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"One Man's Meat Is Another Man's Poison': Marungi and Realities of Resilience in North West Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Approaches to resilience in post-war contexts prioritise systems-based thinking above everyday realities. This paper explores reconstruction through marungi (khat) in North-West Uganda. Presenting ethnographic evidence, we chart connections between marungi and resilience among growers, traders and "eaters". Firstly, we argue for a consideration of the actual resources through which individuals and households build capacity to withstand shocks following war. Secondly, we explore inequities within production lines and the effects of criminalising khat, to demonstrate trade-offs within prospects for post-war prosperity. Ultimately, we argue for process-based analyses of how resilience is negotiated in contingent circumstances.

Introduction

This paper explores the complexities of resilience presented by the production, consumption and regulation of *marungi* – the common term for *khat*, the leaves and shoots of the *catha edulis* plant – among Lugbara-speaking communities in the West Nile sub-region of North-West Uganda. Despite the recent criminalisation of marungi growth in 2014 by the Ugandan state, production has flourished in the region since the mid-1980s. We explore the dilemmas posed by the trade, and in so doing, provide an in-depth empirical discussion of the realities of resilience in a conflict-affected borderland. In so doing, we extend the thematic and geographic focus debated through the resilience literature in Northern Uganda, which largely focuses on immediate post-conflict recovery in the Acholi region, neglecting other communities in the region.

Our inquiry has revealed decisions to grow or trade in marungi are often described using the language of *resilience*: as enabling households to recover from and adapt to changing economic and ecological conditions. Consumers, known locally as 'marungi eaters' since users most commonly chew and eat the leaf, explained that consumption provided a means of coping with

trauma and strenuous manual work. For its advocates, marungi has become entangled in individual and household experiences of navigating and enduring the changing post-war context. Marungi presents an option where neither state-led development, nor sustainable flows of aid, have brought sustained change to people's lives.

Current literature on resilience usually associates the growth or use of illicit substances as a resilience failure (cf. Hammersley 2011, El Rawas *et al*. 2020). Whilst the potential side-effects of marungi consumption continue to be debated internationally, we suggest that for many West Nilers, marungi has emerged as a 'home-grown' resource to build resilience.[1] Our findings echo the conclusions of prior scholars, who have documented the economic functions of growing and using illicit substances, *khat* included (Gebissa 2008, Beckerleg 2009, Both 2017). This paper urges an open-ended approach to the inputs required to become resilient, beyond development tool-kits that champion particular types of agricultural production.

We do not, however, romanticise resilience as built from marungi. Rather, use the drug as a lens to understand the inequities and 'trade-offs' which constitute post-war resilience (Bene *et al*. 2014). Thus whilst we acknowledge enthusiasm from marungi's winners, we note how how differential endowments and social critique affects entry to, and participation in the trade. We also explore growing resistance from social groups who mobilise national law in opposition to the crop. As one local radio broadcast on the topic summarised: 'one man's meat is another man's poison'. Whilst many West Nilers' advocate for marungi as a source of resilience, others decry the crop as responsible for a host of social ills, mirroring the conventional view in existing resilience literature.

Overall, following Harris *et al*., we draw attention to the processual, non-linear means through which individuals and households pursue and achieve visions of resilience (2017, p. 2). We conceptualise resilience not as a definitive, or singular outcome or status, but as a social project, continually navigated and redefined according to economic options, laws and communal activism. Particularly, we emphasise the cacophony of moral-legal voices shaping definitions resilience, and the possibilities for households to work within this complex and shifting field. Located at the boundaries both of legality and of normative community morals, marungi is an apt site to study competing – often incompatible – definitions of resilience.

Methodologically, our findings are derived from a multi-method enquiry that traced the growth, trade and consumption of marungi from 2017–18. Our populations were predominantly Lugbara-speaking, and our research was focused geographically in Arua Town, in farms on its urban periphery, and in one Maracha sub-county that represents the marungi-growing 'heartland' of the West-Nile sub-region.[2] Given the covert nature of the trade, our access was facilitated both by Author 1's long-term engagement with borderland communities, and the residence of Authors 2 and 3 in the area. We

conducted open-ended interviews, conversations and observations with mar-ungi growers and traders, and administered 46 surveys to consumers in Arua Town. Additionally, we conducted 25 interviews with actors in local government, public health and religious and faith communities.

The paper begins by considering the disjuncture between longstanding assumptions within resilience scholarship and complex post-war histories in West Nile. The paper then presents dimensions of resilience as reported by insiders of the marungi trade, before exploring counter-critiques from outsiders. Tracing the fluctuating negotiations associated with post-war recovery, we conclude with calls to re-conceptualise resilience as a negotiated and historically-constituted process, entangled in socio-economic inequities and multi-scalar politics of power.

Towards Negotiated Resilience

Since the 2000s, resilience has become a prominent structuring principle for external actors to examine and channel resources towards reconstruction in post-war contexts. Yet resilience has remained a 'slippery' concept, an amalgamation of ideas borrowed from material science, ecology, medicine and psychology among other fields (Menkhaus 2012 p.3, Biermann et al. 2015). Across this assemblage of disciplines,, most analysts advance definitions regarding the ability of individuals, households and societies to rebound after 'stress', developing internal capacities either to withstand or to 'bounce-back better' from external shocks (Welsh 2013, p.16, Meerow and Newell 2016).

Many scholars have sought to disaggregate particular forms of resilience traits into models of agricultural resilience and/or poverty reduction programmes (Urruty et al. 2016, Braimoh et al. 2018, Dardonville et al. 2020). Exemplifying this, Bene et al. (2014) explain that a resilient system can be conceived of as the sum of (1) absorptive, (2) adaptive and (3) transformative capacities. Whilst the evolution of resilience thinking has yielded ever more complex models based on networks or pathways, at its core, resilience thinkers continue to systematise complex realities through *abstraction* (McKinnon and Derickson 2013). Yet this very exercise often distances expert approaches to resilience from the complex realities of everyday life in post-war settings.

Invested in this dissonance between resilience models and local realities, scholars have attempted to bring resilience thinking into conversation with 'local ecologies of resilience' – to with indigenous vocabularies and institutions which may actually constitute reconstruction in the longer-term (for example Kirmayer et al. 2012, Ungar 2012). Resilience has been lauded as an conceptual entry-point to understanding communities which avoids imposing state-centric – or Euro-American – notions of stability, to instead engaging with existing institutions which shape local responses to crisis.

Accordingly, there has been a recognition of the need to *enculturate* resilience, arguing that for any external approaches to strengthen resilience to 'work', such capacities must be translated into a variety of cultural, ontological and social contexts (Vindevogel *et al.* 2015).

Crucially, underlying such interventions is the notion that diverse cultures and livelihoods can be instrumentalised to render societies recovering from crisis productive once more, restoring the pre-disaster *status quo* (Bene *et al.* 2014). This connection is particularly prominent with respect to building cultural capital, which is often assumed to play a supportive role in bolstering economic livelihoods (Daskon 2010). Tendencies towards categorical abstraction have continued. For example, experts continue to distinguish between 'positive' resilience which strengthens local institutions, versus 'negative' forms of resilience that challenge prospects for long-term stability (Menkhaus 2012).

Following the cessation of decades of war, Northern Uganda has become the case study *par excellence* for scholars to explore how resilience has been built at the communal level. Given the extent of local displacement during the Lord's Resistance Army-Government of Uganda bush war (1986–2006), and the subsequent influx of donor funding following populations' return, most scholars have undertaken research in Acholiland, and often in proximity to Gulu (Betancourt and Khan 2008, Vindevogel *et al.* 2015, Schulz and Ngomokwe 2021, Williams in press). Whilst scholars have been attentive to variations in cultural ideas between different social groups such as young men or women (Vindevogel *et al.* 2015, p. 396), or between survivors and combatants, their attention has nevertheless involved the abstraction of populations, groups, and cultures into indicators within systems. Little attention has been paid to social inequities that affect a given individual's aspirations for resilience. As such, this systems-level research stands in stark contrast to ethnographic research that has emphasised the difficulties of repair and reconstruction (cf. Baines and Gauvin 2014, Porter 2016).

As the ability to overcome challenges is a goal of most individuals and communities, we agree that the language of resilience may help both scholars and communities themselves interpret post-war change (Glantz and Sloboda 2002). Yet the translation of resilience processes from abstract toolkits to actual societies must acknowledge conceptual, as well as cultural divergences (Cote and Nightingale 2012). Particularly, it is important to assess the limits of a resilience paradigm that imports concepts and metaphors from the natural and physical sciences, rendering societies into atomised, homogenous units (*ibid*, Fisichelli *et al.* 2016, Gillard 2016). Such accounts belie social stratification, institutional complexity, and deeper imprints of colonial and post-colonial marginality which continually interface with local social structures and economic decision-making, shaping the options available to survive and adapt to shocks (Duffield 2012, Welsh 2013, Ilcan and Rygiel

2015). We argue that apolitical frameworks – however culturally attenuated – are ill at ease with systems transgressed by stratified power relations (Cafer *et al*. 2019). We thus argue for greater engagement with how resilience may be 'negotiated' when complex geometries of power are made manifest locally.

In recognition of the processes that can engender or constrain resilience, Harris *et al*. (2017) propose an open-ended enquiry framed around 'negotiated resilience', which remains attentive to the politics and complexities of decision-making. Rather than define resilience as a trait, a goal or an outcome, the authors urge grounded approaches that consider how individuals, households or societies become resilient through a 'process of negotiation' (2017, p. 2). This process is non-linear, and often involves changing activities and fates in the face of social critique from state or religious authorities, as well as close kin. Negotiation is thus about navigating journeys to build safety-nets and become resistant to shocks, but it can also include decisions and compromises on what it means to be resilient.

Considering negotiations has the advantage of moving beyond systems-level thinking to acknowledge engagements between different actors over time and across scales of governance, an approach that we apply here to interactions between individuals, households and local political entities. Similarly, MacKinnon and Derickson urge a shift from resilience to 'resourcefulness', which takes account of oppositional strategies between groups, as well as wider issues of resource 'recognition and redistribution' (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013, p. 255). These approaches enable an appreciation not only of a more open-ended tracing of power and politics, but of how particular groups steer claims to resilience towards (or opposition to) normative socio-cultural ideals and public policies (Harris *et al*. 2017, p. 201).

Thus, we ultimately engagement with the frictions, contestations and bargains which are made between social groups in quests to become prosperous. Considering how resilience is navigated and negotiated on the ground thus allows an enquiry that avoids the faulty assumptions of pre-defined structures or systems. To begin that enquiry, we now turn to the history of West Nile, noting the wider political and economic contexts within which decisions to grow or eat marungi are framed.

Building Resilience at Uganda's Borders

Though West Nile's marginality stems from longer legacies of upheaval and colonial policies, the marungi trade has developed in the wake of the wars that followed the fall of Idi Amin Dada, who hailed from the region. Amin's ousting in 1979 by the soldiers of Milton Obote and the Tanzanian Defence Force ushered in a period of terror that led to the wholesale displacement of

populations over Uganda's international borders, to neighbouring (now) South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Crisp 1986, Harrell-bond 1986). Obote's troops, enacting reprisals for violent events during Amin's rule, were implicated not just in the massacre of civilians but also in widespread looting and the destruction of the region's infrastructure. One Lugbara elder described how during this time, Arua, the capital of the sub-region, was 'reduced to nothing'.

Whilst international assistance (and analysis) covered the displacement of Ugandans to South Sudan to great extent, the majority of Lugbara populations fled to DRC and made ends meet without turning to UNHCR refugee settlements. Populations returned voluntarily throughout the mid-1980s, but continued to experience insecurity at the hands of rebel factions formed from Amin's former soldiery well into the mid-1990s (Leopold 2005). Civilians living proximate to the DRC and South Sudan border continued to be affected by sporadic looting and violence associated with the Uganda National Liberation Army and the West Nile Bank Front (Bogner and Neubert 2013). Until 2006, the region was isolated due to war in Acholiland, civilians were targeted by LRA attacks on the road to Kampala, near to Murchison Falls National Park.

All of these dynamics reinforced self-reliance, and many drew on cross-border trading, linguistic and kinship connections to forge viable livelihoods. Meagher (1990) and Titeca (2012) describe the emergence of an illegal cross-border trade that flourished between Uganda, DRC and South Sudan in the decades after return. For Titeca, participation in cross-border trade repre-sented an 'indigenous way to provide development', in lieu of the relief provisions of international agencies and the Ugandan central government (2012, p. 50). In this way, in the region, resilience has long been forged on the boundaries of legality.

Yet, the majority of rural West Nilers returned to subsistence agriculture upon their return. Indeed, deep inequalities emerged between an urban elite who profited from the trade, and rural communities who struggled to re-establish farming cycles in the years immediately following return. Years of displacement had disrupted the cohesion of clan-based structures that had previously governed agricultural production, structures that had already been frayed by the migration of young men to the South during Uganda's colonial period (1914–1962). Reports of a strong ethos of self-reliance that hinged on household units, where individuals worked for themselves, echoed through life histories of those who remembered the difficult post-war years of reconstruction.

For most rural families in the region, agriculture continues to provide the basis for economic existence. According to the most recent (2014) census, 94.4 per cent of Maracha households are engaged in crop growing. Few households subsist completely off the land, as most people sell their surplus

crops and buy additional foodstuffs to supplement what they do not or cannot grow. In the decades following return, conventional agricultural production has been affected by a multitude of factors. Land scarcity, present in Maracha and Arua Districts during the colonial period, has been exacerbated by post-return population growth. Land is divided accorded to patrilineal descent, but during the present research, many families reported that plots were too small to sustain production. Increasingly, land is seen as a commodity: many poorer households have sold their land to wealthy elites, who have amassed plantations for considerable acreages. Overlaid with these struggles, climate change was reported as affecting crop yields, occasionally inducing shortages. In 2009, over 35 deaths were reported in Maracha from the premature consumption of the cassava plant, consumed due to a lack of alternatives (Uganda Red Cross 2009).

Equally significant are the changing activities of transnational companies involved in tobacco farming. Though soils were deemed unable to sustain cash crops of coffee and cotton grown in wider Uganda during the colonial period, since the 1940s, tobacco has been grown in the region. Prior to the war years, this trade was dominated by British American Tobacco, which both supplied seeds to households and bought the crop from them each year. In recent decades, however, this trade has become dominated by competition between tobacco companies, who have introduced changing standards for quality that map onto price structures for acquisition. Since 2010, many Maracha farmers explained that once they took their crop to Arua, buyers refused to purchase the crop, or instead offered a lower price-per-kilo. As tobacco normally brings an annual return, these new deficits left many farmers destitute, and in search of other options.

Even though rural farmers adapt new agricultural techniques and practices, West Nile remains among the poorest sub-regions of Uganda. According to a 2017 UNICEF Index, rates of multidimensional child poverty reached 81 per cent in the sub-region. Farmers remain largely isolated from the rest of Uganda, as a tarmacked spinal road connecting the region was completed only in 2016. Whilst this road did serve as a powerful symbol of development, throughout this research West Nilers remained cogently aware of state neglect. Even when agricultural inputs arrive, rarely do they reach the poorest: as was observed during a 2016 government distribution of dairy cows and hoes, which largely benefited local leaders. Agriculturalists criticised the lack of state-support for agriculture, the failures of health care, and young men often lamented 'digging', but explained there was simply no other form of work which could make ends meet.

The absence of state securities pertains partly to the region's status as an opposition stronghold, which has not traditionally elected MPs from the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM). But as Leopold (2005) noted, this marginal position builds on longer histories of limited investment in the

region. During British rule, West Nile was designated a 'closed district', treated as a 'labour reserve' for workers and soldiers to serve the Bagandan Kingdom. These activities did not lead to substantive agricultural or economic development, as in other parts of Uganda. Earlier on, moreover, in the early colonial period (1880–1914), the region was terrorised and pillaged by Turco-Egyptian slave raiders, European ivory poachers and Belgian Free State colonists. Thus throughout recorded history West Nilers have had to survive largely on their own, adapting to changing ecological, political and market conditions. Given the instabilities experienced by populations over the last century, a central question for post-exile reconstruction is: which baseline constitutes the norm to which local society should return?

Recently, scholars have argued that resilience theory is ill-equipped to deal with long-standing structural causes of inequality that inform all aspects of social, political and economic life (Miller *et al*. 2010, Fanstein 2015, Ribot 2014). In the context of extreme historical marginalisation, these cautions are relevant to any analysis of West Niler's attempts to forge viable livelihoods. One result of this history is that farmers select crops where inputs can be obtained cheaply (and locally). Another, connected result of the regions relative isolation is that people negotiate resilience within local connections and markets which can be tracked and verified, rather than seeking to market goods in the distant capital. We now turn to an examination of how local households negotiate legacies of under-development through growing the marungi crop.

Marungi-Growing as Resilience?

West Nilers know *khat* by many names. *Marungi*, originating from the Kenyan term, is the most common, but those involved in growing and eating the plant often opt for more specific terms, with Lugbara people generally using names derived either from the geographical locations where different leaves are gathered (*gomba, ayee*) or from local foods (*osubi*).

First introduced in Uganda during colonial rule, *khat* was initially sold on a small-scale basis and consumed largely by Yemeni and Somali traders (Eggeling 1951 cited in Beckerleg 2010, p. 63). It was only from the late 1970s on that *khat* production and consumption boomed nationwide, including in West Nile. The exact origins of marungi in West Nile in particular are uncertain. Beckerleg suggests that an employee of the Entebbe Botanical Gardens, returning to Arua District soon after independence, initially introduced the seeds. In the 1960s, a single family were reportedly involved in growing and selling the crop largely to Yemeni and Somali traders. After returning from exile in the mid-1980s, production in the region increased.

Consumption patterns diversified as well, with *khat* at first popular with men involved in trucking and informal trade, but more recently with younger men residing in town, or gathering at trading centres throughout the countryside.

Frequently, the distribution of seeds has followed kinship or neighbourly connections; many farmers explained during this research that they received seeds through contacts for free, and many of today's established growers inherited plantations from relatives who were already established in the trade. One interlocutor explained: 'My father grew marungi, whereas my mother sold marungi, my elders ate marungi – our lives generally depended on marungi'. Several farmers described the early 2000s as the marungi 'bandwagon', a time when many small-holders began to grow the crop, whilst others have transitioned into growing more recently, since the decline of tobacco growing. Other growers began as traders or consumers. One interlocutor simply explained: 'I used to chew, then became a grower with the aim of having it at all times'. Prior studies have suggested that by the mid-2000s, over a hundred or more farmers in the environs of Arua and Maracha Districts were involved in the trade (Beckerleg 2006). Indeed, fieldwork observations by Author 1 during 2016–17 suggest vast increases in the numbers of growers, with many households growing marungi plants along-side conventional agricultural crops. In one sub-county, the area chief estimated that over 80 per cent of farmers were engaged in growing marungi.

Echoing the discourse of scholarly models of agricultural resilience (for example, Urruty *et al.* 2016), marungi was often described by farmers as 'robust', representing a more reliable and continuous source of income than alternative food or cash crops.[3] Growers often explained their decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis: at marungi's current sale price, growers recorded yearly proceeds per acre far superior to that of maize, ground nuts, cassava, beans, sweet potatoes or sesame. Marungi is also durable: the plants prosper in less fertile soils, and its leaves can be harvested year-round. With decreasing land availability, declining soil fertility and climatic change, growers regarded marungi as a means to weather external shocks, invoking the explicit tenets of normative resilience thinking (*ibid*).

Marungi growing furthermore has thrived given that farmers have had direct access to its onwards sale, and can thus mitigate risks posed by changing markets. Marungi can readily be sold within local networks as the crop is produced, unlike tobacco, which was sold to buyers in Arua who operated according to varying standards of transnational corporations. Amid the aforementioned uncertainties of making a profit from tobacco, marungi provided a safer option, with even a bad yield fetching 10,000 UGS (about $3), sold to middle-men who transported the crop not just to Arua, Koboko and Yumbe but across the border to DRC as well. With such market networks adaptable to fluctuating demand within and beyond the region, a relatively stable environment has emerged for marungi growers. Unlike tobacco,

marungi growers do not have to sink transport costs in moving their crop to Arua, or give 'appreciations' to local middle-men. The proximity of sale both reduces uncertainty on the price and provides more frequent returns on investment. Put succinctly, one female grower summarised that marungi allows her to 'touch money anytime'.

Indeed, compared to other crops, marungi brings a high return on investment. According to one owner, marungi harvested from a third of an acre brings about UGS 800,000 (approximately $225) monthly. This owner, who had joined forces with his family members, estimated his entire plantation (about 3 acres) generated approximately UGS 7.2 million (about $2,000) in a month, and UGS 86.4 million (about $23,000) in a year. This figure is significant, representing an income 36 times higher than Uganda's annual GDP per capita of circa $645 in 2018. Similarly, one grower explained the developmental sense behind marungi growth: 'We tilled this land and fended for the family out of the proceeds from the field. I have not gone wrong with marungi and have no regrets so far. It blends well with my lack of skills as I missed out on school because of being orphaned at a young age'. Other growers explained that their profits enabled them to fund the education of future generations, as well as to diversify family incomes into other projects: the owner of the aforementioned 3-acre plantation explained that 26 family members had been educated through his marungi profits, and one Aruan grower with a half-acre farm described how he bought a grinding machine from the profits of his farm. Capable of producing flour at home, he was then able to create an alternative income stream. Still another young man explained that marungi profits supplemented his dealings in cross-border car exchange, a volatile practice in view of international security constraints. Overall, investing in marungi provided many West Nile growers with the ability to withstand uncertainties in other areas of trade, diversify their incomes and plan for the future: all central tenets of a recent World Bank Report concerned with 'increasing agricultural resilience through better risk management' (Braimoh *et al.* 2018, p. xv).

Yet despite these results, negative trade-offs can and do emerge. The shift to growing marungi (and other cash crops) rather than food crops has invariably meant that marungi farmers grow fewer subsistence crops. Whilst marungi growing does generate additional income, those households are thus forced to buy more foodstuffs on the open market, introducing a new vulnerability to fluctuations in staple food prices, which vary on a seasonal basis. Ecological trade-offs also arise from the increased use of pesticides on marungi, which can become increasingly necessary to sustain desired yields. Those farmers who had been involved in growing for decades reported that, over time, marungi and associated pesticides have degraded their soils,

making it impossible to sustain any crops at all. In lieu of these experiences, the short-term benefits of marungi growing may stand in tension with longer-term benefits from less ecologically damaging food crops.

Moreover, viewing marungi as a system confined to the household neglects the inequalities in wider inputs of labour and capital accumulation that it has produced. Trade-offs are apportioned differently along the supply and marketing chains: whilst growers reported robust earnings, pickers and market-sellers emphasised the paucity of wages and instability of the trade. As farms develop, growers depend on wider networks of labour to physically handle and produce the crop, often recruiting young people or women. Such 'pickers' are employed casually by landowners, and often lack substantial plots of land themselves. For these landless individuals, employment is uncertain, fluctuating according to local production and demand; many young people we interviewed explained they simply showed up at the plantation to pick the shrubs. Landless labourers are also forced to accept the wages set by landed growers, which may be as little as UGS 2,000 (about $0.50) per day.

Since it is school-aged children who perform this work, decisions to 'pick' represent a trade-off in missed schooling, a point that policymakers opposed to the trade have harnessed in force. Though some pickers claimed that salaries from casual labour enabled them to pursue education (school fees being expensive for many rural households), the involvement of unregulated and child labour will undoubtedly have deep repercussions for longer-term development of human capital. Bene *et al.* (2014) observe that resilient decision-making within households in resource-strained contexts often involves the adjustment of hopes and desires – such as limiting the number of meals per day to better mitigate financial shocks. The marungi trade features extreme examples of such adjustments, most visible in its use of child labour.

Though our research did not include sellers of marungi, from our observations the direct sale is gendered: whilst males comprise the majority of growers and middlemen, it is often females who vend to eaters in Arua Town. Selling is also more risky, since vendors operate closer to police posts, often in plain sight, across town. As with many urban workers, in lieu of access to rural land – a particular problem for unmarried women who lack claims to land through the customary familial system – prospects for becoming resilient often hinge around available assets. Those who have access to land through deed or custom, and those who can draw upon the labour of family members, have greater freedom to shift or diversify their incomes. Landless persons, however, have relatively little bargaining power to self-secure. Rarely is resilience simply 'win-win':

as argued above, for a fuller, more accurate concept, it is essential to engage with the uneven distribution of costs and benefits within the trade.

Marungi Eating as Individual Coping

During our fieldwork, local media in West Nile often villainised young male marungi eaters as 'idlers'. Similarly, experts have equated drugs with narcotic powers are presented as risk factors in models of resilience. Yet our research found that consumption of the drug was often tied to individual strategies of coping and collective belonging. In what follows, we outline three major resilience connections that 'eaters' of marungi presented or could be observed from the sociality of consuming the crop: promoting productivity, social group formation and psycho-social coping.

Promoting Productivity

In contrast to popular stereotypes of idleness, we found that marungi was often used to ensure productivity in work. Across East Africa, due to its stimulant properties *khat* was first associated with an urban class of eaters who used it to sustain long-distance travel or manual labour. In Arua, many marungi eaters explained that they in fact chewed in order to sustain productivity. One young male bus driver, who was routinely required to make the 10-hour Kampala-Arua journey, explained that marungi enabled him to stay awake along the route. As another eater of 17 years explained, 'In our line of duty [marungi] safeguards against accidents, [it] keeps you alert'. Other respondents reported that they had begun eating whilst working in sugar factories in Southern Uganda, since it allowed them to perform longer shifts, maximising their income. Rather than engendering 'indiscipline',marungi was considered a means of meeting the strenuous demands of manual work for men whose income depended upon their bodily labour.

The necessity of using marungi resonated with the types of work available for young men in West Nile. Marungi eaters reported that chewing enabled them to manage the strains of the unpredictable, often unregulated types of work that analysts have identified as viable options in post-war development. As one male trader attested:

> *magendo* (cross-border trade) and marungi are synonymous … We bought commodities from Aru and Ariwara towns [in DRC] at export price and sneaked them into Arua through footpaths. Many times, the Suda [government soldiers] in Zaire [now DRC] confronted us. They were ruthless and real cheats. They only spoke the language of confiscation, bribery and vandalism. To overcome them,

we took to all sorts of substances to be able to withstand the long cold nights and their wrath. Many times, we fought them off, thanks to the enormous [bodily] energy we got from consuming marungi and other substances.

Here, marungi allowed this respondent to manage the inherent risks of informal or illicit trade. Indeed, this respondent opted for marungi as a calculated *softer* option to other drugs, to which he had similarly been exposed in the cross-border trade.

Social Group Formation

Secondly, as elsewhere in Uganda, in West Nile marungi has today become associated with different types of eating,, namely among young men who congregate around town and trading centres. Whilst eaters are usually between 23–35 years old, lately teenagers have reportedly begun to consume the drug too (Daily Monitor 2011). That marungi is often consumed alongside alcohol, and that groups often congregate in town, has led to the estimation of marungi as a leisure activity. Beckerleg concludes that marungi consumption in Uganda represents a 'growing national hedonism that embraces listening and dancing to loud popular music, drinking in bars, watching English league soccer, and engaging in sex with multiple partners' (2010, p. 3). We found there was often a blurred distinction between consumption for leisure and work. Many eaters who linked consumption of marungi and alcohol to aspects of this 'hedonism' still claimed links between marungi and labour performance, explaining that marungi provided 'energy' for farming, *boda-boda* riding and (more infrequently) construction work.

In other cases, marungi eating was explained through frustration at a lack of employment. Young men in Arua and Maracha, who have grown up against the backdrop of post-conflict reconstruction, expressed frustration that jobs had not materialised. One man in his thirties explained his path to marungi eating followed the loss of his educational papers during the war, which limited his future options. Out of frustration, he took to eating to comfort the pain of his diminished horizons: 'I have never made it in life and I don't see any further hope at this age of mine'. For another Aruan who sought and failed to gain political office, marungi eating served to assuage his worries of unemployment, after his electoral loss: 'The community rejected me. That was the last time I lived an orderly life … marungi became my pastime, my friend, and family that I can confide in to solve or postpone my troubles. It has worked wonders; had it not been for marungi, I would have died due to endless worries'. Others explained that they resorted to chewing marungi because they were simply 'bored' as a result of limited opportunities for formal employment. In lieu of stable work, chewing marungi simply made life 'bearable'.

If marungi eating was often entangled with economic inequalities, our interlocutors also linked its consumption to social exclusion. By their own admission, through eating marungi young men were able to form new social connections. In some cases, groups took names that foregrounded consumption, such as 'gomba boys' and 'fire eaters'. Many were introduced to the drug through peers at work or in their home locality. One 29-year old male grower and eater confirmed, 'It's now seven years since I joined the crew as a result of peer influence. My associates routinely planted and ate it with lots of pleasure'. Clues as to its social function are evident in the nicknames many eaters use to describe it, such as *iribi* (greens/vegetables) or *osubi* (cowpeas, a staple dish).

Mirroring the sharing of food that affirms ties between households, eating marungi as a collective connected these young men who were otherwise disenfranchised from social norms. Interestingly, these collectives often based their membership on inverting dominant social expectations of propriety and respectability. Collectives often claimed 'immoral' spaces, including video halls, trading centres, bushes or backstreets, not frequented by 'respectable' people. One group in Mvara, a small trading centre on the outskirts of Arua Town, took the name 'Above the Law'. For the wider Mvara community, the name stigmatised the group and linked its members to crime, but for the group itself, the name signalled a mode of belonging and behaviour that surpassed mainstream rules. Evading pressures of being responsible men in Lugbara society, these groups formed their own alternative ways of being. Despite their non-conformity, however, these groups do not necessarily engage in criminal behaviour feared by the community. Of similar collectives in Yumbe, Booth observed that the creation of subversive habits allowed young men to maintain peace through the taming – rather than the enactment – of violent impulses (2017, p. 151). Hansen (2010) found similar tendencies in Somalia, where younger generations used *khat* to forget their experiences of war.

Psycho-social Coping

Thirdly, others claimed that marungi eating aided psycho-social coping, medicating the harsh realities of those in a post-conflict setting One young man explained that eating marungi allowed him to cope with the traumatic loss of his parents to AIDS. His testimony relays the circumstances of their deaths:

> I lost both siblings at a tender age. I have managed to live this long courtesy of the Aids Information Centre [local NGO offering treatment and support to persons with HIV] and partly of marungi. With marungi, I have driven away constant sickness and bad memories as both my parents and siblings died in my hands, and in a bad way. They exhibited unbearable pain and horrible symptoms with

blood oozing from their body outlets, others having no control over their bowels, others rotting while alive, [suffering] boils on their bodies. When I imagine I may die the same way, marungi plays the trick [for me to forget about it all].

Another respondent explained that eating helped him to forget the trauma he experienced as part of a group of civilians ambushed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels on a bus to Kampala: 'Since I could not comprehend the loss of my family, and could not easily access and afford substances like Bhangi [marijuana], I settled for marungi, now for the last 27 years'. In such cases, marungi facilitated a forgetting of the past, in order to subsist in the present.

Other eaters acknowledged that eating marungi simply offered them 'some happiness'. Marungi eating here represented a form of self-medication, reflecting the multiple, often dissimilar, ways in which eaters in West Nile have sought the drug amid the inadequacy or absence of institutional psychosocial support. For example, van Reisen *et al*. (2019) have found that psychosocial support and trauma counselling significantly increase socio-economic resilience – yet West Nile has only one reliable mental health facility, at Arua Regional Referral Hospital, to serve nearly 3 million people and 500,000 households. Other respondents explained that marungi represented a substitute for clinical drugs, for conditions including pain relief or worm expulsion. In this sense, marungi eating was often substituted for absent mental or physical health infrastructures.

Overall, it seems that marungi was often used tactically by eaters: to cope with demands of labour, or worries of unemployment; to manage memories of war; or to form connections with other young men. For different reasons, marungi was entangled in alternative visions of resilience among consumers.

Contesting Resilience: Moral Action against Marungi

As this paper has suggested, perceptions of marungi differ between insiders and outsiders of the trade. Thus, to engage with marungi is to engage with how resilience prospects are negotiated not just according to available inputs and networks, but against a fluctuating backdrop of everyday social politics. In what follows, we extend the discussion of the processual nature of resilience, and Harris et al.'s insistence on analysis that includes the 'iterative engagement with diverse actors, interests across time and governance scales' (2017, p.2). In particular, we explore how resilience is inflected by debates from wider legal, moral and religious spheres: individuals and households do not become robust in isolation.

Since the early 2000s, a vociferous anti-narcotic sentiment that has spread across Uganda. Political, religious and public health actors have used the national press, as well as local pulpits and other media, to

present marungi as a 'scapegoat' for social, developmental and health problems across the country (Beckerleg 2006). Eating (and, by extension, growing and selling) has increasingly become a practice onto which any negative socio-economic problem can be blamed. Public allegations of marungi's nefarious effects are both numerous and often contradictory. Whilst some commentators label *khat* as a stimulant that triggers violent crime, other critics decry its sedative effects, and the 'idleness' it induces. Marungi consumption has been blamed for family breakdowns, as well as a suite of mental and physical disorders: one Aruan clinical officer, confidently claimed that '[i]t has made many families separate or divorce ... it has health hazards including reducing libido; wearing of teeth, anaesthetic dysfunction and mental disarray'.[4] Indicating its sway in the public imagination, in Arua, marungi has become a shorthand commonly extrapolated to refer to *any* form of drug use or reason for anti-social behaviour.

At national and district levels, that government officials find condemning marungi attractive is unsurprising. Labelling marungi as a root cause of unemployment or crime provides a convenient alibi both for the failures of state-led health and public safety reforms, and for the failure of NRM policies to provide employment at Uganda's periphery (the very claims put forward by many marungi eaters). Allen (2015) has recently observed similar trends regarding witchcraft accusations in Northern Uganda, whereby political elites participate in witch-finding as a symbolic gesture towards protecting the public. Both criminalising marungi and hunting accused witches can be conceived as a form of what Allen terms 'moral populism': demonstrating protection for communities at low cost whilst avoiding substantive reforms in employment or health provision.

Until 2014, though many Ugandans associated marungi with anti-social behaviour, it was not outlawed. Sometimes authorities often treated marungi as if it were, on occasion arresting traders and eaters under alternative charges, including being 'idle and disorderly', a charge stemming from a dated, (though operational), colonial law which criminalises acts of 'public nuisance' (Beckerleg 2010, Penal Code Act, CAP. 120, 2797). Police mounted occasional raids on plantations in some districts (Uganda Police 2010). Some Districts devised laws, including Arua District, where a 2011 ordinance outlawed the sale and chewing of marungi, practices punishable by fines or community work.

In part because of its growing social stigma, the legal status of the drug changed with the *Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Control) Act 2014*. First aired in parliament in 2009, this Bill included cathinone, the main contributor to *khat*'s stimulant effect, within a schedule of prohibited psychotropic substances. Whilst the Act primarily targeted harder drugs, it also criminalised the production, transportation and sale of *khat* plants

(Kabumba *et al*. 2016). According to the Bill, persons convicted of possession of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances are liable to a fine of UGS 10 m ($2,700) or imprisonment.[5]

Despite these heavy penalties, marungi production and use have continued to increase in West Nile. During our research, marungi's recent criminalisation existed as a lingering presence that had the potential, but not the guarantee, to affect growers' prosperity. In part this was because of the reluctance – or the ability – of local government actors to enforce the new law. Village councillors and sub-chiefs in marungi heartlands are often known locally to tacitly support growers. Given the widespread nature of marungi production among their constituents, several officials explained it is difficult to oppose marungi. One sub-chief of a sub-county reliant on marungi growing seemed vexed by the prospect of a full ban on marungi production: 'Almost everyone in the sub-county will be arrested!' he exclaimed. 'I am sensing danger. When that law is implemented, about how it will affect my people – school fees will not be paid'. In this sub-county, outlawing marungi – not consuming it – was expected to cause social disorder. One Parish Chief explained furthermore that some councillors were themselves growers. Whilst remote political elites rallied towards a ban against marungi eating, rural alliances formed between officials and their constituents.

With enforcement of the 2014 law variable at best, other public authorities have taken it on themselves to continue leading the anti-marungi charge. As is long-established in Lugbara society, clans and religious actors hold significant sway in enforcing moral governance, and often act in opposition to local government actors. District elders' associations collectively and clan elders individually have mounted criticism of growing and eating, decrying marungi as the root cause of an 'undisciplined' youth. Elders have also linked marungi consumption to 'madness', a form of affliction usually associated with spirit-possessed women, who lack the responsibility vested in men (Middleton 1960). Some elders have levied punishments of fining or caning inin clan by-laws. Other elders have sent disobedient sons to the police, with custody effectively serving as a rehab facility to be weaned off the drug. Other times, resilience was negotiated (and disrupted) amid fraught family politics: one young farmer in Maracha reported that his family members had uprooted his crop, following instructions from elders that its growth reflected poorly on the moral image of the family.

Whilst clan elders differed in their levels of response, religious groups more consistently took direct action against growers. Charismatic Christian groups, which have thrived in West Nile since the return from war, have taken a firm stance against modern sins including alcohol and drug abuse. To become a 'saved' member of such a congregation, one must renounce all such activities, including marungi growing and eating. As a son of one recent convert explained: 'My mother also used to sell

marungi, but recently she was saved in the nearby Ociba Pentecostal church. Since it is nearby, the church members made her uproot her marungi – because the Pentecostal churches take a negative approach to growing it – it is a sin'.

Moral boundaries were negotiable, however, as the convert's son continued in the trade: 'I still support my mother through the money that I get through the marungi trade; that doesn't seem to be a problem for her'. Similarly, whilst some pastors decry the 'dirty money' obtained from marungi, one Maracha priest explained, '[i]f you say we [the Christians] are bad because we grow marungi, why should they give their money as offertory?'. Being reliant on financial support from their members, pastors rarely challenged the economic base of their congregants directly. The fates of growers are thus entangled with new Christian moral discourses, and competition between new and established churches to prove the moral probity of their missions through targeting local 'threats'. This form of action takes shape against national laws, but acquires a distinctly local flavour, dependent on shifting local activities of Christians and elders.

As Harris et al. (2017) note, diverse actors and interests bring an inherent complexity to resilience processes. Analysis that abstracts scalar units such as the household thus prevents a focus on the very real frictions within communities, and between local and national priorities. Quests for prosperity through growing marungi present one among many visions for resilience in Arua. Often, economic activities that produced profit for growers generated tension with other social, moral or religious ideas.

Discussion: Realities of Resilience

Couched within contemporary divisions of 'positive' and 'negative' forms of resilience that policymakers and analysts espouse, marungi provides an unlikely site upon which to debate the concept. Yet our sustained engagement revealed the extent of the marungi trade in bolstering the financial capacity of many Ugandan households in the decades following war, primarily by enabling them to withstand future shocks. Indeed, notions of coping, withstanding shocks and becoming 'robust' – terms found in innumerable resilience policy documents – were used by many growers, traders and eaters in West Nile to describe their efforts to make profits or to cope with strenuous, unregulated work. Our first contribution is thus to assert the need for a less morally categorical approach to resilience, moving away from a framework that unduly deems resources as illegal or harmful. Our findings join the conclusions of scholars elsewhere, who have argued for a consideration of the economic functions of khat in Ethiopia and rural Kenya (Gebissa 2008).

Engaging economies on-the ground yields three key insights for the wider study of the realities of resilience. First, we have shown that farmers make many decisions based on certainty and proximate connections. Decisions to grow marungi were often premised on a calculated comparison to other agricultural crops (which today yield less and less income) or cash crops, whose sale was often uncertain. The decline of tobacco growing, resulting from changing standards dictated by international markets, was intimately connected to the marungi boom. Resilience is thus tied to both the intimacies and responsiveness of local economies. In a similar way, social resilience among eaters was built by participating in habits of consumption not with distant relations, but with peer groups nearby. In both cases, decision-making and/or social protections were anchored in localised certainties; remote markets, middlemen and services are regarded as increasingly uncertain.

We do not intend to romanticise the rewards of marungi. Our analysis has shown that the ability of people to profit from changing local economies depends greatly on pre-existing *endowments*. Whilst landed growers or organised family groups can tailor their crop growth to local market demands, landless labourers and women exist as a second-class tier of human capital to facilitate the sale of the crop. Succinctly put, deep inequities lie along the marungi supply chain. Whilst many scholars have argued that resilience is not a zero-sum, win-win game (Bene *et al.* 2014), it is clear from our analysis that risks and benefits are not evenly distributed. In agricultural societies, access to land provides an important factor in facilitating or constraining decision making. Eating marungi was thus often a means for landless younger generations to cope with unregulated and demanding forms of labour. Though more research in this area is required, we contend that marungi has boomed in a space where the challenges of obtaining cash often necessitates difficult short-term decisions within households.

Third, and crucially, we have shown how resilience is not built in a vacuum, but exists as a *process* that involves continual negotiation between local connections, and may entail conflict between neighbouring groups. Marungi's status first as an immoral and now as an illegal agricultural product makes it a ready site to study social contestations around resilience, since there is an established (if arbitrarily enforced) basis for local actors to oppose the crop. Such opposition – uprooting crops, and contesting eating – represents different views of resilience and conflicting ideas of health and work held by key constituencies: in this case, traders, pastors, and proprietous elders. Mobilising resistance to marungi is indicative of how the law itself acts less as a definitive rule than as an instrument which actors use (or evade) to pursue their diverse visions of economic and moral survival.

Such contests between the law, cultural ideals and prosperity are by no means unique to marungi: similar negotiations exist too around profits gleaned through illegal cross-border trade. In this case too, when the

individual wealth evades the law, individuals can also be subject to restrictions posed by local leaders. For example, given the secrecies surrounding individual prosperity, traders are often suspected or even accused of witchcraft by poorer relatives who are still dependent upon agriculture, relatives who have even evicted these traders and destroyed their goods. Economic 'levelling' logics that rally against individual prosperity are by no means limited to West Nile, and have been described as characteristic of many uneven rural geographies (Golooba-Mutebi 2005, Niehaus 2005). Where moral visions of personhood and prosperity act as strong regulators on conduct, ideas may be mobilised by social groups in opposition to perceived immorality of individual wealth accumulation.

Traditionally, policymakers have tended to conceptualise resilience in discrete spheres: economic, institutional, or cultural. Yet the diverse tapestry of resistance to marungi demonstrates that such spheres are often held in direct tension with the struggles of households to prosper. More accurate to say is that in negotiating prosperity, households navigate and bargain with local moral visions, and entertain multiple viable options for accruing wealth. As they do so, individual quests to become resilient may, and often do, fall into conflict with communal values. For resilience to be meaningfully understood, then, we urge a greater engagement with the complexity of the social fabric that mediates economic and cultural processes. It is important to regard these struggles not just as categories of cultural resilience or capital, but as social norms which continually evolve, and which can actively constrain individual prosperity.

Thus, whilst marungi provides a provocative example to reconsider the nature of resilience, it also exemplifies the trade-offs and tensions inherent to any setting where resilience interfaces with inequalities. We urge a consideration for localities as multi-vocal sites where options for resilience move alongside soils, networks, morals and the enforcement of laws. This complex matrix of shifting processes, we argue, should be the starting point, rather than the afterthought, of resilience thinking.

Concluding Remarks

Whilst recent years have seen excessive emphasis on resilience in development projects, agricultural diversification or psycho-social support, these options may not be forthcoming for many rural populations. Idealised portraits of agricultural societies continue to pervade external thinking, to the detriment of truly seeing the complex realities of lives that increasingly depend on accessing cash resources.

Following our exploration of the marungi trade, we urge the necessity of grappling with the qualities that may be found in activities considered 'negative' forms of resilience. For participants in the trade, we found

ample evidence for forms of economic and psycho-social resilience tied to individual and household autonomy. Growers and eaters alike lauded marungi for enabling them to withstand shocks and uncertainties associated with climate change, land shortages and fluctuating distribution networks.

Yet, inequities pervade the production of marungi. Indeed, future work must consider the structural securities that engender a transition to more sustainable, and certain, forms of economic development. Whilst engaging with trades in illicit substances may be unpalatable, only by considering these processes will external actors be able to understand the class cleavages and social stratification that produce an uneven distribution of vulnerabilities.

Ultimately, the marungi trade has flourished in Uganda's state peripheries not in spite of but because of wider legacies of underdevelopment. Recovering from war involved not simply reconstructing society as it existed before (were such a thing possible), but adapting to new demands for consumption in the shadow of increasing ecological uncertainty. Marungi growing has boomed since the crop can be consumed locally, where young men lament both its demands and the absence of formal labour. For any analysis of resilience to be meaningful, it is thus necessary not to make a virtue out of necessity, and shifting blame for state failure to improve well-being onto people who struggle daily to make ends meet.

Notes

1. These harmful effects are contested internationally, for example, the WHO notes the livelihood functions of Khat (WHO 2008).
2. Given the changing legal context, locations and the names of growers, traders and eaters, have been anonymised.
3. Whilst we did not trace the local genealogy of resilience discourses, given the ubiquity of resilience frameworks for delivering development, it is possible this language had been adopted from NGO trainings or government 'sensitisations' on agricultural development.
4. This condemnation is particularly surprising given the limited political action to legislate against alcohol or 'harder' drugs. Though the harmful effects of these drugs are scientifically proven, their condemnation was less prominent throughout the research.
5. Anti-marungi legislation has been resisted by Ugandan growers. For example, in January 2017, members of the Wakiso District, Miraa Growers and Dealers Association filed a motion to de-list *khat* from the schedule of narcotic drugs in the Constitutional Court (The Observer 2017). Petitioners argued that marungi should instead be named as a cash crop, vegetable, or herbal treatment, and that it was an important basis for livelihoods, comparable to cotton, tea and coffee. The language of resilience was used to contest criminalisation.

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Disclosure statement

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