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Negotiating faith in exile: Learning from displacements from and into Arua, North West Uganda

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Abstract

Humanitarians have recently championed faith actors as valuable resources in delivering humanitarian aid. Partnerships are increasingly promoted through international declarations and bespoke toolkits. Such approaches are abstracted from the historical and contemporary contexts through which faith is negotiated, and through which faith actors have become legitimate. This paper explores how faith has been entangled within the dynamics of two spatially connected crises: Ugandans fleeing post-Amin reprisals in the mid-1980s, and South Sudanese fleeing civil war from 2013. Drawing attention to the local-structural engagements which have shaped forms of protection and the legitimacy of faith actors, this paper urges for a consideration of complexity in humanitarians' localisation calculations.

1 | 'I STARTED FEELING MY SPIRIT RESPONDING': FAITH IN EXILE

In an office affixed to his Methodist Church in Vurra, which lies 5km from Arua Town in the West Nile sub-region of Uganda, Bishop Ona, alongside his wife, Jane, recounted their experience of exile to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the 1980s. As a high-ranking pilot who had served in Idi Amin's army, Bishop Ona's life prior to the ousting of the dictator had been one of privilege. Yet, after Amin's overthrow in 1979, Ona was persecuted like other West Nilers. As Obote's "liberation" army entered the region, he moved over the nearby DRC border to evade torture.

For Ona, life in exile was difficult. Though he stayed with relatives living in Aru, "the habits [of people] in Congo were very strange for us", he explained. Ona fled to exile with few possessions; the things he had were quickly sold or confiscated by the Congolese *sudas* (soldiers). There being almost no formal humanitarian presence during the early 1980s in DRC, it became difficult for Ona to support his family. Jane began to brew *nguli* (local brew) to acquire some capital, but this enterprise failed to generate sufficient income. Ona himself began to drink heavily to deal with exile's uncertainties. His health visible declined, and his eyesight began to deteriorate.

Lacking other options, and out of desperation for her husband's condition, Jane turned to the local Congolese Pentecostal Church. Jane recalls the Sunday services, "when it was time for worship, praises are so good, we enjoy it – beating the drums, singing is so good. There are testimonies. I loved it so much … When you accept Jesus Christ, things will change, God will provide, I started feeling my spirit responding – I said, children, let's go get saved." Services provided Jane with momentary relief, and she subsequently entered into regular fellowship with Congolese Christians. At

home, mirroring healing practices within the church, Jane laid her hands on Ona. She recollected, "God told me, you kneel down, place your hand on him, pray. Don't pray loudly – so that he does not hear you. The spirit will come down and touch him." After some time, Ona announced he would no longer drink. Slowly his bodily health improved, and he himself began to attend the Pentecostal church. After attending the service of a renowned Congolese preacher, he felt called to be saved himself. Recognised by the church to be a man of stature, he describes the elation of the local congregation that he had opted to publicly receive salvation there.

Subsequently, Ona rose to prominence in the Congolese religious community. He began to receive "spiritual gifts" and was himself able to heal the sick. The respect he received echoed his time in the military – he became so popular that he was regularly visited by businessmen in Aru who were suffering misfortunes. In mid-1983, Bishop Ona entered into a seven day fast. At the end of this period, he received a vision, "God had shown me that I am going back home, he has given me work to do, to feed the sheep." That same day, Ona announced to the Congolese Church that he was going home. He attributes his safe passage home and ability to reconstruct his life in Uganda to God's grace, along with the subsequent support he received from an American donor to found and build a substantial church on his ancestral land.[1]

Humanitarian practitioners have recently begun to produce blueprints to pursue a 'faith-sensitive approach' to humanitarian protection (French & Fitzgibbon, 2018). On the surface, this formal embrace of faith actors appears to chime with population's lived experiences of displacement, evident in the above narration offered by Bishop Ona and his wife, where faith was central to surviving exile's manifold challenges. Indeed, their account echoes many testimonies relayed by people who had been displaced from – and into – the urban conurbation which is now Arua City during successive conflicts from the 1980s.[2]

Yet, whilst this recognition of the part of humanitarians is deeply relevant, it has been assumed that faith exists as a resource which can usefully embed the ever-expanding suite of psycho-social support and development activities which are now deemed to constitute humanitarian protection (UNHCR, 2013a, 2013b).

Policy Implications

- Generalised tool-kits which seek to involve faith actors in humanitarian protection miss crucial local nuances. It is important to develop tools which reflect histories through which faith has been localised and negotiated in African borderlands (and other settings).
- Humanitarians often present faith as a coherent field, but it is rather a plural space, shaped by multiple actors representing diversity within and between denominations. It is important to develop protection approaches with consideration for this complexity. Most particularly, to promote inclusion, it is essential to involve multiple faith actors in the development of approaches to faith-based protection.
- Significant anthropological and historical literature has explored complex histories of faith in African (and other) contexts. This work should be considered as an evidence-base to inform emergent localised and faith-based protection agendas.
- Faith actors often occupy positions of vulnerability during war and conflict. It is essential that protection strategies extend support to faith actors on the frontlines of conflict.

Similarly, policies suggest that faith leaders can be instrumentalised to deliver programmatic activities which protect individual rights during displacement and after return. Yet, there are tensions, this article suggests between templated approaches to faith which are emerging within the tool-kits and programming of humanitarians, and the diverse means through which conflict-affected populations live and reshape faith.[3] Moving beyond policy-focused approaches which have asked *how* to instrumentalise faith actors to embed norms of protection based on humanitarian law (Wilkinson et al., 2019) this paper explores we might learn from analysing forms and problematics of faith-based protection upon which groups *actually* rely during crisis.

This article is based on ethnographic research with Ugandan and South Sudanese people, conducted by the author between 2016 and 2019. Its central contention is that, to understand the significance of spiritual narrations such as Ona's, it is essential to consider how faith based protection resources are inextricably linked to social contexts, and forged through regional histories of colonialism, state abandonment and conflict. As noted by scholars who have recognised the important work that African clergy, thinkers and civilians have performed in reshaping colonial Christianity

(Behrend, 2011; Tounsel, 2021; Zink, 2018), these histories have often meant that Christian leaders and theologies have been pulled simultaneously into discussion of nationalism, political ideology and morality. Thus, it is important to widen the frame beyond belief and the assumption of shared universal values. Particularly, given that contested histories of colonial participation and local upheaval are common to many African (and other) contexts, and have been the subject of selected influential studies of humanitarian history (Barnett, 2011; Gozzi, 2021; Sornarajah, 1981), it is strange that the colonial roots of Christianity remained generally unremarked upon in humanitarian *policy*. Perhaps, because of shifts towards valorising civilian agency, experts have preferred to view faith as a vehicle for local participation and emancipation, or as a theological resource which transcends inequalities.

In its attention to local realities forged within often inequitable power structures, this paper offers a contribution to recent calls to radically reimagine humanitarianism from the perspective of those who experience displacement (Aloudat & Khan, 2022). The article seeks to make three interventions. Firstly, it seeks to chart the actual labours and logics involved in faith work during displacement. It seeks to move analysis beyond to faith based organisations to consider the lived experiences of a diversity of faith leaders, as well as lay Christians. Secondly, it links these processes to contexts of political marginality connected to longer colonial legacies of faith, which may engender social division in the present (Alava & Ssentongo, 2016; Pirouet, 1980). Thirdly, the article suggests points of learning for policy-making which can consider the politics of faith.

I begin by introducing how faith and protection lie within the policymaking imagination, before exploring the historical embedding of – and resistance to – Christianity along the Uganda – South Sudan borderland. Foregrounding responses of people displaced to and from Arua, I explore how faith has been used to construct viable lives during displacement, in ways which are unseen (or unmentioned) by humanitarians. The paper concludes with a typology built from an analysis of actual experiences of faith-based protection.

2 | METHODS

The analysis builds on ethno-historical research, which involved interviews, life history interviews and extensive participation in services and ministries of various denominational churches across Arua City with Lugbara-speaking populations in Arua during 2016–19, as well as with South Sudanese people displaced to Arua during this time. It focuses on the experiences of African Christians, as this is the faith which predominates in the West Nile sub-region of Uganda which includes Arua City.[4]

Arua is a key locus for the study of protection given the implication of the city in postcolonial violence during the 1980s, but also as a site for hosting populations who have been displaced from South Sudan and DRC in recent decades. Whilst the region's postcolonial history is often described as a time of continuous turbulence, residents of the region understand the past quite differently: as junctures of peace ruptured by specific conflict events. This research focuses on two such conflict events. The first is the displacement of Ugandans over international borders in the early 1980s, following the ousting of Idi Amin. Data are drawn from life history interviews with Ugandans identifying as Anglican and Catholic Christians, who are now considered elders, and endured this displacement, as well as with pastors and leaders of mainline denominations. The second case study is drawn from interviews with South Sudanese people who sought refuge in Arua following renewed violence in the country from 2013, as well as from participant observation in church services. Most participants lived in the states which comprise the Equatoria region, and many had lived in Arua during previous junctures of war in South Sudan. The data produced is intersubjective, with knowledge being mediated by the status of the author as an outsider, the involvement of Ugandan and South Sudanese collaborators as linguistic and socio-cultural interpreters.

Whilst distinct, these displacement experiences are comparable because of connections across the Uganda and South Sudan borderzone. These include shared colonial legacies (Equatoria and Ugandan populations only being demarcated by international borders in 1911); similarities in colonial mission work within an ethnicised-racialised framework of indirect rule; and deep postcolonial continuities in religious administration, as well as the role of successive population movements across South Sudanese/ Uganda and DRC border which have both sutured together communities and fused ideas about Christianity. In contemporary Arua, Christianity exists as a body of knowledges fuelled by conflict proximities and cross-border migration (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Wild-Wood, 2010).

3 | DEPOLITICISING THE LOCAL: TEMPLATING FAITH WORK

Despite deep connections at the conceptual and practical level between faith and humanitarian protection mandates (Ferris, 2011), it is only during the last decade that international agencies have sought to formalise collaborations with faith actors across the African Continent (Wilkinson et al., 2019). The momentum behind this coalition can be seen as resulting from the intersection of transnational processes – from the influence of US-based megachurches on global mission Christianity, to humanitarians' enthusiasm for

localisation (Priest et al., 2010). Beyond signalling an appreciation for entanglements between faith and well-being, this shift is in part based on pragmatism in the face of an ever-expanding realm of protection activities worldwide (UNCHR, 2020). The inclusion of faith actors has been sold by international organisations as a 'double win', which simultaneously increasing aid effectiveness whilst 'empowering' local leaders in the process.

To operationalise faith-based collaborations, influential humanitarian organisations have begun mapping denominational reach (USIP, 2013), as well as developing 'tool kits' which illustrate practically how alliances with Christian and Muslim leaders can be achieved on the ground (e.g. The Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief Worldwide 2018). Toolkits suggest that faith actors could be involved in a host of protection activities, from delivering trainings, conflict sensitisations, and inter-faith dialogues, to the actual delivery of services to refugee populations. In parallel, international agencies have been optimistic about the values of reciprocity and peace which are seen as a fundamental part of religious dogma, and shape imperatives to protect strangers. In 2012–13, the UNHCR 'Welcoming the Stranger' declaration similarly outlined an optimistic approach which noted religious doctrines as informing the integration of refugees (Riera & Poirier, 2014). Tellingly, this initiative was described as a 'journey of mutual discovery' (UNHCR, 2013a, 2013b).

Yet such approaches have done little to address the fundamental power imbalances which pervade the humanitarian system. Wilkinson et al. (2022) note that international actors operating in South Sudan continue to maintain their own operations through the centralised cluster system, according almost solely by legal protection standards. Moro and Tolani (2021) describe how 'localisation' departs from donors and international standards concentrated in the Global North. Toolkits have to date provided a standardised means of embedding pre-defined protection ideals. Such approaches ignore the pre-existing roles faith actors have played in protection activities, and serve to depoliticise and dehistoricise the diverse mechanics of how exactly world faiths have become legitimate in particular places. As such, recent shifts in humanitarianism risk repeating well-rehearsed critiques in development studies, which caution against the simplistic instrumentalisation of faith actors as conduits for development (Jones & Petersen, 2011; Goulet, 1980).

At the same time, scholars have raised alarm that new alliances encouraged within localisation agendas are not based on evidence (Wilkinson et al., 2022). Rather, it has simply been assumed by external actors that faith-based actors can – and should – be pulled into humanitarian vision of protection (Winiger & Peng-Keller, 2021). Euro-American humanitarians have assumed faith to be a vehicle which encourages 'acts of compassion, tolerance and respect for human dignity,

while inspiring social justice, reconciliation and conflict resolution' (Thomson, 2014:5).

Resonding to conclusions that localisation agendas have made little attempt to learn from 'Southern-led responses to displacement' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018), there have been calls to radically reimagine and decolonise humanitarian protection (Wurtz & Wilkinson, 2020). This involved unpacking the complexities of the 'local' in conflict-affected spaces, it has also involved calls to consider reverberations of colonial and neo-colonial dynamics of power within transnational religious partnerships and funding flows (Pincock et al., 2021; Roepstorff, 2020). Drawing together these multi-scalar processes, this paper urges for a consideration of faith as a process made legitimate through diverse forms of both social participation and resistance.

4 | COLONIALITY AND CRISIS: SHAPING CHRISTIANITY IN ARUA AND BEYOND

In Arua, divine resources have long provided a means to interpret and endure recurrent crises driven by slave traders, ivory poachers, and Belgian then British colonialists since the late 19th century. Formally incorporated within the boundaries of the British Protectorate in 1914, Arua became the centre of an administration premised on an extractive design, whereby the West Nile region served as a 'labour reserve', providing manpower for plantations in Southern Uganda, and colonial armies (Acidri, 2016; Leopold, 2005). Colonial occupation radically configured everyday life, not least since outsiders brought epidemic diseases including meningitis, smallpox and Spanish influenza to the area, which led to devastating mortality rates. An historian, drawing on archival records notes that death rates were as high as 50% in some Aruan districts (King, 1970). To manage these deaths, Lugbara communities turned to charismatic prophets, which allowed populations to access protection in the form of divine water. One movement, *Yakani*, acquired particular prominence in the region, and though driven underground by the Protectorate forces, divinatory techniques provided a means for ordinary people to manage sickness.

European missionaries representing Anglican denominations (the African Inland Mission) and the Catholic Comboni Fathers established themselves in Arua between 1916 and 1918. From the outset, whilst missionaries were preoccupied with inter-denominational competition as well as staving off Islam, Aruans conflated Anglican and Catholic actors as constituting collaborators of the colonial state.[5] For this reason, for the duration of colonial rule, missionaries in Arua were known in the same title as colonial state agents – *mundu* (something that is far) or *kuela bantu* (people eaters) (Acidri, 2016). Mirroring dynamics where the

state was involved in forcible recruitment of labour and ransoming of cattle, elders explained that the first missionaries encouraged conversion 'with guns'.

As missions became established in later decades of British Rule, mission-led Christianity became embedded in the development of an unequal class system that emerged through racialised and ethnicised modes of 'indirect' governance. Arua remained the centre of colonial administration, and here an underfunded administration relied on missionaries to provide schools to educate a rising cadre of Arua's elite who staffed the local civil service. For many agriculturalists, Christianity was understood to be a violent force, which resulted in young men being 'taken' from clan life (echoing activities of colonial labour recruiters), to work for missions (Middleton, 1960). More than this, Christianity itself was delivered by missionaries (and early converts) as a moral other to pre-existing ritual praxis. Any vestige of ceremony deemed by them to constitute 'paganism' was vehemently disavowed. In Arua, sometimes violent crusades were launched by Christians to destroy ancestral shrines or the huts of diviners. Beyond the immediate vicinity of Arua, the establishment of churches was slow and, by independence in 1962, dual realities co-existed – educated members of the urban populace had revived and reshaped the faith – whilst uneducated and rural kinfolk considered *dini* (the Arabic term used locally for religion) as a violent, invasive, or irrelevant facet of colonial imposition (Storer, 2021).

Whilst these colonial histories present a cautionary tale for external interveners seeking to embed external logics, be those of development or humanitarianism, these turbulent pasts present a conflicting picture to observed religiosity in Arua today. Indeed, to be a moral person within urban society is to be associated with the church, to attend Sunday services, and to (broadly) adhere to worldly behaviours prescribed by Christianity. Whilst older religious traditions do exist (albeit in modified forms), adherence to ancestral rituals is vehemently disavowed by Christians (Alidri, 2016). Yet, as this paper argues, roots of class division and identity politics formed through mission imposition, appear in surprising ways in contemporary Christian praxis.

Indeed, colonial legacies must be placed within a context where war and exile gave new meaning and opportunities for participation in Christian concepts which had previously held little resonance for Ugandans and South Sudanese. Whilst a suite of factors – including the translation of the bible into *Lugbarati*, encouragement from converted family members, and experiences of Christianity as labour migrants – all served to gradually embed the Christian faith in Arua, the uncertainties of war and exile were particularly and frequently linked by both Ugandans and South Sudanese as the impetus to convert, to deepen their faith, or to become 'saved'. In this way, people's fates connected to the widespread scholarship across both Uganda and South Sudan,

which have illustrated links between conflict and Christianity (Allen, 1991; Jones, 2009; Zink, 2018).

With reference to Dinka populations living in South Sudan, Zink (2018) argues that rural–urban displacement and the dangers of ongoing conflict reduced the presence of international church leaders and served to disrupt hierarchies created by the Anglican mission church. Into this space, more horizontal forms of organisation emerged, and local leaders were afforded increased space to evangelise and participate in shaping the Christian faith. In a similar way, Harrell-Bond notes the presence of evangelists in refugee camps serving Ugandans during displacement in the early 1980s, whereas Jones describes how the centrality of churches in leading reconstruction in Teso, Eastern Uganda, in the 1990s led to many becoming 'saved'. Whilst these ethnographies speak much to how faith has become legitimate in post-colonial contexts, less emphasis has been placed on how African converts have adapted the faith with a priori beliefs and politics *during* crisis. It is the ambivalences rendered by complex processes of localisation – which often served to echo aspects of Christianity's colonial legacies of social division – to which this paper now turns.

5 | CHRISTIAN PROTECTION IN THE WARSCAPE OF NORTHERN UGANDA (1979–86)

For West Nilers in Arua in the 1980s, experiences of war and displacement served to radically reconfigure notions of protection, as well as the centrality of religious authorities as providers of safety. Though conflict had colonial roots (Leopold, 2005), war followed the overthrow of Idi Amin Dada, the notorious dictator born in Koboko, West Nile. Becoming associated with his rule by incoming armies, the region's people suffered deeply after his ousting in 1979, which was instigated by a combined insurgency of the Tanzanian People's Defence Force (TPDF) and the Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA), comprised largely of the soldiers of former leader Milton Obote. Whilst the UNLA were perceived as liberators in wider Uganda, the UNLA enacted torture, murder and looting in West Nile. Revenge expressed in ethnic idioms was expressed in one message daubed onto a tree by a UNLA solder: 'The Lugbara killed our people, now it must be our turn to kill them.' (cited in Harrell-Bond, 1986).

Scholars have tended to describe wars in political-military terms (Crisp, 1986), but in their life histories Aruan elders often married experiences of witnessing and surviving violence to cosmological adjustment – with the horrors of war leading them to evaluate their past and to *accept* Christianity (the Lugbara word for believe *a'ii*, literally means accept). A Maracha elder speaking on the history of his clan invoked Old

Testament logics to encapsulate the past: '[We] Saw exile as a punishment from god – people were taught if you do not believe in God you will have misfortunes – and war is one of those things – so we understood that the war was because we had not been following God, and we started to believe…' And another male elder explained: 'People conceived exile as a punishment from God because of not listening to God'. In so doing, these Lugbara elders outlined a clear theological position where disasters and suffering are a punishment from God in relation to human sin, a stance which evoked colonial histories where Christianity was explained as a 'godly' alternative to other 'sinful' ritual praxis. Amidst the violence of war, previously distant notions of a Christian divinity became relevant to the lives of Aruans.

For others, simply surviving the violence of the Aruan warscape was evidence enough of God's power. One Aruan elder, who had worked as an Anglican minister, explained: 'On the mountain, that was the most miraculous thing God did. There was no sickness, no malaria – much as people were in rain, the cold, being bitten by wild insects, there was no sickness during that period. That was God's work'. Many others explained their survival in terms of biblical narratives of redemption, characteristic of theologies which tied suffering – or enduring it – to spiritual rewards. In so doing, these elders invoked New Testament theologies, as well as drawing on longer histories of Balokole Revivalism, which linked the receipt of salvation, and sometimes the receipt of spiritual power – to devotion (Wild-Wood, 2010). Based on his ethnography of post-conflict Teso, Jones (2009) explains that the language of redemption and marking a 'break with the past' symbolises an effective tool to symbolically leave behind the trauma of war. With few other routes for psycho-social support, biblical resources provided a language to give meaning to suffering endured in war, as well as a script to move past trauma. Interestingly too, the writing of contemporary European missionaries note similar readings of conflict. For example, Father Spugnardi Antonio, of the Maracha Mission in Oluvo, predicted in July 1985 that from the 'incredible discomforts and suffering'…''I am convinced that in persecution and on the cross faith will find new vigo[u]r and the Church within the hearts will grow'. In their interpretation of war, it is likely that Lugbara people were guided by missionaries who remained with them during war.

To understand ontological shifts, it is important to situate discursive accounts of miraculous survival within the wider context whereby humanitarian assistance was virtually absent, and contemporary state actors, made present as armed forces, were perceived as agents of terror. Within this context, as civilians became caught in clashes between the UNLA and former rebel groups (groups of former soldiers who had previously served under Amin), Christian identities acquired new meaning. For context, many rebels identified with the Muslim faith, following legacies of colonial recruitment whereby former Nubian soldiers, and Muslim Lugbara men from Aringa had been recruited to the army. In the warscape, this complexity was collapsed, and populations referred to rebels as 'Aringa', which served as a local shorthand for Muslim. Within Arua, as UNLA troops sought to identify civilians from rebels, identifying as a Christian had a more strategic advantage – it signalled that men were not Muslim – and therefore not rebels. An Anglican pastor, who had moved to Arua after serving the church in the Northern district of Yumbe explained the gravity of being mistaken for a Muslim, and so a rebel: 'It was worse because I had a poll tax ticket from Aringa, I was really hiding. Your poll tax ticket was your identity, to prove you were a legitimate Ugandan. If you did not have one – you were a guerrilla. If it said "Aringa", you were killed. You were asked to show the ticket at roadblocks, soldiers even used to go in homes deep in the village. When they find you at home without a ticket, they kill you'. Christianity thus acquired new relevance among the significance given to identities created through conflict dynamics where Muslim men were identified as rebels.

But accepting Christianity was not just a strategic move. Realities of wartime protection meant that churches were also pulled directly into the warscape, with new proximities being created between missionaries, African converts, and general populations in distress. One of the most emblematic examples was the Ombaci massacre of June 24, 1981, where an estimated 50–100 civilians were killed within a Catholic mission (Relief Web, 1997). Hundreds of civilians had sought shelter in the mission, during periods of intense rebel/government clashes. When soldiers opened fire on civilians – on the basis that rebels were hiding within them – Comboni missionaries attempted to pay off the soldiers, and are remembered as acting as human shields, standing literally between soldiers and civilians (JRP, 2014). For Aruans, these gestures served as a powerful symbol that faith actors stayed with civilians, and represented a wider pattern of diverse forms of religious protection reported in life histories, ranging from defence of civilian rights, sheltering civilians in missions and churches, and on occasion, standing in the way of soldiers' bullets and preventing acts of civilian torture.

As in Ombaci, elders often explained that government armies were perceived as mounting assaults on Christian institutions. An Anglican pastor recalled of his period of service during the war years in Northern Arua District: 'These rebels had already killed seven Catholics near Lodonga. I was number 8 to be killed… When the soldiers arrested me, they said I was training rebels, "he claims to be here in church but he is training rebels"'. Whilst pastors relayed these experiences as heroic moments of bravery, it is notable that forms of protection performed by faith actors, often conferred

great vulnerabilities. In lieu of other options, the role of protection was enacted by Christian leaders affiliated to particular congregations.

Experiences of West Nilers have particular analytic value, as it is possible to trace the afterlives of Christian practices which became legitimate through their imbrication in civilian protection. Important structural changes occurred following return – churches were led by African leaders, with the Catholic Church installing its first Bishop from West Nile in 1986. African Bishops were underpinned by a suite of leaders drawn from an old cadre of war-time converts (like Bishop Ona), who embody masculine power, as well as histories of political resistance. Whilst this leadership certainly led to a new chapter of the faith, funds were gradually withdrawn from European churches, meaning Diocese who had become conduits for (physical and spiritual) reconstruction, became ill-funded. Similarly, mainline missions were being challenged by Pentecostal churches, as well as by the embrace of charismatic iterations of Catholicism – strands of Christianity particular attractive to younger generations. Within this marketplace – and in the context of ongoing political marginalisation – religious leaders have remained prominent and vocal actors who have continued to redefine protection and give meaning to hardships of poverty. Following return, new types of witch-hunting, often led by pastors in Arua, led to the social ostracisation of witches who had acquired evil forces from across the border in Congo. Whilst the expulsion of witches had been rare prior to war, witchcraft became defined as a new and deadly threat which necessitated forms of protection. Storer and Torre (2023) note how contemporary struggles to eradicate witchcraft present as postcolonial legacies where Christianity has been presented as a moral realm against 'evil' forces including paganism, ancestor worship, Islam and spirit possession. In such contexts, faith is not always a benign force, but rather continues to be drawn into evolving socio-spiritual hierarchies and exclusions (Allen, 2015).

6 | CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL SPACES OF HEALING IN EXILE: SOUTH SUDANESE URBAN DWELLERS IN ARUA 2016–19

Over three decades later, the experience of South Sudanese people displaced to Arua City following renewed outbreak of civil war in the newly independent country from 2013, mirrored aspects of West Nilers' displacement. Whilst humanitarians rushed to provide assistance to the (vast) numbers of refugees displaced to settlements proximate to the South Sudan/Uganda border, little attention was paid to those South Sudanese who opted to stay in Arua. Between 2016 and 2018, when this research was conducted, many individuals

and families had been residing in Arua for several years, in accommodation rented from Ugandan landlords, or on land built upon by relatives during previous periods of exile. Many homes were headed by women, whose husbands and male relatives had remained in South Sudan. Many had a significant number of children under their care, and were heavily dependent on cash from those in employ with the government, military or NGOs in South Sudan. As the South Sudanese pound gradually devalued, many women faced deep uncertainties about their futures. Some had begun to make monthly trips to settlements at the border, where they had initially registered upon arrival to Uganda, to collect food rations.

For older women, contemporary exile in Arua repeated patterns of displacement which had followed extreme moments of conflict during the First and the Second Sudanese Wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005, respectively). One female Equatorian pastor explained: '[t]o be exiled seems like one is deprived of his or her dignity and rights as a human person. I say this, because I know, I have seen and lived as a refugee in Uganda for almost half of my entire life'. Whilst connections allowed some to establish small businesses, many younger women remained isolated from Ugandans living in Arua. Whilst residents were not overtly hostile, disputes could be occasion for inflammatory and stigmatising narratives to be directed towards South Sudanese. As such, many opted to keep a low profile, building small pockets of community with fellow South Sudanese neighbours who lived close by. A South Sudanese woman living on the City's hinterland summarised 'it isn't a pleasant experience to be out of one's own Country/home; a place which one can identify himself or herself with'. In this landscape of relative atomisation, churches from a host of denominations provided a means of uniting South Sudanese people. Sunday services provided space where South Sudanese people did not have to modify their language or their heritage, allowing them to step out of the strategies adopted on a daily basis to assimilate with Ugandan populations.

Many South Sudanese in Arua explained that churches provided a source of community and psycho-social support. On an individual basis, prayers provided an important means of managing uncertain presents. During interviews held during a regular Saturday services at a Pentecostal church on the Southern limits of the city, one young male congregant explained, 'with church, life became a bit easier, you get encouragement and ways to overcome temptations, problems – like when someone wants to fight with you, what do you do in that situation? How can you fit in this community?' For others, prayer provided a routinised means of managing troubling visions or bad dreams. One South Sudanese woman displaced from Equatoria explained that after receiving dreams which contained bad omens, she visited

an Anglican minister for prayers, 'I left everything in the hands of God…So, there's nothing that is going to happen'. As finances became scarce, and living in an urban context where there few other options to manage trauma through mental health care, religious healing provided an important therapeutic pathway. In this way South Sudanese people asserted positive visions of faith-based healing which have also been echoed by scholars who have labelled praying with congregations as a cathartic resource for dealing with uncertainty and trauma (Harsch et al., 2021; Williams & Meinert, 2020).

Yet at the same time, social manifestation of faith tended to be more divisive: religious union often encouraged community along the ethno-linguistic lines which characterised life at home. In Arua, cross-Equatorian services hosted services in Arabic, where biblical passages were spoken in Moru, Madi, Kuku and other languages, whilst Azande, Dinka and Nuer faith communities organised themselves as separate religious communities. For the latter groups, specific services were hosted by South Sudanese pastors at designated times, at particular churches across Arua. In part this was a pragmatic move on the part of faith leaders and Christians to accommodate linguistic variation, but it was also a facet of social life whereby communities had organised along ethnicised lines in exile. Zande, Dinka and Nuer communities had often formed distinct structures of everyday governance headed by a traditional 'chief', who had moved with communities to exile.

As scholars have noted, cosmological explanations for war and displacement have shifted markedly in response to changing patterns of violence (Hutchinson, 2001), as well as discourses around nation building (Tounsel, 2021). Within the history of South Sudan, whilst Christianity has been propagated as a resource to unite all South Sudanese, it has also been deployed by some Christians to explain inter-ethnic fighting. The use of Christianity to explain ethnic divisions of course invokes elements of the colonial history of the borderland zone, whereby Christian missionaries, whilst espousing the universality of divine protection, often delivered sermons through the ethnic structures which they perceived as a natural feature of rural African life. Thus, in embedding Christianity, missionaries in practice defined congregations of worship along the falsified ethnic distinctions imported by British colonialists (ibid).

With Christianity in Arua now being characterised by a veritable 'marketplace' of assistance comprised between mainline and evangelical denominations (Williams & Schulz, 2021), dynamics of which had only been emboldened by the arrival of American evangelists who preached with mega phones, leaders went to great lengths to appeal to displaced congregations. This involved providing explanations for a protracted conflict, and the failure of independence to deliver prosperity. Into this context, many South Sudanese pastors proffered explanations from biblical ideas to have ontological and practical value. One clergyman explained: 'I believe, through my personal experience, during the conflict/and exile, faith in Divine person (God) becomes stronger, simply because, God becomes the only source of hope and strength'. Other Christian leaders drew on illustrations of the 'good person who suffers' from the book of Job, and the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew – to indicate links between ordinary suffering and divine power. In parallel, a vibrant Pentecostal scene of emerging pastors propagated biblical narratives which explained displacement as a punishment for individual sin and encouraged individual confession and penitence as necessary for return. For example, in one conversation, where a female pastor explained that 'it is written in the Bible that the Sudanese will be punished… in the Bible, it says the fighting will not stop until they kneel down and ask for forgiveness', As noted by Hutchinson decades prior, war was explained as a 'curse from God'…'[r]ather than confront the reality of their powerlessness as individuals to make "the world good again", many people found psychological solace in the idea that they somehow "deserved" this war' (Hutchinson, 2001, p. 325).

Yet simultaneously, in Arua, a politics of social division was not infrequently pulled into the realm of ontological explanation for violence. In the context of an ongoing conflict which was at the time not infrequently described by Euro-American and African commentators alike in terms of ethnic Nuer/ Dinka rivalries, it is unsurprising that Christian leaders from multiple backgrounds interwove spiritual commentaries with ethicised scripts of blame. Attending a Pentecostal church in Arua designed to accommodate South Sudanese people largely displaced from Equatoria, often blame was placed by visiting preachers on Dinka aggression. A pivotal text in this regard was Isaiah 18:2 – or the 'Prophecy of Cush', which has continually been reworked throughout Liberation and Civil Wars to provide explanation for aggression.[6] Realising Isaiah's prophecy was long equated by selected South Sudanese theologians with the liberation of South Sudan (from Sudan). Yet, in view of the dissolution of peace following independence, some pastors had reworked Isaiah 18, as a prediction that foretells that Dinka groups would bring inter-ethnic violence to the country. One Anglican pastor explained: 'Isaiah-18 is completely relevant to South Sudanese communities in exile. It is literarily reflected in what is happening now: tall, smooth-skinned people are here; destruction is being witnessed, and much more also'. For many congregants, these explanations proved persuasive. One South Sudanese woman explained: '[t]hese Dinka, they have taken us away from our faith. I have forgiven them but the pain is still there. The pain is still there'. In this way, biblical narratives

became a means to further simplistic and reductionist commentaries which have reduced continued war in South Sudan to 'tribal' narratives (Johnson, 2014).

But on the ground, efforts to define conflict were more fractured, and it became clear that theological readings of war offered at the pulpit where not so easily integrated into people's interrelation with their kin and neighbours. One Sudanese woman explained: 'If you look at the description of those people, most people say it refers to Dinka … but I don't know if they're the ones,' she said. For many, long legacies of conflict had made the reworking of these explanations a tired exercise. One pastor explained: 'So many South Sudanese have lost their hopes on South Sudan. People lost lives more than in the previous war between Arabs and South Sudanese'. Whilst contested, it became apparent that Christianity provided one of a number of cosmological logics not only to debate political logics of war, but to reinforce boundary-making processes during anxious and anonymous times (Leonardi et al., 2021). Thus, whilst certainly Christianity has provided many with a resource to cope with violence and provide answers for upheavals in spiritual logics, it has become indelibly linked with an oscillating identity politics born of colonial roots and politicised through decades of war.

7 | RESHAPING PROTECTION: FIVE NOTES FROM EMPIRICAL EXPERIENCE

Faith-based forms of protection in Arua provide an important resource to respond to individual and collective protection needs. It is essential to grasp that while the secular aspects of faith-based actors' role may be intelligible to humanitarians, leaders also negotiate spiritual-moral terrain which is often unacknowledged or unseen by external experts. Yet, with faith being a field continually reshaped transnationally and locally, abstracting faith as a 'tool' can serve to violently remove the very basis for its legitimacy. The following section distils the regional analysis into five key messages to inform future incorporation of faith into humanitarian protection agendas.

Firstly, it is important to view Christianity not as a universally recognisable set of theology, values and rites, but as a product shaped by histories of local participation. Ethnographers and historians alike have continually noted the syncretism of hybridity between Christianity and indigenous belief systems (O'Byrne, 2017; Wild-Wood, 2010). Behrend concludes that Christianity in Uganda is understood best not as a fixed institution, but as a set of evolving processes given life by African Christians (2011). Moments of crisis serve to intensify processes of localisation and innovation, as people seek explanation for the causes of extreme uncertainty. If humanitarians simply assume that Christianity alliances can be imposed, or that the faith exists in forms which mirror Euro-American Christianity, practitioners risk repeating the epistemic violence of missionary evangelists who ignored pre-existing forms of faith.

Secondly, Christianity is characterised by intense multiplicity of denominations, and of actors and competitions within them. Faith is perhaps best conceived as a conversation, or a 'spiritual marketplace' – a localised arena whereby actors associated within multiple mainline and evangelistic denomonations – contest moral, religious and socio-economic norms, including the right way to protect (Storer & Torre, 2023). Set against its social backdrop, these contestations acquire particular complexity stemming from colonial processes whereby represenatives from mainline denominations have competitively – and aggressively – campaigned to evangelise African converts. The more recent arrival of Pentecostalism – and renewed emphasis on public conversion and 'spiritual warfare' – has heightened inter-denominational competition (Jones, 2009); with Pentecostal forms of worship often appealing particularly to younger generations. Thus, whilst humanitarians often seek legitimate partners with actors from mainline denominations actors – often those with established buildings and congregations – this excludes generational preferences within particular faiths. In the context of dynamics spiritual marketplaces, it is important to ask *who* is represented in within humanitarians' alliances.

Thirdly, and relatedly, it is important to grasp that the local participation which shapes spiritual marketplaces is forged through social hierarchies, mediated often through classed, raced, gendered and ethnicised inequalities. These inequalities exist and are enacted at multiple scales, and interact with international flows of funding from Euro-American faith organisations. At the local level, the cadre of leaders who are considered to hold post-conflict authority is often gendered, with faith leaders tending to represent and reinforce patriarchal and gerontocratic social pillars which are embedded in many post-conflict places. As scholars have noted, such distinctions have been reified in northern Uganda (Baines & Gauvin, 2014). It is significant that throughout both periods of exile during this study, few women had ascended to central leadership roles within the church. At the same time, faith leaders may take a stance on ethnicised conflict divisions. By sidelining these intersectional complexities related to inclusion within faith leadership, humanitarians risk reinforcing exclusionary elements of the status quo.

Fourthly, this empirical exploration has heighted the deep imbrication of faith actors and institutions (beyond faith agencies) in taking on protection roles. The literature on Northern Uganda has predominantly focused on how spiritual logics can be linked to the incitement of violence, providing protection for rebel armies, most

notably in the case of the local mythology surrounding Joseph Kony's occult powers (Titeca, 2010). Yet, this analysis has equally shown that faith actors, invoking divine protection, may put themselves in situations of heightened risk in order to shelter and protect civilians. At the same time – religious institutions have provided refuge for populations during periods of violence and exile, but also have served as conduits of information so as to provide safe passage and as focal beacons for communities to consolidate themselves in deeply uncertain circumstances. Highlighting such instances is important such that humanitarians can consider providing bespoke protection for religious actors. There is a need to champion protection which has unfolded away from view of interveners.

Finally – there is a need for greater research which explores the links between violence and faith in conflict (and post-conflict) spaces. From this study, it is clear that the imbrication of faith in wartime protection afforded Christian actors particular types of legitimacy in the relative peacetime which followed populations' return. Following the return of Ugandans from the late 1980s, pastors frequently became interveners in domains including of personhood, community, biomedicine, law, which significantly extend beyond realms of of religious practice. Overall, it is important for humanitarians to consider faith actors as both social and faith actors. The implications of building alliances warrant further exploration.

8 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

When humanitarians seek to harness faith to deliver protection, they build on long and contested histories in places where faith has been embedded and transformed in conversation with social change. Thus, whilst one can conclude that faith is a resource which is centrally related to protection activities, including and beyond protection from violence, faith-based resources drawn into warscapes and displacement context can have radically different implications, which often extend beyond the tool-kits recently produced by humanitarian actors. Cogently, as highlighted by displacement within Arua, faith actors and logics can become entangled in immanent healing, the social construction of boundaries, as well as in wider political struggles relating to exclusionary nation-building. Contemporary realities of faith result from long histories of Christians' everyday participation in the faith, where theology has been localised in a context of state and humanitarian abandonment and colonial governance. Bearing this in mind, the paper urges that humanitarians engage with the specificities of the actual contexts where faith is made legitimate, and in particular with the activities of African Christians who adapt faith against a backdrop of colonial and neo-colonial frames of power and global governance.

Toolkits to engage faith actors in protection activities may depart from a well-meaning appreciation of the role of faith and belief in shaping frameworks of well-being. This enquiry has highlighted the importance of drawing on evidence derived from ethnographic and historical work, as well as abstracted ideas about what faith actors should do, and assumptions about the inherently conciliatory forces within Christian doctrines. In all, the social embeddedness of faith actors warrants further exploration.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
I declare no conflicts of interest with respect to this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data within this article may be available upon request to the author, with respect to participant anonymity.

ENDNOTES
[1] Interview conducted with Tom Lowman and David Angualia in English, Vurra Sub-County, April 2017.

[2] Arua was designated a City in 2020, as is referred to as such throughout this manuscript. In the relevant historical time periods it was considered a town, or the centre of colonial occupation.

[3] The experience of West Nilers who fled to exile in (then) Zaire contrasts starkly to those who fled to (then) Sudan, and featured in Harrell-Bond's Imposing Aid, which draws on experiences of protection in a refugee setting. As Crisp (1986) notes, there was sparse humanitarian provision in Congo, at least in the early years of the 1980s.

[4] Yet, a significant number of the region's residents follow Islam, which dominates selected locales within the inner city trading spaces.

[5] Owing to racialised readings of territory, the Uganda – South Sudan borderlands were regarded by administrators and missionaries as uncivilised and violent places – hot beds of 'animism', as well as being susceptible to the encroach of Islam from Sudan (fears height-

ened by the appearance of Yakan). Early mission biographies are replete with references to fierce strategies of evangelisation to convert 'pagans', in a rush to compete with Islamism, Paganism, as well as Christians from other denominations (La Salandra n.d).

[6]The changing meanings of this passage are also noted by Tounsel (2021).

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