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Answering Exile: how Sudanese refugees deal with displacement

Project Summary

This project sets out to develop recent thinking on the socio-cultural construction of place in the context of debates about human displacement and emplacement. Its ethnographic focus is some of the multiply displaced Southern Sudanese groups currently resident in Uganda and in Sudan. The project investigates relationships between place and the social and ritual activity performed there, and raises questions about the construction of identity and of social value in this context. It considers both social memories of the past and imagined futures, the latter having particular relevance at a time when repatriation to the 'homeland' is under active consideration.

Project Proposal

The project focuses on Sudanese refugees now living in Uganda and explores the socio-cultural activity through which they rethink their identities and remake their lives. The cultural dimension of refugees' experiences have until now been largely neglected in a literature that has focused on legal, technical and political questions. The current project seeks to innovate by generating new empirical material and theorizing the interconnections between related socio-cultural activities and practices and the places in which they take place.

Research questions or problems

Previous research in Uganda has found that in some refugee settlements, great efforts are made to protect and perform certain important socio-cultural activities, such as funeral rituals, while others have gone into abeyance. Such events are both necessary social rituals and important dramatic and aesthetic occasions, vibrant with singing, dancing, special costumes and involving the use of symbolic objects. This study raises questions about the relationship between the environment in which people live (material, social, political), the way in which social relations are organized there and the kinds of socio-cultural practices enacted there. Specifically it asks;

In what ways are cultural practices and activities affected by displacement?

Why is it that certain funeral and naming rituals have sustained in exile while 'traditional' marriage practices have been largely abandoned? Have Sudanese spiritual and clan leaders become familiar and adept at managing the spirits of the forest and the fields which are understood to determine the land's fertility? How do young men enter adulthood when many refugees still insist after 15 years of exile that initiation ceremonies can be held only in Sudan? How can they marry under these circumstances?

What compromises and accommodations are negotiated, that allow critical cultural practices to be represented, symbolized or only partly enacted, while social value and relations are preserved or transformed? What are the differences in the way that the children and youths, born in Uganda, feel about these issues compared to their parents and elders?

The study investigates the complex relationship between people and 'place', with particular reference to identity creation and everyday social-cultural practice. In particular it asks,

What are the significant social and cultural constructions of place in this context?

In what ways and to what extent have these populations of refugees had control over the 'production of locality' (Appadurai in Turton 2004) in different locations and at different times?

In what specific ways is the relationship between people and place made and re-made?

Are 'place making' activities expressive of and/or constitutive of identities and subjectivity? What other forms of identity are important? Has having to start again repeatedly had an impact on the way identity is (re)constructed?

What is the nature of any affective relationship with land in the various locations?

How is land and territory in Sudan in the pre-flight period characterized and remembered? Is land in Uganda regarded and represented differently? How do people represent, describe and express their feelings about the land that they occupy in artistic, aesthetic or narrative terms? How do personal differences in age and experience affect this process? What are the consequences for the (re)creation of identity (national, ethnic, occupational, as

'refugee' or other)?

Aims and objectives

The research plans to

- i) generate empirical material relating to the Uganda/Sudan border area
- ii) contribute to the development of appropriate theoretical frameworks and tools in these under-considered areas
- iii) contribute to the establishment of an intellectual and inter-disciplinary bridge between the humanities and social sciences in relation to forced migration research.
- iv) disseminate the research as widely as possible within academic, refugee and practitioner communities. The end of project report disseminated through AHRC networks and elsewhere will be one element of this process.
- v) with the permission of all involved, organize an exhibition of photographs of ritual and artistic activity with the option of a linked web site for wider dissemination.

Processes of adaptation such as those discussed here may be of relevance trans-culturally and in a variety of contexts. This research will also be of use to refugee advocacy groups in helping to foster among the public a more informed understanding of refugees' experience of displacement and their efforts to re-establish themselves in the UK and elsewhere.

Research context

It is now impossible for Sudanese refugees to hold funeral rites on their ancestral territory with all clan members in attendance. Even the shiny black feathers formerly used to decorate the elders' headdresses are not to be found in Uganda. Change and creativity are essential and, in this particular case, strips of black plastic carrier bags have come to be regarded as an acceptable substitute for feathers.

Refugees are often described as suffering from 'cultural bereavement' (Davis 1993) when they are forced to leave their homes, and it is often assumed that they will attempt to 're-create' as close an approximation as possible of their pre-flight lives in exile. This study problematizes refugees' assumed desire and ability to straightforwardly re-produce a mirror image of their home lives in exile (in this following Loizos 1981).

The study draws on but is not limited to recent debates about the importance of 'place' and territoriality for refugees, which focus largely on effects on resulting entitlements and rights (Malkki 1995,

Kibreab 1999). This research will go further by exploring the nature of the relationship between people, the places they occupy and the social practices they remember, invent and perform to achieve lives they consider to be worth living in the context of repeated dislocation and upheaval. It raises questions about the ways in which people displaced by conflict draw on a range of resources, including internal cultural resources, to help them to comprehend and manage difficult circumstances and to protect and transform those same important social relations and practices.

The study is predicated on recognition that conflict and displacement and peoples' responses to these are not aberrations but are instead embedded in the social relations and histories of the people involved in them and amenable to analysis on this basis (Colson 1971, Turton 2004). In some cases, their responses and social coping strategies take material and aesthetic form, for example in artistic, ritual or productive activity. In other cases, it is to the wider frame of social creativity, for example to the preservation or re-configuration of social relations and practices that we need to look to understand their responses. The proposed study will break new ground in exploring each of these areas in the context of forced migration as well as theorizing the interconnections between these related socio-cultural activities and practices. One hypothesis is that apparently disparate forms of social and artistic creativity are closely interlinked, and that similar principles and procedures can be used to explore both (Davis 1994).

Research methods

This application is for support for field research in Uganda and Sudan. The field research will be multi-sited, historically grounded and comparative, and will encompass work with refugees in and out of settlements, with hosts of refugees in Uganda and with people who never moved or who have repatriated to Sudan.

The principal research methodologies employed will be broadly ethnographic, including participant observation, the collection of oral histories, interviews and group discussions. I also plan to make a photographic and conceivably also a filmed account of artistic and ritual activity. The research themes introduced here are most appropriately explored using face to face, qualitative methodologies as these allow for a deepening of questioning where this becomes necessary as well as intuitive changes of direction in line with the priorities and preoccupations of respondents. Care will be taken to include members of different groups within the population, notably people of different ages, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity (where this is a meaningful category) and professional groups (farmers, traders, teachers, entrepreneurs). Interviews will also be

held with clan, ritual, and other leaders, opinion makers, and with members of religious groups.

There will be a focus on the collection of personal narratives and attention to representations of departure, place making and other important phenomena through storytelling and artistic production including music, dance and dress.