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Marriage and belonging among South Sudanese Acholi refugees in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This article describes refugee-background South Sudanese Acholi attempts to (re)produce customary marriages in New Zealand. The cross-cutting debt obligations and transactions involved in these marriages need the involvement of transnational social networks. Beyond these networks, however, customary marriages are important to ethnic identification, with the transactions involved generating and maintaining feelings of "belonging." Such feelings are largely absent from most refugees' wider resettlement experiences. Analysis of transformations within resettlement-based marriage customs demonstrates how individual and collective belonging is developed and negotiated amid the tensions of resettlement, with differences of opinion over these transformations involved highlighting the contested nature of belonging.

Refugee-background South Sudanese Acholi (SSA) living in the Wellington region of New Zealand (NZ) during 2011 widely considered their marriage customs to be among their most important "traditional" cultural practices.[1] Because of this, these SSAs said reproducing these practices was extremely important for their cultural survival in resettlement. Reproducing customary SSA marriage practices was valued for several reasons. Marriage transactions cemented kinship and social networks and created and maintained Acholi-specific identities. These transactions also helped maintain mnemonic links with the SSAs former lives and the social and geographical spaces anchoring their identities and belongings. In this article I analyze how the (re)production of customary SSA marriage practices in New Zealand by SSAs were tied to individual and community attempts at developing and maintaining a sense of belonging in resettlement, arguing that they were simultaneously trying to develop belonging while maintaining an "Acholi" identity in themselves and their children. I suggest that the reasons for this apparent tension were simultaneous interactions between, firstly, negative community perceptions about resettlement and, secondly, a need to maintain social networks in South Sudan while creating social ties in NZ.

All my interlocutors viewed the specificities of customary Acholi marriage transactions as distinctively Acholi, something marking them as unique and distinguishing them from other South Sudanese. Community members often spoke about how their customary marriage transactions were necessary for cultural maintenance. This was an important concern in discussions about

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issues such as "Westernisation," and instances of other refugees who had not maintained similar cultural practices became proof of how easy it would be to "lose their culture."

Nonetheless, differences of opinion over these cultural practices did exist within the SSA community. This variation reflected individual experiences of resettlement, particularly difficulties integrating into NZ society, and was especially noticeable when these experiences involved conflict with other SSA – for whom group membership was often taken-for-granted as a category of belonging. In this way, contests within the SSA community around issues like marriage transactions demonstrated the group's necessarily heterogeneous nature. It was precisely because of the way these contests problematized people's taken-for-granted senses of belonging – primarily based on assumed categorical similarity (such as being Acholi) – that the negotiations around customary marriage transactions became highly contested sites of sociality. This agrees with Baak's (2011a) analysis of similar practices among the Australian-based South Sudanese community, where some communal practices simultaneously excluded certain community members while other practices included them, creating differential and sometimes competing senses of belonging.

Acholi refugees in New Zealand

The Acholi are a Luo-speaking, patrilocal, patrilineal group of around two million persons from northern Uganda and southern South Sudan. Those in New Zealand in 2011 were almost entirely of South Sudanese origin, most of whom had arrived between 2002 and 2006 after escaping the Second Sudanese War (1983–2005).[2] The entire South Sudanese refugee population in New Zealand during 2011 was estimated at 600 to 700, the majority living around Auckland, Christchurch, or Wellington (Department of Labour, 2009). The Acholi were a small group of less than 70 people in this larger national community and all resided in the Wellington region.

All refugees in New Zealand are provided housing and monetary grants as well as access to health and counseling services and language and literacy training. Furthermore, these refugees are entitled to benefits identical to other eligible residents. All refugees in New Zealand also have permanent residence and may apply for full citizenship five years after arrival (Department of Labour, 2009). Thus, virtually all SSAs in New Zealand were eligible for citizenship in 2011. However, very few had entered tertiary education, let alone had gained a qualification, and the few with employment virtually all had poorly paid, low-status jobs. All my interlocutors mentioned that problems getting jobs and money were major reasons they felt isolated from NZ society, noting that they had neither the opportunities nor the resources to develop the relationships needed to belong.

Educating and raising children was a central concern among community members, and parents viewed resettlement as inevitably leading to the "assimilation" or "Westernisation" of their children:[3] To succeed in education or employment, refugee-background youth had to acquire the same linguistic, social, and cultural skills as other NZ residents (cf. Hoffstaedter & Lamb, 2019; O'Rourke, 2011). Paradoxically, adults saw acquisition of these skills as proof their children were losing their culture and identity. Moreover, South Sudanese parents believed New Zealand privileges children's rights over those of their caregivers, and the involvement of government institutions became a problem for intergenerational relations and cultural maintenance. Indeed, all my interlocutors said this was a fundamental issue, with parents and elders saying the "freedom" promised by the NZ social system encouraged their children to "assimilate" sooner. Elders felt that following customary marrying practices or engaging in traditions like cultural dance (O'Byrne, 2014) therefore helped youth maintain their Acholi identities.

On transnationalism and belonging

I frame SSAs' experiences of resettlement in New Zealand according to the concepts of transnationalism and belonging. Although the literature on transnationalism is vast and multifaceted, it generally shows how interactions and networks between home and host countries define activities, form identities, and shape structures (Bird et al., 2016; Glick Schiller et al., 1995; Guarnizo & Smith, 1998; Vertovec, 2004). Vertovec (2004, p. 1) defines a "transnational orientation" as "a set of sustained long-distance, border-crossing connections" that link migrants "with significant others … who dwell in nation-states other than those in which the migrants reside." This summarizes the experiences of most SSAs in New Zealand, who maintained links with significant others in places as diverse as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States in addition to Uganda, Kenya, and South Sudan. Nonetheless, although many SSAs in New Zealand maintained multiple ongoing international interconnections, these were limited by local, national, and international norms, laws, and policies (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998; Myers & Nelson, 2019).

Kushner and Knox (1999, p. 411) argued that "the need to establish a sense of belonging is crucial for the forcibly displaced or dispossessed." I therefore propose that, at an existential level, analysis of refugees' lives almost necessarily entails engagement with the concept of belonging. According to Antonsich (2010, p. 645; cf. Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2010), the fundamental connection between belonging and transnationalism is located in a socially oriented "politics of belonging" that "constructs, claims, justifies, or resists" how identities and belongings are negotiated and reproduced. Transnational lives and issues of belonging are therefore intimately interconnected (Glick Schiller et al., 1995).

Yuval-Davis (2007, p. 12) argued that most individuals' subjective evaluations of their belonging are "taken for granted, until … threatened," often by processes of exclusion and othering. Although such boundaries therefore make belonging inherently "exclusive as well as inclusive" (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p. 266), belonging "is not just about membership, rights and duties, but also about the emotions that such memberships evoke" (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005, p. 526). Often neglected, this affective component is important because, as Valentine et al. (2009, p. 244) argue, belonging is "not just about being able to 'fit in' … [it is] about emotional attachment and security." Individual feelings of belonging are therefore as much about experiencing nonbelonging, like exclusion or marginalization, as about inclusion or belonging per se (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005).

Affective experiences of social relations or places are significant, too: Baak (2011b) noted that South Sudanese in Australia sought belonging through connection to people and places. Other scholars have argued that belonging is an "emotional attachment" (Antonsich, 2010, p. 647), feeling "safe" (Yuval-Davis, 2006) or feeling "at home" (Jackson, 2002). In this way belonging is sociocultural, spatial, psychological, and affective. However, although often linked to locality and expressed through culture, belonging is fundamentally the individual experience of sociality (Lovell, 1998, p. 1). Thus, in what follows, I will demonstrate the undeniable importance of this element to SSAs in New Zealand: Not only did their feelings of nonbelonging highlight their excluding experiences of the NZ social-relational space, but they attributed failure at developing belonging to the ways in which the lack of economic opportunities and social prejudices resulted in a lack of adequate sociality.

Explicitly linking cultural performance with developing belonging, Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 203) argued that belonging always has "a performative dimension," noting that (re)producing sociocultural practices helps its development. Antonsich (2010, p. 652) called this "doing belonging," and I proceed from the premise that cultural "performances" around marriage helped SSAs negotiate belonging in New Zealand. Nonetheless, I must note that "people are not free to choose their belongings outside of the bounds of power" (Carillo Rowe, 2005, p. 21) and that, being defined and structured by surrounding contexts, "not every form of belonging is possible" (Antonsich, 2010, p. 652). Thus, despite most community members generally identifying with a wider group

described as both South Sudanese and Acholi, the community was a heterogeneous group of individuals with varying backgrounds and experiences.

Like "belonging," "'community' and 'integration' are complex, multidimensional concepts and processes" (Lewis, 2010, p. 572). Much recent literature has demonstrated the significance of the role that the conscious (re)production of cultural practices has among migrant communities, especially among recently settled refugees (Bird et al., 2016; Hoffstaedter & Lamb, 2019; Lenette et al., 2019; Lewis 2010; Myers & Nelson, 2019; Ripero-Muñiz, 2020). In Ripero-Muñiz's (2020, p. 65) ethnographic analysis of Somali refugees in Nairobi and Johannesburg, she found that Somali women were "carriers of knowledge" and "active agents" in wider cultural (re)production. Likewise, Bird et al.'s (2016, p. 104) study of Kareni refugees in Brisbane shows refugees "often use cultural schema from their original homeland to build familiarity in unfamiliar surrounds." However, as Lenette et al.'s (2019) research among South Sudanese refugees in Sydney demonstrates, this may sometimes involve negotiating what should be considered a fundamental cultural practice in the first place.

Indeed, it has been suggested that discussing, negotiating, and embodying contested collective practices helps refugees integrate within the host community (Bird et al., 2016; Lewis 2010; Myers & Nelson, 2019) at the same time building community within resettlement and maintaining connections among the diaspora (Lenette et al., 2019; Ripero-Muñiz, 2020). After all, as Myers and Nelson (2019, p. 1218) argue in their work among Kareni refugees in the United States, the transnational "maintenance of cultural and symbolic ties … appears to mitigate the integration process." Nonetheless, as scholars such as Lenette et al. (2019, p. 766; cf. Baak, 2011a; Lewis, 2010) indicate, the realities underlying cultural continuity are complex and are never unidirectional, easy, or uncontested. Indeed, as I will show in the final section of this article, such attempts at cultural (re)production may only serve to "gloss over important [intra-community] distinctions" (Bird et al., 2016, p. 115).

Marriage negotiations and transnational belonging

This article furthers "the recent trend … to consider marriage or kinship not as an institution that offers the inner secrets of society, but in relation to other institutions, economies, and meanings" (Hunter, 2016, p. ix). Therefore, it describes how customary Acholi marriage transactions were reproduced and transformed in New Zealand, showing that the negotiations and transactions involved helped create and maintain relations among SSAs in New Zealand and throughout the diaspora (especially Australia).[4] By using community members' own ideas about the importance of these transactions, I analyze individual negotiations of belonging alongside larger, communal contests over group membership and identity. Thus, in addition to situating these practices within their "transnational geographies of marriage" (Hunter, 2016, p. x), I show how SSAs' experiences of resettlement affected their sense of belonging in and toward New Zealand. In other words, by describing individual reactions to transforming "bridewealth" transactions (Bossen, 1988, p. 128),[5] I analyze how customary marriage practices manifested wider problems with resettlement and the community's internal tensions, demonstrating the link between these and individuals' difficulties developing belonging.

How resettled refugees balance the competing requirements of developing belonging in connection to a host country while maintaining belonging to countries and communities of origin is a tension with wide comparative significance. This is particularly pronounced when the resettled community is small and the cultural distance between home and host communities is large, such as in the research presented here. I therefore suggest that my findings can be generalized beyond one small sample to demonstrate that the challenges my interlocutors faced are representative of those encountered by other small refugee communities more broadly. This is because they often share generally similar features: a relatively small size, lack of native language competency and/or

literacy, and linked difficulties gaining and maintaining employment. Moreover, in white-settler societies like New Zealand (or Australia; cf. Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007), the "visible difference" of many refugees might also result in discrimination.[6]

This article therefore provides insight into processes relevant beyond either SSAs or New Zealand. My general position is that analysis of SSA resettlement experiences allows important insights into belonging as a theoretical issue. Fundamental to this is the observation that a lack of belonging is a defining feature of the early resettlement period, especially among small communities with great cultural divergence from their hosts. My wider argument is that difficulties in developing belonging is a fundamental early experience of refugee resettlement and that attempts at creating belonging therefore lie beneath many actions refugees undertake in resettlement. This includes the actions SSAs took to maintain and reproduce their customary marriage transactions.

In other words, in performing their culture, SSAs in New Zealand attempted to ensure cultural continuity and strengthen their ethnic identities. This created a range of links within New Zealand and throughout the diaspora. Indeed, through the explicit performance of customary Acholi cultural practices, a specifically Acholi community was created. This gave individuals a group with which to identify, a community to whom they felt connected, and feelings of control over their own lives, all of which helped ground belonging. However, this process was never homogeneous or complete. I therefore conclude by showing that, although marriage transactions generally generated feelings of belonging with respect to South Sudan, whether these feelings existed was individually variable and that inconsistencies of opinion around transforming marriage practices served to highlight the contingent, fluid, and contested nature of belonging.

Materials, methods, and limitations

This article draws on three informal focus groups and 19 open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted during 2011. These interviews focused on questions about Acholi marriage traditions, two previous NZ-based marriages, the negotiations connected to an upcoming marriage within the community, and people's resettlement experiences more generally. Interview transcripts were systematically analyzed for dominant themes using open and axial coding. Emerging themes were discussed with interlocutors via a reflective iterative process during follow-up interviews. Interviews took place as part of larger, Masters-level ethnographic research in cultural anthropology at Victoria University Wellington (O'Byrne, 2012). This larger project used a single SSA cultural performance group as its primary but not exclusive ethnographic focus (O'Byrne, 2014).[7] Except for Alfred (introduced below),[8] all interlocutors in this paper were members of this performance group. Reflecting the demographic makeup of the SSA community in NZ, most group members were middle-aged women and their children, often resettled without husbands.[9]

Research was conducted in English, which partially restricted participation, especially among older women. Although community-based translators was considered, the performance group decided their English-speaking members could provide all necessary information, so no translation was undertaken. Nonetheless, these limitations allow important insight into SSA resettlement experiences: language competency should positively affect belonging, meaning English-speaking SSA should feel more belonging in NZ. However, my interlocutors still spoke about restricted feelings of belonging. Moreover, the economic elements of my interlocutor's discussions were noteworthy: interlocutors of both genders used English words like "payment," "fine," and "debt," showing the emic significance underlying the economic dimensions of Acholi marriages.

A further limitation might be that most interlocutors came from a performance group created to (re)produce Acholi cultural material in resettlement. It is possible that group membership showed members as not only having a stronger desire to (re)produce Acholi-ness but also as less willing to engage in processes of acculturation. However, as the SSA community had less than 70

people during this research and 20-30 of them usually participated in the group's activities, wider generalizations do not seem disproportionate.

Results

An overview of premarital Acholi marriage transactions

In Porter's (2016) insightful account of Acholi sex, love, and marriage, she notes, Acholi marriages involve active negotiation between the couple as well as the parents and lineage members. Porter also notes that divorce is relatively easy to achieve, especially when *lim akumu* (see below) is yet to be completed and particularly when these payments have not yet begun. These generalizations held in New Zealand too,[10] where the transfers involved substantiated Porter's (2016) argument that Acholi marriage is a developing process rather than a specific event.

Necessitating multiple peoples' involvement in various long-reaching social, economic, and political ties, marriage transactions among Acholi represented

> a rite of passage into adulthood, access to rights, and a status within the household and community. Marriage is a lengthy process of negotiations and exchanges of bridewealth, becoming more secure with each transfer of payments and each ceremony. It is a pivotal point in inter-generational relations [and] … building alliances between families (Grabska, 2012, p. 7).

Grabska's statement about marriages among Dinka and Nuer South Sudanese is equally true for Acholi marriages, and several of my interlocutors described how the processes involved in marriage comprised a complex web of relationships with varying stages of "solidification" or "formalisation": These stages evolved from the first beginnings of intimacy (sexual or otherwise), through shared coresidence, and to the birth of children and, ideally, grandchildren. I was told that by advancing through these not necessarily sequential and sometimes lengthy stages, the marriage strengthened the relationships between everyone in two large, interconnected kin-groups. And, as I discuss below, marriage transactions take a central role. Therefore, in what follows, I describe what SSAs in New Zealand themselves considered to be their foundational marriage customs.[11] As will become apparent, the cultural and structural basis of a "legitimate" marriage is the transactions that formalize it.

Therefore, an "ideal" Acholi marriage requires that a series of transactions be made, generally moving from the wider kin-group of the prospective husband to that of his fiancée's patrilineal kin. Several stages are involved, and although at each stage several transactions should be made, how such transactions play out show them as "a fluid and flexible practice which belies rigid classification" (Porter, 2016, p. 97). Indeed, the marriage process is so fluid that there is no precise point wherein one might say a couple are "married": Not only is there no specific ritual to mark any point of transition, with different clans or even couples marking their partnerships differently but also some people talk about anyone they are sexually intimate with as their "husband" (*cwar*) or "wife" (*dako*). However, no matter this variability, the transactions that ideally underpin marriage and mark it as a structuring cultural form are some of the few constants amid otherwise heterogeneous practices. And even here the difference between transactions that *should* be paid and those that *are* can be significant. Nonetheless, it is in the discrepancies between the ideal and the real that negotiations about the value of these transactions in resettlement takes place. Therefore, the final part of this paper discusses what these contestations revealed about the everyday micropolitics of community life among SSAs in New Zealand.

When speaking about marriage transactions in the ideal sense, most SSAs in New Zealand considered them as the practices that defined the process. No matter their diversity in any individual marriage, the transactions ideally occur involved three stages: (a) approaching the topic of marriage and entering negotiation (*cuna*); (b) other premarital transactions, or *luk*; and (c) *lim akumu*, final transactions necessary to formalize a marriage. It should be noted that the full

process can take years, even generations, and is often never completed. Indeed, it may even be argued that because marriage requires different kin groups to negotiate and maintain positive relations for lengthy periods of time, lack of finality is an important element in strengthening Acholi sociality.[12]

Before *lim akumu* or "proper" transactions can be negotiated, a man must broach the topic with the woman's family. This process, called *cuna*, is defined by Baines and Gauvin (2014, p. 8) as "traditional Acholi courtship." To allow discussions to take place, a suitor must make two immediate transactions: a "time wasting fee" to the future bride's family for listening to the future groom's proposal, and a "speaking fee" paid by a man to his wedding committee to negotiate for him. My interlocutors said that separate wedding committees are required for each partner and that not only do these committees decide what will be transacted and how much, but they are ultimately responsible for maintaining good kin relations. Committee members should be senior and respected persons close to the kin of the marital partners. In Africa this included high-status people with wide-ranging social networks, such as priests or ministers, members of government, local businessmen, and elders, friends, and senior kin of both genders. These patterns continued in New Zealand, where committees were composed of community leaders among the Acholi and other South Sudanese ethnicities—mainly Dinka and Nuer—or other African-origin refugees from Somalia or Eritrea.

Historically, the members of a groom's committee were major contributors to his bridewealth fund. Moreover, through their involvement in negotiating, gathering, and distributing this fund, wedding committees filled several economic and administrative functions. As such, they created enduring social relations between marital partners and kin groups via people with social, political, and economic significance. Further, because committee members make significant contributions to the bridewealth fund, the debt owed to them by a groom and his family helps build and maintain transnational networks over longer periods than just one ritual event. This means that marriage transactions' most important functions are only tangentially connected to the actual transactions themselves.

Once *cuna* is paid, additional money—called "opening the mouth of the mother"—is needed to allow negotiations to proceed to the next stage. These next transactions are generally unified under the term *luk*, a process most easily defined as "customary payment[s] related to sex" (Porter, 2015, p. 318). *Luk*-payments include one to enter the bride's father's house and begin negotiations and a second called *balo kwan* "for interrupting the girl's schooling."[13] These are paid to the bride's father. A different payment is made to the bride's female kin for raising her and a second, separate payment made to her mother for giving birth to her. Another payment similar to *balo kwan* is made to the bride's father if the couple have children, increasing with the number of children. Lastly, nonnegotiable "fines" may be levied on the groom's party for entering the bride's father's house wearing shoes, swearing, releasing flatulence, or otherwise "disrespecting" the bride's kin during negotiations. Once *luk* is decided, negotiation of *lim akumu* or marriage-specific transactions begins.

An overview of lim akumu (bridewealth-type transactions)

Most SSAs in New Zealand considered lim akumu, or bridewealth-type marriage transactions, as the second most important part of the marriage process after having children. Indeed, they generally said that a couple were not "really married" until these transactions began, no matter the length of their relationship or the exchange of any previous transactions. Divorce is still easily achieved and children could be considered illegitimate.[14] As a patrilineal society, a woman "marries into" the clan of her husband and, if lim akumu has begun, her children "belong" to that clan (cf. Porter, 2016).[15] Children born without lim akumu have not transferred out of their mother's patrilineal kin group and rights toward these children remain with their mother's kin.[16]

Historically, marriage transactions were fulfilled through the mobilization of social networks (a goat from a friend, a sheep from a brother, your father's cows, and so on). They were paid in livestock, animal pelts, food, millet beer, feathers, and gold. Now, however, they are paid almost solely in money (cf. Grabska, 2012) and, because the costs have escalated significantly over the last two decades, most SSAs in New Zealand found these conversions increasingly problematic: I was told that in Sudan in the 1970s and 1980s, one cow used to be worth several US dollars. This meant that 10 cows would have only cost the groom's family between US$30 and US$50 (NZ$40–70). Nowadays, however, those same 10 cows might cost upwards of US$10,000 (NZ$14,000). Such inflationary calculations make marriage more difficult than ever. For example, the two previous New Zealand–based marriages each required lim akumu of NZ$15,000 (US$11,000) and first installments of NZ$3,000 (US$2,100). These costs were in addition to the NZ$5,000 (US$3,600) required for cuna and luk, which needed to be paid in full before lim akumu could begin.

Acholi marriage transactions in resettlement

In the remainder of this paper, I describe how SSAs in New Zealand attempted to (re)produce their marriage practices in resettlement during 2011. Hunter (2016, p. x) labeled the types of internationally dispersed relations involved the "transnational geographies of marriage," and it is precisely because of these transnational geographies that the community found New Zealand–based marriages so difficult and expensive. For example, transactions were negotiated by committees and kin networks across the world, and the NZ community felt that people living elsewhere were disconnected from NZ realities. These difficulties were heightened by increased numbers of children born into relationships with lengthened pre–lim akumu periods as a woman's family could demand more lim akumu if "correct" process was not followed. Several interlocutors told me this was especially true when the woman's family remained in Africa and assumed people in resettlement were financially better off than those "back home."

Although all SSAs in New Zealand gave multiple reasons for why it was so difficult to reproduce their marriage system in resettlement, the most common reason was increasing expense. This was of such concern that everyone raised the issue without prompting, although there was variation in how they spoke about this. Some told of the difficulties gathering money—others of how excessive requirements caused future financial problems. Yet others spoke about issues of children's legitimacy. In all cases, the underlying problem was the same: a general lack of resources in resettlement stemming from problems finding and maintaining employment. Previous marriages in New Zealand had cost between NZ$15,000 and NZ$20,000 (US$11,000–14,500), a significant amount for any NZ resident to spend on any aspect of life. The real cost is arguably much higher for generally unemployed refugee-background individuals with little money or assets.

Intersections between resettlement difficulties and increasing costs meant the first lim akumu installments might be delayed, sometimes for years. This could result in significant problems, however, as the patrilineal cultural logic that determines children as being members of their father's kin group also states children do not belong to that group if at least some portion of lim akumu has not been paid. I was told that, in this situation, and if the negotiations involved were particularly fractious or if there had been no lim akumu despite repeated requests, the bride's family might even remove or repossess children.

Although, due to the legalities involved, the removal of children was unlikely to happen to New Zealand–based families, the threat remained a prominent fear. Thus a timely first installment was necessary. SSAs in New Zealand widely considered that the difficulties making and saving money in resettlement increased the possibility of future child removal by an African-based family, something particularly worrisome for couples contemplating repatriation. Alfred told me

that this was the reason why he made his first lim akumu installment in 2008. Indeed, he and his wife Regina decided that making this payment and removing this threat was more important than obtaining a mortgage to buy their own home. At that point in time, with their children getting older and the situation in Sudan stabilizing, Alfred and Regina wanted to be able to return to visit family. Without at least partial fulfillment of Alfred's lim akumu, however, they felt the threat of their children being removed was too great.

Although only in his late-thirties, by 2011, Alfred was already a highly respected leader within the NZ South Sudanese community. Objectively speaking, he and Regina were the most successfully integrated SSAs in New Zealand. They were the only family I knew with two people accessing regular full-time employment.[17] However, they also had three children before Alfred began lim akumu. This was costly, yet unavoidable: conditions of life in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, where they had previously lived, and the early difficulties of resettlement life meant Alfred was unable to begin payments earlier. Therefore, in 2008 he made his "first installment" of NZ$10,000 (US$7,200). He said this was considered equivalent to 25 million of his total "debt" of 35 million Sudanese pounds. Further, although he was initially required to "pay" 35 million pounds, the fact that he had children before beginning the process meant he was "fined" an extra 5 million pounds. The "real cost" of his marriage was therefore 40 million Sudanese pounds, and, after lim akumu, in 2011, he still "owed" 15 million pounds, or roughly NZ$6,000 (US$4,300).[18]

On the other hand, William, a younger man in his mid-20s said that his inability to afford even luk, let alone lim akumu, meant he and his partner remained unmarried, despite the community describing them as "husband and wife." For William, as with most SSAs in New Zealand, lack of English literacy, poor employment prospects, and overdependence on low-wage labor meant that, as with much in his resettled life, marriage was prohibitively expensive. He could never see himself being able to afford marriage in resettlement. William openly spoke of his lack of attachment to New Zealand and his failure to find a place within NZ society: Resettlement had been difficult and employment hard to come by, he had little social contacts beyond his own community, and he had been unable to gather the funds to marry let alone buy a house or car. He felt marginalized by wider NZ society and he told me many NZ residents considered refugees "a drain on their resources … just here taking their money." Significantly, echoing the feelings of marginalization demonstrated by other SSAs, William frequently used phrases like, "I am not from here! I am from over there! I belong to somewhere else!" freely highlighting that he did not belong in New Zealand.

Contested traditions

Although the majority of the community argued for continuing to engage in customary marriage transactions in New Zealand, some took an increasingly pragmatic view. Like William, they maintained that it was too expensive. Margaret, for example, consistently highlighted the general poverty of the SSA community, commenting that prohibitively costly marriage transactions hindered the viability of resettlement. Indeed, she argued that the community needed to significantly reduce the cost of New Zealand–based marriages.

Once, during my weekly visit to Margaret's home in the distant, low-income suburb where she lived, our discussion turned to her own marriage transaction experiences. Margaret told me her life in New Zealand was difficult: Still suffering from injuries sustained during the Sudanese war, she survived on rather-minimal disability benefits and her teenage son struggled to attain even low-wage, temporary employment. At that time, her son was in the middle of negotiating luk. The process seemed painful and difficult. For Margaret, her son's marriage was already too expensive. In her early 50s, Margaret was Ugandan by birth but had married a SSA man who had since died, leaving her the sole caregiver for three children. Although she was an important member of the SSA cultural performance group (O'Byrne, 2014), she had few New

Zealand–based kin. Margaret said her son's luk negotiations had affected their lives as well as community dynamics. Indeed, Alfred—as head of the bride's committee—also told me the negotiations had caused hostility in the community. This was primarily due to varying perceptions about marriage transactions reflecting the directions that any bridewealth would move: the bride's kin had taken a hardline traditionalist stance on the necessity and cost of bridewealth while the groom's kin argued that excessive payments damaged the sustainability of the couple's future. The groom's kin also argued that strict adherence to tradition did not reflect resettlement realities.[19]

While speaking about an earlier marriage in the community, Margaret had commented that the general poverty of resettlement was accounted for in those negotiations. Margaret considered this an important precedent and noted that her son's position was "even worse." She said this earlier marriage still required small, almost symbolic payments to be made and had benefited family in South Sudan without negatively impacting either the groom's New Zealand–based kin or the couple's future sustainability. Indeed, the transactions required had been more relational than financial, serving to (re)produce networks of social connectivity rather than solidify economic interests.

However, it was not the payment of the transactions that most concerned Margaret, who consistently highlighted their important social, cultural, and structural functions. Instead, she was more concerned about how it would impact the couple's future. In this, however, she was opposed by the majority of the SSA community: Although everyone agreed marriage transactions were a fundamental Acholi cultural institution, Margaret was one of the few demanding context-dependent transformation. The majority opinion was that the full process must continue despite resettlement conditions, and some women even indicated that this was necessary because it was the debt incurred that guaranteed marital stability.

Discussion

Debates like those about bridewealth described above reflect the very real difficulties SSAs had integrating into New Zealand while maintaining a distinct Acholi identity. The community's discourses about the resettlement-based reproduction of their cultural marriage transactions demonstrates that bridewealth is a highly contested cultural site, linked to individual difficulties with resettlement experienced as issues of belonging. I therefore suggest that Acholi community members' differing opinions toward these transformations were connected with personal experiences of resettlement within New Zealand—not only their economic and social success but also how their individual experience of sociality with other SSAs and other NZ residents interacted to affect the development of their sense of belonging.

This reconfirms the point of O'Rourke (2011), who argued that understanding refugee-background individuals' resettlement experiences needs a holistic perspective that is attentive to refugees' own subjective evaluations. This is undoubtedly true, and it was the combination of issues that refugees face that made their overall experiences marginalizing and the development of their belongings so difficult. For SSAs in New Zealand, separately problematic issues around unemployment, education, economic marginalization, social exclusion, and the loss of cultural identity were further complicated by the vagaries of integration, an uneven resettlement process, and unequal power relations both internally and as part of wider social interactions. Future research should pay more attention to individual experiences of fracture within otherwise taken-for-granted communities of belonging, such as those discussed here, as it is in exactly these intra-communal quarrels that we might most easily interrogate belonging as the individual experience of sociality.

For the SSA community in New Zealand in 2011, these difficulties fed off of and reinforced each other, combining to underscore already-existing feelings of powerlessness and individual and

collective assessments of subjectively poor resettlement outcomes. Most SSAs arrived in New Zealand with great expectations. But despite New Zealand's many objective advantages, in terms of safety, security, and state-provided welfare and health benefits, the community's general resettlement experiences were more difficult and less rewarding than they had hoped. The everyday realities of resettlement had meant tempering their aspirations, and the difficulties they had experienced made stable belonging difficult. Instead, for many, their belongings were fragmentary at best.

SSA marriages that took place in New Zealand in 2011 did so in an increasingly transnational context. One significant reason for continuing their customary marriage transactions was how they linked transnational networks and connected individuals and communities around the world. These connections were created by the process itself, by how marriage transactions were negotiated, gathered, and paid. Through the mobilization of the transnational networks required to pay bridewealth, this connecting function was built into the cross-cutting nature of the debt obligations at its core. For instance, although any one marriage may result in a network of ties created by debts undertaken to gather bridewealth, the true value of these ties cannot be understood outside their full social context: Often, as soon as someone makes one bridewealth installment, the resources from this transaction are used toward the bridewealth debts of others. Thus, although a woman's father may be owed bridewealth, he and his sons owe bridewealth themselves. Further, bridewealth resources are not static but fluid—continually moving throughout multiple transnationally connected networks. The transnational mobility of bridewealth therefore not only reinforces ties between individual people and families but simultaneously reinforces that which allows the origin and continuation of the network: an Acholi ethnic belonging.

I have suggested that community debates highlighted variations within different individuals' experiences of resettlement in New Zealand and showed marriage transactions to be contested cultural sites. Indeed, individuals' difficulties with resettlement played out in debates over the reproduction of customary marriage practices. Further, differences of opinion over these practices highlighted the contingent, fluid, and contested nature of belonging. Different arguments put forward in these debates demonstrated how belonging was multifaceted—constructed, developed, and maintained in varying ways for different individuals. These debates also showed that cultural reproduction and belonging were intertwined, linked to individuals' difficulties with the development and maintenance of a sense of belonging in New Zealand. This made clear how contests over the position and place of culture are as much contests about access to and control over the conditional and relational nature of belonging.

Regardless of differing ideas about the cost of their customary marriages however, all SSAs I spoke with were adamant about the wider sociocultural importance of their marriage transactions: They widely regarded them as a central institution through which other sociocultural elements were integrated. Marriage transactions not only recognized and legitimated marriage and kinship ties but, by maintaining a constant flow of people and things between different social networks, formed a fundamental component of the political and economic life of Acholi society, as well as a foundational basis for individual and group belonging. Another fundamental element of many customary SSA marriage transactions is how their lack of finality is a key process through which Acholi sociality is strengthened and maintained. This important aspect of temporality was unfortunately overlooked in this research, which primarily focused on spatiality instead. It is recommended that further research into the temporal dimensions of individual and collective sociality and belonging be undertaken.

Conclusion

Customary Acholi marriage transactions in 2011 generated a form of social belonging that connected SSA individuals to others in the Acholi and South Sudanese communities in New Zealand and to larger communities of belonging throughout the diaspora. Again, SSAs in New Zealand highlighted that participation within the specifically *Acholi* institution of marriage was an

important means of defining who was Acholi, something through which they could gain and maintain membership within that group of belonging. Moreover, SSAs in New Zealand also noted that this Acholi identity position was fundamentally tied to a place of origin. This further highlighted the centrality of place-based belonging: although similar networks existed within New Zealand, self-identification with place-based communities of origin effectively reoriented belonging back "home" and away from the country of resettlement. In privileging place-based belongings toward both South Sudanese and Acholi homelands, marriage transactions in New Zealand in 2011 therefore allowed SSAs to actively engage in a politics of belonging that constructed identities resistant to the perceived exclusion of NZ society and their idealized inclusion within a newly independent South Sudan simultaneously.

Therefore, in addition to embedding people within networks, SSA marriage practices also identified those who reproduced them as members of the Acholi ethnicity. Because the transactions involved were described as distinctively Acholi, they functioned to differentiate Acholi from other African groups with similar customs. In this way, Acholi-specific marriage transactions were important means of reproducing Acholi culture and community in New Zealand and producing specifically Acholi individuals with specifically Acholi identities. Despite the many functional benefits of their resettlement reproduction, however, not everyone in the community wished to maintain them. Different discourses surrounding their reproduction in New Zealand thus reflected on-going community debates around how to integrate into NZ society while remaining Acholi.

Notes

1. I should acknowledge that, having taken place in 2011, this research is rather old and the kinds of negotiations discussed may well have changed. Likewise, the demographic composition of the community may have changed, especially following independence and further war in South Sudan. Nonetheless, although the *exact* empirical elements of this specific community may have evolved, I suggest their wider experiences of resettlement and belonging are still relevant to many refugees beyond the precise time and place discussed.
2. Although the vast majority of Acholi in New Zealand were from South Sudan, one of my primary interlocutors and an important member of the SSA cultural performance group was a Ugandan Acholi who had married an SSA man. Margaret (introduced later) was the only Ugandan Acholi I met in New Zealand and, as Acholi are patrilineal, her children shared their father's nationality.
3. Both these English words were used by several interlocutors.
4. Members of the SSA diaspora can be found in most refugee-receiving Western nations. The main transnational connections for SSAs in New Zealand were with other South Sudanese communities in Australia and the United States, other refugees in refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda, and friends and family in South Sudan. These connections were maintained via phone calls, emails, and internet-enabled video-based media.
5. I follow Bossen (1988, p. 128) and use the analytic term *bridewealth* to refer to all marriage transactions discussed herein. Bossen defines *bridewealth* as "the transfer of goods, valuables and sometimes cash from the kin group of the groom to that of the bride."
6. However, although this might have impacted their resettlement experiences, as none of my interlocutors mentioned it to me I do not dwell on it further. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is more significant among the country's larger and predominantly Islamic-refugee-background Somali community.
7. The author was not a member of the wider SSA community but simply a masters-level student with NZ citizenship. The author has not lived, worked, or undertaken additional research in New Zealand since completion of this study, meaning there has been little chance to follow up on this work. Having said this, my PhD fieldwork took place among a South Sudanese Acholi community living in South Sudan during the year 2013–2014 (O'Byrne, 2017).
8. All names are pseudonyms.
9. Due to constraints the university ethical review board imposed on an unexperienced masters-level researcher, I could not talk with anyone under the age of 18 even with parental consent. This meant that any discussion with young people about intergenerational differences of opinion was forbidden and remains a limitation.

10. All descriptions in the results and discussion sections are derived from research. In other words, although the overviews seem rather disembodied and functionalist, they reflect how my interlocutors themselves spoke about what they saw as their customary marriage arrangements. Thus, assertions such as "as a patrilineal society, a woman 'marries into' the clan of her husband" or "if *lim akumu* has begun, her children 'belong' to that clan" are aggregated generalizations of primary interview material. This is important, as it reflects how SSAs themselves spoke about these structures and practices.
11. Whether some of these transactions—for example, *balo kwan* or the fee "for interrupting the girl's schooling"—are "actually traditional" or not is beside the point: What is significant is that SSAs deem these transactions to be culturally and customarily important.
12. For other discussions on Acholi marriage transactions, see Baines and Gauvin (2014) and Porter (2015, 2016, particularly Chapter 4).
13. Porter (2016, p. 99) notes that this form of *luk ayige,* or "payment for having sex before the marriage," is often called *balo kwan* (spoiling studies) and is the most variable of all *luk* payments.
14. Although group members told me a man might divorce his wife for barrenness, they emphasized that it was more usual for a woman to divorce her husband for drunkenness, violence, or other mistreatment.
15. All my interlocutors spoke similarly to Diana, who said, "a woman, when she is married, she must leave her family, her father, and go now to her husband's home. That is the right thing to do. She belongs to those people now."
16. See the Acholi marriage transactions in resettlement section for how these transactions relate to children's lineal membership.
17. If any SSA in New Zealand could provide an overview of the community's resettlement experiences, it was Alfred. He was a well-known leader within both the SSA and wider South Sudanese communities. He also worked as a community liaison for a refugee service NGO in one of New Zealand's primary resettlement areas. He thus came face-to-face with the everyday issues of many refugees from multiple ethnonational groups. Therefore, alongside his own expectations for resettlement, Alfred had developed a grounded and well-rounded view of New Zealand-based refugees' resettlement experiences and the bureaucratic, legal, and funding restrictions within which NGOs and the NZ government worked. Despite this, Alfred spoke openly of the difficulties he and his family had experienced in resettlement, how this had resulted in him not developing a feeling of belonging in New Zealand, and how he considered moving his family elsewhere.
18. All economic terminology comes directly from Alfred's own, much longer description of his martial circumstances; the English words used are his own.
19. I do not know the final decisions of this process, which was ongoing throughout 2012, at least. However, comments made by both Alfred (as the head of the groom's committee) and Margaret suggest that tradition would have eventually trumped circumstance and full bridewealth would have been required.

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