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Crossing the line: 100 years of the North-West Uganda/South Sudan border

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This article looks at the complex history of the border area between what is now North-West Uganda, the Equatoria region of South Sudan, and the North-East Democratic Republic of Congo, over pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial periods. In the early colonial period, international borders changed several times, and local people found themselves successively part of King Leopold’s Belgian Congo, Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Sudan, and the Uganda Protectorate. Cross-border movements included European adventurers, slave armies and ivory poachers, who periodically terrorised local populations. As “West Nile” district, colonial North-West Uganda was systematically underdeveloped, and became a labour reserve and a major source of army recruitment (epitomised by the characteristic local figure of Idi Amin). In the post-colonial era, movement over the borders has been characterised by large-scale cross-border informal trade, refugee movements, armed rebel groups, and the region’s continued marginalisation from more economically developed and politically powerful parts of the three countries. The article explores changes and continuities in the salience of these borders over the past century and a half.

Keywords: borderlands; Uganda; Sudan; Congo; migration; conflict

The border relationships of the only part of present-day Uganda to the west of the River Nile, known since colonial times as West Nile, are different from those of the rest of northern Uganda for three main, interlinked, reasons: (i) the people of the area are not of the same ethnic/tribal identities as those elsewhere in northern Uganda, and have had a very different political history, the main groups being the Lugbara, Madi, Kakwa and Alur. With the exception of the latter, these are speakers of Sudanic rather than Nilotic languages, and are agriculturalists not pastoralists, unlike those in other parts of northern Uganda, such as the Acholi and Langi peoples, or the Karamojong of the North-East. The Equatorian people on the Sudan side of the border, such as the Kuku and the Bari, are also linguistically and culturally different from the majority south Sudanese groups such as the Nuer and Dinka; (ii) the political history of West Nile also differs considerably from the rest of the Ugandan North, especially in the early imperial period and the post-colonial era; (iii) the proximity to the Congo (formerly the Belgian Congo, then Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo) has been as important as the Uganda/Sudan link, and has led to very different cross-border flows – both of people and of commodities – from those in other parts of the North.

This paper is in two main parts. The first looks at the complex imperial history of the region, especially the changing definitions of the borders in the early part of the twentieth...
century. The second focuses on the post-colonial experience of the region, from 1960 to the 1986 victory of the National Resistance Movement, and outlines the successive waves of forced migration, informal trade and cross-border conflict. At the end, I look briefly at north-west Uganda’s borderlands over the past decade, from the period of my ethnographic fieldwork in Arua town to the present day, and at local attitudes to the post-CPA relationships between West Nile and South Sudan.

**Imperial roots**

Over the past 100 years, the West Nile area has been, successively, part of the Congo, part of Sudan and part of Uganda. For this reason, the area appears in volume six of the standard *Cambridge History of Africa* in the chapter on “Western Equatorial Africa”, and in volume seven in the chapter on “East Africa” (the brief period as part of Sudan is not mentioned). While this paper focuses mainly on the Uganda/Sudan border, the history of the region is also profoundly affected by the Uganda/Congo and Sudan/Congo borders. Over the past 100 years, these three frontiers have seen persistent conflict, widespread illegal trading networks, and massive forced migrations, all of which continue to the present. Both the Uganda/Congo border and the Sudan/Uganda border in West Nile have their roots in British/Belgian negotiations which go back to the nineteenth century, so I will begin then.

According to all accounts, the first contacts between the people of what was to become West Nile and outsiders from a radically different culture came in the form of raiding by Arab slavers from the (Turco-Egyptian) Sudan, around the middle of the nineteenth century. Adults and children were either taken off to the north to join the slave armies or be sold on, or they were ransomed for ivory (a third group were held as servants, soldiers or wives in the slavers’ fortified enclaves or *Zaribas*). A tripartite trade grew up in people, guns and ivory, and a pattern of armed raiding of homesteads and abduction of local people was set, which was to be repeated many times over the next 150 years. The first Europeans to reach the area came in with the slavers after 1860, and in the late 1880s the area dramatically to the notice of the European imperial nations, due to the presence of a German Muslim convert known as Emin Pasha, who in 1888, in the wake of the Mahdi’s Islamic insurrection in Sudan, was “rescued” from the area by Henry Morton Stanley, in one of the world’s first international media events. Thanks to Emin, as a later European participant in the area’s history put it, “this little territory has perhaps passed through more vicissitudes and has at one time had more interest centred around it, than any part of central Africa”.

Emin’s legacy was both material and ideological; he left behind him an enduring place for the region in European fantasies of Africa, notably Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* inspired by Emin’s story, and he also left a considerable number of troops, former slave-soldiers who settled in the area forming the core of a new “ethnic” category, the “Nubis” or “Nubians”, whose numbers later included Emin’s namesake, Idi Amin (“Emin” is the Turkish version and “Amin” a transliteration of the Arabic form, of a fairly widespread Muslim name meaning “Faithful”. “Pasha” was an Ottoman military/diplomatic rank). It was Emin’s troops, believed by the British to be “the best material for soldiery in Africa”, who were used by Captain Frederick Lugard of the Imperial British East Africa Company to create what in 1900 became the Uganda Protectorate. The “Nubis” were supposedly their descendents but, under colonial rule, “Nubian” identity became open to a variety of local people who were prepared to convert to Islam, take up a military career, and speak “KiNubi”, a variety of “trade Arabic”.
By the early 1890s, the area, which became known as the “Lado Enclave”, and at its largest included what is now West Nile as well as most of Sudan’s Equatoria province and even a chunk of the present-day Central African Republic, had become what one historian called “the most annexable part of the interior”. Britain, France, Germany and Belgium competed over it, seeking to establish both legal claims and “facts on the ground”. The main aim was to control the upper reaches of the Nile, a political position which acquired the status of a mythical quest in the minds of certain Europeans, including King Leopold of the Belgians. To cut a very long story short, Belgian troops became the first European forces on the ground. In 1892, they arrived in the southern Enclave and came to an agreement with Fadl el Mula, the leader of the Nubi, who were the major armed power in the area other than the Mahdist forces. By 1898 the Belgians were the sole organised military force in the Enclave. In 1900, they set up bases in the town of Lado and elsewhere in the Enclave, with some 1500 soldiers under an officer named Chaltin. A British officer of the Egyptian army, Kaimakam [Lieutenant] Malcolm Peake, reported that, “there is no doubt … that the natives dislike the Belgian rule; this may be accounted for I think, by the fact that Belgians, living in the country, live on the country as a rule, taking food from the natives and not paying for it.”

However, the Belgian supply lines to the West African coast were stretched, and the British combined immense diplomatic pressure with increasing control over the Nile route. The Belgian troops became more and more dependent on their rivals for supplies, and the British did nothing to discourage the anti-Belgian agitation of various humanitarian and commercial groups. At the same time, a complex series of negotiations took place, during which the British Foreign Office was much amused by Leopold’s suggestion that the area be partitioned according to tribal boundaries:

On November 3 [1901] … Eetvelde [Leopold’s negotiator] came equipped with an elaborate tribal map of the southern Sudan … . Neither Phipps nor Eetvelde had heard of such tribes as the Kakwa or the Kuku, and Lansdowne confessed in exasperation that he had no idea who the “Quak Quak” or the “Ku Kus” were … . By the time Salisbury saw the King’s “exploit in cartography” the Kakwa and Kuku had become a standing joke at the Foreign Office.11

In fact, the Enclave was rather a disappointment to the Belgians, especially economically. Their concessionaires found “little ivory and less rubber”. The real problem was one of communications: no crop, and probably not even ivory, was worth the prohibitive transportation costs down the Uele and Congo rivers to the West coast. Throughout the period of European disputes over the upper reaches of the Nile, the importance of “facts on the ground” in the Scramble meant a gradually increasing number of Belgian troops had to be sent to the Lado, which by 1902 was costing Leopold at least £60,000 per year, a vast sum at the time.14

As the Belgians realised the lack of commercial possibilities in the Lado, and as their chances of taking over the Bahr el Ghazal evaporated in the course of diplomatic negotiations and economic realities, the troops increasingly made no real attempt to govern the area, especially in the southern district of the Enclave, known as Mount Wati, which was later to become West Nile District. As a later British administrator put it:

It appears that the Belgians were impressed by the fierceness of the Lugbara and therefore no steps were taken to provide an overall administration. The stations were kept secure by armed askaris called [by the Lugbara] “Tukutuku” after the sound of their guns, and the Belgians were content to acquire the support of surrounding chiefs without going any further afield. Many parts of the district were left to elephant hunters and tribal raiding parties.
The anthropologist John Middleton’s informants in the 1960s remembered the Belgians themselves as spending “most of their time drinking gin and tea”. They were seen as, “pleasant enough men who did little but talk and drink; but the Tukutuku are remembered as evil people”. After King Leopold’s death, the British diplomat Sir Arthur Hardinge wrote that, “the raiding propensities of the large force maintained...[in the Enclave] by the king in connection with his claims and designs on the Bahr al-Ghazal were rather a terror to its shy and savage aboriginals”. My own informants agreed. Those who collaborated with the Belgians and accepted chiefly offices seem to have been particularly at risk. One elder told me about his great grandfather:

During that time when the Belgians were here... these people created a lot of brutality in the area. With their agents, they looted peoples’ animals, they killed people, they raped women. The relation between these authorities with our local people was hostile. I can remember one of my great grandfathers, who was the first Sub-County Chief of Belgium. He was shot by the Belgian authority. When he was called to come to the muzungu, I think he told to the messenger that he was still preparing himself to come. This messenger went immediately and reported that the man says he is a Chief, he doesn’t want to be bothered by people here, by foreigners here. So when he came he was just shot dead straight away. He was called Ajukua. And then from that time I think the issue of joining the administration and so on was alien completely. I think the elders even cursed whoever wanted to associate himself with the foreigners here. She will affect him, he will fail, he will get his fate. So there has always been suspicion between the people and a new administration and so on since that time.

The curse on those who collaborated with successive governments was not lifted until 1992.

Aside from their own casual violence, and that of the “Tukutuku”, the Europeans unwittingly brought with them new diseases and infections for the local people and their herds, bad enough to be clearly remembered more than fifty years later by Middleton’s informants:

the Lugbara were... seriously affected by... the appearance between 1890 and 1895 of cerebrospinal meningitis, smallpox and rinderpest. There seem always to have been recurrent famines, but there was a particularly severe one around 1895. I have also heard Lugbara say that there were outbreaks of plague and smallpox around this time. These disasters resulted in serious changes in both the human and animal populations, and in considerable movement of people from one area to another.

In 1905, having asserted de facto military control in the Bahr el Ghazal, the British lost patience with the Belgians, and a blockade was imposed against Congo supplies travelling down the Nile. Exhaustive negotiations culminated in the Anglo-Congolese Agreement of 1906, which spelled the end of any realistic prospect of Belgian rule. The Agreement recognised the Enclave as the personal property of King Leopold of the Belgians for as long as he lived, to be administered as part of the Congo Free State. On Leopold’s death, the Enclave would come under British control as part of the Sudan condominium, and Belgian interest in the place accordingly faded.

Over this period, the Lado became a playground, and a killing ground, for white adventurers, the last place in Africa in which unregulated elephant hunting was possible, and the venue for what the historian of imperial hunting, John MacKenzie, called “the swansong of the professional European ivory hunter”. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, demand for ivory products had risen dramatically among the growing European and (especially) American middle classes. While hunting in Africa as a whole became increasingly restricted, in the Lado things were different. The application of international game laws was sporadic, while the authorities never effectively controlled the Enclave
outside the immediate areas of their settlements. Poachers could move easily across the international borders between the Uganda Protectorate, the Belgian Congo and Sudan, avoiding the hunting laws, which differed between the three countries.24 As the Belgians began to pull out of the Enclave after the 1906 Agreement,25 the commercial ivory hunters increasingly took over:

Poaching rapidly changed from a hazardous sport to a prosperous profession. By 1908 there were already about eight or ten hunters making a lucrative occupation from ivory poaching … after a time they grew bolder and by 1909 had overrun the whole of the southern Enclave … No one discouraged the hunters. Uganda officials put few obstacles in their way, while the indigenous tribes helped them in return for the elephant meat.26

Ivory had always had its links with slavery, and this was still the case:

Porters were seized from the riverain tribes. Frequently, if a poacher was unsuccessful, he would intimidate a local chief to supply him with ivory, threatening to shoot him and burn his village if turned away empty handed.27

Aside from the links with slavery and the arms trade, moreover:

Poachers were in general an undesirable lot … Burning villages and commandeering porters were part of their normal procedure. Not only did they seriously deplete the great elephant herds, but they prevented any peace, security or stability in the Lado Enclave.28

After Leopold’s death in 1909, for some months no authority whatsoever (effective or otherwise) existed in the Lado; it was not until June 1910 that the Enclave was formally transferred to the Sudan. The former Mombasa ivory trader E.D. Moore wrote:

[T]he abandoned territory was left wide open. Into it poured all the adventurers and riffraff of British East [-Africa], Uganda, and the near-by Sudan, all bent on getting rich quick in a few months of unrestricted elephant-shooting for ivory, or to find the hoard of ivory that Emin Pasha was supposed to have left there. All restraint was thrown aside; the raiders were in a country absolutely without the presence of constituted authority; and crime, even murder, could be committed without fear of legal consequences, for the British could not touch the country until the time was up, and the Belgians had abandoned it.29

In local accounts, the ivory hunters tend to blur into a series of incursions over the period. Their impact on local people was very like that of the earlier slavers: homes were burned, people abducted as porters or to ransom for ivory, cattle killed or taken away for food, random killing or wounding of anyone who got in the way.

From Congo to Sudan to Uganda

In 1910, then, the Sudan authorities acquired a piece of territory which had, for some years, been under no de facto imperial authority and had become a killing ground for European ivory hunters. Local people had become adept at manipulating the tripartite (Sudan/Congo/Uganda) borders. They had also learned to be very wary of Europeans. After so many years of imperial scrambling over the place, the Condominium authorities found the Lado Enclave something of a headache. As Robert Collins commented:

On 17 September 1909, Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Congo Free State, died. By the terms of the Anglo-Congolese Agreement of 9 May 1906, Leopold had agreed, in return for a railway concession from the Congo to the Nile, to annul the Anglo-Congolese Agreement of 12 May 1894 and, on his death, to hand over the Lado Enclave to the Sudan government. On 16 June 1910 the agreement of 1906 was consummated, and the Enclave was officially transferred to the Anglo-Egyptian authorities and attached by them to Mongalla Province.
But the transfer of the Lado Enclave to the Sudan created nearly as many problems as it solved, for the greater part of the Eastern boundary of the Enclave from 5° north latitude to Mahagi on Lake Albert, did not adjoin Sudan territory but rather bordered on that of the Uganda Protectorate. Indeed, before the Enclave reverted to the Sudan, the presence of the Congolese on the west bank of the Nile and Uganda on the East afforded the tribes the opportunity to play off one government against the other. Frequently the bulk of a tribe, such as the Bari, would live on the Congo side to avoid paying hut taxes to Uganda, while keeping their cattle on the opposite bank to avoid paying tribute to the Congolese. The difficulties, if not the impossibilities, of governing those who could change their rulers by merely crossing a river was apparent to all, but the transfer of the Enclave from the Congo Free State to the Sudan did nothing to correct this anomalous situation.

The logical and indeed self-evident solution to the problem was of course for the Sudan to hand over the southern Enclave to the Uganda Protectorate in return for the Uganda territory opposite Lado and Rajaf.

The Condominium authorities handed the problem over to a young officer, Bimbashi Chauncy Hugh Stigand, who had hunted in the Enclave and made something of a specialism of “native administration”. In his textbook on the subject, one of Stigand’s emphases was on fitting administrative borders to tribal boundaries and, in general, he distinguished far more sharply between different groups of Africans than did many of his contemporaries. Before his death in 1919, at the hands of the Aliab Dinka, Stigand developed a complex ethnic theory of the Enclave, which was to have great influence on later administrators:

the Kakwa and Makaraka are intelligent, civilised and progressive, and so are the Moru, Mundu and Avukaya to a rather lesser extent. The Bari are worthless, indolent and retrograde, and the Fajellu are superior Baris or inferior Kakwas. Many of the Madi and all the Lugware are shy, savage and unsophisticated. At the north end of the Enclave, the further one proceeds from the Nile, the more intelligent are the people.

If one follows the Nile upwards one also meets a progression of better types of people. Commencing with the Bari again, to their south are the Madi, a slightly superior people; south again are the Alurr who, taken as a whole, are distinctly more intelligent than the Madi.

As for the area that was shortly to become West Nile district, Stigand wrote:

the Belgian ... posts ... had been abandoned some years before, and the bulk of the people had relapsed into a state of savagery and disorder. The greater part of the Lugware country was found in a state of utter disorganisation, practically every village was hostile to its neighbours, whilst it had been the practice of the better-armed and more organised tribes to the north and east to make continual raids on them.

Stigand recommended to his superiors that this “disordered” southern part of the Enclave be transferred to the Uganda Protectorate, and this was agreed in principle as early as 1912. A boundary commission was appointed, whose basic premise was “to separate the Bari speaking tribes from the Madi and the Lugware”. Two years later, just before the outbreak of the First World War, the southern tip of the Enclave was transferred to the Protectorate of Uganda in a territorial swap between these neighbouring components of the British Empire.

Under the Uganda Protectorate, once effective colonial rule was established in West Nile (an occasionally violent process which took several years and in which the Nubi, now working for the British, played a central role) the district was used as a labour reserve, gazetted as a “closed area” from which outsiders were excluded, and systematically underdeveloped in favour of the cash crop agriculture of southern Uganda. Many local people worked in the southern Ugandan plantations, others joined the army or took up other coercive trades of the state, as police officers, prison warders or informers. The
borders gave the British a reason to maintain the district as a closed area; as a Chief Secretary to the Governor wrote in 1926:

The question of the retention of the West Nile as a "closed district" has been engaging the attention of this Government for a number of years. Apart from the fact that the tribes resident in the district have been truculent and troublesome up to comparatively recent times, the proximity of the Sudan facilitates the ingress of very undesirable influences, while the long international frontier which forms the western part of the district [ie, the Congo border], renders it particularly important that every precaution should be taken to avoid trouble among the various tribes.35

Drawing the lines
However, the international borders, though defined by imperial treaties, remained undemarcated on the ground until the approach of independence. In 2001, I interviewed a distinguished retired British diplomat who, as a young man in the 1950s, had been stationed at the British High Commission in Kampala (and whose anonymity I have preserved). In the run-up to Independence for the Congo, it was decided to delineate and fence for the first time the Uganda/Congo border, and he was given the job of doing this. The West Nile section of the border had been defined by treaty between Britain and Belgium as the watershed of the Nile and Congo rivers, and it therefore ran for much of its length along the top of a range of hills. He asked his superior how he was to know which side was which, and was told that, where the streams ran west (towards the River Congo) this was the Congo side, and where they ran east (towards the Nile) that was Uganda. “What about where there are no streams?” he asked, and was told “Then just piss on the ground and see which way it flows”. A fine metaphor for colonial borders more generally.

As for the Uganda/Sudan boundary, in 1960 the District Commissioner for the Madi area (by the Nile river) wrote that:

- a very tiresome situation has arisen on the northern district border after local meetings at Provincial level made it clear that the Sudanese were unwilling even to discuss a physical boundary line for local administrative convenience, but preferred to leave everything undecided until a Boundary [sic] Commission could be appointed. Whilst a temporary agreement has been set down on paper, it is extremely difficult for chiefs on either side to observe it faithfully in practice without some necessary survey work being done first. Hitherto we may have been privately aware that we did not know where the international border ran; but now both sides, in effect, have admitted ignorance and whilst it may be possible to describe the temporary agreement in words it is certainly not possible when in the bush to know whether one is within one’s jurisdiction or outside it . . . .

In a highly centralised administration, Madi continues to suffer from a geographical situation too far from the centre and, moreover, has not been particularly fortunate in her boundaries. Of the nearest centres of moderate population with which she has most affinity, Kajo-Kaji, Nimule, Attiak, two are in a foreign country. Had the wishes of the people instead of alien politicians drawn the boundary lines she would seem disposed naturally to look and bind towards the north, or the east, or to both.36

Mr Duke’s analysis would be reflected many times in the post-colonial period. Maybe the West Nilers, and indeed other northern Ugandan groups, would more naturally be part of South Sudan than allied with southern Uganda? This question has been raised by academic political scientists such as Ali Mazrui and Mahmoud Mamdani, as well as by many local people.
Crossing the lines: post-colonial West Nile and its borders

At the time of Independence, West Nile was still a remote and underdeveloped part of Uganda. The most senior person from the district during President Obote’s first regime (1962–71) was the army commander Idi Amin Dada, a classic example of the Nubi soldier, who grew up as much in the British King’s African Rifles as he did in his West Nile homeland. Many different and conflicting accounts of Amin’s background exist. Most believe that his mother was a Lugbara, his father Kakwa, but he was often said to have been born over the borders in Sudan or Congo. Like other West Nilers and their neighbours over the border, his was a liminal identity. Another, very different, example of what Virmani terms this “situational nationality” is that of the Kuku poet and literary critic Taban li Liyong, who claimed sometimes to have been born in Uganda, sometimes in Sudan.

After Amin’s coup in 1971, more and more male West Nilers joined the armed forces, encouraged as a counterweight to the numerically dominant Acholi and Langi, northerners seen as supporters of Obote. After 1975, however, internal fighting among the north-westerners led to Amin’s Nubi supporters targeting their Lugbara and Madi neighbours. After an ill-advised attack on Tanzania, the Tanzanian army invaded Uganda alongside Ugandan rebels to overthrow Amin in 1979. As the troops moved through the country, Amin’s forces fled to and through West Nile. The Tanzanians, greeted as liberators elsewhere, were seen as violent invaders in West Nile and most of the population of West Nile fled over the borders, by the beginning of the 1980s. Ondoga ori Amaza, a Madi medical student in Makerere at the time, wrote later of the events of 1979:

The idea of getting out of Kampala, even as the war approached the capital, never occurred to me. In my naive civilian thinking, the war had nothing to do with me since I was not a soldier. This thinking, however, turned out to be a reflection of my underestimation of the extent to which Amin’s misdeeds and excesses had been “West Nilised”. For no sooner was Amin overthrown than everybody from West Nile became not only Amin’s agent, but even a foreigner. We were variously labelled Sudanese, Nubians or Anyanya. People from West Nile, the Kakwa, Lugbara and Madi in particular, found themselves being singled out as those responsible for Amin’s misdeeds.

The accepted view in the literature seems to be that the Tanzanian forces behaved well, and that persecution of the West Nilers began with their replacement by – mainly Acholi and Langi – Ugandan forces in April 1980, after which, as one of Peter Woodward’s informants told him, “If you had a Moslem name, you died, if you were from the Lugbara, Madi, Alur and Kakwa tribes, you died. If you were from the Sudan, you died.” However, some local informants claim the violence started earlier; one (Lugbara) man told me, “They started shooting as soon as they crossed the border from Nebbi: it was Luo versus Lugbara, Nilotes versus Sudanics.” Whenever the violence started, West Nile’s position on two international borders for once served it well, and some 250–350,000 people were able to escape to comparative safety in Sudan and Zaire.

The southern Sudanese poet, Taban Lo-Liyong, described the West Nilers’ exile from the viewpoint of a “host” political leader (he was MP for Kajo Kaji at the time) as well as that of a former refugee in Uganda himself:

When Amin fell and Oyite-Ojok started chasing his fellow citizens out to every corner of the world . . . . The Madi ran, the Lugbara ran, the Kakwa ran, the Muslims ran, pursued by the Langi, the Acholi, and the Tanzanian soldiers who, while doing their master’s bidding, were filling their purses. Those Ugandans who were in Arua ran to Kaya, a smuggler’s meeting point on the Uganda, Zaire and the Sudan border. Some of these were brought straight to Yei and then dispersed in refugee camps. Some headed first for Gulu, and then to Nimule. These were
also settled in camps, strung out on the road between Nimule and Juba. Between Nimule in the east and Kaya in the West, there is a long, undermarcated, sparsely populated and unpatrolled border. This is where most of the remnants of the resistance took their last stand on the Ugandan side. On the Sudan side, the old, the infirm, the young, the Madi, Lugbara and Kakwa just walked across, chose a location similar to the one left behind, built huts and began cultivating. When the land became congested, latecomers moved inland and bartered with zinc sheets or whatever else they ran with for land. These are my guests. The guests of the hospitable Kuku of Kajo Kaji sub-district. And they are not just a handful, they are many.43

Perhaps surprisingly, the West Nilers’ period of exile is one of the most exhaustively analysed refugee movements in African history.44 Barbara Harrell-Bond and Ahmed Karadawi (a former Assistant Commissioner for Refugees in Juba) began their research in 1982, and pursued it up to the publication of Harrell-Bond’s 1986 book *Imposing Aid*, which was claimed to be the first ever independent academic appraisal of an emergency assistance programme. This work launched the University of Oxford Refugee Studies Programme (now Centre), and indeed the whole academic sub-field of forced migration or refugee studies itself, which now exists in university departments around the world. Less well known is Harrell-Bond’s encouragement of Oxford student field trips to the Ugandan camps in Sudan, which was to begin the careers of a whole generation of Africanist migration and development experts, including Alex de Waal, Ken Wilson, Richard Black, Alula Pankhurst and JoAnn McGregor. The conclusion of much of the University of Oxford Refugee Studies Programme (RSP)’s work at this time was that confining refugees in camps under the auspices of the United Nations was both oppressive and counterproductive, as well as exacerbating tensions between refugees and local people over the distribution of scarce resources.

While some of the refugees returned as early as 1982, others remained in exile until they were repatriated after the National Resistance Movement (NRM)’s 1986 take over of Uganda. Many did not want to return even then, and the conditions they faced back in West Nile were often very poor. As Tim Allen wrote:

There was not much that was “voluntary” about this repatriation. Most Ugandans remained refugees as long as they could and only returned to Uganda when the war in Sudan made their continued residence impossible. Back in Uganda, life was difficult. Economic activity was restricted … and the security situation has remained unpredictable into the 1990s. The relief effort mounted by UNHCR and other international agencies was of limited help, and Ugandan state services were inadequate. It took several years for agricultural production to reach a point whereby most families had enough to eat and many people had to rely on gathered famine foods for prolonged periods. That they survived as individuals and as groups reflected a remarkable capacity to make ends meet.45

**Cross border movements in the mid-1990s**

Shortly after the Ugandan refugees returned in the early 1990s, they were followed over the border by increasing numbers of Sudanese refugees, following in-fighting between different southern factions in Equatoria, encouraged by Khartoum. At the same time, the Sudan government began sponsoring Ugandan rebel groups, such as the Lords Resistance Army and, in West Nile, the less well-known West Nile Bank Front, led by former Aminist soldiers.46 The resulting instability plagued the West Nile region during my fieldwork period. In particular, large numbers of Sudanese refugees increasingly came to dominate much of local economic and political life. As one cynical West Niler told me, “Arua has only two cash crops; tobacco and refugees.”47

The rebel groups, the West Nile Bank Front and the Uganda National Rescue Front II, supported by Khartoum, operated over all three borders, attacking villages and abducting
children and adults in a manner familiar to local people, as we have seen, since the
nineteenth century. Nor was this their only link with the early imperial period. One British
nurse who was abducted by the WNBF told me they had said they were fighting for
something called the “Lado Republic”, a term which meant nothing to her, but a lot to me.

The contemporary salience of the early imperial period goes wider than this. From the
1990s to the present day, a West Niler based in Denmark, styling himself “King John Bart
Agame of the Lado Kingdom” has operated a website advocating the creation of a Lado
state in the territory of the old Enclave and, as we shall see below, the idea has continuing
resonance among West Nilers.48

Alongside the forced migration movements of the 1980s and early 1990s came an
increasingly flourishing informal (or as Janet MacGaffey calls it, the “Real”) economy of
cross border trade; including legal goods illegally traded (e.g. petroleum products) and
illegal goods illegally traded (e.g. various drugs, minerals and diamonds) as well as many
items that fell between these stools (guns, gold, tropical hardwoods). Much of this was
centred around the Zaire/Congo border areas, where economists and anthropologists such
as Kate Meagher and Janet MacGaffey wrote detailed studies of these illegal markets
(known throughout Uganda as the “Magendo” trade). These trades went back to the
collapse of the Ugandan economy under Amin,49 but increased as the slow recovery of the
economy from the late 1980s went alongside the slow collapse of Mobuto’s Zaire. In 1990
Meagher analysed a triangular trade between North East Congo, North-West Uganda and
across to Kenya, involving gold, coffee, foreign currencies and mercury. MacGaffey’s 1991
study listed the following commodities as being illegally traded over this part of the
Congo-Uganda border: gold, coffee, ivory, skins, live animals, vehicles, fuel, tea and
papain. Most of these trades persisted during my fieldwork period in the mid-1990s, plus
diamonds, guns, illicit drugs, cigarettes, and timber from protected tree species.50 Just as
the rebel attacks with their abductions, mutilations and killings were reminiscent of the
nineteenth century slavers, so the smuggling trades echo the earlier ivory poachers and
their exploitation of the international borders.

The most characteristic form of magendo from the mid-1990s to the present day is that
carried out by West Nile’s so-called “OPEC Boys”. As I describe it in my book, this
operates as follows:

The main way this worked was that a fuel tanker (say) would enter Uganda from Kenya with
papers stating the load was for transshipment to Zaire. Therefore no Ugandan duties would be
levied. The truck is driven through Uganda to (perhaps) the Aru border post where, for a
consideration, the driver obtains stamps from his weigh-bill from the Ugandan border post
showing the fuel has left Uganda and from the Zairean customs post to show it has entered
Zaire. The truck may even actually cross the border. Either way, its untaxed contents are
siphoned out and taken back to Arua for distribution throughout Uganda.51

Alongside the Sudanese refugees, the rebels and the magendo trades, other cross-border
flows also grew and deepened over the period of my fieldwork between 1995 and 1998. To
cut a long story short, Ugandan and Rwandan forces, allied with local rebel groups in the
Allied Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (ADFL), swept through
Eastern Zaire, eventually overthrowing Mobuto and triggering what has been called
“Africa’s First World War”, in which troops from more than nine African nations pillaged
the country’s mineral wealth.52 At the same time, Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army (SPLA)
forces together with Ugandan soldiers launched a major offensive in south Sudan, taking
over most of Equatoria (though stopping short of Juba). By the end of 1998, the Ugandan
government was pretty much in control of the border area in all three countries.
The borders today

In August 2007, I returned briefly to Arua for the first time since my fieldwork a decade earlier. In the wake of the 2005 “Comprehensive Peace Agreement” between the Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) and the Khartoum government, the area was comparatively peaceful and thriving. The Sudanese refugees were being repatriated (sometimes as unwillingly as the Ugandans had been to return in the early 1990s), and the increasing importance of cross-border trade into Sudan was apparent in the dramatic growth of Arua’s market area. Even in the difficult days of the mid-1990s, this had flourished, largely due to the magendo trades, with (I estimated) some 800 stalls. By 2007 this had increased at least four-fold, while the wider commercial area had also grown beyond recognition, with internet cafes and Indian restaurants giving it a cosmopolitan air unknown a decade earlier. A dozen or more new hotels had appeared around the town (many still under construction). Most of the economic growth appeared to be due to trade into Sudan, the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) instability in Gulu district having helped West Nile to become the major crossing point between the two countries. Though considerable informal trade still exists, much of the Uganda–Sudan traffic seems to be legitimate business, in basic commodities, clothing and items such as bicycles and motor bikes. The Uganda–Congo trade, however, is still very largely illicit smuggling, by both small traders and much bigger operators. It is not yet clear how the recent discovery of large oil deposits near the Congo border (in Lake Albert and extending up into the former West Nile) will affect the local economy and cross-border relations. However, while I was in Arua, Congo soldiers shot and killed a British oil company operative on a disputed island in the lake, an isolated event but one which does not bode well for the impact of these discoveries on local peace and prosperity.

My book, Inside West Nile having been published in Uganda, I was asked by an Arua radio station to take part in a phone-in on local history. The results were interesting. The most frequent questions involved the colonial origins and contemporary relevance of the borders, with many West Nilers being interested in the period of Belgian rule (some thought from my surname that I must be related to King Leopold). Many spoke of the way the borders split related peoples. One mentioned Agame’s Danish internet campaign for a Lado state. Others asked whether they would be able to join an independent South Sudan, if one emerges from the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and whether the British would pay reparations for separating the West Nile from its Sudanese neighbours and allying it with an unsympathetic Southern Uganda. The topic generated such interest that the radio station extended the show by half an hour (delaying the popular Billy Graham’s Prayer Hour to do so). It was clear that the nature of the borders and their colonial history remain of keen concern to the people of West Nile. If the people of South Sudan vote for some form of secession from the North (in a referendum due for 2011), it seems likely that their neighbours in North and North-West Uganda will find even stronger reasons for wanting to ally themselves across the borders, rather than with the South of the country.

It is difficult, however, to summarise the attitudes of the West Nilers to the international borders. Obviously, different people, with varying histories of cross-border movement and different degrees of involvement in the economic opportunities offered by the frontier, will have different attitudes, both to the existence of the border itself and to the people on the other side of it. But many individuals are themselves ambivalent. As Paul Nugent has shown in relation to the Ghana–Togo frontier, there is an inevitable tension between the sense of cultural and linguistic community across the border, and the economic and political opportunities offered by its existence. The boundary may be both a
negative imposition by powerful outsiders (colonial and post-colonial) and at the same time a valuable resource to be exploited. Cross-border connections can be harmful to local people (for example, used by the state to delegitimise West Nilers as not really Ugandan) or helpful (not only economically, but, for example, as somewhere to go when times get politically difficult). In this ambiguity, tension and contradiction lies the essential liminality of such African border communities.

Throughout this account of 100 and more years of the history of the North-West Uganda/North East Congo/South West Sudan borders, three interlinked themes have been explored: (i) conflict and forced migration in repeated waves of population transfers, from slavery to contemporary refugee movements, (ii) illicit cross-border traders, from ivory poachers to oil and mercury smugglers, and (iii) the practical irrelevance of the shifting international borders to local peoples’ ideas of cultural and political community (despite their continuing importance to the local economy). It is difficult to envisage a future for the people of West Nile that would not involve a continuation of these factors, whatever the eventual impact of the discovery of oil.

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Fieldwork and archival research were carried out between 1994 and 2000, as part of my doctoral research at the University of Oxford Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, under the supervision of Professor Wendy James. Much of this material is placed in a wider context in Leopold, Inside West Nile, which also contains relevant acknowledgements. To these, I add my thanks to the anonymous reviewers of the present article.

Notes
1. Fieldwork and archival research were carried out between 1994 and 2000, as part of my doctoral research at the University of Oxford Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, under the supervision of Professor Wendy James. Much of this material is placed in a wider context in Leopold, Inside West Nile, which also contains relevant acknowledgements. To these, I add my thanks to the anonymous reviewers of the present article.
5. Smith, Emin Pasha Relief Expedition, 53.
7. See the correspondence between Leopold’s emissary Van Etvelde and the British Ambassador in Brussels, Sir Francis Plunkett, June 1894, in UK National Archives: FO 403.201 Inclosure in No.135. The major push against the Mahdists began in 1896, and their headquarters, the town of Rejaf, was taken in February 1897.
8. The process is described in detail, as stories reached Wingate’s intelligence service, in the Sudan Intelligence Reports (a part set is in Rhodes House Library, Oxford). A brief outline of events is in the 1904 “Military Report on the Congo Free State” pp. 181–4, in the UK National Archives WO 33/316.
9. Sudan Intelligence Reports 69 (April 10, 1900–May 9, 1900) Appendix A, 5.
10. The various stages of this are outlined in Sudan Intelligence Report no. 73 (August 6, 1900–September 7, 1900), 2; Sudan Intelligence Report no. 78 (January 9, 1901–February 8, 1901), 2.
12. This may explain why a book such as Adam Hochschild's popular account *King Leopold's Ghost*, which argues that Leopold's motivations were exclusively commercial, does not mention the Lado Enclave at all.


19. Interview with Mr Nahor Oya, February 6, 1997.


25. By 1907, according to Collins, “they held only five stations scattered along the road running from the Congo-Nile watershed through the centre of the Enclave to the Nile” (“Ivory Poaching,” 217). Under the 1906 Agreement, the Enclave ran from the Nile/Congo watershed (the present Congo/Uganda border) on the west to the *thalweg* (deepest channel) of the Nile on the east.


27. Ibid., 219.

28. Ibid., 222.


31. Stigand, *Administration*.


33. Ibid., 78.


35. Chief Secretary to the Governor, to the Secretary, Uganda Planters’ Association, January 19, 1926, Uganda National Archives.


39. See, for example, the authorial details on the dust covers of Taban, *Eating Chiefs*; Taban, *Another Nigger*; Taban, *Meditations*.


42. A missionary writing in the *Uganda Church Association Newsletter* noted that “we thank God that Zaire and Sudan were so near otherwise the slaughter might have been much greater than it was” (quoted in Pirouet, “Refugees in and from Uganda,” 248).


48. See the website at http://www.npi-news.dk/.

49. See, e.g., Green, “Magendo”; Prunier, “Le Magendo.”


51. Leopold, *Inside West Nile*, 40; a more extensive analysis is Titeca, “Les OPEC Boys.”
References


