. After earlier stays and visits to Khartoum and Juba, I had been hired by Leiden University's Van Vollenhoven Institute to lead a socio-legal study on 'primary justice systems' and family and land disputes in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan (see Map 1).³ It was a joint study with aid organisation Cordaid, and the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) of the Catholic Diocese Tombura-Yambio.⁴

When I first arrived in capital city Yambio in September 2014, I felt immediately attracted to it. It was a green and sprawling state capital, poor but brimming with hope for positive change. The city centre boasted markets, government offices, churches, banks and NGO and UN compounds. Most people lived on relatively large plots, with unfenced homesteads of several grass-thatched clay huts (*Zande: bambu, Juba-Arabic: tukul*) around a courtyard.⁵ Some people upgraded their houses with brick walls, corrugated roofs, and small solar panels. Often, people had planted some vegetables around the courtyard and maintained bigger gardens outside of town. The many rivers, high annual precipitation, moderate temperature, and good soils rendered Western Equatoria State suitable for farming.⁶

I trained and led a research team with eight local researchers from Yambio's Justice and Peace Commission. Between January and April 2015, we carried out 338 semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and discussed our findings daily.⁷ We started to understand what caused land and family disputes, and how various

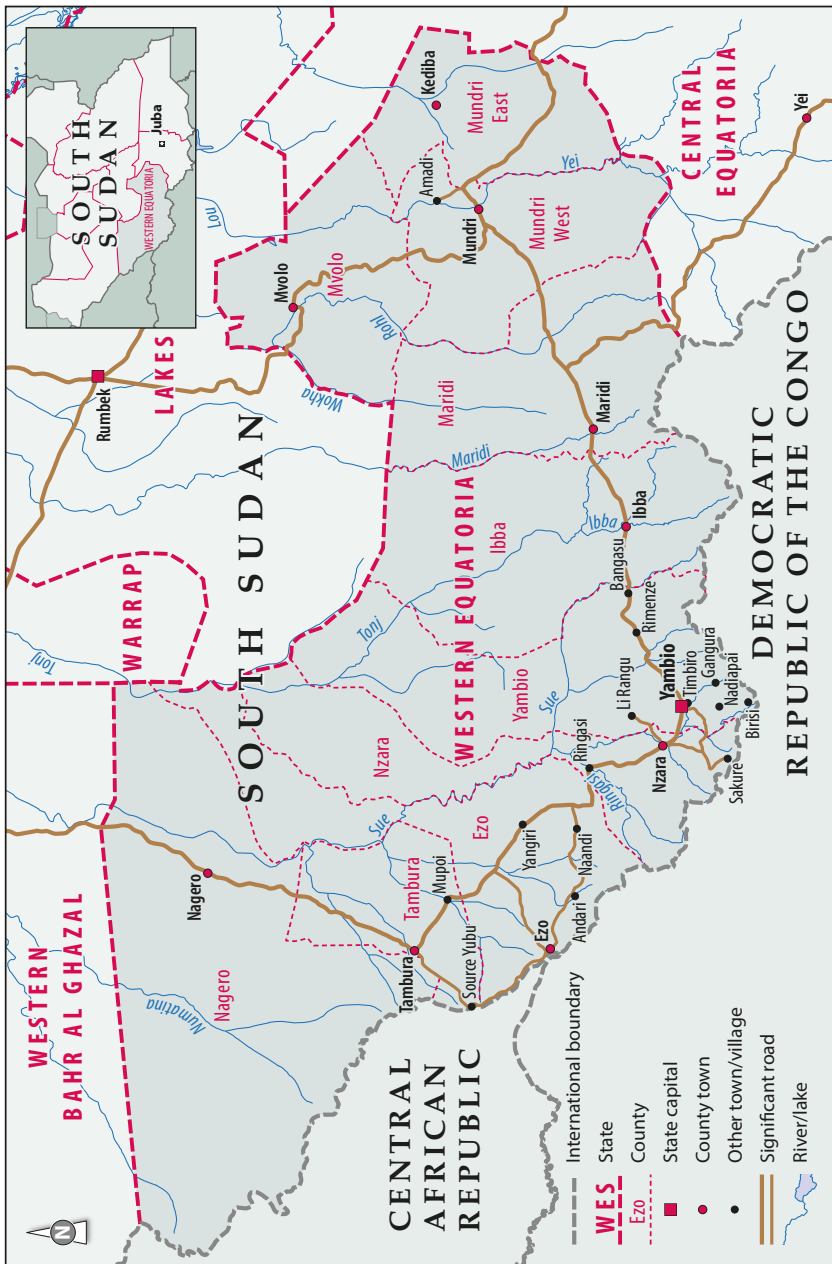
³ Western Equatoria State was one of South Sudan's ten states when I started my research in 2014. From 2 October 2015 those ten states were subdivided repeatedly. Western Equatoria State was divided into Gbudwe, Amadi, Maridi and Tambura States. But on 15 February 2020 the constitutional 10 states (plus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

⁴ Their long-standing and fruitful cooperation, and Western Equatoria's relative safety, motivated our choice to conduct the study here.

⁵ In 2009, a survey found that some 85 percent of the population of Western Equatoria lived in tukuls (clay huts, often with grass thatched roofs) (National Bureau of Statistics 2012). Many homesteads had a separate kitchen hut and a granary.

⁶ Yambio was estimated to receive an average 1,142 millimetres of rain each year, with most falling in the rainy season from April to December (RoSS Ministry of Agriculture & Forestry 2013).

⁷ Western Equatoria State had 10 counties. We did the lion's share of the research in Yambio and Nzara counties, and made several day-visits to Ezo, Tambura, Ibba, Maridi and Mundri-West counties. Due to distance and insecurity, we did not reach Mundri-East, Mvolo and Nagero counties. Within our selected counties, we mostly focused on towns, not villages or countryside.





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

Source: Braak and Kenyi, 2018.

attempts at resolution worked. Many institutions that existed on paper were absent or weak in practice. While institutions were weak, personal networks were strong. We found that local ‘justice providers’ were working and cooperating, so that many disputes *were* being resolved peacefully (Braak 2016). The area experienced a hopeful period of peace characterised by return migration and reconstruction. In the temporal and geographical proximity of war, people here went about their daily lives and were mostly preoccupied with family affairs and work. Even though there were some worrying rumours about trouble further east, it was hard for me then to imagine Western Equatoria at war.

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

Between November 2015 and July 2019, I spent 15 months in Uganda. I divided my time between Entebbe, Kampala, Arua, and Bweyale, with regular visits to the refugee settlements (see Map 2). Many Zande refugees lived in Kiryandongo RS and nearby Bweyale town, so those areas became a focus (see Chapter 7). I conducted my own research and worked with South Sudanese colleagues on two sub-projects about ‘customary authority’ and ‘resilience’ among the refugees.⁸ Together we organised some 138 semi-structured interviews, oral histories, and focus group discussions. Meanwhile, in Western Equatoria (Yambio and Nzara) two research assistants conducted 81 semi-structured interviews with ‘stayees’ and IDP’s from

⁸ These sub-projects were respectively: 1) For the ‘South Sudan Customary Authorities’-project of the Rift Valley Institute, funded by the Swiss Government; and 2) For the ‘Deconstructing Notions of Resilience: Diverse Post-Conflict Settings in Uganda’-project of the London School of Economics’ Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

2016 to 2018. Yet as often with anthropology, the line between research and life itself was blurry. I learned a lot from informal encounters: roadside small-talk, church services, shared teas or dinners, WhatsApp or Facebook-chats, football matches (watched and played), and through the poetry and paintings of some of my interlocutors. All these different experiences and impressions inform this book.

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

1.2.1 *‘The Azande’, reading Evans-Pritchard, and change overlooked*

The Azande were divided by colonial boundaries across present-day South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Central African Republic (see Section 2.4). Like many anthropology students worldwide, I had read about ‘the Azande’ in British anthropologist Evans-Pritchard’s ‘Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande.’ Published in 1937 (and researched in 1926–1930), this landmark in classical anthropology demonstrated how Zande beliefs in the occult were logical from a Zande perspective. Anthropology students are required to read his book to this day; albeit critically.⁹ When I arrived in Yambio, I learned that many Western Equatorians, too, had heard of ‘Evans’ but that his books were rare here. I carried various Evans-Pritchard books with me and would read and discuss them with my research team there.

It was odd to read Evans-Pritchard’s work in Yambio in 2015. His use of the ethnographic present tense suggests that Azande live beyond time and change. And yet clearly things had changed. Zande people had travelled across the world for refuge and religion, education and employment. Some had settled ‘outside’, many returned home with new ideas. Western Equatoria State by 2015 also hosted global churches, international aid organisations, transnational teak companies, US special forces, East African migrant labourers, Congolese and Central African refugees, and of course thousands of people from elsewhere in South Sudan. People had mobile phones, satellite TV, and Facebook accounts.¹⁰ We would watch Premier

⁹ I read it at Leiden University when I studied cultural anthropology (graduated in 2010), and BA-students still read it in 2019–2020 for the module ‘Culture and Comparison’.

¹⁰ A 2013 survey in the Western Equatorial counties of Ezo and Tambura found that on average 32 percent of the households had a mobile phone (Rigterink, Kenyi, and Schomerus, 2014). I would

League-football on the weekends, enjoy Ethiopian coffee in the market, and listen to Ugandan pop music. Yambio was, in other words, connected increasingly and intrinsically to the wider world.

Such change and global connections were not new. In prefaces and footnotes Evans-Pritchard, whose research took place in the late 1920s, had acknowledged the changes that followed colonialisation from 1905, and that his picture was more coherent than contemporary reality (Evans-Pritchard 1971, 69). Conrad Reining, a student of Evans-Pritchard, conducted research in 1952–1955 in the aftermath of the Zande Scheme, one of the most ambitious development schemes in colonial history which had involved the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Azande (see Section 3.2). He described how:

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

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

1.2.2 Conflict, salvage anthropology, and constructivist/essentialist quagmires

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

estimate that this number would be higher in state capital Yambio and may have increased in recent years.

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 ... We allow access on the condition that it will help our children.¹¹

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

Yet like so many other anthropologists at the time, Evans-Pritchard's work was often paid for by the colonial government which sought to control colonised people 'on a shoestring' – often opting for indirect rule through traditional authorities (Berry 1992; Mamdani 2004; Ntsebeza 2005). Where anthropologists and administrators did not find suitable traditional authorities and identities to work with, they would strengthen existing ones or even invent new ones (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1982; Leonardi 2013; Oomen 2005). Colonial, ethnographic, and local knowledge production around tradition and history interact in complex ways (Spear 2003), and it has now become impossible to separate 'insider' and 'outsider' versions (Hamilton 1998). In various places and cases, this process has had disastrous consequences. For example, in Rwanda and Burundi, Malkki writes, 'there is a chilling traffic back and forth between the essentialist constructions of historians, anthropologists, and colonial administrators, and those of Hutu and Tutsi ethnic nationalists' (Malkki 1995, 14). Put mildly, ethnographers, even when they aspire merely to 'document', are likely to affect their subject. I will further analyse some of the quagmires around history, historiography, and invention in relation to the Azande in Chapter 2.

Postcolonial anthropologists have tried to emancipate themselves from this troubled inheritance. The old anthropologists' bread and butter – the ethnographies of whole peoples, cultures, or nations – were regarded by their disciplinary offspring at best as 'exonostalgia' (Berliner, 2014), or worse as colonial constructs or tools (Mamdani 2004; Ntsebeza 2005; Hoffman, 2021). Constructivist anthropologists in the age of globalisation observed how 'groups are no longer tightly

¹¹ Interview with former state minister, Kampala, 1 August 2017.

territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous' (Appadurai 1991, 191). They argued instead how, 'Identities are not an essence but a *positioning* ... Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power'" (Hall 1994, 226). Identity, in the eyes of anthropologists, became many things but not fixed: 'Identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, etc' (Malkki 1992, 37). Whereas classical anthropologists had stressed the 'idem' of individual people's identities (their likeness to others in a group), the constructivists shifted attention to their 'ipse' (what set them apart) (Heinich 2019) or the multitudes everyone contains (Berliner 2014). The constructivist critique made an imperative correction to the essentialist views on cultures and peoples of before.

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

Ethnic groups are, to be sure, inventions and constructions in some measure ... [but they are] no less real for existing intermittently, for having fluid boundaries, for having subjective or even arbitrary standards of membership, for opportunistic use of tradition or even for lacking a proprietary claim over a local space. They are real if they are actual people who are united in consciousness of their common ethnic identity however spurious or misguided that consciousness may be ... Nonetheless, ethnicity is not a fossilized determination but a living presence produced and driven by material and historical forces. (Ake 1993, 1)

In Africa and beyond, the constructivist insight that social identities are multi-faceted, multi-interpretable, and changeable constructs, should not be taken to mean that they cannot take on more essentialist form, and be experienced as real and consequential (Heinich 2019). This ostensible tension – between identities' constructed nature, and their essentialised experience – is a paradox in theory, but an often-lived reality. The challenge in writing about 'identity', then, is to devise 'a concept

“soft” and flexible enough to satisfy the requirements of relational, constructivist social theory, yet robust enough to have purchase on the phenomena that cry out for explanation, some of which are quite “hard” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 12).

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

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

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

1.2.3 Constructed essences: Reaching across time

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

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

Similar ethnographies of displacement and social (re)construction have been conducted in South Sudan. Most have focused on particular groups: Dinka (Cormack 2014), Nuer (Hutchinson 1996; Grabska 2014) and Murle (Felix da Costa 2018). Zande history, politics and economics has been somewhat distinct from these groups: Azande had pre-colonial kingdoms (not ‘acephalous societies’), lived mostly from agriculture (not cattle keeping), and have played different – less prominent – roles in the last two wars and the ruling Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (see Section 2.5). On one level, these differences and their consequences have caused friction between South Sudanese people and groups. On another, they have meant that general statements made about South Sudan often apply better to Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities than to Azande and other ‘Equatorians’.

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

1.3 Outline and point of the book

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

interlocutors, friends, and teachers, I have chosen to include five portraits, based on life history interviews.

The first part of this book explores the turbulent history of ‘ruptures’ and ‘movements’ from which the ‘Zande people’ and the ruling ‘Avungara clan’ emerged. Chapter 2 analyses the historical episodes which shaped socio-political life in Western Equatoria, notably among the Azande, from around 1500 until 2015, and how they influenced governance and identity. Inspired by Vansina (1968), this chapter draws on archival sources and oral histories, to take a critical look at Evans-Pritchard’s authoritative historiography of ‘the Azande’. This chronology offers the historical background for the rest of the book. Chapter 3 focuses on the movements of individuals and groups over this same period, and shows how movements interfaced with the formation of traditional authority and identity in Western Equatoria. Western Equatorians had moved so much that by the start of my research few people were ‘continuous resident’, and the towns were increasingly cosmopolitan. Exile and return had also brought new ideas, networks and resources which in turn influenced the post-conflict moment (Chapters 4 and 5). This history of movements would later also inform people’s migration deliberations in 2015–2016 (Chapter 6).

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

The third part analyses the latest episode of war and displacement. Chapter 6 analyses the causes and consequences of the war in Western Equatoria (2015–2017). It then draws on unique interviews both with refugees in Uganda, and with ‘stay-ees’ in Western Equatoria, to analyse why people stayed or left for Uganda among other places. It uses and modifies Carling’s ability-aspiration model to analyse these

decisions, and finds a particularly remarkable group of elite stayees who had been able to leave but did not aspire to do so. They either stayed throughout the war or returned after having brought their families to refugee camps. Chapter 7 analyses people's initial arrival and settlement in Uganda, their main concerns, and how their experiences were mediated by their varying encounters with the Ugandan state bureaucracy (2015–2019). It found among other things a battle for permanence between refugee authorities – who insist that refugees remain liminal and do not use 'permanent materials' for their houses – and refugees, who in defiance planted trees that would take years to grow, edified their *tukuls* with paintings, and even buried relatives on the land. Chapter 8 analyses how refugees try to reconstruct order and authority in exile and to govern themselves, focusing in particular on two forms of 'refugee authority' ('refugee welfare councils' and 'community organisations'). It finds that competing attempts at authority were underpinned by particular identifiers. The chapter analyses the remarkable absence of traditional authorities among Zande refugees, as well as their perhaps even more remarkable enduring popularity.

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