



Politics of Return

Impact report on engagement workshops and exhibitions



Politics of Return project: impact report on engagement workshops and exhibitions

Executive Summary

Over the course of three years, the Politics of Return research project produced high quality evidence-based outputs. The academic and creative dissemination work of our team has informed UK and international policies and practices. The focus of this has been to mitigate cycles of violence in sites of widespread displacement and return in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Central African Republic. The research has been designed to impact, involve and benefit four key audiences, including: local communities who have experienced or been affected by displacement and return, governmental and non-governmental policy makers at both the national and international level, and the next generation of development practitioners and African leaders. This impact evaluation report considers the ways in which a series of events, exhibitions and creative activities from the Politics of Return project has influenced and benefitted these four target groups.

We have tried to work with local populations in the countries of research by providing a magnification of key issues relating to war-affected communities who have experienced forced displacement and difficulty in their returning 'home'. In doing so, the research and its creative impact has challenged representations of the refugee and internally displaced person's experiences that are often shown as people with assumed and imposed victimhood. Through interactions with the Politics of Return project's events, communities affected by conflict and displacement revealed that the create outputs aided in a type of memorialisation of their experiences.

The project's activities have impacted policymakers by securing their active participation, allowing them to understand the research findings and use them to inform their policymaking work. This has been achieved by developing a series of policy briefings with clear recommendations and through nurturing relationships with policy professionals. Key stakeholders participated in workshops with development practitioners, government representatives and researchers to inform the development of policies that align with the project's findings and aims.

We have collaborated with other research and UK funded projects to initiate further works, both academic and artistic. As a result, individuals who have been inspired by their experiences of the project have been driven to expand on it through new exhibitions and further research. The project has also impacted future research on the topic of refugee return in the region of central Africa. It has questioned and strategised how we, as researchers, can manage expectations, make realistic promises to those we work with, and avoid perpetuating negative impacts of engagement. Finally, through the project's collaborations with organisations such as AYINET, and support of initiatives such as PfAL and its contribution to the LSE's annual Africa Summit, it has supported the next generation of



development practitioners and Central African leaders, which is a key instrument in changing thinking and practice over the longer term.

Research Context

The Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa's [Politics of Return](#) (POR) project, which began in 2017, took place at a time when forced displacement was being defined as one of the world's foremost challenges. By mid-2019, as the project wrapped up, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported that the world's forcibly displaced population had hit a 'record high' of 70.8 million: equivalent to 25 people being forced to flee every minute in 2018. The region for this research focus, central Africa, has witnessed prolonged and repetitive forms of displacement for many, many years. In 2018, the UNHCR reported that the number of refugees in Africa had almost tripled over ten years, from 2.3 million in 2008 to over 6.3 million. At the time of the project, Uganda was the third-largest refugee-hosting country in the world, after Turkey and Pakistan, with an estimated 1.19 million refugees in December 2018.

The populations that are forcibly displaced also face comparably difficult situations when they return to their original homes, if that ever becomes possible. To date, international organisations have prioritised 'going home' as the most durable solution to this crisis. Processes of 'return and reintegration' represent a huge practical and policy challenge for world governments and are therefore a critical international policy issue. By analysing how refugees, internally-displaced persons and former combatants in Uganda, South Sudan, Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo negotiate and experience 'return', our research cohort have aimed to help fill a large gap in current knowledge on the 'lifecycle' of conflicts in some of the world's most difficult places. Drawing on anthropology, comic journalism, history, heritage studies and political science, we have focused on the everyday experiences of those attempting to build or rebuild communities in central Africa, contributing to a better understanding of how conflict-affected societies constitute or reconstitute themselves.

The research has been conducted to answer the following set of research questions:

Research Questions:

1. In circumstances of return, following and during armed conflict, how does social repair become possible and what are the critical conditions, common patterns and features?
2. How do international and national projects and programmes aimed at facilitating return, repair and peacebuilding relate to and become entangled with realities of lived experiences on the ground?



3. What generalised insights emerge from a comparison between sites in Central Africa and literature on return and repair in other parts of the world both recently and historically?

Politics of Return Collaborations:

There have been a number of other research projects that have worked alongside or with our research. This section demonstrates how the Politics of Return project is not contained but interlinked with other research. One such example is the Trajectories of Displacement and Notions of Resilience project at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa, which conducts a range of research with direct policy implications for governments, intergovernmental organisations and NGOs. Based on empirical evidence and thorough analysis, its targeted policy campaigns strive to make real impact through clear recommendations. The Trajectories of Displacement and Resilience project is a multi-disciplinary exploration into return and social repair after mass displacement in Northern Uganda and has produced a series of policy papers.

The Politics of Return project has collaborated with the following organisations:

- London School of Economics & Political Science (Lead Research Organisation)
- ESRC, United Kingdom (Co-funder)
- Ghent University (Collaboration)
- Gulu University (Collaboration)
- Green Economy Coalition (Collaboration)
- University of Juba (Collaboration)
- United Nations (UN) (Collaboration)
- London School of Hygiene and Trop Medicine, United Kingdom (Collaboration)
- Social Science Research Council (Collaboration)
- 32 Degrees East Ugandan Arts Trust (Collaboration)
- University of East Anglia (Collaboration)
- University of Kinshasa (Collaboration)
- University of Gbadolite (Collaboration)
- Uganda Museum (Collaboration)
- African Youth Initiative Network (Collaboration)

Key Findings



The 'return' of displaced populations and former combatants can lead to renewed tensions and, potentially, further cycles of violence.

The research underscores the need to consider the political and social, not just humanitarian and logistical dimensions of return. Return is an inherently political process, affecting the legitimacy of public authorities and power relations. This research makes the case for more conflict-sensitive approaches to return.

Uganda

In Uganda, research has underscored the importance of paying attention to what happens in gender relationships and the risks of violence as people re-establish homes after decades of upheaval. The nature of gendered violence upon return is different than it was in the context of Internally Displaced Persons camps, or for those in the Lord's Resistance Army.

The research has highlighted in particular some of the spatial dynamics of gender that came to the fore because of displacement. For instance, research shows some of the key considerations which lead to the prevalence of certain forms of sexual violence in the context of return, as well as the protection against others. It shows how many of the services available for women are for the least common forms of violence they actually endure and how little responds to what would be most relevant to them.

Beyond violence, our research points to a number of dynamics that have broad reaching implications for people's everyday lives, including for public authorities, and how social disputes are mediated. One of the most significant of these is the fact that virtually no formal marriages were possible during the time of displacement. The drastic reduction of formal marriages, among other things, have entailed profound disruptions to 'normal' gendered orderings of life. These dynamics pose both challenges and opportunities for more just gender relationships.

Research into the social function of stigmatization of former LRA combatants in northern Uganda found – through interview-based and ethnographic methods – that stigmatisation of former LRA returnees takes many forms and serves multiple functions, calls into question whether this catch-all term actually obscures more than it illuminates. While stigmatisation is usually practised as a form of 'social control', its function can be 're-integrative' rather than purely exclusionary. Through the northern Ugandan case study, this research advances conceptual and empirical understanding of the manifestations and functions of stigmatisation in spaces of post-war return, challenging the logic underpinning those interventions which seek to reduce it.

Central African Republic

In Central African Republic, research revealed that displaced and formerly displaced communities emphasize that the persistence of the war and ongoing violence is due to disputes about material entitlements and distribution, and how those factor into who



belongs, and against whom people feel it is acceptable or even moral to commit violence. Building on their experiences as individuals, family and community members, and on the state of permanent instability they have lived in for years, refugees, returnees, and stayees have identified important causes and solutions for the conflict. However, so far, they have not had a chance to express these causes or solutions in official forums that discuss the war and its effects.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

In eastern DRC, a process of ‘circular return’ was identified, in which combatants moved between armed and civilian life. Individual incentives to join and re-join armed groups go beyond the search for economic opportunity. Previous experience in armed groups and the socialization process and shared identities that emerge is a decisive factor, and many individuals return to combat having already gone through civilian re-integration programmes. This research calls for new approaches to Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration, building on community-based processes and moving away from looking at armed mobilization and de-mobilization from a purely security perspective.

Ex-combatants in ‘return’ to where they have support systems. These support systems may be a spouse and children, or fellow fighters. Ex-combatants in DRC do not necessarily return to where they grew up, or were recruited from, or to their province or town of origin. In Uganda, however, most people traced are living on ancestral farms or in nearby towns. This again is explained by support systems – although those systems are not necessarily benign and may involve stigmatisation. People living in towns seem to be doing a bit better. Relatively few have the option of moving away to other parts of the country.

In DRC, research showed that social support structures and the solidarity provided by fellow ex-fighters through, in one case study, a bicycle taxi union, provided the best chance of social integration after war. At the same time, research showed that a strong, locally owned, support and reintegration network like the Toleka union can only be as successful as the conditions around it will permit. If the nature of public authority remains fundamentally the same as it was when they were mobilized, and ex-fighters return to the same modes of corrupt, exclusionary, or predatory governance that created the conditions that permitted them to pick up arms in the first place, integration will fail in the long term.

South Sudan

In South Sudan, research on returnees after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement highlighted that some returnees sought to build their own social capital at ‘home’ through demonstrations of their own militarization. This was especially the case as authority and status in South Sudan was often linked to military service. This prompted some returnees to engaged in armed conflict or join the armed forces that have been active in the recent civil war.



In South Sudan the realities after the big peace agreements have been ignored. South Sudan has repeatedly remained a heavily militarised society with incentives to rearm and not demobilise.

Identity norms created by courts during periods of displacement can shape post-conflict identities. Research in Sudan among South Sudanese refugees highlighted that courts set up to govern refugees can rule on the most intimate relationships, such as marriage, and through these rules reshape norms of identity. This can include legally entrenching politicized, identity-based divisions. It can also include maintaining a social role for the dead including wartime dead. This has implications both for how identity and long-term divisions are made, but also what is necessary to reconcile and bring a meaningful peace.

Refugees and displaced people can use their material worlds to recreate dignity: Research in South Sudan highlighted how South Sudanese in some of the most difficult sites and under UN governance had built and decorated elaborate shelters in order to preserve dignity and create varied social status. Therefore, shelters and material realities do not only impact comfort but can be crucial for people's own construction of dignity, certainty and hopes for the future.

Impact Strategies

To share and disseminate the above findings we devised a dynamic strategy for impact. Policy briefs, academic papers and academic conferences were the foundation of knowledge sharing as practiced by the academy. However, we sought a way of including arts and heritage as a unique potential to have broader reach to share our research. We included a project curator who was responsible for developing exhibitions, a catalogue and a series of events that shared the research through paintings, cartoon illustrations, collage, photography, film and sound installation. In total the project engaged nine different creatives from the region where the research was being undertaken. Their inputs, we found, also created a different type of research capacity that had not previously been captured by the research cohort. Over the course of seven different exhibitions and dialogues, we were able to share the research across the regions of research as well as within the UK academy. The report that follows is an investigation into this pathway to impact and how it relates to other impact strategies as well as the various target audiences we proposed to engage through our research.

Target Audiences for Impact:

Local Populations:

The research project aimed to have an impact on local populations in conflict-affected places by assisting the development of policies based on the full set of functioning



regulatory structures and norms used by local populations in sites of mass displacement and return, rather than merely those that have been defined for them. Thus, we worked through our strong local networks of researchers, civil society leaders and customary authorities to involve returnee populations in the research process.

Policy-makers:

We targeted policy-makers by generating recommendations and strategies to strengthen current approaches and interventions related to persistent conflict and endemic violence in our research sites. Policy that delivers human security in conflict-affected areas must be designed to work effectively in complex and contested local environments, characterised by competing interests and hybrid public authority structures. Our research was designed to be easily translatable into succinct policy briefings, and has already been done so in some instances, which are elaborated below. We have disseminated these briefings on the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa's website and social media channels, as well as presented papers and findings at conferences, workshops and annual stakeholder meetings.

Publics

Throughout the project we promoted public engagement with the scientific evidence on how viable ways of life are constituted post-return and/or how certain dynamics can lead to endemic and persistent conflict. This was done through free and public exhibitions, teaching and research at institutions in the UK, South Sudan, DRC and Uganda. In addition we engaged media within the research countries to help disseminate accessible research material, through modes such as journalistic articles, blog discussion and visual materials.

The Next Generation of Development Practitioners and African Leaders:

We view the training and development of young development professionals as a key instrument in changing thinking and practice over the longer term. We have been able to include many young Africans as part bridging the research project without Programme for African Leadership (PfAL) scheme based at the LSE, the SSRC's African Peacebuilding Network, NExtGen African Social Science programme and the LSE's annual Africa Summit. Throughout the lifecycle of the research project we engaged these different groups of young leaders to support the research process, participate in events and share the findings.

Evaluation of Arts, Creative and Heritage Impact

One of the project's aims was to highlight the lived realities of displacement, which, for some, could mean becoming trapped in cycles of displacement and return. It has also been



our aim to expand the impacts of our work into more spaces and to learn how to express the dense and layered research we undertake. We sought artists and creative producers to support our research and to develop creative and artistic outputs as a key dissemination outlet.

Rather than being a passive commentary on research findings, the events have been created and curated to become central elements of the research process. The exhibitions of artwork in particular have been curated not as a call upon artists to mimic ideas in their art, but rather to engage in dialogue with researchers and subjects, and use their contemporary

forms to make statements on the issues presented. The sections below specifically assess how creative outputs have built on and interacted with the research findings.

The following events and activities are assessed in this report for their role in impact on achieving engagement with the four key audiences in the ways proposed in the project's proposal.

Visual Dissemination

Enduring Exile – Research by Liz Storer, Photography by Katie G Nelson, Curation by Kara Blackmore

In late 2016 Liz Storer, worked alongside photographer Katie Nelson to produce the ethnographic photo project 'Enduring Exile', which documented the lives of South Sudanese citizens displaced in Arua Town, West Nile. The project worked with women as they attempted to find a semblance to their former lives in a foreign land.

Images featured were collected in churches, community spaces and homes in November 2016 in Arua, Uganda. Ethnographic research by Storer began in September 2016 and followed the everyday lives of South Sudanese women in their homes, public spaces, and churches. An exhibition included a series of photos from the Bishop Alison Theology College, Pajulu; Ambiriambati Anglican Church and the South Sudanese United Student Association Theatre Group. These extended glimpses of settings are complemented by images from St Charles Lwanga Catholic Church and portraits of the South Sudanese women who were involved.

The project sought to present an alternative narrative to the commonplace representation of refugees as "victims" while restoring the local experience of refugees that is often silenced by international actors whose responsibility is to serve the displaced.

Funded by the British Academy Haycock Grant for the Sudans 2016–17 and in collaboration with Nicky Kindersly, the work was launched at the Uganda Museum in on the 26th May 2017. Attendees were primarily from the South Sudanese diaspora in Uganda and joined for



a day-long workshop and discussion on the content of a series of research as well as the photographic and performance interventions.

Over 90 people attended, the majority being from the South Sudanese diaspora in Uganda, and this discussion produced the following questions:

- *How do we work against the exclusionary, tribalising, radicalising forces of the current civil war?*
- *What should the state look like in South Sudan? How should it relate to its citizens?*
- *What is the responsibility of truth-telling versus the risks of accusations, in cycles of violence?*
- *How does silencing affect distant refugees in camps?*

The photographs instigated deep discussions and we were invited by the Uganda Museum to display the photographs for an additional three weeks to continue sharing the research findings.

This event was the second in a series which focus on understanding dynamics of conflict and displacement in South Sudan. Building on this experience, the *Understanding South Sudan* workshop in London drew together scholars based in the UK, to understand how our work and practice can speak to the outcomes of this initial discussion, and how our research practice more widely can be conducted in an ethical and responsible manner. Beyond this, the conference explored the practicalities of doing research within South Sudan and in displacement camps, and how access both shapes and limits how knowledge is produced.

We showcased the photographs from *Enduring Exile* alongside cartoons that had been produced as part of the Justice and Security Research Programme. The conversations at the workshop and conference, alongside the visual materials, provided a rich conversation in which previous research could be built upon and showcased continuously.

Mobilising Histories Global Challenges Research Fund Conference and Sketching Violence Exhibition

The Mobilising Histories conference, hosted by the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre in May 2018, brought together several UK Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) projects. The purpose was to discuss how heritage and arts-based interventions could be used in post-conflict societies to strengthen respect for human rights and make progress towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The primary focus points of the conference were confronting 'dark pasts', mobilising traumatic memory, addressing inequality and injustice and critically engaging with the SDGs. A number of talks, discussion panels and group conversations between participants from various backgrounds – from researchers and academics to curators and heritage workers – analysed these issues, attempting to reconcile them with the needs of post-conflict societies.



Here, curator Kara Blackmore showcased a series of cartoons that referenced the research. With the cohort of academics and practitioners, Blackmore was able to refine her curatorial strategy for the Politics of Return project while continuing to share research findings that have informed the continuing research in Uganda and South Sudan.

Artist in Residency Programme, 16 June – 15 September 2018

This residency was a collaboration with 32^o East | Ugandan Arts Trust, as a curatorial method to bring together conceptual artists with the academic research. Lessons from the cartoon commissions were taken into account to infer that translation of dense and layered research required time and translation to have maximum impact. We also saw this as an opportunity to continue collaboration by piloting a residency of social art practice to develop artistic research skills at 32^o East. Over three months Bathsheba Okwenje, Willy Karekezi and Kusa Kusa Maski Gael responded to academic research on displacement and migration in the region. These emerging artists grappled with concerns about representation and used the residency to explore the boundary lines of their practice.

We documented the process through blogs. The residency was launched with an invited dialogue session and closed with a studio exhibition. In between we hosted a day-long workshop at the Uganda Museum entitled, the Grammar of Images: When Art Speaks Back. At the Grammar of Images, 70+ artists, academics and NGO professionals grappled with issues of representing displaced persons. Audience members ranged from UK-based scholars, photographers coming from as far as Gabon, a representative from the International Criminal Court's Trust Fund for Victims, as well as Uganda's Human Rights Commission.

The Grammar of Images conversation and artistic showcase was part of the biennial festival KLA ART 18. It included artworks by Bathsheba Okwenje, Willy Karekezi, Kusa Kusa Maski Gael, Sarah Waiswa and Kudzanai Chiurai and colonial archives from the Uganda Society. The event aimed to engage conversation around the processes of artwork and research with legacies of humanitarian assistance and ongoing aid support for post-war development and creative sectors.

We asked: What does social practice mean in Kampala? How can artists work with or in reaction to research institutions as well as aid and humanitarian organisations? Can we measure impact of the aesthetic and ephemeral?

The event did not seek to make definitive claims, rather, artists sought to see how artwork fit in an ecosystem of continued misrepresentation around forced migration. In doing so, artists asked if there is a space for academic research to have impact and insisted that aid and humanitarian organisations pay attention to the ways in which contemporary art creates collective social portraits that can speak beyond a single image of someone suffering. Placing the work and conversation at the Uganda Museum put in stark relief the legacies of colonial gazes and showed how those ways of seeing can be internalised even



decades after independence. The event presented the potential of shifts in knowledge and research production.

Dark Pasts - Optimistic Futures, March 2019, The Africa Summit, London School of Economics and Political Science

After the artist residency finished we were granted additional funding by the Economic and Social Research Council to transport the artworks from Uganda to London for the annual LSE Africa Summit. The original artworks and cartoons produced from the research collaborations were paired with a film installation, and two set of photographs of African cities. They made an important arts and culture contribution to the Summit which was unlike any previous year.

Pairing the artworks that stemmed from research on war and post-war displacement and return with urban images of optimism created a juxtaposition between different perspectives on the African continent. However, the real politics of migration was experienced when we tried to invite 25 African colleagues who were part of the research as audience members at the Summit. Unfortunately, only 3 of the colleagues were granted visas, prompting an unexpected output and impact through the commissioning of visa-blogs on the process of acceptance and rejection. These blogs by Charity Atukunda and Bathseba Okwenje then went viral, being shared over 1,000 times and were featured in UK media outlets as well as new artworks in Germany and Norway.

Furthermore, the additional ESRC funding supported the production of a print catalogue that we were able to share with all 500 participants attending the Summit. This catalogue was then reproduced for the When We Return exhibition in Gulu, Uganda and is now available online.

Lastly, the additional ESRC support allowed the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa to purchase the artworks produced during the residency and to be able to showcase them as pedagogical tools for future engagements.

Politics of Return Conference, and Launch of When We Return exhibition 25-26 July 2019, TAKS Arts Centre, Gulu, Uganda

The culmination of the project was a two-day conference and exhibition launch in Gulu, Uganda that brought together colleagues and partners from across the research sites. Over 100 people attended the conference, ranging from academics to art professionals. This two-day public conference brought together the Politics of Return research team, artists, and cartoonists to mark the end of the project and discuss new research agendas.

The conference featured a series of panel discussions between researchers, academics, artists, civil society representatives, writers and the local area Ugandan MP. The discussions



explored the relationship between art and research, ideas of transition, accountability, justice and social repair in the aftermath of war and displacement, artists' positionality when working in conflict zones, representations of children born of war, constructions of 'home', and how return can be depicted in cartoon format. The conference also featured a speech from MP Hon. Lyandro Komakech who launched the *When We Return* exhibition at the conference.

The event was not only an opportunity to further examine the intersection and co-production of research and arts, but also provided space for the public to view and engage with artworks produced alongside and from the research. Through its regional combination, the event aimed to make sense of the difficult realities of displacement and return, reflecting on themes of return, reintegration, and displacement. The exhibition brought together works by an international group of artists including Bathsheba Okwenje, Willy Karekezi and Kusa Kusa Maski Gael from the Politics of Return residency at 32° East Ugandan Arts Trust, as well as a film from Ben Mergelsberg and cartoons from artists Didier Kassai, Thembo Kash, Tom Dai, Charity Atukunda, and Victor Ndula. Participants were invited to engage with the work through a series of panels that promoted the interaction of researcher, artist, subject, and viewer.

The conference was also attended by media personal and resulted in coverage in leading Ugandan newspapers as well as a one-hour radio talk show at Mega FM hosted in the local-language, Acholi. Media coverage in the *Daily Monitor* prompted TRAC FM Foundation to contact curator Kara Blackmore and the research colleagues to inform a new campaign on Transitional Justice that will be launched in 2020.

The works represent collective social portraits of the research findings. The purpose of the artwork was to expand the biography that researchers establish in their work. *Kanyo Love*, by Okwenje, uses physical and emotional layers to show the biographies of Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) wives, through text, photography, audio and physical objects. Maski's *Three Women on the Lake* uses collage layering to take a refugee's reality and recompose it in a surreal world. Karekezi paints on bodies and canvas to create questions on return, or why we do not. Mergelsberg's *Bush Camp* piece questions our sense of documentary film. Works are not shown as static, fixed in time and place, but rather as dynamic and influencing and being influenced by context.

Cartoons created a more accessible format for understanding research and is part of the 'grammar' of images that characterised this exhibition on displacement and migration. Extremely powerful images and work were open to their own subjective interpretation by each viewer. Visual imagery is able to elicit emotional responses when the written word is not enough. By casting the subject in a collaborative role rather than a passive one, artists, subjects and participants alike can engage meaningfully with difficult topics through an artistic lens, and challenge the stereotypical portrayals and mountains of data to which we are all subjected.



The exhibition continued until the 14th of August and had an estimated 500+ visitors from Uganda, the USA, UK and other European countries. Some of the most impactful feedback comes from the Ugandan visitors who have lived the histories that the artwork was addressing. As the attendance register demonstrates, the exhibition was an effective means of disseminating the project's research to audiences locally, regionally, and internationally. Exposing these audiences to the subject matter and stories depicted in the artwork, aligns with the project's overall objective of reaching new and existing publics, and facilitating their engagement.

Creative Writing and Heritage Publications

We also worked with creative writers, like Gloria Kiconco to creatively respond to the processes and academic findings. The Principal Investigator published a collection of writing that was in the Oxford University archives. Creative-critical writing inputs came as reflections of the artist residency and from the research on ideas about home and displacement in northern Uganda. British and Ugandan authors reflected on the visual artwork processes, the research and archival material. As a result there was a deeper investigation into the heritage of Ugandan creatives and migration experiences.

Lawino's People – Conference, Publication, Conceptualisation

In May a conference brought together creatives and scholars to reflect on the legacy of Okot p'Bitek's legacy and the role of anthropology in understanding the past. Okot was a writer and former director of Uganda's National Theatre. He is famously known for his work 'Song of Lawino' (1966).

The republication of Okot p'Bitek's seminal yet largely forgotten anthropological works came at a time when the Acholi people of Uganda, in the aftermath of a 20-year war, are looking back to discover their pre-colonial and colonial cultural history. Tim Allen framed the historical and political context of this work, including p'Bitek's fraught relationship with Western scholarship. The event provided an opportunity for around 60 participants to discuss the kind of research they felt was important following the end of the war, and the breaking up of the displacement camps.

Creative Writing Workshop – Juba, June 2019

In June 2019 researchers led a series of writing workshops over one week to support Ugandan and South Sudanese attendees' creative writing. The attendees were encouraged to produce one short story, based on personal experiences of forced displacement, for future submission to creative outlets and exploring personal past experiences.



Summary of Impact

1. Local Populations: Impact

Highlighting marginalised perspectives:

The events, arts and heritage, and creative events and outputs of the Politics of Return project have shared a set of research findings that narrate, and highlight a myriad of lived experiences in a variety of ways. At the Grammar of Images event, AYINET director Victor Ochen spoke on the effects of suppressing artists and their ability to give a voice to the voiceless through their work: 'We see them [artists, musicians] being killed because they are standing up for truth, they are trying to speak for the voiceless and they are stepping on the feet of those in power... Keep talking about truth even if it hurts somebody's ears! As long we are giving that voiceless person a voice, it's a calling.'

Beyond the Statistics

At the Beyond the Statistics event, many South Sudanese participants noted that this workshop was the first opportunity they had to voice their views and debate the experience of displacement in Uganda. Going forward, attendees highlighted the need for greater facilitation and more opportunities for South Sudanese citizens to speak freely on their experiences because of the polarization of public discourses. The open conversation that concluded the workshop was both challenging and emotional, with many audience members reflecting on their personal experiences, frustrations and fears. Those present offered a diverse range of life experiences in relation to the continuing conflict, emphasising the present regional and social differences in how the effects of war are felt within and beyond South Sudan. Attendees were from a variety of professional and scholarly backgrounds and many were connected to civil society or aid organisations and engaged in projects with displaced groups. Others attended because of their frustrations at their inability to voice aspects of their current experience as displaced persons in Uganda.

Attendees of the Beyond the Statistics workshop expressed their sense that narratives of conflict remain dominated by certain narratives that are often generated by outsiders. There are few spaces and options for South Sudanese citizens themselves to challenge such accounts which often coalesce around tribalising narratives of violence, and generalised experiences of war-induced displacement. Many attendees commented on their limited power in challenging these narratives and prejudices, and focused on the need to discuss common trauma across political lines and the violence perpetuated by South Sudanese state actors. The potential for regional shared learning and exchange of experience, was also highlighted. Several stakeholders from Ugandan institutions emphasised the shared recent history of displacement and exile, particularly in West Nile and northern Uganda. The



possibility of sharing lessons from on-going reconciliation in northern Uganda was also raised.

Outside the context of the workshop, it was posited that routes onward could include providing support to regional primary, secondary and higher education institutions to host similar discussions, or more creative outlets including art or theatre projects. At present, whether based in camps or in cities, many South Sudanese in Uganda experience a sense of disconnection and dislocation. Many people based in the refugee camps live in distant geographical locations, encountering little, regular institutional contact or support beyond what is deemed necessary for their basic survival. In many of the camps, there was also a consensus that life is becoming more uncertain, for instance as some food rations are reduced following limited notice.

Whilst many may be increasingly involved in camp-based UN and international non-governmental projects, there is little support for more political ideas to be discussed and heard, beyond perhaps (in some cases) dealing with immediate emotional trauma. A clear message from this workshop was that as interveners, it is important and urgent to stop a process of depoliticising 'trauma', instead giving space and support to refugee communities for intellectual and social solidarity.

When We Return: Art Exile and the Remaking of Home

Hosting the When We Return exhibition in Gulu was a unique possibility to share the artwork with people directly impacted by the issues the research addresses. We invited people represented in the work to preview and give consent on the artistic interpretations of their lived realities. There was an overwhelmingly positive response and an open space to debate and dialogue about the research findings.

Artist Bathsheba Okwenje reflected on the practice of community engagement with 36 women who had returned from being forcibly abducted into the Lord's Resistance Army. She wrote 'I think what I witnessed with the protagonists of *Kanyo, Love* is this realisation that their stories are important; that the artistic interpretation gave them an opportunity and an audience to maybe hope for more; to validate their experience; to see possibilities for change. I think it was very important and meaningful to them that we brought the outcome of the research back to them to engage with and give feedback.' This need for more engagement has led to Bathsheba Okwenje becoming an honorary research fellow at the FLCA to continue applying for funds to continue the project with the 36 women.

Jackie Atingo, one of the Ugandan Research Assistants wrote: 'The women [showcased in the artwork] felt more valued. They realised that even many years after the war they are still important especially when it came to issue of returnees. They are not forgotten. They also felt that their issues shall be handled since it has been exposed to the world. It as a kind



of feeling of hope for them. Finding their pictures in the exhibition gave some of the women strength to face the world even if they were living in hiding because of stigma. Putting their pictures with the others gave them confidence. It was a time that the returnee mothers reflected on their past deeply. They could see what happened in their past in their minds. It was a time of memory for the ladies.'

Reviewing her experience of the exhibition, LSE graduate Meital Kupfer, concludes:

'I think the largest sense of parallel [between her work and the POR project] can be found in the way that the POR's artists interacted with their subjects versus how INGOs can often interact with their subjects. Bathsheba Okwenje, for example, invited the women she photographed and interviewed for her Kanyo Love piece to the opening that we held before the start of the conference. This enabled the subjects to voice their discontent, if any, with aspects of the work and get an intimate view at how the artist has decided to portray them. Kusa Kusa Maski Gael did a similar thing, and I think it is important, as the decisions the artists make are directly influenced by how they interact with their environs and subjects.'

This call to engage was a curatorial decision by Blackmore who has been inspired by the ideas of research and representation-accountability in which subjects of research and artwork should have the opportunity to engage the final products and critique them accordingly.

Compared to the conceptual artworks of Okwenje and Gael, the cartoons created a more direct format for understanding research. This type of artwork was used in most of the events and exhibitions and required little translation because both the visuals and the captions were accessible forms of interpreting the research. The powerful images and visuals set forth the research findings but were also open to subjective interpretation by each viewer. This reinforced the proposition of the impact that visual imagery is able to elicit emotional responses when the written word is not enough.

Challenging Victimhood: Enduring Exile; Mobilising Histories Conference, Grammar of Images, Creative Writing Workshop, Juba Dissemination:

Through a sensitive engagement with local populations, the creative impact showed that many participants and respondents felt that the victim narratives needed to be reframed. This was also apparent in the research findings that challenge the vast amount of literature which depicts post-war settings as only having voiceless victims in which the research must speak on behalf of.

Deploying a visual narrative approach, in keeping with the theme of the Enduring Exile workshop, the photo series challenged commonplace, humanitarian representations, which equate the refugee experience to one of near total victimhood. The creators posited that the activities and logics through which those in exile construct community and live out their



lives bear significant meaning. As such, *Enduring Exile* drew attention to aspects of local experience silenced by mainstream statistical explanations of refugee crises.

A priority of the project was to involve participants in the shaping of the photo project, and their guidance and opinions were central in shaping the settings of the work. Furthermore, it was considered essential to share images with participants and church communities. In order for those involved to view their images at this exhibition, nine return tickets from Arua were funded through the Haycock Grant. The theatre group pictured also performed an interlude from their performance photographed in the grounds of St Charles Lwanga Catholic Church Oli.

Equally, countering victimisation was a theme that featured at the Mobilising Histories conference in Johannesburg, South Africa:

‘The notion of the ‘ideal victim’ which such a process creates was touched upon at the Mobilising Histories conference, as was the necessity of rejecting the notion of an ideal victim by recognising the multiplicity of narratives that explain a ‘dark past’. Yet rejecting the notion of an ideal victim is complicated by the legal and social frameworks of nation states that necessitate victims to be labelled as such.’ – Mailies Fleming (Attendee from the University of Leeds).

Challenging representations of the refugee experience and victimhood was also a theme raised at the Grammar of Images event. When posed the question of how to deal with presentations of the ‘ideal victim’ in media spaces and reports or amongst NGOs, Victor Ochen, a former displaced person from northern Uganda who is now head of the African Youth Initiative Network (AYINET) and a UN Global Goals ambassador, said:

‘If people step forward to amplify the voices of truth and justice we should be accountable to the people we represent. It’s important to realise that we lost everything during the war ... the only thing we were left with were our stories and nobody should manipulate our stories for their own gain. Our stories should be told in a way that is effective and legitimate, we should be the rightful people to legitimise our stories being told around the world ... as victims there’s so much room for manipulation’.

Victor went on to explain how he would like to see the subjects of stories allowed input and feedback to those who depict them, and have access to the information they provide, rather than it being inaccessible to them exhibited just in cities. He explained it was about ‘who owns the story? ... they should be able to say yes it’s perfect it’s us [the depiction is accurate], now go and use it in a way that accurately represents our struggle and our resilience.’

Victor Ochen’s account is echoed by Politics of Return researcher, Naomi Pendle, who explains the impact of a creative writing workshop her team organised:



‘Personal accounts about displacement and return in South Sudan that are shared internationally often follow a certain standard form and emphasis on victimhood. This can conceal South Sudanese agency, as well as the complexity of overlapping journeys made during times of conflict and peace. The writing workshop gave the opportunity for South Sudanese academics to understand some of the skills involved in creative writing and to provide space for them to write their own stories and alternative narratives. The stories that have been written highlight the comedy, the cleverness and the complexity in people’s journeys to and from South Sudan. Many of these journeys overlapped with previous periods of movement to and from South Sudan, but during periods of flight from conflict, they became new spaces of danger and safety. The stories also highlighted how many journeys were important for people’s personal histories and relationships, such as demonstrating their ability as a husband.’

Memorialisation of Experiences

The When We Return exhibition had a significant impact on keeping the war-related issues of populations in relevant policy and memory spaces. What emerged from interactions with the artwork at the exhibition was a clear indication that people of northern Uganda will live to remember the war and that it will be passed on from generation to generation. The participants in this exhibition talked about how the images have refreshed their memories of the war because they have once been in this life. One of them said jokingly ‘don’t waste your time explaining the images to us, they speak by themselves’.

They said the experience of the war is similar in all the four countries the research covered comparing the issues of injustices and trauma. According to them, the visual images tend to summarise the war experience in these countries in a way that everyone can view and understand without any explanation.

Here are some of the quotes from the visitors to the exhibition.

“Art is much easier to understand than reading a whole book or sitting and listen to be present. Art, you feed your eyes and asked questions and can never forget what you have seen the memories stays with you”. – Joseph

“I was impressed with the Cartoon it is straight no need to ask questions about it. I wish someone could also make carton for the street children this would really help to educate people as you have done with the children born in the bush”. – Cathrine

“The remains of the camp, has brought back the memories. It has reminded me how we used to distribute food to the camp people mostly when I look at the USAID Tin. How we would be waiting for the security clearance and also convoy to go to the camps”. -Anonymous



“Impressive work and it could be linked to tourism; this exhibition should not be for a short period of time and should be a long term where people can come and they are talked to about what people went through in northern region and other countries. There are people who do not know about what happened in the Northern region and the stories of these women this is very good and unique”. – Bernard

By combining the ethnographic narratives of return from across the region with visual art, the exhibition has created a way to talk about the past amongst local participants and attendees. This is another example of how this project has used innovative arts platforms to reach new audiences, to disseminate the research’s evidence-based findings to new as well as traditional research audiences.

The events of the Politics of Return project has also presented an opportunity for the artists, as members of communities whose experiences they depict in their art, to reflect on their own positionality as artists and individuals. As Rasheeda Nalumoso, Arts Manager for the British Council, highlighted:

‘The project is interesting in its engagement with artists across different levels of expertise and experience and offered a range of ways into the subject matter that I could see strongly impacted upon all of them as artists in a reflective practice ... I observed and enjoyed the multi-disciplinary approach to artistic practice that artists were encouraged to respond to archives and first hand source material which also demonstrated the complicated nature of archiving when entering the territory of reconciliation, trauma and personal experiences. This strongly showed the nuanced layers that much work in the development sector does not always grasp. I value just the lead artists shared their personal stories a reminder of the importance of storytelling as a tool’.

Naomi Pendle explains how cartoonist Thomas Dai’s work with the Politics of Return project was influenced by ‘Tom’s own experiences living as a Nuer in Sudan [which] helped him reshape this research and displayed a clarity to a potentially complex set of research findings’.

2. Policy-Makers: Impact

The Politics of Return project has influenced policymaking in a variety of ways and at various levels. We have been able to engage the UK Government’s All Parliamentary Groups for Africa, UN representatives, Ugandan government officials and leading justice practitioners. Thus the research and creative dissemination has influenced initiatives for the returnees who are impacted. Research findings have been translated into succinct policy briefings containing infographics and actionable recommendations. The following policy briefs were produced, in part, as a product of the researchers’ involvement and participation in the Politics of Return and its events:



- *Trauma-focused mental health interventions:* Costanza Torre, Sophie Mylan
- *Children from the LRA and services for formerly abducted persons:* Jacqueline Atingo Owacgiu
- *Welcome home from the “bush”? A roadmap towards the collective hearing of child soldiers and “rebel wives” in the Acholi sub-region, Norther Uganda,* Raphael Kerali

Briefings such as these are key to influencing policymaking change, by generating recommendations and strategies to strengthen current approaches and interventions related to persistent conflict and endemic violence in our research sites.

As a director of AYINET and UN ambassador for the SDG 16, Victor Ochen has been a consistent voice on global policy and lived experiences in Uganda. He has tabled the need for artistic and heritage approaches in his African Union meetings as well as integrated the collaborative work into his organisation’s proposal for a future centre of Peace.

There has also been legislative success linked to the activities of the Politics of Return project. On 19th February 2019 Ugandan MP Hon. Lyandro Komakech (DP, Gulu Municipality), who had spoken at the Politics of Return conference, presented a motion for a Resolution of Parliament urging the Ugandan government to support former female abductees (LRA Wives) and children born in captivity during the Lord’s Resistance Army insurgency in Northern Uganda. MP Komakech outlined how the conflict caused negative effects on abducted girls and women who not only endured tremendous physical and mental suffering during their time in abduction but were also forced to marry LRA combatants resulting into births of several children. He asked that Parliament identifies and profiles the affected victims and restructures the current government financing. Parliament tabled the motion by creating specific financing of former female LRA abductees and their children born in captivity with a view of enhancing their capacity.

Machar Diu and Naomi Pendle’s research came at a moment of considerable debate among policy makers in Juba both about post-war returns and about the future of the UN POCS. The research was presented in June 2018 in Khartoum to an academic audience and September 2019 in Juba to a policymaker audience. On both occasions, the research was useful to add complexity to the simplistic assumptions of some aid workers who assume the apolitical nature of returns and are still learning of the historic experiences of return in South Sudan. Moreover, during the presentation of the POCS shelter photography in the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office in January 2019, DFID staff encouraged applying for future research in order to expand these alternative approaches to thinking about protection.

Thomas Dai’s cartoons were circulated widely and provided a wide audience for our findings. Circulation includes through policy networks in Juba, particularly in September 2019, during the Juba dissemination meeting with policy makers (DFID, WFP, UNMISS, NGOs). Thomas also narrated his own history of displacement and return throughout his lifetime, and related this to his political agency as expressed through his acquisition of the ability to draw comics and cartoons. He described how he developed his interest in and skills



to sketch in different places as he moved homes, and how this had created space for political discussions in an otherwise heavily censored context.

Affecting NGO/Development Practitioner Policy

Our desired impact for NGO and Practitioner Policy change was by inviting key stakeholders to our creative dissemination events. As a result the audiences at each event was always a mix of academics, artists, NGO professionals and sometimes government officials. The GCRF engagement at Mobilising Histories was an opportunity for the project to be showcased in a debate around using Dark Pasts for addressing SDGs. The exhibition Sketching Violence brought a tangible example for the Mobilising Histories conference to raise questions surrounding art-based development interventions and research, and organisations' policies to govern it.

'One major conclusion reached at the Mobilising Histories conference was the need for a code of ethics and engagement to define arts-based development interventions. The host-guest relationship between practitioners or funders and beneficiaries should ideally be predicated on a pre-existing relationship and guests should come on an invitation-only basis. This helps to ensure that a visit is not merely for curiosity or extractive purposes, but is equitable for all involved'. – Mailies Fleming.

Reflecting on the impact that the Politics of Return has had on artist activity in Uganda, Rasheeda Nalumoso (British Council Arts Manager, Kampala) reported:

'I think it has been a reminder of the importance of cross disciplinary collaborations for organisations like 32 ° East who hosted the residency in 2018. As a producer on the KLA ART festival activity, I observed the learning artists taking part in KLA art 18 got of their engagement with the Politics of Return artists and what lessons can be learnt from practice as research to make for dynamic and active artistic processes that respond to current situations and personal experiences framed through the artistic proposal and research questions each artist took.'

A visit by UN Women to the When We Return exhibition spurred a programme for children born of war to gain sponsorship for school fees. The exhibition and conference was a catalyst for this encounter because it brought together people who lived the realities of the research as well as policy and development actors, thus creating a dynamic audience interaction.



3. Publics: Impact

The Politics of Return project has promoted the engagement of various publics with its research findings on how viable ways of life are constituted post return and/or how certain dynamics can lead to endemic and persistent conflict.

Artistic Publics:

There is a unique impact as a result of the interaction with the creatives involved in the project and who encountered the collaboration between artists and social science research. Our collaboration with 32^o East, the duration of the artist residency and the production of the catalogue have demonstrated that artists and academic engagements can be fruitful avenues for disseminating findings as well as encouraging artistic research. The three resident artists were able to go on from the residency to continue their work with an enhanced ability to research, engage research and interpret difficult histories. Furthermore, the residency and LSE project webspace raised the profile of the artists, making them more searchable and desirable.

The Politics of Return had a marked impact, not just on the artists involved but on the Kampala arts scene more broadly. It has directly influenced the activities of KLA ART Labs in 2019 that work to develop artistic research capacity. Two of the KLA ART Labs artists were involved with the Politics of Return project, and received full bursaries to carry on their work for KLA ART 2020.

After hearing about the When We Return exhibition in Gulu, the German and French Embassies, alongside Alliance Francais, organised for the artworks to feature during the Geopolitics annual conference, which took place in October 2019 at Makerere University and was curated by Nikissi Serumaga who had been part of the project while working at 32^o East. The exhibition was publicised on social media and has had 3000 visitors, and 50 When We Return catalogues have been disseminated at the exhibition.

We have also been able to use the images from the artworks to continue disseminating research. For example the covers of Lawino's People and Poverty and Development are adorned with artworks. In addition, the December 2019 issue of Anthropology Today featured findings from the Politics of Return research as well as artistic inserts to illustrate the research findings and the artists' own research.

Academic Publics

Our stakeholder meetings and policy roundtables aimed to strengthen networks among teaching and research institutions. By convening stakeholder panels in Uganda, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, we have extensively disseminated and solicited feedback from researchers, policymakers and local populations in the researched countries in order to ensure our research addresses stakeholder interests and needs. The workshops at events such as the Lawino's People Event, Beyond the Statistics, Politics of Return



Conference, Mobilising Histories conference and Khartoum/Juba Disseminations have ensured that local populations, policymakers in local countries, locally based international organisations and civil society groups were able to participate and provide feedback at each stage of the research in order to help us identify policy targets and institutional processes. The cartoons have proved to be useful additions to writing workshops in Gulu, Juba and Entebbe, whereby visual evidence and dynamic dissemination strategies were taught. The visual material helped to bridge academics with varied capacities to discuss around shared research findings.

Researcher and former LSE MSc student Meital Kupfer received a grant from the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa at LSE to conduct her dissertation research. As a result, this was intertwined heavily with the Politics of Return Project. Meital explains how her work with the POR project connected with other areas of research and with other groups:

‘The POR project directly informed how I looked at my research question since I was also trying to conceptualise the idea of return and displacement, but through the eyes of the displaced, rather than the Western aid agencies. I chose visual media because of my background in photography and the fine arts, and eventually it was able to align with POR’s work due to the focus on different mediums of expression and the focus on indigenous voices[...]The POR research has allowed me to have a well-rounded view on the issues of the work and directly supported my thesis in looking at artists that seek to represent their realities through mixed media.’

4. Future Generations of African Leaders and Development Practitioners: Impact

Through the project’s collaborations with organisations such as the African Youth Initiative Network (AYINET), and support of initiatives such as the FLCA’s Programme for African Leadership (PfAL), it has supported the next generation of development practitioners and Central African leaders. This is a key instrument in changing thinking and practice over the longer term. AYINET is one of the region’s foremost youth organisations which runs a variety of interventions aimed at dealing with the legacies of violence and abuse and aims to build trust between the state and communities in order to accelerate human development. PfAL is an FLCA extra-curricular programme initiative at the LSE which focuses on leadership development and networking, available exclusively to graduate students of African nationality at the school.

Finally, by hosting the Dark Pasts: Optimistic Futures exhibition during the 2019 LSE Africa Summit, the Politics of Return project facilitated the interaction and exposure of an exciting new generation of African and development leaders in attendance of the summit. The summit status, as one of the UK’s foremost academic events focused exclusively on Africa, means that it attracts some of the brightest young talent from the African diaspora and the



rest of the world. Their exposure to the Politics of Return was thus an important achievement of the project.

Conclusion

This vast and deeply collaborative project expanded the creative pathways to impact to include creative processes and outputs. We were able to respond to the key findings on sexual violence, gender, stigma and transitional justice as well as work to represent the everydayness of displacement and return. All the conceptual artists chose to focus on women and the issues found in the research. We were also able to employ creative writing to respond to creative processes as well as expand the creative cohort to respond to negative impacts like denied visas. In working with key audiences, such as those impacted by the conflicts our research addresses, we were able to be accountable and respectful of inequalities and vulnerabilities.

It has been a challenging task to try and reflect on the impact of these creative undertakings. The evaluation process, however, has shown that artworks are more than representations of key findings and actual processes of uncovering knowledge. Curating a series of works-in-progress and conversations allowed the impact to unfold in tandem with the research. Also, we saw that there is more need to think methodologically about how to bring together social sciences and contemporary artwork. Fortunately, this has charted a new avenue for the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa to explore and a foundational art collection with which it can work. In summary, one of the greatest outcomes has been our ability to do informed work with creative communities in war-affected countries and to develop a multidisciplinary way of addressing cycles of displacement and return.

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