

Keeping the Faith: On the spiritual dimensions of South Sudanese exile in Arua, north-west Uganda #LSEreturn

While material support is vital for the survival of displaced people, there are also spiritual and religious consequences of exile, says LSE's Elizabeth Storer.

This article is part of our [Politics of Return](#) series, an [AHRC/ESRC PaCCs-funded](#) project which explores the dynamics of return and reintegration of refugees in Central and Eastern Africa. Follow all updates on the project on Twitter and Instagram through the hashtag #LSEreturn.

In Arua, north-west Uganda, South Sudanese citizens displaced largely from the Equatorial states unite on a monthly basis with one purpose: *to pray for peace in South Sudan*. In a meeting in late 2016, a visiting pastor explained to the congregation:

*"We are all suffering. We disobeyed God. We've forgotten him.
Where is the peace? What we sowed is what we are re-paying now.
Our brain cannot rest, our heart cannot rest, our minds cannot rest. We are all sick.
We have to pray. We have to sing. So that God can hear us and forgive us."*

His message was message: war in South Sudan was a punishment resulting not just from the actions of leaders, but also from the sins of *those ordinary civilians present* in the congregation. Return home was dependent on public and repeated confessed of sin, and recommitment to God through prayer.

In exile, the religious space is populated by many religious actors, from different denominations. In Arua, north-west Uganda, Pentecostal factions of the Christian church are becoming increasingly popular. In these settings, leaders consistently base vivid sermons on the causal links between sin and war, drawing on biblical references of suffering to do so.

Religious representations and understandings are often ignored by international policy-makers focusing on the political and military drivers of conflict. But for many in exile, who have lost faith in their government and other institutions, spiritual understandings of causality and responsibility provide a space to imagine a future, back home in South Sudan.

Displacement and Settlement

With the intensification of war in South Sudan since mid-2016, the previously more peaceful Central and Western Equatorial states have become the sites of active conflict. Previously, the regions of South Sudan bordering the Central African Republic and Congo to Uganda had not suffered directly since the renewed outbreak of war since 2013. These areas were comparatively prospering from limited development activities and trade opportunities.

However, over the past two years many residents have been forced to leave their homes because of clashes between government and rebel troops, and the increasing repression, hunger and violence against civilians. Significant numbers of these newly displaced communities have fled across international borders to Uganda, whose approach to resettlement has been celebrated by as particularly welcoming and generous. Even the most uncritical analysts now agree that the policy of awarding land to refugees to become self-sufficient, is now under strain, given recent 'influxes' across the border – there are now nearly [one million](#) registered South Sudanese refugees across northern Uganda. This is the story of displacement that has eclipsed international media outlets, but not all South Sudanese citizens reside within Uganda's refugee settlements: some have chosen to stay in urban areas.

A large population of self-titled "urban refugees" live in Arua, where there is now a visibly expanding population of South Sudanese citizens, many of whom come from the ethnic communities of Central and Western Equatoria. Their residence often relies on personal or commercial links created over successive waves of displacement across Uganda-South Sudan border. In the 1980s, it was Ugandans from West Nile seeking refuge in today's South Sudan to avoid reprisals from their association with the dictator Idi Amin.

Of course, the opportunity to live outside of camps also depends on a supply of cash, often facilitated through the remittances of relatives back home. Since the value of the South Sudanese pound plummeted, this reliance has become increasingly precarious. Life has become increasingly uncertain.



The Church in Exile

Urban refugees in Arua town are often undocumented and exist largely outside the gaze of international agencies, and often the Ugandan state. Fearing unpredictable encounters with state institutions, if altercations happen, people often choose to stay quiet. For many, it is the different denominations of the Christian church that provide the only semblance of institutional, psycho-social support.



Drumming during a service at the Bishop Alison Theology College, Pajulu, Arua

Many leaders and representatives of different churches have moved with their South Sudanese congregations into exile. Some leaders have created new places of worship in Arua, in an attempt to unify disparate South Sudanese communities. For many who live in relative isolation, the church provides an important unifying backbone. In some cases, provisions have been made for weekly prayer services; one Catholic church now has a designated Sunday mass in the Zande language for the surrounding community. These services provide an important community to offer guidance on the challenges faced in exile. One young man explains, *'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?'* Community church meetings provide a forum where South Sudanese citizens do not have to modify their language or their heritage, strategies which many admit they adopt on a daily basis to assimilate into Ugandan populations.



But navigating the everyday in exile is not just about practicalities. Many people speak of receiving troubling visions or being haunted by bad dreams. Emotional healing is also needed when people lose family members at home. For those who cannot afford medical care, the spiritual healing of particular church groups may be the only option. But beyond physical healing, religious ideas are also a means of comprehending the senseless violence at home and the possibility of imagining an end to exile.

Conflict as Curse

In Arua, a female pastor heading an emerging Pentecostal prayer group 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... when something is written in the Bible, it will come to pass.”* Commentary on civil war in today’s South Sudan has often been couched with reference to Christian experience. With reference to the historical experience of conflict, [Christopher Tounsel](#) explains that *‘many understood their struggle in terms of biblical themes, especially that of suffering.’* [1] Since the Second Civil War, particular readings of the bible proved foundational in assuring hope of eventual victory over Sudan. Particular relevance was read into the ‘Prophecy against Cush’ contained in Isaiah chapter 18 which denotes that a ‘strong and powerful nation’ of ‘tall and smooth skinned people’, would eventually come and worship the Lord at Mount Zion. Realising Isaiah’s prophecy became equated with liberating South Sudan.



Based on her extensive research with Nuer communities, the anthropologist Sharon Hutchinson explains that from the early 1990s, Christian explanations for continuing conflict was widely in circulation. Conflict was now understood as a *'Curse from God'*. These novel explanations for war paralleled the fracturing of the SPLA in the early 1990s, when national leaders began to fight themselves, marking the beginning of the widespread South-on-South violence. Nuer forces allied to Machar killed and displaced hundreds of civilians in the 'Bor Massacre'; Garang's forces retaliated by destroying Nuer villages. Prior to this, Hutchinson argues, Dinka and Nuer soldiers would not intentionally kill vulnerable groups, including women and children.^[1] At that time, the scale and dynamics of the conflict transgressed all former moral limits which had governed lethal violence. Understanding conflict as a 'manifestation of God's Anger' provided a means of dealing with the horror of a war that was now beyond the limits of human control. [She writes:](#)

"Rather 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, that they 'brought it upon themselves'"

Again, the verses of Isaiah 18 proved central to confirming the diagnosis of a curse. In fact, some versions of the Good News Bible published this text under the title of 'God Punishes Sudan.' This publishing practice continues in selected editions today.

Spiritual Warfare

Twenty years later, independent churches continue to propagate explanations of war rooted in biblical verses, albeit with vigorous additions of illustrations of a violent spiritual war between God and the Devil. In late 2016 in South Sudan, the Bishop Isaiah Dau of the Pentecostal Church of Sudan [addressed](#) a congregation with a stern warning to leaders and the South Sudanese people to stop violence. He declared: *'Shedding blood is the work of the devil and anybody who is killing people is doing the work of the devil'*. Following similar logic, a representative of the independent church in Arua explained that continuing deaths at home are indicators that *'God is fighting a war in the spiritual realm – God is intervening. Read Numbers 23:19. The Lord is not a man who tells lies. He is not a man who changes his mind – he will fight until he crushes the bones of the enemy'*. Understanding that evil forces are governing the actions of those committing violence, seems to explain the unexplainable. Furthermore, through prayer – such forces can be reversed by ordinary people, distant from active conflict

On a day of National Prayer in late 2016 a prominent Bishop [rejected](#) the notion of an inevitable curse on South Sudan. Instead, he suggested an alternative diagnosis:

"I hear people say God has cursed South Sudan, I am afraid I disagree. We are not cursed, we are blessed but we are sinners. That is why we hate ourselves, that is why we kill ourselves and that is why we backbite ourselves. So we are the problem. But we have been given the opportunity to be forgiven to be enriched and to be healed"

While still looking to the spiritual realm for healing, rejecting curse – rather than rendering groups weak at the hands of omnipotent and all-encompassing spiritual forces – serves as a means of offering renewed options for atonement and hope for return. This route home lies in personal redress for sins.

Independent Churches in Arua

In a later meeting of the Equatorial church mentioned at the beginning of this piece, in late 2016, a pastor from Yei opened proceedings by emphasising that this meeting was an opportunity for people to openly confess their sins: *"What have you done to cause the continuing conflict"* he asked. His sermon was followed by lengthy preaching from two visiting Pentecostal preachers, one of whom is a refugee himself. Their message was translated from English, into Arabic, as well as other local languages. Anchored with Biblical references, the preachers explained that South Sudan is in darkness:

"You have mismanaged the light. The lord gave South Sudanese independence and freedom, but in this period of peace, you turned away from God. You turned to money, you bought things and vehicles, and forgot the gift that our Father had given, you forgot the light that God had given."

According to these pastors, God granted South Sudan the gift of independence in 2011. Yet upon returning, South Sudanese communities turned to a "soft life", enjoying "money, vehicles and easy living". While enjoying their new freedom, people turned towards money, away from God. In response, the pastors relayed that peace will come, only when the congregation "forget their love of money". The sermon concluded with an impromptu performance where South Sudanese pounds were collected from the congregation and prayed over. His message was well received, and was followed by a long period of vigorous and emotional prayers in which the congregation received the gifts of the holy spirit and exalted desperate pleas for return.



These ideas about individual sin, and the performance of public confession and repentance, are common across independent churches in Uganda and South Sudan. It may seem misplaced to locate responsibility for ongoing war in those South Sudanese communities who are more likely to have been the victims of violence, or its consequences. But for many, who have returned to exile after the brief hope offered by Independence in 2011 – a long displacement seems inevitable. Explanations grounded in biblical example seem to offer hope, restore agency and provide a workable directive for those desperate for a tangible route home. Political drivers of conflict have become circular, distant and frustrating – many have now turned to alternatives. A South Sudanese woman decried: *“peace cannot come with the gun, unless God intervenes. There is nothing without suffering, we have to suffer before we get peace.”*

Find out more about the [Politics of Return research project](#).

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[1] Hutchinson & Jok 1999, p. 131