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# Refugees in Uganda between Politics and Everyday Practices

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# Individual and Collective Agency and Identity Construction among South Sudanese Refugees in Adjumani District, Uganda

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**Abstract**

Refugee's agency has been the object of a growing literature questioning victimizing narratives of powerlessness. In positioning itself in this stream, this paper explores different processes of identity production among South Sudanese refugees in Adjumani District, Uganda. Through a comparison of social dynamics in refugee settlements and among self-settled refugees, it shows that identity production is highly situational and that it can be considered as a form of agency, even though its transformative potential remains low. Acknowledging the complex relationship between structural constraints and refugees' agency, the concept of social navigation is mobilized to shed light on refugees' identity choices: though these do not modify structural conditions, they do contribute to creating spaces of agency that ultimately make refugee lives more secure and predictable.

**Keywords:** Agency, identity production, social navigation, refugees, Uganda

## Refugees, identity and agency: an introduction

In the past twenty years, a rich scholarly literature has questioned the image of refugees as passive victims, exclusively characterised by conditions of loss and disruption. Several authors have emphasised refugees' active decision making in relation to their livelihood strategies (Jacobsen 2002; Kibreab 2004), places of settlement (Hovil 2007) or creative shaping of new identities and senses of belonging (Malkki 1995; Hovil 2016). Refugees are neither simply victims nor agents of resistance (de Vries 2016); rather, as other

categories defined by a legal status, they act in a liminal space characterised by strong external constraints that they engage with in diverse and creative ways.

Refugee identity has been the object of several studies that have emphasised the situational and socially constructed character of identities in refugee communities (Malkki 1995; Mahmoud 2011; Hatoss 2012). Malkki's work in particular has shown how the refugee category can be adopted or refused by different refugee communities according to their place of residence without necessarily reflecting the legal reality. People might be refugees but hold *de facto* naturalisation documents such as ID or voting cards, or simply be recognised as members of the community (Malkki 1995). While, to some, 'refugeeness' is a foundational identity in the reconstruction of a moral community, to others it is something that should rather be concealed or denied in order for them to be recognised as members of a community. Lund gives a number of examples of situations where actual behaviour and its practical acceptance by local authorities produces *de facto* recognition of some sort of informal social contract between what he calls 'illegal citizens' and the state, ranging from receipts from paid utilities attesting residence to participation in civic associations (Lund 2016).

The making and unmaking of people's multiple identities is indeed a field of active engagement, where claims to refugee identity or practices of invisibility become ways of accessing certain bundles of rights that would not normally be available, challenging the state's regulatory role and the very existence of differentiated bundles of rights attributed to different categories of people (Hovil 2016). Refugee is thus a social category that can attribute a specific identity to people, but that can also be side-lined in favour of other categories or other forms of identification, without necessarily shaping people's actions in an unquestionable way. This is where the refugee's agency emerges: people "can indeed move 'out of place' and act in a manner that is seemingly outside their limited interests and identities. Just because people are workers, it does not mean that they will claim higher wages through a union. Just because people are poor, it does not mean that they have to be led by others who know what is best for them" (Neocosmos 2014: 147). Just because they are refugees, it does not mean that they will choose to use this category as a source of identity and abide by the social and legal norms that define their condition.

While some have criticised the framing of agency in simple opposition to structure (Beswick and Hammerstad 2013); people are never completely free to make decisions and act as they want. Rather, agency has a relational and dynamic character, as illustrated in the concept of social navigation used by Vigh (Vigh 2006; 2009). Social navigation refers to the willing action of people living in a constantly changing and unstable environment. It "directs our attention both to the way people engage in the world and the way they move toward positions they perceive as being better than their current location and the possibilities within them" (Vigh 2009: 432). It emphasises the fact that people act not only while assessing their social environment in the present,

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but also anticipating the consequences of their decisions in the future. Acknowledging the existence of social forces that pose structural – though unstable – constraints on agents, social navigation allows us to shed light on multiple forms of agency, including not only those that do not directly aim to change "the boundaries of 'what can be done'" (Beswick, Hammerstad 2013: 481), but also those that enable us to "navigat[e] the spaces of others to our advantage" (Vigh 2009: 432). In picking up one form of identity or another, refugees navigate their experience of exile and exercise their agency, even though this agency is often centred around survival and coping, as is for example the pursuit of invisibility by certain actors in certain situations (Bøås 2013; Thomson 2013). Even though this agency does not ultimately change their structural conditions, it contributes towards securing a space for action that makes refugees' lives more secure and predictable.

## The Ugandan refugee response

Since the outbreak of civil war in December 2013 to the time of writing, over a million people have crossed the border from South Sudan to Uganda seeking a safe haven. Partly following previous experiences of displacement during the war with Sudan in the 1990s and partly due to geographical proximity, they have sometimes actively chosen to settle in Uganda thanks to its well-known open policy of welcoming refugees. "In the first war, I was a refugee in Kenya. This time I chose to come to Uganda because we have been in Ethiopia, Kenya... but here there is agricultural land and the weather is conducive for production", said one of my interviewees in one of the Adjumani refugee settlements.[1]

Indeed, in recent years, many international observers have praised Ugandan refugee policy for its openness and long-term nature.[2] The country's legal framework relies on the establishment of refugee settlements – with much emphasis on their distinction from refugee camps, accused of isolating refugees from the local population. Refugee settlements began being created in the late 1980s to host refugees fleeing the war in the Sudan. They were set up by UNHCR and the Refugees Department of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) mostly in West Nile Province, a remote and underserviced region in the northwest of the country that was plagued by armed insurgencies for over twenty years between the 1980s and early 2000s (Leopold 2005; Refugee Law Project 2004). When the contemporary refugee flow started, people were directed mostly towards that area, and particularly to the districts of Yumbe, Adjumani and Arua, for several reasons that include geographical proximity with the border and the presence of pre-existing refugee settlements.

In Uganda, refugees' right to work, to do business and to access basic services is recognised by the government. The so-called 'refugee response' is based on the idea that refugees should reside in refugee settlements, where they can easily access free social services and relief aid in the form of food or cash, and where they receive a

plot of land for housing and subsistence agriculture. Despite the centrality of the refugee settlement in the Ugandan refugee response, refugees are not forced to live in settlements. Even though theoretically the OPM can obstruct refugees' right to move, evidence suggests that refugees enjoy a very high degree of freedom of movement within the country. This ease in moving from one place to another has resulted in the expansion of the room for refugees' agency in terms of where to live and what to do in order to make ends meet in the most effective possible way.

### Refugee settlements

Ugandan refugee settlements host the vast majority of the refugee population residing in the country. Due to the high mobility of refugees, it is difficult to have a realistic estimate of how many people actually reside in the settlements; however, with the exception of the 86,770 refugees registered as urban refugees in Kampala, all of them are registered as residents of one of the refugee settlements and own a refugee ID card.[3]

Refugee settlements look like villages or small towns. There are service facilities such as schools, healthcare, water posts; community facilities such as youth centres, churches, playgrounds, makeshift movie halls; roads, small cultivated fields, security officers. Plots are sometimes well delimited with fences or hedges; other times, no clear border is visible and people apparently share small portions of land. Even though it was not possible to access official statistics on the ethnic affiliation of refugees in Adjumani District, based on field visits to the settlements and data from other districts, it is possible to establish that Adjumani District settlements host a wide variety of ethnic groups from South Sudan.[4] Ethnic segregation is not encouraged in the settlements, and several camp commandants stressed how refugees would be settled exclusively according to the availability of plots.[5] While in some of the visited settlements people were settled according to their ethnic affiliation at least at some point in time,[6] refugees generally live within mixed ethnic communities, with children sharing classrooms and frequent – though not always friendly – exchanges at water posts or other service facilities.

Ugandan refugee settlements are administered according to the two principles of self-reliance (refugees need to be encouraged and enabled not to rely on relief aid alone but to actively produce food and engage in business) and self-governance (refugees need to have local governance structures that can liaise with Ugandan government institutions and international organisations involved in the refugee response). Self-governance is something typically encouraged to reduce the costs of governing the refugees (de Vries 2016): in the case of Uganda, neither the UNHCR nor the OPM would have had enough resources to look after such a huge mass of people as the one hosted in the country.[7] Refugees are thus encouraged to participate in local governance and in humanitarian service delivery through local governance structures provided for by the Refugees Act

2006 and district-specific guidelines: the Refugee Welfare Councils (RWC).

In 2014, with the new inflow of South Sudanese refugees fleeing from the war in their home country, RWCs were officially created both in newly established settlements and in pre-existing settlements that were revitalised and expanded. Acting on a voluntary basis as intermediaries between the government and its international partners and the wider refugee population, RWC members ease top-down and bottom-up information flows (including about the start-up of development projects and the identification of their direct beneficiaries), control the territory in terms of security, resolve disputes among the refugees and between the refugees and the host community (in cooperation with local government authorities) and provide recognisable stakeholders to involve in consultation processes with the refugees. Three levels of RWC exist, with an increasingly less direct form of election, roughly mirroring the system of Ugandan local government.[8] These functions make RWC members relatively powerful gate-keepers of the refugee community.

As a top-down creation, RWCs represent a sophisticated form of 'invited space' of participation (Cornwall 2002, 2008). At the same time, however, RWCs are actively recognised as legitimate and functioning local authorities by the refugee population (de Simone forthcoming). According to a female refugee leader in Boroli settlement, the creation of RWCs has resulted in a sharp reduction of ethnic tensions among the refugees in the settlements as they provide for a space of dialogue and negotiation between different refugee communities (Refugee Law Project 2015).[9] Refugees' choice to recognise the authority of such institutions speaks of their will to recognise their common participation – if not belonging – to an imagined community, enhancing a shared collective identity. The influence of refugee camps/settlements on the production of identities has been analysed by several authors. Malkki has worked on Burundian Hutu refugees' identity in Tanzania, showing how they appropriated the refugee category as a historicising feature of their collective identity, producing a political subjectivity in opposition to the dehistoricising victimhood of mainstream narratives (Malkki 1996: 377). A similar dynamic has been detected in Roma camps in Italy, where residence in camps not only gives people access to various entitlements, but also visibility and public recognition as a community (Sigona 2015). Lucy Hovil has analysed the complex relationship between citizenship, identity and belonging among encamped refugees in several African countries, highlighting the interactions between different levels of identity and belonging (Hovil 2016). In Uganda, living in the settlement under the supervision of RWCs encourages constant exchanges among the refugees. These exchanges contribute to the strengthening and enhancing of a refugee identity,[10] as was the case for Burundian Hutu refugees (Malkki 1996), but also to the emergence of a specific South Sudanese identity that transcends particularistic ethnic affiliations exacerbated by the conflict that broke out in 2013 and recalls, to some extent, Sigona's (2015) 'campzenship' in its interaction with the outside socio-political context.

While the majority of the refugees hosted in Adjumani settlements is likely to belong to Madi and Kuku-speaking communities due to the geographical proximity to the border of their areas of residence in South Sudan, considerable numbers of Bari, Dinka, Nuer and Murle people, hailing from regions further away from the border, are also present. Even though it is more difficult for these groups to engage in direct interactions with local host communities and authorities due to language and customs barriers, they still manage to express leadership positions through educated members, particularly in areas within the settlements where they constitute the majority of refugee residents. It is not my purpose here to argue against the role of ethnic affiliation in the election of RWC members. Rather, I believe that despite complex and sometimes contentious ethnic-related dynamics in RWC elections (de Simone forthcoming), all refugees participate in the process – at least at the RWC I level. There are no groups trying to isolate themselves or trying to support a different kind of authority: the emergence of a collective identity is conveyed through the respect of and the reliance on the RWC institution as well as through the participation in its elections. In none of the settlements visited or discussed during the course of fieldwork, in April-May 2018, did a single ethnic group control all the positions within the local governance institution: rather, all the ordinary people interviewed among the refugees reported addressing their problems and grievances to the locally elected leaders. Interestingly, several Dinka women interviewed in Mungula 1 referred to the non-Dinka RWC I chairperson with the Dinka word for chief, *beny*, testifying to a very high degree of recognition and respect for such leaders.[11]

Indeed, all of the interviewed RWC members reported that one of the most important qualities that a person needs to have in order to be elected as a refugee leader is a non-discriminatory attitude towards people belonging to other ethnic communities. Even though in some cases there were rumours of certain RWC I chairmen keeping information about development projects and relief assistance from certain cluster leaders[12] belonging to different ethnic groups,[13] all of the ordinary refugees interviewed reported relying on RWCs and cluster leaders every time they had problems, grievances or questions about how things worked in the settlement, irrespective of their ethnic belonging, including in ethnically mixed clusters.[14]

The recognition of the RWCs' authority and legitimacy, as well as self-identification as refugees and as South Sudanese, is not something that is simply imposed by the structural conditions of life in the settlement and by the external identification of the refugees as a unique undifferentiated body; rather, it constitutes a deliberate choice that allows people to advance claims and advocate for the improvement of their life conditions. One example of this is the mobilisation of the settlement-based refugee population to increase the quantity of food distributed after a few months of ration reductions[15] and to ask for treated maize seeds to avoid an insurgence of pests in the crops.[16] On other occasions, the demands were advanced in an even more vocal

way. In several settlements in Adjumani District a widespread discontent over the kind of red sorghum distributed as a food ration gave rise to demonstrations and to the involvement of opposition MPs in order to force the OPM and UNHCR to change the kind of food distributed: "The former Camp Commandant [in Pagirinyia] was a dormant person. He didn't react to problems. We complained a lot, also because by that time we were receiving a particular kind of sorghum that not even animals could eat. So we complained at the presence of opposition MP who came to visit the settlement, and they brought the issue on TV, putting the president under pressure. Then, the Camp Commandant was immediately removed [and] [...] the food changed into maize".[17]

The creation of new institutions and spaces of interaction among people who find themselves sharing the place of residence just by chance provides a precious occasion for producing shared norms of coexistence that are based on civic values and cultural mediation, rather than ethnic specific customs, and that ultimately produces a form of collective identity that transcends particularistic ones. In the words of one RWC member: "[the people] now finally see themselves for what they are, South Sudanese and all refugees, and they are recognising that the fault [of this situation] is of the politicians. I really appreciate our being in Uganda, we always talk together".[18]

### Self-settled refugees

No official numbers of self-settled refugees exist in Uganda, as urban refugees are officially registered only in Kampala.[19] Urbanisation rate trends (from 1.7 million urban dwellers in 1991 to 7.4 million in 2014) suggest that there is a considerable rural-to-urban migration; thanks to the freedom of movement they enjoy, it is widely believed that refugees actively contribute to these numbers.[20] According to Ugandan refugee policy, urban refugees are not entitled to relief aid, which is only distributed in the settlements. A recent study conducted by VNG International on self-settled refugees in Koboko District found that only 6.3% of the refugee population surveyed in Koboko Town received any form of support (cash or physical items) from NGOs, which suggests that support from development actors to self-settled refugees is indeed very limited (VNG International 2018).

Adjumani is a small urban centre registered as a Town Council under the Local Government Act (1997). It is the headquarters of Adjumani District, which was created in 1997 during another period of mass inflow of refugees from South Sudan. The national census conducted in 2014 reported an urban population of 42,000 (Republic of Uganda 2014), but this number has likely increased due to the massive inflow of refugees from the nearby border with South Sudan in the following years. Adjumani is no exception in terms of data availability: no recent official figures on urban refugees residing in the town are available, except for the 2,054 reported in Adjumani District's five-year Development Plan 2015/16–2019/2020.[21] This figure is however likely to be outdated as, by the time it was provided, Adjumani District hosted only 88,000 refugees

while by August 2019 their number had reached over 205,000.[22]

For the refugees, life in town is more difficult than in the settlements, where they live under the protection of the Ugandan government and international agencies. In town, their status becomes legally vulnerable: even if evidence has shown that refugees are free to move out of the settlements, theoretically their presence in town could be questioned by Ugandan authorities for a number of reasons ranging from public security to public health concerns (Government of Uganda 2006). Secondly, social services are not free in town: people need to pay school fees, health care, taxes, rents. Thirdly, overall, the environment in town is less friendly to refugees than in the settlements. This is true not only for people speaking different languages and having different customs from the local Madi population – the Dinka, for example, are often described as lazy and 'wild' –[23] but also for Madi-speaking South Sudanese. Several women reported being insulted and called *kevokevo* by Ugandan urban dwellers, which in the Madi language literally means someone who comes and goes and does not take care of his/her own things.[24] One of the reasons for these perceptions may be that in the settlements the benefits deriving from refugee presence are more visible to the host population in the form of improvements in the availability of basic services and infrastructures. In town, such improvements are much more indirect, and many interviewees from the urban host community rather lamented an increase in the price of housing and other items, as well as growing market competition, particularly in low-capital businesses such as the trade of second-hand clothes or of beans and maize (provided as food rations to the refugees in the settlements). As a consequence, self-settled refugees are often victims of the Ugandan urban dwellers' discriminatory behaviours, which range from the imposition of higher fees to access the same services to limited inclusion in the formal job and house rental market.[25]

As moving to town requires at least a basic capacity for catering for themselves, it is typically the wealthiest families that can afford it, either because they receive remittances from relatives from South Sudan or from abroad, or because they have some savings. These savings do not necessarily derive from their previous activities back home, but can also be the product of business undertaken as refugees or of other kinds of salaried work (from casual labour to more qualified work with NGOs operating in the settlements), which means that longer term refugees sometimes manage to move to town after some years of residing in the settlements. Vice-versa, other wealthier families who initially settled in town have been forced back to the settlement because of a failure to find employment and the exhaustion of their financial resources (Ilcan 2018).

Notwithstanding the hardships of residing in town, refugees still choose to move out of the settlements and face these challenges for several reasons, ranging from access to services of a higher quality to better job and business opportunities, to feeling more secure in the anonymity of the urban area. Women often cited access to better and

less crowded schools for their children as a reason for residing in town,[26] together with access to healthcare for themselves or close relatives.[27] Other reasons cited by (mostly male) interviewees related to business opportunities,[28] even though this did not necessarily entail renting a house in town and becoming an urban resident: at least one of my interviewees spent his working day at his shop in town, returning to a near-by refugee settlement to sleep in order to save the money for the rent. Security was also a major concern, with allegations of a 'black car' of South Sudanese security forces raiding the settlements at night in search of political opponents and causing frequent disappearances.[29] Residence in the anonymity of the town for people concerned about being wanted by the South Sudanese security forces was therefore preferred to living in the settlement, where everybody knew each other (informal conversations in Adjumani and Kampala).

As these accounts demonstrate, the reasons for leaving the settlements typically concern individual problems and situations deriving from the conditions for the refugees. The strategies employed by self-settled refugees to navigate such challenges and craft a space where they are recognised as legitimate settlers are also individual and barely ever mobilise refugee identity, instead opportunistically trying to conceal it. In contrast with the settlements, at the time of the fieldwork, no South Sudanese refugee association existed in Adjumani Town, nor separate refugee authority. All of the self-settled refugees interviewed related directly to the Local Council (LC) 1 Chairperson of the village where they resided for any problem concerning their daily life, ranging from theft to the breakdown of boreholes (Focus Group Discussion 01). This relation was always on an individual basis, just as the one with any other Ugandan resident in the same area, and sometimes it turned into a form of friendship and a sort of infrastructure through which people could cope with the challenges of urban life (Simone 2004).

While all refugees participated – including financially – in local social events such as weddings and funerals, some were also asked by the local authorities to take on a more active role in community life. This was easier for refugees residing in the area since the 1990s or earlier; nevertheless, more recently settled refugees – particularly those who already had some social networks in Adjumani – were also likely to be involved. Naomi,[30] a 40 years old woman from the South Sudanese Madi community who had been living in Adjumani since the 1990s reported being a member of the local Village Health Committee in charge of monitoring the hygiene situation of the village and of making sure that all residents, including disabled persons, had adequate access to health care. Naomi claimed that she became part of the local VHC at the explicit request of the LC1 chairperson of the village where she was residing: as she had been living in the village for quite a while, he thought that she would provide a more effective link with the growing self-settled refugee community in the area. This idea of having refugee representatives in local community bodies was shared by other

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LC1 chairpersons within Adjumani Town Council to overcome the difficulties in relating with the non–Madi speaking refugee population.[31]

The integration of individual refugees in local society through connections with LC1 chairpersons sometimes goes as far as encouraging refugees to participate in LC1 elections,[32] which is not strictly allowed by the law, and to informally acquire a Ugandan ID card thanks to the recommendation of the LC1 of their village of residence.[33]

The pursuit of economic activities was found to be an area of particular importance for self-settled refugees, who are mostly in town in order to improve their situation through a more stable and reliable income. Since job opportunities in Adjumani are few, mostly linked to government offices and international agencies who are not keen on employing refugees for fear of retaliation from the local community,[34] most refugees in town try to start up their own small businesses. To do so, they either partner with local entrepreneurs or rely on solid social bonds established with local authorities. An example of the first case is Susan, a young South Sudanese woman who settled in Adjumani Town. In 2016 she received some cassava as a gift from a local church group. She used the cassava to brew some local beer, which she sold informally from her house at a price of 1,000 UGX per half-litre bottle. She then reinvested her income to buy more cassava and continued brewing alcohol for some time, until she decided to expand her business. To do so, she convinced her Ugandan friend Anita, met at the church group, to join her, and together they started buying vegetables from a wholesaler coming every week with a truck from the eastern part of the country. They moved to Awindiri Market, the local food market in Adjumani Town. They regularly pay market dues to the municipality, and even though both claim to have equal right to work as the other vendors at the market, it is usually Anita who interacts with local authorities, suppliers and strangers in general – indeed, she was also the one who first agreed to talk to me and my research assistant.[35]

These kind of friendship links are also deemed necessary if refugee entrepreneurs start businesses on their own. Paul, a refugee from the South Sudanese border town of Nimule, was able to open a carpentry shop in Adjumani town centre thanks to previously existing connections established when he was displaced in the 1990s, and friendship with the Local Council 1 chairmen of the places where he lived and where he worked. He argued that the mediation of the LC1 was vital for him to solve a dispute with his workshop landlord, and had enabled him to rent a plot of land for the workshop and make his business flourish – though he complained about what he described as the discriminatory attitude of international NGOs and government agencies, which, he claimed, would not accept his participation in bids because of his refugee status. The LC1, he said, knew that he was a good man, paid taxes and employed 12 people – seven of whom were Ugandan citizens – so he was able to integrate in the local economic fabric with his activity *in spite* of being a refugee.[36]

Smaller scale informal businesses are also common among urban refugees in Adjumani

Town. Refugee women typically produce beer, cook pancakes, make bead jewellery and sell these products from their houses without paying market dues. To make this kind of business acceptable and legitimate, they participate in the Village Savings and Loans Associations, commonly known as *assusu* in the local Madi language. These groups were initiated by development NGOs in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and seem to have taken root in local society. They are a common form of grassroots organisation especially among groups of women, borrowing money for extraordinary family expenses (burials, children's school final exams, etc.) or for starting or expanding small business activities. In a focus group discussion carried out in Patua village, Adjumani Town, nine out of seventeen women reported participating in such groups. Membership of an *assusu* with Ugandan women to some extent increased their perception of security and of acceptance by the local community. One of them explained: "people know we do that [selling goods from their houses without paying market dues], it is fine with the local government, because they know that we are members of *assusu*, they know who we are and where we live so we cannot do anything bad" (Focus Group Discussion 01). The examples described above refer to strategies that one of my female interviewees described as "becoming more Ugandan". While in the settlements the category of refugee provides a powerful tool of identification and unity, in the town it rather becomes a liability, as described by Malkki (1995) of the Burundian refugees in Tanzania, and consequently concealed in favour of other, more individual identities – that of resident, of businessperson, or member of an *assusu*. Whatever right or entitlement self-settled refugees are able to claim with some success – be it involvement in economic activities, participation in *assusu* or community bodies, participation in local elections – they do so not so much through stressing their refugee status but rather irrespective, and sometimes even in spite, of it. Refugees' recognition as legitimate residents by local authorities and the host community mostly relies on their capacity to establish individual relationships with their Ugandan neighbours or with the local administrative authority. Such relations are deemed to be stronger than formal arrangements: when renting land or houses in town, most of the refugees stipulate informal agreements with the LC1 chairperson as a witness, and this is considered to be a stronger guarantee of tenure security than a formal lease agreement that could be brought to court.[37] At times, not being registered as a refugee even opens up opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable, such as permanently acquiring land for housing within the town council.[38]

Even though people generally recognise that the process of becoming more Ugandan is a slow and sometimes uncertain one, most of those interviewed seemed nevertheless to consider it effective in improving their life conditions at a local level, even if it sometimes damaged their opportunity to legally regularise their position at the national level. This was true irrespective of the length of stay of the refugee: while length of stay influenced the capacity and resources available to the individual to "become more

Ugandan", people who had arrived in the most recent refugee flows and managed to settle in town tended to privilege individual solutions to their problems.

**Going back and forth: situating identity between the town and the settlement**
Despite the diversity of situations that refugees experience in the settlement and in the town, and despite their apparent separation and distance, strong connections and exchanges persist between the two. The large majority of refugees arrived after the breakout of the war in South Sudan in December 2013, including those settled in Adjumani Town, holds an official refugee ID card released in one of the South Sudan–Uganda border posts.

Papers published in the early 2000s show that, among the self-settled refugees in urban areas, many registered in the settlements and then moved to towns in search of better access to livelihood opportunities and basic services (Refugee Law Project 2005; Hovil 2007). This movement is not one-directional nor definitive. People continuously move between settlements and the town for a number of reasons that range from business activities to family affairs, to celebrating religious festivities with the South Sudanese community or the community of origin, while living for most of the year as town dwellers. This is true to the extent that buses and other forms of private/public transports have been established between settlements and nearby towns. As recent case studies and estimates suggest, these are the urban centres where most self-settled refugees will stay, in order to easily go back and forth for business, to benefit from the distribution of relief aid and – in some cases – to check on their property and family members left behind (VNG International 2018). Relief distribution represents an important pull factor towards the settlements: people will travel from the town to the settlement on distribution days, on these occasions employing their refugee identity cards, which they never use in town.

Refugee families will also spread out geographically, with some members moving to town to do business or go to school, and others staying in the settlement to collect food/cash rations and look after house and property. Both the individual and collective identities are played out according to the situation and to the need of the moment: besides the inspiring words of the RWC members quoted above, people do not usually attribute a moral understanding to their collective South Sudanese/refugee identity. Rather, people seem to choose quite rationally between the two: in town, they rely on an individual identity based on residence and direct relationships with neighbours and local authorities, which conceals their refugee identity; and in the settlement, they prefer the collective identity of refugees/South Sudanese mediated by the institution of the RWC through which they can more successfully deal with everyday challenges. The choice is a tactical one: it allows them to solve everyday problems in the most effective way.

A good example of this identity-switching relates to access to land in the settlements. According to the Ugandan refugee policy, refugees registered in settlements receive a plot of land for housing and farming. However, due to the large number of arrivals since 2016, the size of such plots has been dramatically reduced (from 100x100m to 25x25m, with some variance between different settlements), which does not allow for the cultivation of sufficient crops to feed large families. These limitations have not been mitigated by food or cash distributions by international organisations. Several of my interviewees in the settlements had therefore resorted to other strategies in order to cope with the lack of food: one was to negotiate with local individual landlords on an individual basis in order to rent more land outside of the settlement to expand the family's fields. However, a recurrent story was that, after they had paid the rent for the land, they became aware that the landlord had rented the same land to more than one person at a time, or that the landlord forcefully took back the land after the renter had cleared weeds from it and planted their crops. Because the rental agreements were often so-called gentlemen's agreements with no proper documents in place, besides feeling in a weak social position, refugees were also in a weak legal position and could not sue the landlord to have the land or their money restored to them.

Clearly, in such cases, resorting to individual action as individual refugees in rural/settlement settings does not work. To resolve these kinds of disputes, refugees often resort to RWC I mediation, again strengthening the recognition of this institution and reaffirming their belonging to a community represented by the RWCs. While not always effective for individual refugee cases, collective action through RWC representation has helped strengthen the image of a solid refugee community. Engaging collectively with the host community, the refugee community is able to achieve at least some of its objectives (for example access to more land), while at the same time 'paying back' the host community through the 'trickle-down' effect triggered by refugee response-related international assistance – which is indeed one of the reasons why public discourses around refugee presence in the areas around the settlements have remained overwhelmingly positive in spite of the increasing demographic pressure on natural resources.

In contrast, when in town, (self-settled) refugees find themselves navigating a much more hostile environment, where the benefits of a refugee presence are not so visible. Even people who are very active in the refugee community in the settlements thus rely on different kinds of personal network that go beyond being a refugee while in the towns. John, one of the refugees I interviewed who worked in town and lived in one of the settlements in Adjumani District, was a pastor and looked after several orphans, attempting to create an orphanage for refugee children. At the same time, while running his small shop in Adjumani Town centre, he often referred to his personal acquaintances in the town, mentioning particularly his friendship with one of the LC1s

who had supported him in opening his business, and stressed the fact that he did not know many refugees in town aside from some of the people who had come from his hometown in South Sudan.[39]

These examples show that the choice of relying on refugee identity or on a more individualistic form of identity is a conscious, tactical one. This choice can be seen a form of social navigation enacted by people living in a condition of structural weakness to improve their individual situation and to cope with the experience of exile.

## Conclusion

This paper has shed light on different processes of identity production among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. In line with the findings illustrated by other authors (Malkki 1995; Hovil 2016), it finds that refugees' identities are highly situational, and vary according to the different settings in which refugees find themselves: in the settlements, people use the category of refugee to construct a collective identity based on 'refugeeness', on recognising the authority of refugees' local institutions, and of being South Sudanese; in town, people prefer to adopt more individualistic identities that do not necessarily deny but often conceal that of the refugee, which is often perceived as a liability. In contrast to other contexts (Malkki 1995), people do not seem to attach a high moral significance to their identity choices: rather, they consciously pick the identity that most favourably enables them to "navigat[e] the space of others" (Vigh 2009: 432) to their advantage.

Using a number of examples garnered from field research in Adjumani District, this paper has argued that refugees' identity choices can be understood as a form of social navigation through their experiences of exile. Refugees' navigation strategies do not change "the boundaries of 'what can be done'" (Beswick, Hammerstad 2013: 481): for example, even though they are able to settle disputes peacefully in the settlements through the recognition of the RWCs' authority, the scarcity of resources that leads to such disputes is not addressed. Even though they collectively manage to claim different types of grain as food aid, this does not affect the reliability and quantity of distribution, which are also critical. In town, even if they manage to establish good relations with LC1s and local neighbours, renting houses and land, they remain legally vulnerable. Nevertheless, these strategies represent a way of carving out spaces of agency in spite of structural constraints, achieving small successes and helping to make refugees' lives more secure and predictable.

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**NOTES:**

1 - Interview 0042, RWC I Chairman, Mungula I Refugee settlement, 10 May 2018.

2 - See for example *Uganda: One of the Best Places to Be a Refugee*, «BBC Africa», 13 May 2016: https://www.bbc.com/news/36286472; J. Hattem. *Uganda May Be Best Place in the World to Be a Refugee. But That Could Change without More Money*, «Washington Post», 20 June 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/06/20/uganda-may-be-best-place-in-the-world-to-be-a-refugee-but-that-could-change-without-more-money/; C. Titz, M. Feck, *Uganda Is the Most Refugee-Friendly Country in the World,* «Spiegel Online», 13 September 2017: https://www.spiegel.de/international/tomorrow/uganda-is-the-most-refugee-friendly-country-in-the-world-a-1167294.html. Indeed, Uganda is one of the very few countries in the world comprehensively applying the principles provided for by the Geneva Convention (United Nations 1951) and its Integrative Protocol (United Nations 1967).

3 - Data from the Ugandan Refugee Response portal: https://ugandarefugees.org/en/country/uga.

4 - According to data provided by the deputy RDO in Arua District in May 2017, Rhino Camp hosted members of 53 ethnic groups, mostly Kakwa and Bari (over 64,000), but with a considerable presence of Dinka (about 17,000), Nuer (about 15,000) and Pojulu (15,000).

5 - Interview 0014, Camp Commandant, Pagirinyia Refugee Settlement, 3 May 2018.

6 - Interview 0045, local staff, International NGO, Adjumani Town, 10 May 2018.

7 - UNHCR's consolidated appeals are very often severely underfunded. Suffice it to say that in 2017 the organisation received only 34% of the total funding appealed for in that year. See *Uganda 2017 End of the Year Report*, "UNHCR", n.d.: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63609.

8 - Ugandan local government has a five-level structure going from the Local Council I, at the village level, to Local Council V, at the district level.

9 - Focus Group Discussion 02, 24 participants, Boroli Refuge Settlement, 18 May 2018.

10 - Refugee identity is here understood as the attitude to use the refugee label to identify oneself, to indicate a person's belonging to a wider group (that of refugees), and to create a distinction between oneself or its group and other groups (that of the host community). This attitude was expressed by all of my interviewees in the refugee settlements. On the agentive use of the refugee label, see Burnett (2013).

11 - Interview 0056, refugee woman, Mungula 1 Refugee Settlement, 15 May 2018; interview 0058, refugee woman, Mungula 1 Refugee Settlement, 15 May 2018. For an in-depth discussion of the meaning of the word *beny* and of the kind of authority it expressed in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial South Sudanese society, see Leonardi (2013).

12 - Cluster leaders exist in some of the settlements at a level below that of the RWC I.

13 - Interview 0028, Cluster Leader, Pagirinyia Refugee Settlement, 8 May 2018.

14 - This was also reported by Stites and Humphrey (2020).

15 - Interview 0023, RWC I Chairman, Pagirinyia Refugee Settlement, 7 May 2018.

16 - Interview 0046, RWC I Deputy-Chairwoman, Mungula 1 Refugee Settlement, 10 May 2018.

17 - Interview 0015, RWC I Chairman, Pagirinyia Refugee Settlement, 3 May 2018.

18 - Interview 0061, RWC II Secretary General, Nyumanzi Refugee Settlement, 16 May 2018.

19 - See the Uganda Comprehensive Refugee Response Portal: https://ugandarefugees.org/en/country/uga.

20 - See R. Kalyango, *Guest Post: Rural to Urban Migration of Refugees in Uganda*, "Research & Evidence Facility – SOAS" (blog), 29 August 2017. https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/ref-hornresearch/2017/08/29/rural-to-urban-migration-of-refugees-in-uganda/.

21 - See *Adjumani District Five-Year District Development Plan (2015/2016–2019/2020)*, "National Planning Authority", n.d.: http://npa.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ADJUMANI-DISTRICT-DDPII-2015-2016-to-2019-2020.pdf.

22 - See the Ugandan Refugee Response Portal at: https://ugandarefugees.org/en/country/uga.

23 - Interview 0111, LC1 Secretary Karoko, Adjumani Town, 21 May 2018; Interview 0116, LC I Chairman, Patua, Adjumani Town, 14 May 2018.

24 - Interview 0012, Female self-settled refugee, Adjumani Town, 2 May 2018; Focus Group Discussion 01, 17 female self-settled refugees at Patua Village, Adjumani Town, 2 May 2018.

25 - Interview 0019, Male self-settled refugee, Adjumani Town, 4 May 2018; interview 0111, *cit.*; Interview 0112, Ugandan woman married to a refugee, Adjumani Town, 21 May 2018.

26 - Interview 0008, Female self-settled refugee, Adjumani Town, 30 April 2018; Interview 0010, Female

self-settled refugee, Adjumani Town, 1 May 2018; Interview 0012, *cit.*; Interview 0022, Female self-settled refugee, Adjumani Town, 5 May 2018; Focus Group Discussion 01, *cit.*

27 - Focus Group Discussion 01, *cit.*

28 - Interview 0019, *cit.*; Interview 0020, Male self-settled refugee, Adjumani Town, 5 May 2018; Interview 0035, Female self-settled refugee, vendor at Awindiri Market, Adjumani Town, 9 May 2018.

29 - This topic was brought up by several of my informants, but they asked not to be mentioned in the research and for me to avoid giving any information that could lead to their identification.

30 - To protect the privacy of ordinary people interviewed both among the refugee population and the host community all names reported have been changed (often upon their request).

31 - Interview 0011, LC I Chairman Paridi Village, Adjumani Town, 1 May 2018; Interview 0109, LC I Chairman Minia East, Adjumani Town, 21 May 2018; interview 0116, *cit.*

32 - Interview 0011, *cit;* interview 0109, *cit.*

33 - Until the creation of the National Identification and Registration Authority, in 2015, this meant that refugees holding Ugandan ID cards could access services and rights reserved for Ugandan citizens, as there was very limited crosschecking of different databases. Holding a Uganda ID card was enough, for example, to be registered for voting in national elections, because the Electoral Commission and the Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration would not crosscheck the information about legally registered citizens holding national ID cards. Besides being illegal, this was also in open opposition to the citizenship laws that forbid naturalisation for refugees and their offspring. For an in-depth analysis of the ambiguities surrounding refugee's access to citizenship, see Ahimbisibwe and Belloni in this special issue.

34 - Interview 0019, *cit.*; informal conversation with international NGO representative in Adjumani.

35 - Interview 0033, Young female vendors (one self-settled refugee and one Ugandan national) at Awindiri Market, Adjumani Town, 9 May 2018. Bjørkhaug, Bøås, and Kebede (2017) report a similar dynamic with Ivorian refugees in Liberia.

36 - Interview 0019, *cit.*

37 - Interview 0019, *cit.*

38 - Interview 0020, *cit.*

39 - Interview 0021, Male self-settled refugee, Adjumani Town, 5 May 2018.

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