

How Refugees Imagine and Strive Toward Their Future:

The Aspirations and Hardships of South Sudanese Refugees in Uganda

Isao MURAHASHI

African Studies Center, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Tokyo, Japan

This paper addresses the aspirations and efforts of displaced people to create new lives and opportunities, taking the South Sudanese refugees in Uganda as an example. Refugees are often perceived as people deprived of agency and seen as different from “migrants.” However, wartime migrants also aim for a “stable, comfortable life” along with self-preservation and security. It is often overlooked that becoming and staying as a refugee is a transformative experience. Migration can lead refugees to seek new opportunities, reshape their future, and become agents of change. This paper demonstrates how South Sudanese youth strive to improve their lives and imagine their futures by presenting the narratives of their daily lives, everyday practices, and livelihoods. Moreover, it takes two South Sudanese refugees as examples. One is an orphan who experienced family loss, repeated displacement, and structural disadvantages. The other became a pioneer migrant, leading his family and community members to escape to Uganda. Both frequently travel in and around their camp, pursuing livelihood options in the face of economic challenges. Another way to understand the aspiration of refugees is through the examination of their preferences in their utilization of photographic images. Refugees often prefer utopian or dreamy photographs to “real” images of their lives. Therefore, I discuss how displaced people plan and aspire to a future in the contingent conditions of Ugandan refugee settlements.

Keywords: displacement, future aspirations, mobility, South Sudanese, Ugandan
refugee settlement

Introduction

Future-making by the displaced

Refugees are often perceived as people deprived of agency, although wartime migration can also be triggered by the aspiration to a stable, comfortable life. Young migrants particularly tend to cross borders to gain access to education. Classical categorization defines migrants as people who voluntarily move to seek economic opportunities and refugees as those who are forced to move due to political persecution. However, as Bakewell (2011) pointed out, although refugees are not migrants [as a category], that does not mean they cannot become migrants [as a condition] or that displacement cannot be beneficially analyzed as a form of migration [as a process] (Bakewell 2011:25).

When discussing how refugees create their futures, I claim that like most migrants, individuals cross national borders with a mixture of motivations. The distinctions between “voluntary” and “forced” migration or “economic” and “political” reasons for migration do not capture the realities of the complex motivations and reasons for migration. Instead, displacement can be viewed as a subset of migration.

This paper discusses how South Sudanese refugees in Uganda create their future. I explore their transformative lived experiences and the everyday practices of refugees who aim for a better life and future. In addition, I explain how people negotiate and navigate the precarious “camp life” to imagine their future. Specifically, I explore refugees’ imaginative “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2013) for a better future.

Simultaneously, I present my careful observations of the social conditions in the camps where the South Sudanese refugees live.

Refugee camps used to be established and designed as a humanitarian space where aid workers saved the lives of the displaced and mitigated their suffering. However, current refugee camps have been reconfigured as spaces where refugees are empowered, educated, and prepared for a future with targeted self-reliance and resilience approaches. Finally, I discuss how migration can inspire people to imagine a better life, highlighting the narratives of refugees about their imagined future using photographic images.

Cross-border migration between South Sudan and Uganda

Since the 1940s, South Sudanese youth have crossed the border to Uganda for higher education and better work opportunities, whether during war or peacetime. After the 1950s, two Sudanese Civil Wars¹ caused the South Sudanese people to flee and move to neighboring countries, including Uganda. Some of them have been living in refugee camps for many years. The South Sudanese people have formed a highly mobile community owing to their repeated experience of displacement.

In December 2013, fresh internal conflicts in South Sudan following its independence caused a mass exodus of the South Sudanese. This civil war continued until 2019, leading to the establishment of a power-sharing government. Since 2019, ~4 million people have been internally and externally displaced, and most of the 2.1

¹ The first civil war began in 1955 and ended in 1972 with the signing of Addis Ababa accord, and the second civil war started in 1983 and ended in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

million refugees in neighboring countries remain reluctant to return to their country of origin due to security fears.

Since the 1960s, Uganda has hosted the displaced people of South Sudan through many of its 60 years of turmoil. Ugandans too fled the West Nile region to seek asylum in southern Sudan during the 1980s following the collapse of the Idi Amin regime. From the late 1980s to the present, almost every year, except for an 8-year peace period, South Sudanese refugees were hosted in Uganda. When heavy fighting occurred in Juba in 2013 and 2016, Uganda witnessed a mass influx of South Sudanese refugees. By July 2017, Uganda was sheltering over 840,000 South Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers.

Escaping from violence is the primary motivation for those who cross national borders. However, I claim that most South Sudanese escape to their neighboring countries in the hope of making a better future. The youth, in particular, expect better educational opportunities. For example, a refugee youth in Uganda's Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement (hereafter referred to as Kiryandongo R.S.) clearly answered my question, "Why did you come to Kiryandongo?"

He said: "First, I fled war, and second, I came here for education." Another case was proposed by Schiltz *et al.* (2019:44). A Dinka youngster in the Adjumani settlement said, "If you are educated, everything will be possible." Clearly, he believed that educated people can go anywhere. His statement also indicated that some youths arrive in a Ugandan refugee settlement with excessive expectations.

Even in wartime, the South Sudanese control their options by choosing between staying to fight, moving locally and internally to seek more security, or crossing an international border to seek a better future.

Study Area and Fieldwork

This paper is based on my fieldwork conducted in Kiryandongo R.S (**Figure 1**). Since 2014, I have been visiting Kiryandongo R.S. and interviewing refugees every 6–12 months. Kiryandongo R.S. was set up in 1990 to host Sudanese refugees during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005). More than 90% of Sudanese refugees were repatriated after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). A new influx of South Sudanese refugees started in December 2013.

According to the statistics provided by the Ugandan refugee authority, namely, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), the refugee population of Kiryandongo R.S. has been estimated at 56,000, 99% of whom are South Sudanese (UNHCR 2020). Women and children below 18 comprise 84% of the residents, 64% of whom are children. South Sudanese refugees consist of the Dinka, Nuer, and Equatorians. Most of the Dinka and Nuer fled their homes or Juba between 2013 and 2016 due to heavy fighting between the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO). Both conflicts led to the creation of Equatorian refugees who refused to repatriate to Sudan after the signing of the CPA. The new arrivals following the 2013 violence in Juba were registered as South Sudanese refugees in Kiryandongo R.S.

I conducted my fieldwork using non-structured interviews and participatory observation of South Sudanese refugees. Therefore, most of the families and individuals discussed in this article are informants I became acquainted with during my stay in Kiryandongo R.S.

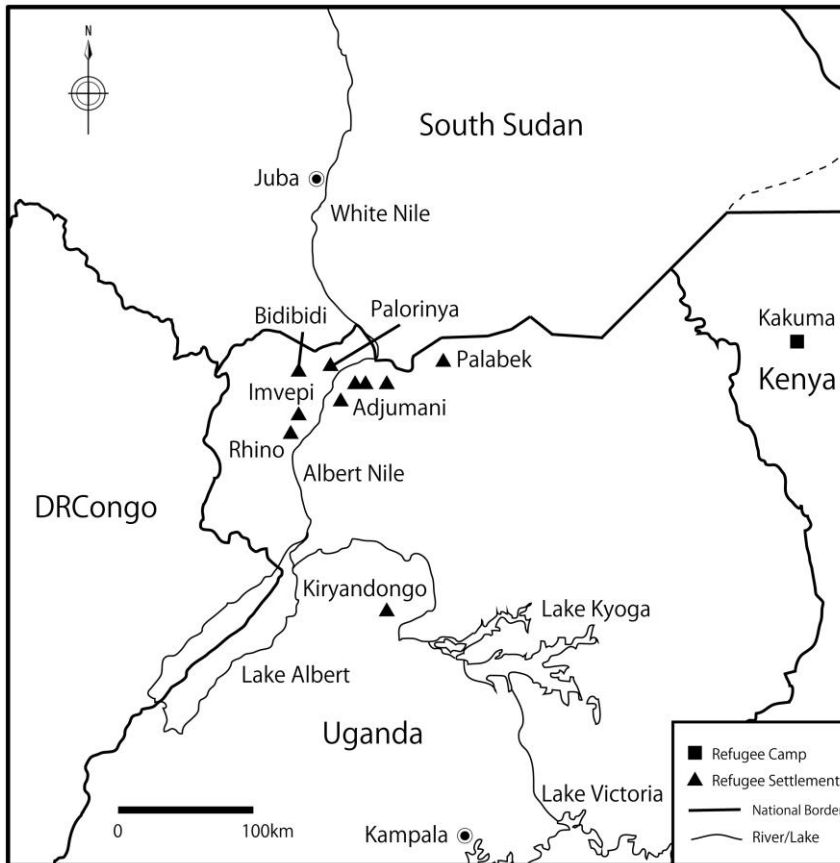


Figure 1. Map of refugee settlements in northern Uganda

Source: UNHCR Uganda (2017).

Refugee Camp: Change of Humanitarian Approach

The refugee camp and its implications

In the discussion of refugees' future creation, I have mentioned the social conditions of the refugee camp while carefully examining the transformation of discourse and the rationale of international humanitarianism. Refugee camps have been criticized over a long period. According to Giorgio Agamben's insightful discussion, refugee camps produce refugees as the ultimate biopolitical subject, or "homo sacer," a life that can be killed but not sacrificed (Agamben 1998).

Meanwhile, classic humanitarianism victimizes refugees and addresses them as recipients of aid, namely, "beneficiaries," who can only appeal to common humanity.

Humanitarian organizations intervene primarily to care for people and mitigate their suffering. Care and maintenance programs are largely limited to the provision of food, shelter, and healthcare for beneficiaries.

Since the 1990s, the vast majority of the world's refugees have remained in exile in the developing world. In such cases of prolonged displacement, provision of aid such as food, shelter, and medicine often plays a limited role in the lives of refugees. In addition, a more developmental approach to enhancing refugees' economic capacities has become prevalent. They often find themselves in a long-standing, intractable state of limbo (Milner 2014)².

The South Sudanese have experienced this “permanent temporariness of the camp” due to prolonged war. Numerous scholars have pointed out that such “encampment” policies have limits. At present, other concepts such as self-reliance and resilience have emerged and have been widely accepted by humanitarian actors.

In light of this, the self-reliance and resilience approach has become central to the humanitarian response to refugee situations. According to the UNHCR's definition, self-reliance refers to the ability of individuals, households, or communities to meet their essential needs, enjoy their human rights sustainably, and live with dignity (UNHCR 2017a). Resilience is defined as “the ability of individuals, households, communities, national institutions, and systems to prevent, absorb, and recover from shocks while continuing to function and adapt in a way that supports long-term prospects for sustainable development, peace and security, and the attainment of human rights” (UNHCR 2017a). While the concept of self-reliance is not new, the current practice of self-reliance is largely shaped by international donors that aim to create cost-

² Protracted situations refer to those who have been in exile for more than 5 years.

effective strategies offering long-term support to refugee populations (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018).

Governed by a version of humanitarianism that prioritizes self-reliance and resilience, refugee camps are being reimagined and reconfigured as spaces for empowering, educating, and preparing their residents for a future where they will no longer need to be supported (Duffield 2008; UNHCR 2017a).

Ugandan settlements and the self-reliant and resilient model

Since the early 1960s , Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees, including the South Sudanese, Rwandans and Congolese in agricultural settlements It is also considered a pioneer of the self-reliance and resilience approach to refugees, that was clearly embodied by the famous “Self-Reliance Strategy”(SRS)³.

Uganda enacted the Refugee Act in 2006, which permits refugees to freely move and work. To address prolonged displacement, Uganda adopted the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)⁴, an integrated refugee management model that provides refugees with access to land and social services. Under the CRRF self-reliance and resilience policy, the camp remains a temporary space, and voluntary repatriation remains the most desirable solution.

³ Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS) was introduced in the West Nile sub-region during 1999-2003.

⁴ The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) conceptualized the self-reliance and resilience policy in 2016 after the New York declaration. Uganda adopted the framework, which is now regarded as pioneering (UNHCR 2017b). The Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) strategy launched in 2016 enshrines the principles of CRRF (UNHCR 2017c).

In Ugandan settlements, land has been allocated to family heads listed on family attestation documents, depending on family size. In addition, food rations have been filtered through family heads (Murahashi 2018). However, several disadvantages were recently noted due to the huge number of refugees. The size of the allocated land per family has gradually reduced as the number of refugees has increased. Now, only a 30 m × 30 m plot of land is allocated to each refugee family. In Kiryandongo R.S., 70% of refugees have arable land, and 23% have no land (Khadka 2017). Monthly food rations that include cereals, sorghum or maize, beans, CSBs (a type of fortified food), salt, and cooking oil have been provided, but the amount has been gradually reduced due to a lack of support from donors.

In addition, during the uncertain progress of peace talks and ongoing insecurity, refugee situations have become protracted, and a growing number of refugees spend years in these settlements.

Imagining Futures

Dominic: An orphan's despair and aspiration

Here, I present the narratives of two refugees and their life stories as material for discussing refugees' creation of a future or how they imagine their future will be. The first case is Dominic from the Madi in South Sudan, an adult orphan in his early 30s⁵:

⁵ The two refugees' names shown in this paper are pseudonyms, so that no individuals can be identified.

*Dominic's narrative*⁶

“I was raised as an orphan in a town near the Sudan–Uganda border after my parents were killed during the Second Sudanese Civil War (supposedly 1980s–early 1990s). I stayed in Kiryandongo R.S., protected by a Catholic pastor’s family during the 2000s, but I was chased away by the host family after the pastor died. After the signing of the CPA, I repatriated to South Sudan. When fighting broke out in Juba in December 2013, soldiers searched the houses and looted all properties. My house was burned down by soldiers and looters. I decided to go back to Kiryandongo R.S., but I have not registered yet and stayed in a settlement because I am afraid of my former ‘family’. When I asked them to add me as a family member, they refused. If there is no family, it is challenging for me to get support from NGOs. I asked NGOs to support my schooling, but none answered. They are unwilling to support orphans because they know we do not have money. Instead, I started as a mobile photographer with my friend’s support.”

In 2014, Dominic started an informal job as a “mobile photographer” with his friend’s support. He takes photos of people, both refugees and Ugandans, in and around Kiryandongo R.S. Every 10 days, he goes to photo studios in Kampala to retouch and develop them. There is a high demand for photographs of host communities and refugees among residents of the Kiryandongo R.S.

⁶ This narrative is incited from my field note written in 2015 based on my interview with Dominic.

Most of the refugees prefer that the backgrounds to their photos (which show shabby houses and the rural landscape of the camp) and their clothes are completely changed (**Figure 2**). They want the images to depict their desired third-country resettlement (i.e., a city, an airport, a luxurious hotel, and nice clothes).

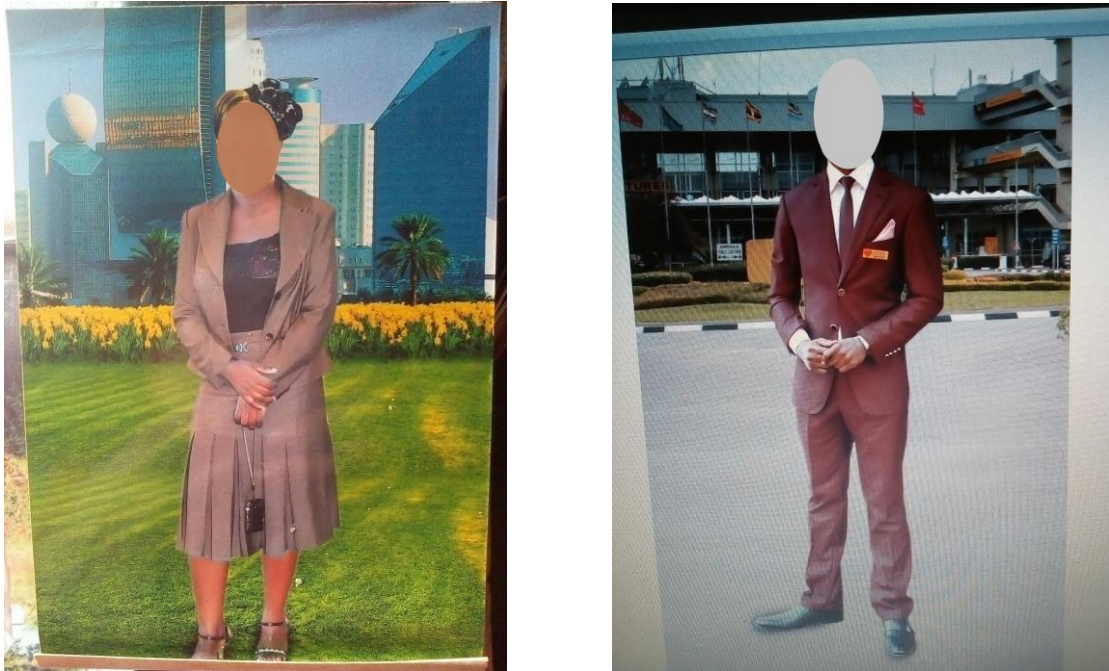


Figure 2. Photos have backgrounds totally changed to an urban and stylish backdrop⁷

Dominic expected to benefit from more business opportunities by staying in the town rather than the settlement. He emphasized that being a “mobile photographer” was his only means of survival and said, “Suppose, I live in the refugee settlement, I will have no money. Nobody will help me.” He wants to resume his schooling at all costs because his schooling stopped at the primary level due to a lack of money.

⁷ The facial images of these photos are edited so that individuals cannot be identified.

His life has been punctuated by several upheavals. He was robbed of most of his belongings by a thief in mid-2015. He can no longer rent a house in the town or take refuge in the nearby church. He told me that in such a situation, “All I can do is pray to God.” Moreover, he was hospitalized in a nearby city after he was seriously sick and suddenly collapsed on the road.

Later, he told me that he had been unconscious in the hospital for some days and could not move even after he was revived. The crisis in his life led to a new encounter. A Ugandan woman cared for him devotedly while he was hospitalized, and they began to live together in the town soon after he was discharged. They bore a son in 2016 and were registered as a refugee family in Kiryandongo R.S. Although his marriage was not guaranteed by any payment of bride wealth, the mother of his girlfriend allowed them to stay together⁸. When he had a new family, he decided to register as a refugee with his wife and son, and he successfully obtained a refugee status.

He is currently running a kiosk and has resumed his job as a mobile photographer. He aspires to buy a plot of land in a town and bring his aunt over who has lived alone in a suburb of Kampala since her husband passed away. Like other South Sudanese youth, his life is uncertain and dependent on highly contingent social

⁸ The woman hailed from Ugandan Acholi. The people from the Uganda–South Sudan border area, such as the Acholi and the Madi, have similar cultural habits. Inter-marriage between two ethnic groups is not rare, even though there are not many cases of marriage between refugees and Ugandans. Once a Ugandan marries a refugee, the Ugandan is entitled to obtain a refugee status. Creating a new family by inter-marriage with a person from the host community can culturally, socially, and economically promote a South Sudanese refugee’s integration into the host community.

conditions (i.e., war, death of biological family members, his adoptive family's refusal to accept him, looting, and theft). His future aspirations do not include repatriation as his wife is unwilling to stay in South Sudan, and he has no job and has only a few relatives to care for them. Instead, he has opted to settle in Uganda to stay with his family.

Alex: An ex-soldier's anxiety and expectations

The second subject in this study is Alex, a former rebel soldier in his late 30s from the Moru in South Sudan. He did not become a refugee until 2014. He had been “in the bush,” implying that he was fighting as a guerrilla soldier for the SPLA⁹ during the Sudanese Civil War. However, his ethnic group was targeted by the SPLA due to political antagonism between the South Sudanese government and local supporters:

*Alex's narrative*¹⁰

“I was running my own clinic in my hometown since 2011 and then I joined local vigilante groups to protect people's fields from Dinka cattle keepers supported by SPLA¹¹ military commandants. I fled my home after local conflict erupted in 2015. Some months after my arrival, my wife came to Kiryandongo. Both my wife and I were given family attestation cards and registered as family heads. I have five biological children with

⁹ SPLA is the abbreviation of Sudanese People's Liberation Army, or the anti-government armed groups during the second Sudanese Civil War.

¹⁰ This narrative is based on my field notes written in 2016 during my interview with Alex.

¹¹ SPLA: Sudan People's Liberation Army, Government forces after the 2011 independence.

my wife, even though I have to care for fifteen more children here. Many of them are my relatives' children and orphans in my neighborhood. We were allocated plots of land by the OPM. In addition, I negotiated with the OPM and obtained eight acres of land for myself. I distributed a part of the land that was allocated to me to the Moru people, and I take care of the children who have lost their parents. I plan to set up a new nursery school for refugee children, including my dependents.”

Soon after his arrival, Alex had several ideas for entrepreneurial activities (i.e., transnational trade of maize produced in the settlement to South Sudan). He received four acres of land from the OPM and began commercial farming. While many refugees are not successful at farming, he applied trial and error to increase agricultural inputs and productivity. He has worked on farming various cash crops, such as vegetables, fruits, and sunflowers, and introduced an irrigation system into the settlement. His efforts were evaluated and awarded by NGOs, and he was hailed a “model farmer” in Kiryandongo R.S. His tribesmen and kin have high expectations of him and regard him as a leader who can rebuild the community in Kiryandongo R.S. If a leader rebuilds his or her own family in a specific community, the reorganization of other families and households can occur rapidly. This case shows how a family head can contribute to the reorganization of a community as a pioneering figure.

However, this does not mean that Alex has become a successful farmer, fully managing household budgets. A lack of initial capital, an insufficient water system for irrigation, internal disputes between refugees, and low payments for NGO extension workers were all obstacles to living in the camp.

Alex believes that educational opportunities for his children will ensure a better future for him and his children, although expensive school fees place a financial burden on the household. He said, “I have to pay the school fees for my children. Education for the children will lead them toward a better future. But school fees, including boarding, costs too much, and I cannot manage the total expenses.”¹²

In this situation, he began to imagine a different future in the middle of his 5 years of camp life. The first was the dream of resettlement in a third country. In 2018, Alex’s neighbor resettled in Australia through a family reunification program. It is commonly believed in Kiryandongo R.S. that only those who have families and relatives abroad can manage their life in the camp as they receive remittances from them. He obtained a resettlement form from his friend who lives in Australia and applied to the Ugandan authorities. His application was almost approved, but he was asked to pay a heavy bribe that he could not afford.

Repatriation, however, still presented him with dangers. Although he had already given up joining the opposition armed groups, he was always regarded as a rebel commander in his hometown. Traveling home could be a risk to his life. He said, “I decided to leave the military because it is extremely useless in the current situation. I lost interest in serving my country because everybody is engaged in fighting for no good reason. Thus, I cannot find any reason to fight in South Sudan.”

In February 2020, when the government decided to collaborate with the opposition armed groups to form a new government, he decided to return to South Sudan. He is now self-employed in Juba and has decided to leave his wife and children

¹² This narrative is taken from my field notes written in 2018 based on my interview with Alex.

in Kiryandongo R.S. so that they can benefit from the safe environment and proper education offered in Uganda.

Discussion

Most refugees continue to investigate new possibilities to live and realize a better future in highly uncertain conditions. Most of their attempts to maintain their livelihoods are directed toward their own and their descendants' future, particularly focusing on education. The classic care and maintenance program has been criticized as it does not include any future plans, whereas self-reliance and resilience policies foster refugees' hopes for a better future. However, many refugees face challenges due to structural constraints (i.e., income generation, employment, living costs, and educational expenses). Even Alex, who was regarded as a successful refugee farmer by the NGOs, failed to realize his expectations and aspirations due to insufficient official NGO support.

In the camp, individual refugees aspire to different futures according to their original plans for their lives, as well as their experiences in the settlement (i.e., third-country resettlement). Whenever they fail to find any tangible future in exile, they tend to escape into an imaginary world and harbor a fatalistic attitude toward their future.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the JSPS Core-to-Core Program (A. Advanced Research Networks), "Research on the Public Policies of Migration, Multiculturalization, and Welfare for the Regeneration of Communities in European, Asian and Japanese Societies." I also would like to thank Editage (www.editage.com) for English language editing.

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