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'When the World Turns Upside Down, Live Like a Bat!' Idioms of Suffering, Coping, and Resilience among Elderly Female Zande Refugees in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, Uganda (2019–20)

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ABSTRACT
'Resilience' is trending in development theory and practice, where it is often measured using countable socio-economic *outcomes*. This paper draws on ethnographic research with South Sudanese Zande refugees in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, Uganda, to show a different and often overlooked perspective; that of elderly refugee women. Having lived through decades of war and displacement, these women have developed a rich body of knowledge about suffering, coping, and resilience. Mixing idioms, folktales, and anecdotes, they teach youth not to focus on *outcomes* or 'big dreams', but on a stoic acceptance of loss and perpetual precarity. They advise *actions* like farming, childcare, and faith. Even so, suffering and coping are socially conditioned and policed, and the intimate circle harbours both protection and dangers, like witchcraft. The women's accounts contrast bleakly with up-beat neoliberal developmentalism which sees cash-infused 'resilience' as the key to refugees' self-reliant futures.

When it comes to living with adversity, elderly South Sudanese people are experts[1]. Cycles of war, displacement, and return have been common. Many who live as refugees today have three times before fled from war, like Mama Minisare[2]: 'In my life it is only war that has forced me to live in almost all parts of the earth'. Perpetual instability has shaped how people see the world, and their place in it – which is also reflected in countless Zande proverbs, expressions and folk tales. This article explores how people live in this world which turns 'like a termite's neck' (*wa goro ge*), and what that says about 'resilience'.

This paper foregrounds the perspectives and experiences of elderly South Sudanese Zande refugees in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement in Uganda. We analyse the life histories of five elderly women, and their counsel on suffering, coping, and resilience. We contrast their accounts with the wider

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psychological and developmental scholarship on 'resilience'. We find that refugees have let go of hopes, dreams and preferences; look to earthly achievements as potential causes for jealousy and witchcraft; and often distrust the people around them. Many refugees live liminal lives, veering between alienation and dependence, and assimilation and homesickness. 'Resilience' in their eyes is not about 'thriving' or 'bouncing back' (as it is for many development organisations) but about simply *ka kuti pai* (to hold on) and *asada tise* (to exert oneself). They constantly adapt to their environment through a bricolage of resilience. Most importantly, they focus not on *outcomes* but on *actions*: keeping a flexible mind, spiritual faith, hard physical work, and child care. Refugees remind each other that they are out of place: '*Kumbo boro kua baramu yo te*' (one has no inheritance in a foreign land). And the most successful refugees still fear death through the *gbegbere ngbaduse* (bad heart, witchcraft) of their neighbours. This paper finds that resilience is a central concern to elderly refugee women, even if suffering and coping are shrouded in moral ambiguity.

Methods used for this paper were open-ended life history interviews and semi-structured interviews carried out in Kiryandongo RS in December 2019 and January 2020. We complement this with the lived experience of Author 1 (Hillary) as a South Sudanese Zande refugee, and the longitudinal PhD research of Author 2 (Braak) in South Sudan and Uganda. When Author 1 was young, he was a refugee in the DR Congo. He lost his father there, so he was raised mostly by his mother and grandmother, who taught him invaluable lessons on wartime survival through anecdotes, Zande expressions, folk tales and songs. They would say: 'If it starts, don't run because you don't know where the bullets are coming from. It is better to stay put, pack your vital things and wait for it to cool down.' The women taught him survival skills, some of which were archetypically 'masculine', like construction, fishing, hunting, and herbal medicine. As the Zande say, *vuru ngbakugbo I na ino ndikidi kumba ni* (In the war or in the bush is when you know who is a man). Author 1 was groomed by the women in his life to be a man, and to be ready when 'it' would start again. This knowledge helped him to survive the most recent outbreak of war in South Sudan, and to find refuge in Kiryandongo RS in 2017.

Most resilience research in Africa has focused on youth and men, overlooking women (Gladden 2012, p. 192) and the elderly (Kiteki 2016, p. 13). And yet Author 1's experience – and these women's very survival – indicates that elderly women have valuable lessons to teach on resilience. As Mama Regina said: 'In war, if you don't have a strong brain to think how you will live, you will just die.' For this paper, Author 1 contacted five knowledgeable elderly women in Kiryandongo RS, and asked if they were willing to participate in this research with Author 2. Author 1 then conducted semi-structured interviews with the women about their lives, their insights on 'resilience', and

their advice for others who are 'running out of resilience'. The women were all clan-relatives of Author 1, and one was even the midwife during his birth.[3] This prior proximity to the research subject and respondents undoubtedly aided Author 1's access, and it meant that the women sometimes spoke to him as a young relative. This kind of insider ethnography has also been critiqued; with some arguing that outsider researchers might be better placed to ask naïve questions, be spoken to candidly, note the remarkable, and write objectively (O'Reilly 2009). Yet due to the confusing shocks of war and displacement, Author 1 was exactly in the right position to pose questions to his elderly clan relations. Further, Author 2 brought theoretical moorings and analytical distance to the research design, analysis, and writing. By working together, we feel we have mitigated some of the shortcomings of approaching this subject as purely an insider or outsider.

Resilience: Policy, Scholarship and Terminology

By 2018, the South Sudanese Civil War (2013-present) was estimated to have cost the lives of some 380,000 people (Checchi *et al.* 2018, UNHCR 2018). It has also displaced an estimated four million people, with some 880,000 leaving for Uganda (UNHCR 2020). Uganda's refugee laws have been lauded as 'the most progressive in the world' (World Bank and UNHCR 2016), even if there are also concerns about corruption among the Ugandan refugee authorities (OPM, UNHCR and WFP 2018, Sserungogi 2018). Still, in principle refugees have access to social services on par with nationals, and are free to work and move. They are allotted land in sprawling settlements, and encouraged to cultivate themselves into self-subsistence.

'Resilience' and 'self-reliance' are central notions in Uganda's policy, and the wider UN refugee frameworks (United Nations General Assembly 2016, Herbert and Idris 2018, UNDP 2018). Critical scholars argue that this emphasis risks diverting attention away from root causes of conflict and disasters (Welsh 2014, Barrios 2016, p. 28), that it is based on a neoliberal desire for 'cost-effective exit strategies from long-term refugee populations' (Joseph 2013, Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018, p. 1469), and therefore represents a form of abandonment (Duffield 2015).

But what is resilience? Definitions and operationalisations vary widely. The concept has roots in psychology, where it was initially associated with 'invulnerability' to shock, adversity or 'stressful life events' (Garmezy 1971, Luthar *et al.* 2000). Psychologists have since studied 'protective factors' and individual 'coping', 'the thoughts and behaviours used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful' (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). In evaluating how (in)vulnerable or resilient someone is,

psychologists often looked at socio-economic outcomes (e.g., stable careers and interpersonal relations) (Werner 1989) and psychopathology (Vindevogel *et al*. 2015).

When it comes to psychopathological disorders, psychologists have long acknowledged that Western notions are not universal (Eisenbruch 1991, Ungar and Liebenberg 2011). Cultures often have specific 'idioms of distress' (Nichter 1981) through which people experience and discuss mental health (Ventevogel *et al*. 2013). Research with Sudanese refugees in the West, for example, found a reluctance to medicalise distress or seek psychological support (Goodman 2004, Westoby 2008, Tempany 2009, Gladden 2012, Savic *et al*. 2016, p. 80). And one especially insightful study in Uganda developed culturally sensitive resilience indicators by asking 'stakeholders' how one identifies youth who are 'doing well despite the difficulties in life' (Vindevogel *et al*. 2015).

Yet this context-sensitivity and attention for actions is less apparent in development programming on resilience among South Sudanese refugees and 'host communities' in Uganda. For instance, an analysis by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) defines resilience quite conventionally as 'the capacity of a household to bounce back to a previous level of well-being after a shock'. But then it relies on a universal set of quantitative socio-economic indicators, such as how much money people receive (e.g., loans, aid, remittances), how much things they have (e.g., radios, lamps, camels), and their proximity to markets and public services (FAO and OPM 2018, p. 44). UNDP also pursues 'resilience'-programming in Uganda, a.o. with its 'Emergency Response and Resilience Strategy for Refugees and Host Communities. While project documents leave resilience undefined, they do refer to a '3x6 Approach' to 'help build resilience' in six steps; 'engaging, generating income, saving, joint venturing, investing, accessing markets' (UNDP 2018). It is only a slight exaggeration to say that in these operationalisations, to be 'resilient' is to have things and to (be in a position to) make money. Both FAO and UNDP disregard psychopathology and own understandings of resilience. Further, the money and possessions that these organisations take as central to 'resilience' emerge from our research as shrouded in moral ambiguity.

Our research did not start from an *a priori* definition of resilience or 'doing well', but rather by questioning the fundamentals: How do elderly South Sudanese Zande refugees in Uganda talk about conflict, displacement and distress, and people's responses to it? All interviews were conducted in Pazande, which allowed us to discover and discuss context-specific or Zande terms (Ungar and Liebenberg 2011, p. 127, Fabinyi *et al*. 2014, Liao and Fei 2016). The term 'resilience' had no direct Pazande equivalent. After carefully listening to some scholarly definitions, one of the elderly women proposed two Zande expressions close to 'coping'. The first, *asada tise* can be translated to 'exerting oneself'. It is composed of *tise* (noun: self), and *asada*

(verbs: to test, to attempt, to try; and nouns: exam and temptation). The second, *ka kuti pai* we translate to 'holding on' or 'persisting'. It is composed of '*ka kuti*' (verbs: to hold, to cling to) and '*pai*' (nouns: thing, problem), but the sum is more than the constituent parts: *ka kuti pai* is widely used to encourage people to hold on in the face of adversity. The elderly woman explained: 'I think of a child learning to walk. Though it falls many times, the baby will *ka kuti pai* until it masters walking'. The other women shared this conceptualisation of resilience as the ability to keep exerting oneself, 'holding on to life' no matter how difficult the situation might be.

The women's explanations focused especially on *actions* that helped them to hold on. They said '*I naa vo nga wirikumba ni kpe te*' (they can't dress up a man with leaves). That is, in the hardest times people can still act, even if just to get dressed. The cited psychological and development literature focuses on 'doing well' and achieving positive *outcomes* (be they psycho-pathological and/or socio-economic) after a shock. By contrast, the elderly women were pessimistic about achieving outcomes beyond survival and sanity. They have learned that shocks may well recur, and tried rather to live with perpetual precarity.

Lives Lived Amidst War and Displacement

Resilience scholarship often centres around the notion of a 'shock', after which the individual or 'system' seeks to restore the pre-shock state (Barrios 2016). Yet the history of South Sudan and the lives of these women, were marked by perpetual conflict and change. We offer, here, a brief introduction of that history as it shaped the lives of our five central women.

The women were born between 1934 and 1963 in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan. They lived through the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972), the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), Zande-Dinka clashes (2005–6), attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army (2008–9) and the South Sudanese Civil War (2013–2020). The political and economic root causes of these various conflicts have been discussed elsewhere (Johnson 2003, 2016, Schomerus and Allen 2010, De Waal 2015, Rolandsen and Kindersley 2017). The women have experienced history differently, and walked unique pathways to exile in Uganda. They have all suffered, lost husbands and often children. Still, their lives were about much more than loss and victimhood (Malkki 1995), and it is important to see how: 'War appears as a context for people's life stories, rather than as the focus in itself of their narratives' (Leonardi 2013, p. 144). Throughout, the women studied, taught in schools and at home, and guided the social lives of their families and communities. And, as we will see, they still try to counsel others in the refugee settlement. We introduce the five women here.

Mama Nagene was born in 1934 in Ibba. In the late 1940s she eloped to Juba where her husband became a soldier. Shortly before Sudanese independence (1956), the First Sudanese Civil War broke out. She was by her husband's side when he was shot and killed in battle. Her husband's colleagues carried her on an improvised stretcher to Uganda, 'We had to run without going back to check the dead bodies'. She has stayed in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement since. The tall mango trees surrounding her house bear witness to her long stay. She jokes: 'If only they would give awards to the refugees who stayed in Uganda for over fifty years!' Sometimes when she hears Zande music, she misses home. But after she eloped, she lost all contact with her relatives, 'If I would return, I would be a foreigner to them'.

Mama Regina was born in 1946 in Source Yubu. In 1965 she crossed the border to the Central African Republic (CAR) to seek refuge from the fighting between Anyanya-rebels and the Sudanese army. She returned to South Sudan in 1972. But in 1983 war resumed, with southern rebels now constituting the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). When the SPLA came to Western Equatoria 1990–1, many people were fearful and suspicious, and fled: 'We were just in the bush until the bush became our home'. After some ten years, she moved to Yambio. That is where she lost her husband in 2014 during the South Sudanese Civil War. In 2016 she fled to Uganda, and now she stays in Bweyale town next to Kiryandongo RS.

Mama Sungufue was born in 1948 in Ezo. She completed her primary school in Source Yubu, and got a teaching certificate. Like Mama Regina, she fled to CAR in 1965. After three years, she returned to Ezo with her husband. But he was accused by government officials of being an Anyanya-rebel and taken to Tambura, Wau, and Juba to be questioned and tortured. When he was eventually released, the couple stayed in Juba until the Addis Ababa agreement (1972), after which they moved back to Western Equatoria. Shortly after her husband died in 1989, war resumed in the area in 1990. So Sungufue fled to CAR again for a number of years. She returned to Ezo, but in 2009 the *tong-tong* (LRA) attacked her church there. She survived and fled to Yambio. In 2015 war displaced her to Juba, where she witnessed the outbreak of violence in July 2016 – trying to fall asleep under her bed while gunshots were ringing outside. Then fled to Uganda, where she settled in Kiryandongo RS.

Mama Minisare was born in Tambura in 1949. In 1964 she fled from war to Mboki camp (CAR). In 1973, she returned to Ezo. 'Just when we thought the world was becoming peaceful, again, [SPLA-leader] Garang came with his soldiers in 1990. The killing was too much in Ezo . . . so we fled to Yambio'. Life in Yambio was good, although Minisare lost her husband in 1996. She never thought of leaving, until the LRA attacked Yambio in 2008–9, and Mama Minisare hid in nearby Li-Rangu for two years. In late 2015, as conflict broke

out in Yambio 'life became difficult', and she fled to Dungu (DRC). Six months later, she returned to Yambio thinking the fighting was over. That was a mistake. Just three months later fighting intensified again, and she fled to Kiryandongo RS.

Mama Joan was born in Li-Rangu in 1963, making her our youngest respondent. In 1965 her family took her to refuge in the Amadi (DRC), where she spoke her first words. They returned to South Sudan in 1966, until the SPLA came in 1990. Then she cycled back to the DRC with a baby boy on her back. Joan's husband became sick and died in the DRC in 1991. Only 27 years old, she was now a widow with four sons. When her father, too, died in Sudan, she left her children under the care of the oldest, a 12-year-old boy, and entered Sudan alone. 'I went straight to see the grave of my father. I stayed there for six months. Then I set my mind to my children. I had no idea what was happening to them [in DRC]'. This was a turning point for Joan: 'It is true that your fingers are your relatives … I did all the work of a woman and the work of men … God became my relatives, my father and my husband'. She stayed in DRC until September 1998, when the SPLA came to force the refugees to return to South Sudan. During the LRA-conflict in 2008–9, she stayed at home in Yambio because her kids had already moved out, and she could take care of herself. But then in 2015, 'This one of yesterday where boys were raping even our type, forced me to flee to this red soil [Uganda]'. Now she stays in Kiryandongo RS.

The life stories of these women illustrate that war and peace are often fragmented, blurred, and localised in South Sudan (Kindersley and Rolandsen 2017). For instance, the First Sudanese Civil War started in 1955, but the fighting between the Anyanya-rebels and the Sudanese army only intensified in Western Equatoria in 1964–6. In these years, each of the five women walked to the nearest international border.[4] The women's pathways illustrate that *oto be vura* (running/fleeing from war) is a complex process with several steps (Kaiser 2010, Schapendonk and Steel 2014). There was not a single shock, or a linear movement from 'home' to 'exile'. Displacement presented ruptures as well as continuities (Malkki 1995, Kindersley 2017).

Conflict confronts people with choices, such as to stay or move. Zande 'stayees' often invoked the popular expression '*Yo ngba tini a té*' (literally 'There is not a place which is good', effectively 'The grass is always greener on the other side') (Braak and Kenyi 2018). Stayees further cited their belief in pre-destination, reluctance to (again) become a refugee and 'wait for aid', love for the homeland, and fear that their land would be grabbed, as reasons for staying in South Sudan. Reasons for leaving were equally varied. Some invoked the Zande proverb: '*Batiriki I so ko puu ni baso, Nzapianzapia I so ko pirapira*' (Batiriki was hit by the spear, but Nzapianzapia only got bruised). This proverb refers to the story of two men: Batiriki who did not act in response to the danger of the spear, and died; and Nzapianzapia who fled and survived.

Some Zande used this proverb to justify fleeing conflict. So, whereas many stayees drew on predetermination to argue for staying, refugees argued that pre-determination was no excuse for inertia – and that God's Plan still required people to be active. Like other refugees, the elderly women were disillusioned by the latest civil war. Whereas the previous ones were fought roughly against the Sudanese government and culminated in independence in 2011, this one was between southerners. Mama Sungufue put it well:

> South Sudan was supposed to be a nice place, but our uncles after becoming leaders started war . . . and now our boys have joined them too. They do not know how to use guns. That is why most of us are here to rot in this [refugee settlement].

Independence should have been a landmark shift towards self-determination. But instead, political and military domination continued, as did violent counterclaims (de Vries and Schomerus 2017). Every war, every displacement marked people's lives. And contrary to the 'bouncing back'-idea of resilience-scholarship, the women had little hope of ever returning to the way they were before.

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement

Kiryandongo RS is home to some 65,000 refugees, mostly from South Sudan (UNHCR and UNHCR and OPM 2020). It is a popular settlement, largely because it's only two kilometres from Bweyale, a rapidly growing town on the tarmacked main road between Kampala and Gulu, and Juba beyond (Kaiser 2000, Wandera 2018). This offers opportunities for trade and mobility. Whereas the settlements in West Nile are remote and rocky, this area has fertile soils and better rains, making farming feasible. But the large number of refugees quickly overwhelmed the available arable land, and the plots allotted became smaller and smaller (FAO and OPM 2018, p. 22). That and the scarcity of labour, mean that many households cannot farm self-sufficiently (Taylor et al. 2016, Betts et al. 2019, International Refugee Rights Initiative 2019, p. 2). At home and as refugees in the DRC, many Zande had lived in one place, but cultivated a large garden elsewhere. They had relied on the forest, too, for firewood and medicine. Yet in Uganda they face friction with the host community when they venture into the nearby woodland. The women complained that here, 'small things that make life meaningful need money'. The monthly aid is rudimentary: Per person either cash (31.000 UGX = 8,35 USD) or an equivalent food basket. And this amount was repeatedly reduced over the last few years.

There are few jobs in the settlement, and many people are stuck and 'sit idle'. Time slows down. People have fled a vicious civil war, and the distrust and divisions of home periodically echo in the settlements (Onen 2016, Radio

Tamazuj 2019). With little to distract them from the haunting memories of the past and the depressing news about the present, many people turn to alcohol or gambling (Kiryandongo District 2018, Bohnet and Schmitz-Pranghe 2019, p. 18, OPM *et al*. 2020, p. 109). And yet others 'hold on' in spite of these dire odds, or even thrive surprisingly. We discussed the present predicament with the five elderly women, and were taught how they viewed suffering, coping and resilience.

Suffering: Madness, Daydreams and Dependence

The women differentiated various ways of 'getting lost' in war, displacement, and poverty, and the condition is subject to figurative language. Sadness, grief, and emotional distress are common among South Sudanese refugees, but 'not necessarily understood as abnormal, but rather a part of everyday life' and discussed in less medicalised language than in western psychiatry (Ventevogel *et al*. 2013, Savic *et al*. 2016, p. 79). Before discussing coping, we asked the women about problems and suffering; keen to identify 'idioms of distress', the 'socially and culturally resonant means of experiencing and expressing distress in local worlds' (Nichter 2010). These idioms illustrate how people see problems, and how they may act in response.

In speaking about suffering, the women used elaborate idioms and artful descriptions. They would say that everyone at times feels overcome by problems, suffers from the poverty that 'bites like a snake', or struggles 'to swim in an ocean of poverty'. Some people get lost: they 'sit idle' for hours, maintain poor personal hygiene, and perhaps drink alcohol. What elsewhere is called 'depression' is familiar to many Zande, even if they would express it as *bakere gberarago* (overwhelming sadness). When someone acts 'a little bit crazy because of the images they see in their head', one might say *riise yo aima gbera* (the head has become bad). This is used especially for people who have witnessed or committed 'bad things' – like war-time violence – and who in Western psychiatry might be described as traumatised.

Some people drift further away, and their minds become 'like a bad clock', 'upside down' or *zukuzuku ri boro yo*. This last expression comes from porridge. When women mix flour and water to create porridge, sometimes *zukuzuku* (lumps) remain in the mixture. The porridge (*bakinde*) is then called *zukuzuku bakinde* and considered bad. *Boro* means person. So *zukuzuku ri boro yo* refers to somebody whose brain is mixed: Some parts are fine, others are not working well. Both for porridge and people's minds, the women advocate hard work as a solution.

The women recognised that not everyone has the mental strength to face problems, and that it is unpredictable how a person will react to hardship. Some people embrace struggle as a learning school, saying 'difficulties shape people to be strong'. Others are 'defeated' by those same problems. Mama

Minisare: 'Before the eyes of God, I don't know what eats people's heads . . . Some people will allow problems like *kitinyake* (case moths) to surround them.' The women were not always kind or understanding for people who get lost in this way. When Author 1 was small and lived as a refugee in DRC, his mother would tell him a popular folktale of the Hare, Bushbuck and Leopard. At the end, the Leopard ate the careless Bushbuck, while the Hare survived because he was always on his guard. Mother would conclude: '*boro na boro na kina gani bera* (each person has their own brain). When things are difficult, be alert like Hare and use your brain wisely to survive!' As in the folktale, the women maintained that an individual is responsible for their situation. Unless their 'two hands were cut off', people should be hard-working. Mama Sungufue cautioned with another proverb: '*Dua riiru nadia nga kumbo bai te*' (He who bends his head does not inherit from his father). Which is to say that those who spend time thinking rather than working will not prosper. The women often blamed people who 'sit idle' or 'do nothing' for a lack of character. In the words of Mama Nagene: '[They have] lazy brains. People think that sitting lazy like the wives of Zande kings will solve their problems. That's a lie. That is why they don't *asada tiyo rogo raka* (exert themselves in life)'. The women reasoned that people's inability to work hard and 'be useful' in the face of adversity, were at the root of overthinking and madness.

The women saw 'getting lost' as not exclusively or even mainly a psychological phenomenon. Life in exile offers temptations to be resisted, many paths astray. Intriguingly, the women argued that one such path was adjusting too much to Uganda. Mama Minisare: 'We can live like *aboro kono* ("people from here", locals), but we are not *aboro kono*'. She invoked a Zande proverb: '*Kumbo boro kua baramu yo te*' (one has no inheritance in a foreign land). This proverb refers to the ties between belonging and access to land, a cornerstone of Zande socio-economic lives. And so, four women were hoping to return to South Sudan in the future. Mama Nagene formed the exception, having left South Sudan fifty years ago and lost all contact with her relatives. If she would return, she said, 'I would be a foreigner to them'. But in Uganda, too, she remained at some distance from the locals in Kiryandongo:

> *Ho bera arimo re ni* ('When brain enters me', when I overthink), I join the Acholi and we drink their tough brew for many days [laughs] Sometimes I insult them in Pazande, what will they understand? [laughs] But drinking *chipanga* (Luo term for home-made gin) does not solve any single problem. But that is how *aboro kono* (the people of here, locals) live, so I am sometimes like them.

Refugee scholarship has generally found that it is more difficult for older refugees to adapt than for young ones (Kia-Keating and Ellis 2007, Perera *et al*. 2013, Kiteki 2016). But we found that this is not just a question of ability, but also of aspiration (Betancourt *et al*. 2015).

The elderly women worried that youth were too quick to adapt to life in Uganda, and that this made them dependent, lazy and money-minded. Although the women had each received support (aid and remittances) from time to time, they cautioned against dependence, becoming like *wiri zire* (a small bird) or *anvurukpe* (bed bugs). Many cautionary tales were told. Mama Sungufue:

> It happened to my old friend. She could get a lot of money from her only child outside [in the diaspora]. But one day, death that does not reason came and took her child. She died the same day when the news reached her. I see such people here in Kiryandongo. There are many dead people who are still moving waiting to be buried because of over depending.

Being dependent on money, to her, was like being dead alive. Once the source of your support is disrupted, as it inevitably will be, you die.

The elderly also worried that the youth were tempted by quick schemes to riches, taking considerable risk in the process. Consider the story of Kumbonyaki, a good friend of Author 1. One day he received an anonymous call, promising him a big profit if he could send mobile money. Kumbonyaki borrowed 1,500,000 UGX (404 USD) from local businessmen. He sent the money, expecting to get rich in two days. But the days passed, and he received neither money nor news. The businessmen demanded their money back, and eventually opened a case against Kumbonyaki at the police. His hopes of coming out of poverty were crushed, and he was left with only one option: to flee back to South Sudan. Mama Minisare recalled the story and concluded:

> Look at Kumbonyaki. He was a good boy. I don't know where the heart of becoming rich entered him. His spirit was for riches. Riches that are made in a day just like blinking the eyes.

In the women's analysis, Kumbonyaki's inability to stay focused in this 'turning world', made him an easy prey for a con artist, and he tasted the bitter fruits.

Earlier psychological research has argued that optimism (defined as 'the generalized inclination to expect favourable life outcomes') might help people cope with war (Riolli *et al*. 2002). But in the Ugandan refugee setting, youthful optimism and 'dream-like future imaginings' are simultaneously encouraged by 'resilience and self-reliance initiatives' and punished by the settlements socio-economic realities (Schiltz *et al*. 2019). The women were certainly sceptical. Mama Regina: 'Don't let your brain deceive you so that you start dreaming of big, big things in the afternoons. Because such big things

never come.' Whereas youth oscillated between fatalistic surrender and hopeful imagination, the elderly women strove for stoic acceptance of the bitter present.

The elderly women's worries and distrust of money were rooted in the 'turning world', in which the only certainty is the self, followed at some distance by God, ancestors and close relatives. Good tidings, monetary wealth and outside support are fickle. Mama Regina: 'I had plenty of money during old Sudan in the bank, but when war came it went like air. When a python gets a gazelle, does it save part of it somewhere? No! It swallows it into its stomach! [laughing]'. 'Old Sudan' refers to Sudan prior to the separation of South Sudan in 2011, and 'war' here to the Second Sudanese Civil War. Both Sudans have notoriously unstable financial systems. Some people react by storing their wealth in property or portable golden jewellery. Others argue to 'eat when there is food'. Repeated experiences of conflict and displacement have taught the women to distrust some of the core tenets of capitalism – private property, money and saving – which underpin much development thinking on resilience, and the programmes by FAO and UNDP mentioned before.

Ka Kuti Pai (To Hold On): Coping, Spirituality, Hard Work, and Child Care

In this bitter present, how does one avoid 'getting lost'? What are some of the coping mechanisms or traits that the women see as important for '*ka kuti pai*' (to hold on)? Earlier research among other East African refugees identified common coping strategies: 'faith/religion or other belief systems, social support, and cognitive reframing or finding meaning in the situation' (Gladden 2012). Is this similar for our elderly women? The women saw resilience not as inherited or static, but practiced over time and learned from experience, by observing others, and by listening to the elderly. Mama Joan said: 'Learn from our example, [and] you will always survive in difficult times till you see yourself in our age'. She added a warning: 'You asked me for advice for the two of you, my advice is always bitter'.

Before anything else, the women emphasised the need for a realistic appraisal of the present state of the world, and one's position in it. Sungufue said: 'The world turns like *goro ge* (the neck of a white termite), when it starts to turn, it can turn you towards happiness. Another turn can put you between death and life. When that happens don't you think of saying or even thinking that it's over [or] giving up. Because the next turn may favour you, who knows?' Earlier research among South Sudanese refugee youth in Uganda similarly found that they viewed uncertainty and open-endedness as a 'condition of life' – harbouring both good and bad possibilities (Schiltz *et al.* 2019, p. 43). Mama Regina added:

Boro na nye nga ku rogo gbégbére musumo te (one can't stay forever in a nightmare). In 2016 everybody in Juba was in great fear without knowing who will die and who will live. We all had to start looking through glasses of tears. Yet today, [I am] soon to celebrate 2020!

The July 2016 outburst of violence in Juba that she referred to, was a dark hour for many. And the bar for hope was extremely low: Not dying, the nightmare ending, the war subsiding. Rather than to be optimistic like the boy Kumbonyaki, these elderly women taught to accept the hardship and the unpredictability of the world, and to be humble and flexible in response. Resilience to them was not a better future, but 'to become accustomed to a future without substantial progress' (Schiltz *et al*. 2019, p. 48). Mama Minisare counselled: 'Be content with whatever you have … *Rungo ngba ti kpio* (Poverty is better than death)'. Mama Joan saw resilience as being, at the root, 'about being quick to adjust your brain and yourself to this world full of problems'. She expanded:

> You cannot fix your mind only to eating the good things you used to eat while with your mother, right? You should not fix your brain to eating *gadia* [traditional Zande dish] as if this is Yambio [in South Sudan]. [Pause] Your friend, Bruno [Author 2], also, they say their world is the best one, but if you talk to him, tell him: 'There are times when the best world turns upside down.' But if that happens to him one day, he should just remember the words of the old Zande woman. Let him just adjust and start living like the bat.

Having realised that life goes up and down, the women advised to draw hope from spirituality. Mama Regina: 'Do not turn away from God or anything that gives you hope. Without hope … you will just give up'. During the war, Mama Regina felt divine protection: 'You just jump once and bullets drop on your footmark … This kind of surviving only God can do that for you. If you don't trust in God you are doomed to die.' Worrying was all the more useless, because the women believed that God had already determined when they would die. This belief in a predetermined time of death was also found in earlier research among Sudanese refugees, (Goodman 2004, Carlson *et al*. 2012). In the face of daunting risks, they took courage from the conviction 'that it was not their time to die, and when God willed it to happen, then they would accept it' (Kiteki 2016, p. 10). The elderly women combined a belief in God, with that in ancestor spirits. Mama Regina: 'Because Azande deeply believe that although the ancestors have died, they also keep on living'. Their belief in these higher powers added meaning to life, suffering, and death, something these women argued was key to 'holding on'. This confirms older research which sees 'making meaning' as a crucial coping strategy in traumatising times (Frankl 2008).

Having accepted the turning world and trusting in the supernatural powers, the work of 'exerting oneself' (*asada tise*) begins. The women all mentioned the importance of hard physical work, well beyond the age at which they would culturally be accepted to leave farming and child care to the younger generations. Mama Minisare: 'God is good, but again strengthening one's hands is better … *Asada tise* to me is about being you, and to keep exerting yourself in the lake of problems.' Farming was so important to the women, that some fled from South Sudan with a hoe. Unemployment is often mentioned as a 'risk factor' in resilience studies (Kiteki 2016). Our women agreed that farming bore physical and mental fruits. Mama Nagene, who arrived in Kiryandongo in the 1960s, was proud:

> I started with my little energy to cultivate this land. I planted these trees that are feeding me today. Some of them are older than you [laughing]! … You can be like me only if you [dig] your hands deep into the soil [and] put away the pride of your age … If your hands are still with you, you will not die.

So far, the women mostly emphasised individual thoughts and actions to *ka kuti pai* and *asada tise*. But they also often mentioned social connections. Earlier studies on South Sudan and its refugees, mostly emphasised the important role of social networks in providing material support and information (Barnes *et al*. 2018), and framed caregiving as labour (Stites and Humphrey 2020). Yet in our interviews, the women spoke of child care as closely tied to their own wellbeing. Recalling her exile in the 1990s, Mama Joan explained:

> In those days when my sons were young, I drew hope from them to go on living. I used to think to myself, if I give up now or turn into a mad woman, how many problems will these children have when they grow up? Who will take care of these angels if not me? Now that they have grown up, they do not want to stay with me. I begged them for these three [grandchildren], and now they give me hope.

A similar experience was recounted by Mama Sungufue. During the previous two wars she had taken courage from her children. But during this war she arrived in Uganda alone: '[Coming to] Uganda was as if I was in prison. None of my children wants their children to stay with me'. She felt better when a relative gave her a child to care for. The women saw child care not merely as labour, but also as a source of hope and strength. Mama Sungufue: 'If I don't do this, how will this child survive?' The women's words are reminiscent of the accounts of Sudanese refugees who fled to the USA, and on their arduous journeys relied on a sense of selfhood as responsibility to others, to keep holding on (Goodman 2004, p. 1183). Where earlier studies identified parents as 'protective agents' to refugee youth's wellbeing (Weine *et al*. 2014), we

found that it works the other way around, too. The elderly women derived part of their sanity and self-worth from the connections they have to others, and from the care, empathy and advice they give.

The Morality of Suffering and Survival: Resilience and 'Bad Heart'

The work of resilience, *asada tise* and *ka kuti pai*, is not without risks. The settlements are places of scarcity, poverty and jealousy. Suffering and coping are socially conditioned, and subject to public scrutiny. When a refugee does relatively well, people respond variously. 'Some people will look at you and say: "This man is courageous and strong, he is able to do his things alone", and they will appreciate you', Mama Regina explained. But others, 'Will bring a problem for you so that you can come down to their level'. In the eyes of some, a rich person can avoid jealousy and hatred by sharing their good fortune. Mama Sungufue:

> When you are successful, many friends will be yours, but not genuine ones. These are the kind of friends the Zande will term as a *ri ti unga* (those who eat at life). The day you will refuse them these things, know that you are about to follow your fathers [and die]. Because the issue with people is that if you do well and you don't share, they will just think of killing you.

Others held that sharing does not matter: If you are doing well, people will envy you. And so thriving in the camp risks provoking repercussions. Mama Minisare:

> As you start to prosper in this camp, even your own Zande will start gossiping about you . . . Here they will send you *Awola*, the sickness of the Acholi.[5] If they see that this sickness is not working on you, ah, they will just think of sending you to the under earth [grave].

'Send him under the earth' usually refers to witchcraft-related deaths. South Sudanese Zande's supernatural beliefs were made (in)famous by Evans-Pritchard's 'Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande'. The techniques have since changed and *mangu* is not common anymore. But the belief that witchcraft is a likely cause for bad fortune and death remains common with Azande and other groups in this region. In the settlement, people live in close proximity to others, and at short range witchcraft is said to be more powerful (Reining 1966). So, when a successful person dies, many people suspect that a jealous person had a *gbegbere ngbaduse* (bad/evil heart) and resorted to witchcraft. Mama Regina gave a recent example:

> As we are here now, just these things [refugee aid] that they are giving us. Now the body (corpse) of a lady is on her bed in Molokonyi. Just for the sewing machine and her own sweat. Now she will not be able to see the sun anymore.

She referred here to a refugee who had received a tailoring training, and had started to overcome some of the challenges of refugee life. Tragically, after coming back from tailoring training one day she developed a mild headache. Three hours later she died. Her death was widely attributed to witchcraft because she had been *asada ti ri* (she exerted herself) so successfully. Mama Regina built on this example to advise the prospective resilient person:

> In this place if you are not careful and *kini asadi ti ro* (and keep exerting yourself) too much, it is like inviting death upon yourself. People will be watching you. Once they know that you have enough money, both your own people and *aboro kono* (the locals) will plan to kill you for it.

The ambiguous social responses to prosperity and success, are further tied to the common belief that some people use witchcraft or sorcery to get rich or successful (Geschiere 1997, Comaroff and Comaroff 2003, Leonardi 2011). The move from South Sudan to the Ugandan refugee settlement, has for many also meant a move from relative autarky to a more monetised life. Around the settlement, money can be made fast without work: through slot machines, football betting, aid and remittances. Opaque global technologies and forces result in inexplicable local inequalities. The women suspected that wealth and success gained in this way, were immoral heights to be followed by a calamitous decline. Mama Minisare: 'Riches that are made in a blink of an eye, a-ha! You will not count many footsteps!' Whether better-off refugees had gotten rich through hard work, development aid, or witchcraft, the women believed that a social or spiritual punishment was likely.

Living like a Bat: The Bricolage of Resilience

This paper has highlighted the overlooked body of knowledge that elderly female Zande refugees draw on to understand and teach suffering, coping, and resilience in a refugee settlement in Uganda. Their insights were informed by decades of war and displacement, in which they have lost husbands, children, and dreams, and 'lived like bats' in this 'upside down world'. There was no singular shock, and a return to a 'pre-shock normal' that conventional resilience-thinking assumes, is not likely. In response to this turbulent history, Zande people have developed concepts and idioms to speak of war and displacement, and of suffering, coping, and resilience. The women have learnt (and taught) their resilient practices over time – resulting in improvised 'patterns of positive adaptation' (Ungar 2008) and everyday practices (Masten and Powell 2003). Here, resilience research could further draw on kindred concepts such as 'bricolage', 'assemblage' and

'amalgamation', based on scholarship on lives that are in other ways uncertain (Bear 2015, De Boeck 2015, Ramsay 2019) or precarious (Tsing 2015, p. 2).

Critical scholarship has warned that 'resilience' and 'self-reliance' programming, risk simultaneously raising refugees' expectations of life, while reducing support to them (Schiltz *et al.* 2019). A neoliberal resilience paradigm – especially when informed by austerity – could well increase inequality by rewarding the entrepreneurial few and abandoning the destitute many (Duffield 2015, Cavanagh 2016). Our article points to an additional risk: that common operationalisations of 'resilience' in terms of money and assets, might not only miss the mark but actually endanger aid recipients. We cited the example of a refugee who died shortly after receiving tailoring training. Her death was widely attributed to her success, and the subsequent jealousy and 'bad hearts' of those around her. The women taught us that refugees do not only help each other up, but also keep one another down. Suffering and coping are socially constructed and sanctioned. One can suffer too much or too little, and lose people's sympathy and face social and spiritual sanctions either way. This is an important nuance to recent scholarship which argued that 'mutual support or internal dependency is traditionally embedded in people's survival means' (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018, p. 1469).

Fundamentally, where most resilience policy and research operationalise 'resilience' by focusing on *outcomes*, these refugee women mostly looked at *actions*. Considering that the future – bleak or bright – lies in the hands of God and the ancestors, the women focused on *ka kuti pai* (to hold on) and *asada tise* (to exert oneself). To them, resilience was about coming to terms with loss and precarity, and maintaining one's sanity (what psychologist would term 'the absence of psychopathology'). The women regarded 'big dreams' as one of the many ways to get lost, and earthly success (especially the rapid and monetary kind) as dangerous and unreliable. They valued individual effort, self-sufficiency, and hard work (farming and child care) mostly for their spiritual and mental benefits over the alternative – 'sitting idle' – rather than to achieve socio-economic outcomes.

Notes

1. The research for this paper was conducted shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, which anew disrupted the lives of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. The impact of the pandemic on the subject matter is beyond the scope of this paper but might be explored in the future.
2. We use pseudonyms to protect the identity of our respondents.
3. Note that South Sudanese Zande generally consider that they belong to four clans. While the four women were all clan relatives of Author 1, they did not all belong to the same singular clan.

4. From Li-Rangu to the DRC; from Tambura, Ezo and Source Yubu to CAR; and from Juba to Uganda.
5. The precise nature of 'awola' is complicated. It was described to us by two Ugandans as a 'manmade' sickness which is sent through the air by a person with a 'bad heart' to its victim. One woman said the effect is like poison, and that it causes symptoms like diarrhoea and an upset stomach.

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