

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Dancing Is Like Our Identity. It Shows Us Who We Are”: Performing Identity Among New Zealand’s Refugee- background South Sudanese Acholi.

Ryan O’Byrne, MA.

Department of Anthropology, University College London

ABSTRACT

Refugee-background Acholi in New Zealand attempt to (re)produce their customary cultural practices in order to develop and maintain their Acholi identities in resettlement. Ethnographic research with an Acholi cultural performance group investigated processes of identity formation within New Zealand’s Acholi community. Through knowledge of and participation in customary Acholi cultural practices such as ‘traditional’ songs and dances, Acholi individuals simultaneously (re)produce not only Acholi culture, community, persons, and identities, but also narratives of resettlement which idealise voluntary return to their country of origin. Such performative activity is found to generate, construct, and mobilise sociocultural identifications, suggesting boundary creation and maintenance is a distinctively performative social practice. The processes involved problematise not only ideas about how refugee-background communities engage with their past, present, and future, but also simplistic notions of how ethnic identity formation and boundary maintenance occur. In the final analysis, it is argued, the specifically performative dimensions of all cultural and ethnic practices and acts must be recognised. Indeed, the specific (re)production of these performative practices are especially important for refugee-background and other marginalised groups.

ARTICLE INFO

Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to ryan.o’byrne12@ucl.ac.uk

Cite this article as: O’Byrne, R. (2014). “Dancing Is Like Our Identity. It Shows Us Who We Are”: Performing Identity Among New Zealand’s Refugee-background South Sudanese Acholi. *Human Welfare*, 3, 5-21.

Introduction

The processes through which refugees form and reform their individual and collective identities are central to understanding their experiences of resettlement. As anthropologist Tania Kaiser notes, “when people become refugees, they suffer the loss not only of [their] land, property, assets and material possessions...but also of the less tangible networks, relationships, socio-cultural practices and identities...they are obliged to abandon” (2008: 376). Further, as Kaiser also claims, it is precisely through shared identifications and other

such intangible aspects of socio-cultural life through which refugee-background groups “previously engaged with each other and with their environment on a day-to-day basis” (2008: 376; cf. Kaiser 2006a). Finally, much research has demonstrated refugee-background communities often use music and other performative cultural activities to help recover their pasts, reform their identities, and negotiate and make sense of their new environments (Conquergood 1988; Kaiser 2006b; Reyes Schramm 1989; Roberson 2010). Indeed, Nolin

(2006: 45) argues that as refugees re-establish their communities in resettlement, their collective experiences of displacement entail the widespread reconfiguration of individual and group identities.

In this paper, I present data gathered from Masters Research among the refugee-background South Sudanese Acholi community in New Zealand (NZ), demonstrating how they use the public performance of some of their customary cultural activities to create, maintain, and demonstrate their individual and social Acholi identifications. I do this by specifically focusing upon an Acholi cultural performance group who were active within the NZ South Sudanese community during 2011, the Sudanese Acholi Cultural Association (SACA).

However, the embodied processes of identity formation demonstrated during SACA performances are simultaneously embedded within the Acholi community's narratives about life in resettlement, narratives which idealise future voluntary return to their country of origin and within which Acholi cultural knowledge is deemed paramount to community members' successful return. Therefore, these performances function not only to (re)produce specifically Acholi cultural identities but, by the very act of embodying those cultural identities, actually (re)construct Acholi social individuals from specifically socialised Acholi bodies.

Following Csordas (1990, 1994, 1999), it is my contention that SACA's performative cultural practices are specific examples of embodied forms of sociocultural (re)production. For Csordas (1999: 143), "embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience". In other words, the body is necessarily both "a cultural and historical phenomenon as well as a biological and material one" (Csordas 1999: 144; cf. 1994: 3), and any understanding of embodiment must

begin "from the methodological postulate that the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture" (Csordas 1990: 5). According to this understanding, which grounds *habitus* in the cultural conceptualisation of social and individual bodily practices (cf. Bourdieu 1977; Csordas 1990, 1994), it is important to emphasise "the essentially intersubjective and social nature of bodily experience", particularly regarding "form, appearance, and motion" (Csordas 1994: 14).

Consequently, performative cultural practices can be a significant means of identification, with communal cultural performances functioning as important expressions of self and community where 'culture', 'identity', and 'community' can all be (re)made through "a shared process of practical action" (Calhoun 2003: 559). It is in this way, I suggest, that refugee-background Acholi in New Zealand NZ use the embodied knowledge of specifically constructed social bodies to present, and represent – both to themselves as well as to others – what it is and what it means to be Acholi within the NZ context.

Therefore, in this paper I describe how members of SACA use cultural performances to help them, their children, and their community develop a sense of Acholi-ness with which they can identify and through which they can ground their resettled lives. I establish my argument through investigation of two elements of SACA's role in the Acholi community: 1) the construction and dissemination, through cultural performances, of an Acholi identification; and 2) the historical and cultural education of the community's children. Focusing on the performative (re)production of customary Acholi cultural practices, and demonstrating how these performances are associated with the creation and maintenance of explicitly Acholi identities, I argue that SACA members privilege

specifically cultural and performative identifications. I further suggest that SACA's attempts to perform and (re)produce customary Acholi cultural practices primarily serve as creative means of adapting to the conditions of resettlement in ways which allow the (re)production and maintenance of shared and specifically Acholi identifications. This is not, however, the simple homogenous replication of pre-flight modes of socio-cultural life, but complex modes of engagement with past, present, and future enacted differently by differently positioned individuals. In this, the data agrees with Kaiser, who argues that

“while explicitly socio-cultural activity is known to often increase in the immediate post-flight period as individuals and groups take solace in the familiar and assert their cultural identities in the face of the evident challenges to them that flight has represented, it is equally clear that as time passes and situations change, something much more complicated than a straightforward reproduction or replication of a discrete and homogenous culture is being enacted. Rather, groups in new configurations may be in a position to engage in a much more dynamic process whereby they create a new socio-cultural configuration that remembers their past, reflects their current situation, meets some of their needs, and protects what they aspire to for the future” (Kaiser 2008: 381).

South Sudanese Acholi in New Zealand

The Acholi are a small but distinct Luo-speaking ethnolinguistic sub-group within the larger refugee-background South Sudanese community in New Zealand. Most of NZ's Acholi population arrived between 2002 and 2006 as part of NZ's annual refugee intake of 750 people (Department of Labour 2009: 6). As such, the Acholi community in NZ form one of many such Acholi communities worldwide and

constitute a small part of the 30,000 plus refugees that NZ has received since 1987 (Coleman 2009).

The total South Sudanese population in NZ in 2011 numbered around 700, mainly in NZ's three largest cities (Auckland, Christchurch, and Wellington), and predominantly ethno-linguistically Nuer and Dinka (Department of Labour 2007). True quantification of South Sudanese resettlement in NZ and Australia is notoriously inaccurate, however, and establishing trustworthy numbers proves very difficult (Robinson 2011). Almost all NZ's Acholi population live in Upper Hutt and Lower Hutt, the somewhat-isolated northern suburbs of Wellington, NZ's capital city. Based on conversations and interviews with South Sudanese community leaders, I estimated the total South Sudanese population in Wellington to be around 400 people in 2011. The Acholi were only one group within the South Sudanese community in Wellington at this time. A preliminary community census conducted during the research estimated the Acholi population in NZ at slightly less than 70 in late 2011.

Methodology

The research presented here was conducted as fieldwork for a Master's Degree in Anthropology and the methodologies used were broadly 'ethnographic'. Data was collected through a combination of participant observation and unstructured and semi-structured interviews over a period of seven months between February and August 2011. Participant observation was conducted on 20 occasions, primarily involved interacting with the members of SACA, and included participation in: public performances; practices for these performances; language classes; committee meetings; and community events. As this research investigated the reproduction of Acholi cultural practices in a resettlement context, SACA members' resettlement experiences formed the basis of analysis.

As well as participant observation, home visits, and numerable unstructured interviews, I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with key SACA members and three group interviews with SACA's seven-person guiding committee, one each near the beginning, middle, and end of the research period. Each interview was recorded using handwritten notes as well as a digital audio recorder, transcribed, and then analysed using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software. Research was conducted with the consent of the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, followed the AAA and ASAANZ codes of ethics, and all participants gave either written or verbal consent for their participation.

Meeting SACA

SACA was formed by a collection of Acholi women in 2008 and is organised by a seven-person guiding committee who attempt to ensure the group stay true to their Acholi cultural roots, an important aspect of the community's vision for the group. Committee members continually emphasise that the specifically performative basis of SACA's activities help Acholi negotiate resettlement in NZ. They highlight the importance of cultural performances for reproducing unequivocally 'Acholi' identities and are definitive that an embodied or performative knowledge of Acholi cultural traditions such as songs, dances, or moral plays is vital for members' identification as Acholi. They openly state it is not only knowledge but also participation in Acholi cultural practices that makes one Acholi.

There seem to be three categories of SACA membership: core members, occasional participants, and children. The majority of core members are Sudanese-born adults defined as Acholi by birth or marriage. As a patrilineal society, a woman nominally becomes a member of her husband's family and clan when she marries. Further, non-Acholi women who

marry Acholi men may, over time and through having 'Acholi' children, become seen as Acholi rather than part of other South Sudanese ethnic communities. This indicates forms of instrumental, performative, and constructed identity formation (Nagel 1994), making simplistic notions of identity formation theoretically and empirically problematic (a recurring point in this paper).

Due to differences in activity levels, work schedules, and event attendance, true assessment of group membership was difficult throughout the study. Attendance at most performances was usually around 20 people, of both genders and varying ages, but the largest attendance I witnessed (at the March 2011 South Sudanese Referendum celebration in Lower Hutt Town Hall) involved nearly 40 performers, a significant number given the size of the Acholi community in NZ. A noticeable aspect of membership is that core members are usually either unmarried Acholi men without children, or South Sudanese women who have children identifiable as Acholi and born outside Sudan.¹

The core of SACA's activities are cultural performances reproducing 'traditional' Acholi songs, dances, and moral plays. Indeed, a significant reason the Acholi community created a cultural association was due to shared beliefs on the importance of cultural performances in educating their children into Acholi moral principles (cf. Kaiser 2006b: 187-188). As the quote used for the title indicates, SACA members explicitly link Acholi cultural performances (dancing, etc.) to the (re)production of Acholi identifications. They believe an interaction between performance and education passes along their cultural heritage to their children. Further, and underlying the importance of this, is a concern their children will not be 'proper' Acholi if they are ever able to return to South Sudan.

It is important to highlight the embodied aspects of SACA members' identity formation. As well as

performances, and the cultural knowledge needed to participate in performances, participants' physical, emotional, and embodied reactions to their performances are foundational to feeling like a SACA member. Participation allows people to gain a sense of identity and belonging they may feel but are often unable to articulate.

For example, SACA co-leader William² described core SACA members as those who “*give themselves up*”. At first I thought he meant giving up their time and effort to help the group. However, while in the midst of the adrenaline high which came from participation in my first SACA dancing practice, it struck me this conceptualisation was too disembodied: William also meant people giving themselves up to the moment of the performance and the physical and emotional effects which come from that. The success of performance in creating a sense of Acholi identity and group membership actually comes, I suggest, from participation in the physical acts involved in those performances.

The visceral nature of members' participation should not be understated. I suggest many group members experienced identification with both their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and the group itself, through their embodied and emotional performative actions. Indeed, because of the true extent of the viscerality on display as well as in performers' responses to such performances, I suggest these performances are not so much for any particular audience as they are for performers themselves: in the creation and meaningful reproduction of actions and movements comprising a performance, performers physically and emotionally position themselves as Acholi. A sense of ethnic and group membership is created as much by individual action as by the social fields within which they are enacted.

Origins and Aims of SACA

SACA originated during a conversation among Acholi women discussing the boredom of life in resettlement. Like many South Sudanese in NZ, most SACA members have poor spoken English. Further, due to their refugee backgrounds and lack of educational opportunities, most were also functionally illiterate, vastly limiting changes of finding employment within NZ. Without jobs or money, therefore, they spent much of their lives indoors and at home. There was little to break the monotony. Speaking of this boredom, the group secretary Diana said:

'The idea, the group, it was a conversation [...] We were just sitting there and we said: 'We are so bored right now! And back home we used to have some dancing, and cultural, and stuff like that.'³ But right now we are really bored!' And then [we] said: 'Why can't we form a group? And dance?' And we said, 'How can we do it? And then who and what is needed?' [...] And we said 'Ok. Let's give it a try!'

Boredom, and the isolation that comes with it, permeates and submerges many other aspects of refugees' resettled lives (Kushner & Knox 1999: 412; Newbury 2005: 279). As Kushner and Knox (1999) note, a common resettlement theme is immense boredom arising from lack of opportunities, resources, and interpersonal interaction. For example, committee member Bernice often said she had nothing to do except go to church. However, although boredom was a key driver in SACA's creation, the group itself quickly became significant within the Acholi community's lives.

In Figure 1 (see next page), I reproduce SACA's charter. I reproduce the language in this document, unedited, because it demonstrates two important aspects of Acholi resettlement. First, it highlights difficulties with English language competency. Second, and despite

these linguistic difficulties, it demonstrates SACA's obvious abilities in planning, organising, and clarifying their goals. Despite language problems and lack of social and cultural capital, SACA still constructed a comprehensible, articulate, and focused charter that many organisations would be proud of. This document sets out the group's aims and illustrates the key ways group members conceptualise their place in the world, their origins, and their identities. SACA explicitly defines member's affiliations to both a national (South Sudanese) and an ethnic (Acholi) identity.

SUDANESE ACHOLI CULTURE ASSOCIATION (SACA) NZ.

WHO ARE THE SACA:

The Acholi people came from Sudan, they settled in Magwe County, East of Equator, and Southern Sudan. Their Culture value known to be the best in Sudan and to the Acholi people it's what Identify us as Acholi, it past down from generation to generation, part of the Acholi generation are in New Zealand that why the SACA should exist.

THE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE SACA NZ.

- (i) *Culture Education for the Acholi children through performances.*
- (ii) *To retain and strengthen the Acholi culture within the Sudanese community of New Zealand.*
- (iii) *To share our culture traditional with the wider community.*

WHY SACA IS IMPORTANCE:

- (i) *SACA aim to Acholi children to known who they are and where they came from.*
- (ii) *SACA want Acholi children to know the value of their culture.*
- (iii) *Research show the importance of culture identify for successful resettlement. New Zealand is a multi cultural society made up of many people, its importance for the SACA as New Zealander to be able to contribute to New Zealand multi cultural society.*

WHAT IS THE SACA GOING TO DO IN ORDER TO ACHEAVE THEIR GOALS?

- (i) *Singing Acholi songs.*
- (ii) *Performances and dance*
- (iii) *Speaking and reading Acholi language*
- (iv) *Development of Acholi language*
- (v) *Telling tradition/history to the children.*

SACA's charter clearly details the physical, embodied, and performative acts through which they construct and maintain functional and viable individual and communal identifications. Singing songs, performing dances, telling stories: SACA purposely list performative cultural traits through which membership in the Acholi community can be expressed and determined. These performative aspects are important for the everyday activities of the group, as well as the role they play in developing and maintaining an Acholi community in NZ. Cultural performances both create embodied identities and feelings of group membership and belonging. They are also a means of community formation, generating feelings of *communitas* through shared participation in ritual activity (Turner 1968, 1988). Further, by linking performance and cultural activity to ethnicity, performance is a marker of cultural and ethnic identity in a specifically Barthian sense (Barth 1969).

Acholi Cultural Performances

Performances provide education and entertainment for community members, giving them knowledge about the place and people to which they trace their roots, and are fundamental to SACA's role in the community. They also give members activities to break up the monotony of everyday life. This is not all SACA offer. By presenting performative and artistic experiences, SACA physically demonstrates who and what the Acholi people are: what clothes they wear, how they speak, what they do, how they do it. Performances physically manifest Acholi cultural traditions and simultaneously produce an embodied and knowledge-based ethnic identity.

SACA engaged in several public performances over the course of this research. These all included the presentation of one to three customary songs and dances. The main dances performed were the *Otoli*

(warrior dance) and the *Larakaraka* (courtship dance), each considered among the most important Acholi dances (Acholi Reunion 2008; Kaiser 2006b). As the elements comprising these performances were vital in producing Acholi identities in NZ, I now describe these elements to illustrate how Acholi identities were formed and expressed.

Critically, performances provide those without experience of South Sudanese life a tangible means of identifying themselves and others as Acholi. As Abelhardy (2008) and Lewis (2010) highlight, to portray 'authentic culture' also demands the physical and material elements that together make up artistic performance: the costumes and instruments as well as the activities themselves. The group's core members recognise the importance of these physical manifestations of their Acholi cultural heritage. They recognise the difficulties in creating a coherent identity without easy reference to something tangible. SACA members believe these physical elements are particularly important for their children because, as one committee member noted, "*they can see and know that: 'Oh! This is Acholi people and Acholi culture and this is what they do'*".

SACA members think lack of males is the group's largest problem. It was certainly an issue at every performance I observed and this often meant performances customarily gendered demanded significant adaptation (cf. Kaiser 2006b: 190-191). Kaiser (2008: 388) argues that "in many of the socio-cultural activities and rituals...not everyone and everything properly associated with the practice is available...In these cases, refugees have been adept at accommodating absences and substituting people and objects where this is necessary for the ritual to go ahead". In Kiryandongo refugee camp in Bweyale, Uganda, this meant that "where the possibility of substitution [did] exist, it [was] not limited to the

material world but also to the realm of social relations and action [and] in some cases to the substitution of one person, or category of person, for another” (Kaiser 2008: 390).

One example in relation to SACA in NZ is the *Larakaraka*, which has very definite male and female roles. Sometimes, to allow performance of this dance, SACA’s women take on male roles. I witnessed one such performance at a wider Wellington refugee community event that, although well received by the crowd (who said it was “vibrant”, “colourful”, and “full of energy”), disappointed the group’s members. While recognising the audience liked the performance, they were deflated. I suggest that, although members recognised the necessity of adapting performances to fit resettlement’s constraints, SACA members felt that such an adaptation reduces the cultural value of such performances: such events fail to authentically represent an Acholi heritage and thus also fail to teach appropriate gender roles and morals.

SACA performances are always accompanied by instruments: a large hourglass-shaped drum (*bul*) held between the knees and hit with a short stick; a hand-held semi-spherical drum made from the dried shell of half a calabash (*awal*) played, like those Kaiser (2006: 194) observed in Kiryandongo, with a fistful of bicycle spokes held together with electricians tape; and a standard hand-held sports whistle to direct dancers and alert them to changes in direction or timing.

SACA’s *bul* is carved out of wood, has figures of dancing bee-hive haired women running across its head and neck, and is covered with a black and white marbled goat skin decaying from overuse. I was told the *bul* is the most important instrument: “*It is the voice of the dance.*” It keeps the rhythm and maintains the beat. At all performances I witnessed, the eldest woman played the *bul*.

This itself is interesting for several reasons: 1) Playing the *bul* is usually a male role; 2) This woman plays the *bul* because she “*is the only one who know the music*”; 3) This woman was “*born Madi*” but, having married an Acholi man, “*is now Acholi like us*”. These points all not only demonstrate Acholi patrilineal kinship rules but further highlight both the lack of men in SACA and the importance which cultural knowledge has for group members and their understandings of ethnic community membership. It also highlights the flexibility and multidimensionality of Acholi ethnic group membership.

The *awal* provides a distinctive staccato percussion somewhat like maracas and is usually played by men. Some of SACA’s *awal* are, unfortunately, in a poor state of repair – unwittingly left behind a parked car by a child, they had been sewn together with twine but are now slowly disintegrating. Much as Kaiser (2008: 392) shows for the changing production of instruments over time in Kiryandongo, none of SACA’s most ‘traditional’ (and thus most important) instruments were made in resettlement either: it had been too long since group members had left South Sudan, and the knowledge, skill, or desire had dissipated. Instead, the group’s drums were imported from Uganda and not easily replaced: beyond the obvious expense and difficulty shipping from Africa, Acholi instruments must be blessed and ‘initiated’ before public use (Kaiser 2006b: 188). Therefore, even though they might be substituted for drums sold by African specialty stores around NZ, doing so reduces the authenticity of both the drums and the performance.

The final elements are spears, shields, anklets, and headgear. Anklets and headgear are reminiscent of styles common in Africa, but, also similarly to what Kaiser (2008: 388-390) found in Kiryandongo, substitutions are made from readily available materials. For example, Kaiser notes, “black plastic bags stretched

over a wooden frame substitute for the splendid ostrich feather headdresses once worn in Sudan, and strips of white paper flutter in imitation of white feathers” (2008: 389). In NZ, male headdresses are made from peacock rather than the customary ostrich feathers, while women usually wear gull feathers dyed red. Anklets are small bells hand-made from objects such as coins and suspended from plastic loops. Another percussive instrument, the constant foot stamping of Acholi dances makes them extremely effective.

Shields and spears have special ritualistic importance: in response to the question ‘Why do you need spears?’ the group replied in unison “*because you cannot dance the Otolì without the spear!*” Although seldom physically used, spears are always symbolically represented, even if only through positioning arms as if holding them. I only saw the group physically use spears and shields once, at the South Sudanese Referendum Party mentioned earlier. The significance of ‘proper’ weapons here should not be understated. This was an important event for the South Sudanese community in NZ, a party at which all South Sudanese ethnicities gathered to celebrate their new country. Most importantly for SACA members, and unlike their usual performances at multinational refugee events around Wellington, the Referendum Party was explicitly South Sudanese in focus. SACA were on show in front of hundreds of others at an event that also featured performances from other South Sudanese ethnicities. For a group whose charter explicitly states, “*Their [the Acholi’s] Culture value [is] known to be the best in Sudan*”, this was an event at which to stand out. It was not enough to symbolically represent weapons: spears were found, shields were made.

Most significantly, and unlike the entire Wellington refugee community performance described earlier, at the Referendum Party the Acholi community put forward almost a dozen male performers. Further, they

went to great lengths to ensure they would stand out within the boundaries of the wider South Sudanese community. The participation of usually peripheral members ensured the wider community knew the Acholi ethnic identities of the performers. I suggest that this demonstrates the importance that Acholi community members place upon their specifically Acholi identity: for SACA members that day, not only was it important to be socially Acholi, it was more important to be culturally Acholi. In this way, at the South Sudan Referendum Party at least, it mattered less whether any one individual could define themselves as Acholi through ancestry, birth, or marriage. Instead, importance was attached to whether or not that individual could publicly and visibly engage in the performance of Acholi cultural knowledge: that is, knowing how to *act* Acholi. In a socio-cultural milieu within which Acholi culture was normatively reduced to Acholi customs or traditions, biological ‘fact’ was considered less important than cultural expertise.

In publicly performing their Acholi identities and cultural practices at the Referendum Party, SACA members publicly displayed their membership in two related yet distinct social categories. They were simultaneously South Sudanese and Acholi. This performance therefore worked to publicly draw attention to performers’ membership in two distinct yet interrelated groups at the same time. Importantly, however, this performance also simultaneously included and excluded audience members from those same categories, indicating the hierarchy of identifications shared by group members. Although SACA celebrated the South Sudanese identity they shared with the audience, the identities they performed and prioritised were explicitly Acholi. Performance emphasised Acholi traditions as a means of ethnic distinction at the same time as it operated to highlight identification with the wider national group.

Performance, Education, and Repatriation

Being culturally Acholi does not just happen. SACA members are adamant that the intersecting roles of cultural knowledge, performance, and education are vital to create culturally identifiable Acholi people. They say that a person must learn to become Acholi and then demonstrate that knowledge through performative activities: although a person may be born Acholi, they may not be able to ‘act’ Acholi (that is, to participate in customary cultural practices that Acholi community members considered to ‘be’ specifically Acholi). Conversely, some of the group’s ethnically non-Acholi women became culturally Acholi through gaining performative knowledge of Acholi cultural practices, an example of a prioritisation of performative ethnicity linked to a cultural means of belonging. This is one reason parents are worried by the process they call “*Westernisation*”: without knowledge of their Acholi cultural background, their children cannot identify as Acholi.

This is where SACA comes in. Explicit knowledge of Acholi history and cultural practices are essential for grounding Acholi identities, particularly for children. For example, Diana told me:

‘For us, without forming this group, the children born here will not know anything about their history. So that is what we are doing. And now, the attempt we make, so far the children are already able to know who we are. Because they are able to try some things and they can see and know that: “Oh! This is Acholi people and Acholi culture and this is what they do.” And so that is what really makes them what they are, they know their song. They can tell themselves from others, because they know Acholi song and dance.’

Importantly, being and knowing are two separate aspects of identity. Someone can be born a particular

type of person, but knowing how to distinguish one’s self and others takes knowledge of the cultural things that, together, comprise and allow expression of that identity. Acholi children in NZ see pictures of Acholi in Africa and, through the knowledge gained from the education provided by SACA, know they are Acholi. Yet, this is not enough. They need to “*know their song*”. That is, if they are real Acholi, they also need to know how to culturally participate.

This is why performances are so important. Moreover, this is why a cultural performance group is so important: dances are connected to songs that tell history. Performance and education go hand-in-hand. Because SACA members explicitly conceptualise children’s cultural education through performance, performance and education are one and the same thing. Bernice explained this, saying:

BERNICE: ‘In our culture, all the dances, they are telling a story, so they are very interesting. It is not just dancing, it is telling stories. That is why there are a lot of song in Acholi. Because all the song have meaning. They all have meaning [...] And that is because everything that happen [historically], they have a song for it. And then in the future, if they start singing, they will know.’

RESEARCHER: ‘And that is why the dancing is so important? Because all the dances are to songs and all the songs have meaning. Or one reason why?’

BERNICE: ‘Yes, yes. It is a really like giving the young ones to know what happen.’

RESEARCHER: ‘Like a form of education?’

BERNICE: ‘Yes. Yes, because there was no writing and things. And if you can remember all those song, then you can remember when all those thing happen, and what happen [...] If the song is being

sung, because you know the meaning of song, you can feel it in your heart.'

Kaiser (2006: 189) notes similar performative uses among refugees in Kiryandongo. Singing and dancing were regularly used not only for entertainment and cultural transmission, but also to (re)produce a specific form of mythico-history (Malkki 1995) simultaneously educating residents and morally evaluating people and events. As socialisation through cultural performances simultaneously transmits both cultural and moral values (Kaiser 2006a, 2006b), it is unsurprising performances are similarly used in NZ.

When speaking about SACA's aims, members tell of the difficulties of resettlement and the problems of reproducing Acholi traditions in NZ. They feel SACA have a defined role connecting the community in NZ to their South Sudanese heritage. In the remainder of this paper, I give an extended discussion between myself and the SACA committee about their conceptualisation of resettlement and SACA's role within it:

WILLIAM: 'The group came into existence because we thought there are important things to work out [...] because we have got a lot of kids born here [or] brought from home when they were little. So they don't know anything about Acholi culture or Acholi people. We thought, while being in NZ, because it's a different country, so we thought not to lose our background completely, it is important to keep the little ones know what is taking place exactly [...] So that is the most important part [...] Now the little ones who doesn't know anything completely from that period, at least they have got some of that stuff, and knew more about where they came from.'

BERNICE: 'Yes, because we really want them to learn but they are not really interested in it. We are having to forcing them to dance. Yes, they are not interested.'

Adults' fears about their children's 'Westernisation' and the loss of their identities and cultural knowledge are common among refugee-background and migrant communities (Al-Ali, Black, & Koser 2001; Kushner & Knox 1999: 407). SACA members fear their children are becoming 'Westernised', just as, through acclimatisation to NZ life, they themselves are becoming 'Westernised'. In this, as in many things, children are representative for the community's problems as a whole. Continuing the interview with the committee, I asked them why children were not interested in Acholi culture. Bernice replied:

BERNICE: 'Now, they just adopt the culture, the Western culture. Because the way that we dress for the song and dance is very different and things like that. They are really not interested, I don't know why!'

WILLIAM: 'They do not want to just give enough to work it out. Only some few of us are trying to put this life together. Because, to make us good people within this society. And if I am not exercising my culture, in the near future the whole system will break down. Which meant that, if I put it [cultural education] away, the [young] generation will never exist anymore.'

SACA members feel obligated to instruct the community's children. Even William, who has no children of his own feels this. Part of this responsibility is to ensure children learn the knowledge and skills needed for repatriation. This replicates findings among other refugee communities worldwide (Al-Ali, Black, & Koser 2001; Kababe 2010; McSpadden & Moussa, 1993), where parents feel obliged to teach children the language and cultural life of their homeland, reinforcing their identities whilst providing them with the skills needed to repatriate. For SACA, giving children Acholi linguistic knowledge is an important component of their responsibility. The interview continued:

RESEARCHER: *'Well, going back to what you were saying, that it is important for children to know where they come from, what are the most important things for the children to know? Is the language or the history or what?'*

WILLIAM: *'Yes, well, that is a pretty good question. Now in a different place [...] if you come from a background where you speak only English, then no matter what happens you are not going to forget, even if you are going in some other different direction, like Sudan. You will never forget that, because that is your origin, that is a part of your life already. The most important part of it. Which is why we are teaching our kids in this stage [...]'*

'We just thought that it is very important to give them a direct life with at least some of our languages. Because it is very important. And most of the kids does not want to put themselves into that, but if they were to go home, what would happen? For example, if they could not communicate with their elders? [...] Which meant that we did not give them that opportunity to learn! And we are not going to do that. They are part of us, so we should take them to where we came from. Yes. So that is the most important part of that, the kids learning our own dialect, our own language. That is part of it, yes.'

Linguistic knowledge is vital for children's abilities to identify with other aspects of Acholi cultural life, both in NZ and upon their repatriation. As such, Acholi language holds a privileged place within the Acholi diasporic consciousness,⁴ just as the 'home' language does for many diasporic communities (Abelhardy 2008; Kabebe 2010; Langellier 2011; Malkki 1995): Acholi in NZ worry that without linguistic competency repatriated children will be "out of place". This is a constant fear among a community who think resettlement demands their children at least partially socially and culturally assimilate. Continuing, I asked:

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RESEARCHER: *'So, a lot of the dancing and stuff. Is any of it to do with ideas of wanting to teach the children their background, their culture?'*

DIANA: *'Yes, we really want to teach them. We want to teach them to pick it up. The young people coming through, they can't learn the words. Because these young people were born outside Sudan, and they can't. They were just born on the way, or in the settlement, in the refugees camp. And others were born here. And so if they didn't pick it right now, they won't be able to do it.'*

BERNICE: *'Yes, because our language and our culture is important to us. It is important because it is important for our children. They need to know their language, their culture, their history. Even now, if we go back, it will be hard for us. It is hard to understand them [in South Sudan]. So we need to teach our children so that they can understand. So that they can go back and not feel different or out of place.'*

The importance SACA placed upon teaching echoes other refugee-background groups globally. According to Fanjoy (2011), refugee-background communities prioritise children's cultural education because children are considered the community's future and their primary means of maintaining cultural continuity. This is somewhat paradoxical, Fanjoy argues, as the possibility of their even partial assimilation means children also represent the community's greatest fears. Following Bernice, Diana expanded with:

DIANA: *'We wanted to let them know everything, if they ever went home they shouldn't be green. They should know everything. Because, by the time we started [SACA], we knew that one day it will be alright at home. There will be peace, and if the children choose to go back there, they should know something. And not only that, they are here as*

children, and we are here, and we are unique. And ourselves, we cannot be totally integrated. Still that uniqueness will remain [...] And if they say, 'What do you know about the place?' And then you have to give them something, culturally, about yourself [...] Because if you say 'I am an Acholi!' When you can show it? Because speaking is not enough, because anyone can learn how to speak, you have to get into the culture of it!

The strongest reasons SACA want to educate their children in customary Acholi cultural practices is their hope those children will one day repatriate. If they should, they need to know how to act and participate in South Sudanese life. The repatriation ideal underpinning SACA's diasporic consciousness therefore structures and determines much of their activities.

Conclusion: Performance, Belonging, and the Resettlement Experience

Customary cultural performances fulfil a variety of important social, cultural, and affective functions for Acholi in NZ, and this is apparent throughout all of SACA's work within the community. By focusing on SACA's attempts at cultural and ethnic continuity through the embodied (re)production of customary Acholi cultural practices, I have demonstrated their importance for NZ-based Acholi. Individual identities are created and reaffirmed and, at the same time, membership in groups comprising other similarly identifying individuals are expressed and defined.

Through the preservation and revitalisation of customary sociocultural forms, SACA assists their community in coming to terms with resettlement. They also help community members develop a sense of Acholi identity through membership in an ethnically and culturally defined Acholi social group. Moreover, the integration of education and performance functions

to create and maintain these specifically Acholi identities and group membership as well as communicate this ethno-cultural heritage to others.

The visible and communal aspects of performances also function as social expressions of participants' identities. Acholi in NZ appreciate Acholi cultural activity for its heritage and traditions as well as for its ethnic distinction. More significantly, I suggest, performances are valued for the ways they act to confirm membership in a group of belonging through which people build and maintain networks and social support. In this way, a person is not Acholi simply through being born Acholi. Rather, that person has to indicate their Acholi-ness through performance. It is not enough to say they are part of the group. Instead as Diana noted, they "*have to give them something, [...] to get into the culture of it!*" This, then, is very much an identification predicated on the ability to successfully embody that identity.

Several points can be gleaned from SACA's charter and actions. Firstly, the creation of a specifically 'Sudanese Acholi'-defined performance group allows the formation and performance of identification within a particularly Acholi ethnic group at the same time that this is positioned alongside a South Sudanese national identity. However, although SACA is a group which values both Acholi and South Sudanese culture, heritage, and identities, the phrasing and emphasis in SACA's charter and performances suggests their Acholi identities take priority over their South Sudanese equivalents.

Nowhere was this more obvious than at the Referendum Party. Here SACA publicly displayed their membership in both the South Sudanese and Acholi social groups. In doing so, however, they make a public statement about a hierarchy of belonging. Always introduced as South Sudanese at other events, SACA were first and foremost Acholi in this instance. By

specifically focusing their performance on obvious markers of Acholi-specific cultural activity, Acholi membership within the South Sudanese nation was claimed at the same time as this hierarchy of identification was publicly expressed. Doing so allowed SACA members a place within the wider South Sudanese community but, in demanding Acholi cultural knowledge as a marker of Acholi ethnic identity, effectively denied reciprocal membership to non-Acholi South Sudanese. The fact that performance played an important role in this public boundary marking suggests ethnic boundary creation and maintenance is a distinctively performative sociocultural practice. I further suggest that SACA's performances also demonstrate that this ethnic boundary making is very much an *embodied* sociocultural practice, one in which group members' inclusion or exclusion is publicly determined and expressed by their ability to bodily reproduce their shared Acholi cultural *habitus*. This is an area of research which needs much further investigation and, indeed, the application of the methodological principle of embodiment to earlier data regarding ethnic group formation and distinction may perhaps yield interesting results, leading to fruitful but previously unconsidered lines of analysis.

Therefore, I have also argued that SACA's attempts at cultural (re)production are as much about exclusion and boundary maintenance as they are inclusion. This ethnic boundary maintenance resembles Barth's (1969) thesis on ethnic group distinction and the role key cultural traits play in the creation, maintenance, and policing of ethnic boundaries. SACA makes use of partially circumscribed and essentialised cultural traits such as song and dance to delineate the similarities and differences between themselves and other groups. Linked to this boundary maintenance is the categorisation of self and other through the creation and reproduction of specific membership requirements.

SACA therefore shows simultaneous examples of primordial, instrumental, performative, and constructivist ethnic identifications (Nagel 1994), problematising simplistic or singular notions of ethnic identity formation and boundary maintenance.

A noteworthy focus in SACA's charter and activities is their emphasis upon specifically embodied performative cultural aspects as instrumental means of identity construction that, when expressed through collective performances, acted to establish a performative basis for identification. Performance therefore operates to identify belonging inwardly, on the basis of individual attributions of membership within a particular sociocultural unit, and outwardly, on the basis of the public demonstration of membership through the reproduction of practices associated with it. One of SACA's more instrumental functions is the actual physical production and reproduction of Acholi cultural practices. This instrumental element should not be forgotten, as without obvious physical, material, and embodied mnemonic aids, the construction or maintenance of viable Acholi-oriented subjectivities is extremely difficult, especially for those with no personal experience of South Sudan. Indeed, as Kaiser has shown for similar cultural activities among South Sudanese Acholi refugees in Uganda, "emphasis should be placed on the performative dimension of such activity, with an almost theatrical effort made...to preserve and re-present important aspects of culture...in a context which is in other respects characterized by uncertainty and relative poverty" (Kaiser 2008: 392).

Alongside having a number of competing identifications concurrently, the importance of both a performative and an instrumental form of ethnic identification within the South Sudanese Acholi community in NZ highlights the necessarily complex nature of identity formation among refugee-background communities, especially for smaller ethnic groups

within larger, nationalised refugee populations. The fact that SACA members are required to demonstrate not only intellectual but also embodied knowledge of their ethnic background highlights that ethnic and cultural identity is an iterative and dialogic process which simultaneously encompasses individuals *qua* individuals and individuals as members of a particular social group. In this way, these findings should be of relevance to the study of any refugee-background population in NZ, as well as to researchers interested in other refugee-receiving countries elsewhere in the world. It should be noted that suggestions made in this article come alongside several limitations, none of which, I believe significantly affect the conclusions drawn. Rather, they are best understood as further research opportunities. Firstly, due to this research being conducted as a Masters project, this study inevitably suffered from considerable time and resource constraints, restricting both the number of people who could be interviewed, the number of events which could be observed and participated in, and the number of South Sudanese or other refugee-background communities who could be engaged with. Most problematically, for an anthropologist at least, is that it also significantly restricted time spent with community members, limiting the development of the interpersonal relationships so important to the ethnographic endeavour. Therefore, future research at the PhD level or beyond should extend both the research period and the number participants involved, as well as carrying out a comparative study between Acholi performances and other similar South Sudanese or refugee-background community performances. Likewise, it would be of considerable interest to conduct a follow up study focusing on the long-term resettlement experiences of SACA's members, as well as an investigation of the experiences of young Acholi returning to South Sudan. Unfortunately, none of these suggestions were a viable possibility within the

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constraints limiting this current study.

Footnotes

1. By this I mean that women may be of any ethnic group but, through a combination of patrilineal descent rules and marriage to Acholi men, their children are considered Acholi and they themselves become somewhat incorporated into the Acholi ethnic group over time and/or through acculturation.
2. In the interest of maintaining participant anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.
3. It should be noted that, by the term 'culturals', Diana and other SACA members are not referring to something like a worldview or shared system of meaning, but to a rather reified or essentialised notion of Acholi culture (always is the singular). Their use of the term 'culture' (i.e., custom or tradition) always referenced the 'traditional' or historical aspect of Acholiness, thus referring to 'traditional' marriage, funeral, or hunting practices, as well as to those things practiced and produced by the SACA themselves. Indeed, as will be made clear later, it is the specific knowledge of these traditions which are determined in defining someone as Acholi or in enhancing a person's Acholiness.
4. For Safran (1991: 83-84), a diaspora explicitly requires a collective consciousness formed through forcible dispersal from a homeland and, despite disagreements about the specific definition, this "diasporic consciousness" remains a fundamental attribute of most conceptualizations of the term 'diaspora' (Abelhardy, 2008; Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 1997). Place of origin is an important definitional component due to its continuing importance to diasporic communities themselves (Wahlbeck, 2002), even if that "mythic place of desire... is a place of no return" (Brah, 1996: 192).

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