Youth Culture, Refugee (Re)integration, and Diasporic Identities in South Sudan

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Introduction

Studies of societies emerging from conflict, especially those focusing on urban settings, have often approached youth in terms of their potential for renewed violence. Of primary concern in these studies is often the link between young people's socio-economic and political exclusion and various forms of disruptive, antisocial behaviour—e.g. gang membership, crime, failed demobilisation—all these being the particular challenges facing most child ex-combatants (Ismail 2003; Boothby *et al*. 2006; Brier *et al*. 2009). A few noteworthy exceptions notwithstanding (Newhouse 2012; Hart 2008; Hoodfar 2008), the common conflation of "youth," "refugee," and "ex-combatant" categories has directed attention away from the experiences of young people who did not participate directly in armed conflict, including those returning from lives in camps for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). These static social categories often guide the formulation of post-conflict policy and the implementation of reintegration interventions, with little consideration of the fluid identity self-perceptions of young people themselves.

In post-war South Sudan, the cultural practices and identities of youth, like other spheres of the country's turbulent social life, are increasingly being shaped by multiple cultural flows. The relative stability that has characterised this young nation since the 2005 ceasefire has facilitated the return of significant numbers of displaced persons who are now striving to reintegrate in the society they fled years ago. For large numbers of uprooted children and youth the term "reintegration" may be a misnomer, as many were born in exile or fled home when they were too young to remember it. The life experiences of those displaced by the war have been quite diverse and disparate depending on their migratory trajectories, resulting in the emergence of a wide range of youth cultures and identities. Fieldwork among South Sudanese refugees in Egypt and Uganda reveals serious generational differences regarding the very desirability of return. Inter-generational conflict is not uncommon, as the exilic experiences of many youngsters—including access to formal education and employment opportunities not readily available in their country of origin—have created expectations of a "modern" way of life

perceived as largely incompatible with the traditional rural lifestyle, social relations, and gender dynamics they associate with South Sudan. Those who grew up in Khartoum or Cairo, where the language of instruction is Arabic, are facing exclusion and additional difficulties adapting to the English-based curriculum currently implemented by the new South Sudanese government. Against this complex and tumultuous background, the diasporic identities and cultural practices of youth are being translated, appropriated, and creolised to fit into local social contexts and structures.

Based on fieldwork conducted among young South Sudanese refugees in Egypt and Uganda and returnees in South Sudan, this essay examines the various identities and cultural orientations imported and re-constructed by returnee youth now living in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, after years of exile. I begin my analysis with a discussion of the concepts of "youth culture" and "cultural practices of youth" as they relate to the formulation of identity groups in post-conflict South Sudan. This approach, I argue, offers a useful lens to analyse the challenges and opportunities facing young people in this newly independent nation in their efforts to overcome a legacy of war and displacement, contributing in the process to the construction of emerging notions of South Sudanese nationhood. Next I outline my research framework and methods, followed by a brief overview of the current socio-political conditions in the country, which provides a necessary background in which to situate the experiences of young South Sudanese returnees. I then present the main findings of my study, structured around the three common categories emerging from the analysis of accounts of youth culture: identity construction, gender dynamics, and centre/periphery relations. I focus on young people's social self-positioning, their expressed hopes and priorities, and the specific challenges and opportunities they themselves identify as shaping their experiences of reintegration. I conclude my analysis by summarising the main lessons learnt through my research, re-emphasising the significance of adopting a more youth-sensitive approach to the study of the practices through which culture and identity are produced in situations of post-conflict reconstruction, refugee repatriation, and urban displacement.

Agency, Identity, and the Study of the Cultural Practices of Youth

Bourdieu argues that youth is just a word (Bourdieu 1993). The concept "youth" is, to adopt Durham's phrase, a "social shifter" which, as in the linguistic sense of the term, takes much of its meaning from situated use—it is a relational concept emplaced in a dynamic context, a social *lifescape* of power, knowledge, rights, and cultural notions of agency and personhood. As Durham notes, "to imagine youth, and to imagine the concept relationally, is to imagine the grounds and forces of sociality" (116). Definitions and notions of children and youth cannot, therefore, be

simply based on biology or chronological age. They do not denote a fixed group or demographic cohort. A case in point, in South Sudan, the terms "child" and "youth" are not defined within fixed parameters. They are instead fluid, socially constructed categories characterised by criteria that may include being single, non-initiated, not steadily employed and still dependent on one's family (Jok 144-45).[1] However defined, young people in most parts of Africa have traditionally played a central role in many key developments that have shaped the socio-political life of their countries.

Responding to the inclement socio-economic and political circumstances surrounding Africa's youngest generations, the entire continent is witnessing what Mamadou Diouf has described as the "dramatic irruption of young people in both the domestic and public spheres," situating youth at the very heart of the continent's socio-economic and political life (Durham 2000). Earlier studies of youngsters in crisis-affected societies tended to adopt a negative outlook, with younger children typically categorized as victims while adolescents and youth were largely perceived as a potential force for social disruption and upheaval (Cruise O'Brien 1996; Richards 1996; Abdullah *et al*. 1997). Gender stereotyping was also common, with female youth identified as "troubled" and males as "troublesome" (Stainton-Rogers and Stainton-Rogers 1992). International attention has progressively shifted from an exclusive concern with the negative impacts of violent conflict and displacement to a positive awareness of the creative roles that young people can play as agentive participants in the process of post-conflict reconstruction, not just passive recipients of others' provisions (Ensor 2012). Yet, much of this more recent youth-inclusive research continues to be approached from a transition-to-adulthood perspective which downplays youth-focused interaction and cultural production (Bucholtz 2002).

Moving beyond life-stage approaches which examine youth as a stage in a developmental trajectory, current studies of youth culture emphasise the conditions of young people's experience, and the social and cultural practices through which they shape their worlds (Wulff 1995). The "static and inflexible cultural boundaries" that characterised earlier approaches are being replaced with "a more dynamic form of youth culture: the cultural practices of youth" as proposed in modern anthropologically-based re-theorising (Bucholtz 539). An emphasis on agency and attention to the ways in which elements of global capitalism, transnationalism and local culture are creatively combined in the production of identity—seen as fluid, mediated and ever-changing—are salient dimensions in anthropological studies of the cultural practices of youth (ibid. 525). A focus on youth culture, thus understood, necessitates a clearer elucidation of "the ideational systems of meaning and practice that young people, explicitly or implicitly, create as they interact with other youth globally and locally" (Christiansen *et al.* 15). The experiential and phenomenological dimensions of youth are dynamically positioned in particular political and social contexts, so that a focus on meaning and

discourse is combined with attention to dimensions of power, generational relations and social worth. This perspective thus requires that we examine "not just the ways that youth see their world as topographies of value and recognition, but equally how the surrounding world sees the youth in question and the relationship between the two" (ibid.16).

The corpus of literature on youth culture across the African continent has expanded considerably in the last decade (Ntarangwi 2009; Argenti 2007; Abbink, J., and van Kessel 2005; Diouf 2003). Recent studies of youth in post-conflict African societies have revealed the importance of gendered constructions of individual identity and social membership. Challenging uncritically glowing accounts of Rwanda's developmental achievements, Marc Sommers, for instance, offers a more balanced account of the creative initiatives of contemporary Rwandan young men and women struggling to come of age and cope with survival, adulthood and the legacy of genocide. Lahai's discussion of Sierra Leonean youth's resourcefulness and livelihood strategies as transformative tools of social self-positioning is another case in point. His typology of "*dollar boys*" (youths in the Sierra Leonean black market of foreign-currency exchange), "*leone boys*" (those who exchange Leones, the local currency), and "*cool wata mamies*" (young women and girls who sell water on the streets) presents a compelling illustration of youth culture and adaptive agency in post-war Sierra Leone (2012). Following this trend, my own study of youth culture in South Sudan seeks to contribute to the scholarly literature, as well as intellectual and policy debates around post-conflict reintegration, identity construction, and citizenship in this young country and, more broadly, within the Sub-Saharan African context.

Research Framework and Methods

This essay examines the linkages between the transnational migratory trajectories and the local realities and imaginaries of youth culture in South Sudan, where young returning refugees are seeking reintegration into a national fabric that has changed vastly during their absence. The views of those displaced within national borders (internally displaced persons, or IDPs), and those who did not leave (sometimes referred to as "stayees" by government officers and aid agency personnel) are also considered in the analysis. Youth culture as an ideological phenomenon entails a process of identity construction that is enacted at the individual level (O'Donnell and Wardlow 1999), as well as at a cultural level (Fornäs 1995). The connections between individual and social, transnational and local, are grounded in the centre-periphery dynamics of the global cultural economy (Hannerz 1992). My analysis seeks to elucidate how these patterns and cultural practices acquire distinctive meanings within the context of young South Sudanese returnees' discourses of identity. While this paper primarily focuses on the youth cultures and diasporic identities

of young returnees in Juba, the urban capital of South Sudan, my research was carried out as a multi-site study in which common themes were examined in diverse localities in Egypt, Uganda and South Sudan.[2] In particular, this study seeks to identify discourses of identity among displaced South Sudanese youth in order to analyse the relationship between displacement, (re)integration, and the construction of a diasporic sense of self.

The research design was conducted from a phenomenological perspective which highlights the subjective experiences of the individuals and their own perceptions of their life and the world around them (Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Husserl 1962). The focus is on understanding the youth cultures adopted by young South Sudanese returnees from the point of view of the participants themselves, as it is their meanings and understandings that the study seeks to illuminate. Research participants, either individually or in focus group conversations, discussed their experiences in the diaspora, their repatriation to South Sudan, their aspirations, and the challenges and opportunities they face in their new "home." The initial results of the analysis of transcript narratives were shared with the returnee youth in the study, eliciting further discussion and providing them with the opportunity to refine their intended meanings and their significance. Each conversation and subsequent discussion helped to reveal the ways in which participants subjectively understood and actively negotiated notions of selfhood and group belonging. Data analysis was grounded in the identification of the recurring topics and themes that emerged from the data. These initial topics were sorted into categories in order to identify sub-topics which informed further data analysis. The next stage involved developing patterns of relationships between the categories identified, so as to clarify the links between the cultural understandings, experiences, and aspirations of the participants. In an effort to verify the accuracy of the interpretations and enhance validity, findings were discussed with study participants, who were invited to revisit their own constructions.

Additionally, background information on the general situation in South Sudan was gathered through formal and informal interviews conducted with representatives from UN agencies, international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, national, state and local government officials, donors, school directors, teachers, and students, and refugee and IDP returnees, both youth and adults. Sites visited included primary and secondary schools, local markets, vocational training programmes, and livelihood projects.

Waves of Displacement and Emplacement in South Sudan

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed on January 9, 2005 between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). It brought an end to the Second Sudanese Civil War which lasted more than two decades, and reportedly resulted in over 2 million casualties including women and children. It also forced more than 4 million people from South Sudan to become internally displaced or seek refuge in neighbouring countries (UNHCR 2006). The Republic of South Sudan became an independent nation on 9 July 2011, following a largely peaceful referendum that took place on 9 January of that same year, in which the people of South Sudan voted overwhelmingly—by 98.3%—to separate from the North (Save the Children 3).

The situation of the youngest generations of South Sudanese warrants focused attention. With the proportion of under-fives reaching 21% (NSCSE/UNICEF 3), over half the population of 8.26 million under the age of 18, and 72% of its people less than 30 years old (Save the Children 3), the world's newest nation is also one of its youngest. Ambivalently valued as either sources of human and social capital, or else viewed as burdens on the fragile economy—or even as a force for social disruption and additional conflict—children and youth in South Sudan have often borne the brunt of the many challenges that have besieged their country. Few groups experienced more missed opportunities and greater risks during the conflict than the country's girls and boys. The life experiences of those displaced by the war have often been quite diverse and disparate depending on their migratory trajectories, among other factors. Thousands fled, alone or with their families, across the borders with Uganda, Kenya or Ethiopia and became refugees in internationally-managed camps. Others arrived in Egypt, where no camps exist, but the chances of resettlement to a Western country– mainly the US–were high prior to the signing of the CPA. Many others moved to the IDP camps that were established around Khartoum, while some stayed more locally.

The Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) encouraged the return of refugees, driven by the political incentive to increase population numbers in time for the census which eventually took place in April 2008. Returnees started to arrive in South Sudan at the end of the war in 2005, with their numbers increasing dramatically in the run-up to the referendum. OCHA estimates that 1.5 to 2 million South Sudanese living in Northern cities returned to the South between October 2010 and July 2011 (OCHA 2011). While at the present time, returnees' choice of where to settle is constrained by security concerns and the availability of services and opportunities, many are concentrated in overcrowded settlements in Juba—as well as a number of state capitals in the South—where the estimated population doubled between 2005, when the historic peace agreement with the Khartoum government was signed, and 2010, when

Juba's population stood at roughly a half million (Martin and Mosel 2011). Although many in the region view the return of displaced persons as an encouraging sign of peace, the influx of returning refugees and IDPs to impoverished areas of the South has further strained the weak local infrastructure, limited resources and employment opportunities. Research participants in Rumbek, Lakes State, for instance, point out that tensions between returnees and those who remained behind, over access to land, cattle and decision-making power are not uncommon and have occasionally degenerated into physical violence. While most repatriated refugees do often express a desire to rebuild their own livelihoods and futures and contribute to the building of a viable and peaceful South Sudan, the GoSS's expectations that returnees would be welcomed back by their former neighbours have not always proven to be accurate.

For large numbers of displaced children and youth, many of whom were born in exile or fled home when they were too young to remember it, reintegration poses particular challenges. Many young returnees were exposed to functioning cash economies in Egypt, Kenya, Uganda or Khartoum, and arrived in South Sudan with relatively high educational standards and expectations that local conditions in South Sudan are currently unable to meet. Although they do not always find a market for them, their higher skills and educational level serve to identify some of them as "elite," the implications of which are discussed in the following section. Those who grew up in Khartoum face mistrust and rejection from locals who identify them as members of the Arab culture of the North. Fieldwork among South Sudanese refugees in Cairo, Egypt and Adjumani, Uganda, also reveals views on education, repatriation and integration which often differ from those of their Sudan-born elders. Some would have preferred to remain in the diaspora, at least until educational and employment opportunities improve back home. Others long for resettlement to a Western country, a possibility that became more remote after the signing of the ceasefire agreement. Unlike older generations, most of these young people, particularly those based in Cairo and Khartoum, are completely urbanised and unaccustomed to the rural lifestyle they associate with South Sudan. From their long years in exile, which often comprised much or all of their childhoods, returnee youth are importing different cultural orientations that reveal the salience of style and group membership as central bases for identity and belonging. Indeed, youth has become an institutionalized mediated identity space, readily available transnationally for the construction of emerging notions of South Sudanese nationhood.

The Cultural Practices and Identities of Youth

In South Sudan, as in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, youth as a historically constructed social category reveals itself as a relational

concept. Through the lens of youth, "relations and constructions of power are refracted, recombined, and reproduced, as people make claims on each other based on age—claims that are reciprocal but asymmetrical" (Durham 114). My study of young returnees in South Sudan explores the intersection of youth and borders through the prism of space, identity and lived experience. Starkly different past experiences and a current climate of social instability, economic hardship, and tenuous notions of nationhood have combined to inspire new identities for young returnees. Field data suggest the emergence of three common structures through which the diversity of accounts of locally embedded youth culture is organised in South Sudan: these are identity construction, gender dynamics, and core/periphery relations. By no means mutually exclusive, these fluid categories are based on either individual self-identification or social ascription—or both, depending on the case.

Identity Construction

Identity emerged as a core structuring category in the narratives of all research participants. Although all three structures derived from the data are part of the total cultural identities of the youth in the study, identity as a specific structure is highlighted to denote pieces of narratives that explicitly deal with how informants perceive themselves and the ways in which they articulate their notions of individual selfhood and social membership. Identity thus serves as a common structure through which youth culture and youth cultural style combine to express and reinforce difference. Perhaps the most immediate catalyst of youth identity construction among returnee youth in South Sudan relates to young people's migratory and diasporic experiences.

Those who followed their families to Khartoum, Sudan's capital city, are commonly known as Khartoumers. They are also often disparagingly called *Jalaba* (Arabs) (Sommers and Schwartz 6), in reference to their Arabic culture and imputed Islamic inclinations. Those who returned to the South before independence have been legally categorised as internally displaced persons (IDPs) rather than refugees since, before South Sudan separated from the North, migrating to the north of the country constituted a form of internal displacement—i.e. it did not involve crossing international borders.[3] Some young Khartoumers express bitterness about their elders' decision to flee to the North where they did not have access to the educational and other opportunities provided by UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) and other humanitarian organisations to refugees in camps and settlements in other African countries.

The use of the label *Jalaba*—a term I never heard them apply to themselves—connotes suspicion about Khartoumers' political and sociocultural allegiance to South Sudan. Most Khartoumers report having endured precarious living circumstances, often including harassment and state intimidation while in the North. In the South, Khartoumers are often

characterised as disloyal, culturally and politically allied with the North, and even as spies for Sudanese Arabs. Their hardship is however discounted by those who remained in the South during the war, whose own suffering is invoked to legitimise their higher moral claims to patriotism.

Diaspora youth, sometimes referred to as "East Africans" or "foreigners," encompass those who lived as refugees in East Africa and other asylum countries. While the term "diaspora" is used in a descriptive neutral sense, the labels "foreigner" and "East African" are inflammatory as they characterise returning refugees as no longer South Sudanese, and as importers of an alien and unwelcome culture. Like those who fled to the North, (male) diaspora youth often confront criticism at their lack of participation in the war effort. While both groups may be considered intruders by stayees, diaspora youth face a different set of challenges than their counterparts returning from Khartoum.

Local perceptions that Khartoumers and diaspora boys and girls are importing an alien Western culture fuels mutual mistrust and foments the belief that those who left South Sudan during the war have become "foreigners." While this attitude may deepen separation, inter-group conflict and a sense of otherness, it can also promote the crystallization of young returnees' identities in a context of hybridity and ambiguous senses of belonging. Style has become a very prominent cultural medium for expressing these and other identity manifestations of youth culture. The subaltern voices of Khartoumer and diaspora youth—as well as those of so-called "*nigga* boys" discussed below—may be constrained, but never completely silenced as they are expressed through attitude and style. The emergence of style-based groups in the post-CPA period can be seen as a result of the establishment of new youth cultures which stand in a differential relation not only to mainstream and parent culture but also to each other (Hebdige 1979, Clarke 1976). Gender dynamics constitute a particular dimension of identity construction, often externalised through style, which emerged quite clearly in the narratives of study participants.

Gender Dynamics

Unlike Khartoumers whose dress code is typically as conservative as that favoured by those who stayed in South Sudan during the war, diaspora male and female youth often stand out because of the clothes they wear. In some cases, their foreign-bought clothes are simply different and perceived as more Western than those typically available in South Sudan. In other cases, young males have adopted a hip-hop look consisting of T-shirts and baggy, low-slung jeans that deliberately expose a bit of underwear. Popular among male youth in many parts of the world, this hip-hop look is seen as deviant by many South Sudanese. Those who sport this style, referred to as "*niggas*" or "*nigga* boys," are categorised as particularly threatening and rebellious for importing and openly

embracing a foreign style seen as standing against local tradition. In Juba, the county government issued a special order in 2008 criminalizing "*nigga* behaviour*.*" In addition to the country's capital, other big towns such as Wau are also reportedly experiencing increasing numbers of *nigga* boys, which has become a source of social tensions (Leonardi *et al*. 2010).

Some *nigga* boys, frustrated by local conditions of rejection and limited opportunities, and unable to assert their masculinity in locally-sanctioned ways—proving their contribution to the war effort, holding a steady job, owning enough cattle to get married—adopt an oppositional and deliberately foreign "*nigga* identity" to distance themselves from a society in which they feel that they do not belong. *Nigga* groups may, on the other hand, include non-diaspora members who eagerly participate in discussions of global (mainly American) hip-hop music, videos, attire and other expressions of hip-hop culture. By joining *nigga* groups, non-diaspora boys appear to willingly cross borders of culture, if not of geography. Embracing a transnational "modern" style to which they were not directly exposed in exile is made more exciting precisely because it is foreign.

The style of dress of some returning female youth is similarly categorised as transgressive. Diaspora girls are identified by their untraditionally tight and revealing clothes. Sommers and Schwartz report the terms "*tumbu* cut blouses" (*tumbu* means stomach in Kiswahili), and short "don't-sit skirts" (7) as used in reference to some of the items often worn by diaspora girls; tight jeans and T-shirts similar to those favoured by diaspora boys are also sported by these young females. While the dress code for females in South Sudan is not nearly as conservative as in the North, where a woman can be arrested for wearing trousers, the style favoured by diaspora girls may be perceived as a deliberate affront to South Sudanese tradition, and incidents involving violence and police arrests were mentioned in field interviews. Many diaspora girls display a self-assured attitude and are more forward with non-kin males than is the norm in South Sudan. Better educated and more "worldly" than their local counterparts, they express progressive views on marriage and women's role in society—including participation in the public sphere—which are often at odds with traditionally patriarchal mores.

Employment is another sphere in which gender dynamics are identified in study participants' narratives as playing an important role for the construction of identity among returnee youth. Although brewing or consuming alcohol is illegal in Sudan, many displaced South Sudanese reportedly resorted to drinking as a way to cope with the frustrations of life in an IDP camp in the North. Some women turned to brewing and selling beer as one of the few income-generating opportunities—albeit illegal— available to them. Some Khartoumers have replicated this pattern upon returning to South Sudan where there are no restrictions on alcohol. Brewing beer is typically done by females, as it is seen as an extension of the socially-ascribed roles for women, which include food preparation. Drinking, on the other hand, is perceived as far more transgressive when

done by young women as when done by men. Cultural expectations also constrain the choice of jobs considered acceptable for boys and girls. Most manual labour—i.e. clearing land, doing construction work, selling water in the streets—is rejected as undignified by local boys who fear inviting criticism from relatives, peers, and perhaps even more humiliating, girls, if seen engaging in any such activity. Local girls avoid jobs as waitresses in restaurants and bars, and other occupations that require them to mingle with non-kin males, especially at night. Doing so would damage their reputation and lower their dowry price and marriage prospects.

Some diaspora boys and girls and, to a lesser degree Khartoumers, appear to have a more flexible outlook on job acceptability. This attitude was perhaps born out of survival, as difficult conditions while in exile might have forced them to engage in undesirable but available livelihood strategies to which they have become accustomed; alternatively—or perhaps simultaneously—it could signal additional efforts to rebel against constraining traditional social mores, as expressed by several young diaspora girls who defended their choice to work in the bar of a popular hotel/camp in Juba. Diaspora youth (mostly males but including females as well) who are fluent in English and have degrees from respected foreign institutions are an obvious exception. Many of these "elite" returnees have secured high-status, well-paid jobs with the government or with UN agencies, international donors, or nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). Most categorically reject any kind of manual labour, especially farming, which they see as incompatible with their urban life style and beneath their superior qualifications.

Centre-Periphery Relations

Consciousness of a locality's position in relation to a global system of centres and peripheries (Hannerz 1992) is part of the process of identity formation. Rural areas in South Sudan are positioned as peripheral to the core represented by Juba and other urban regional capitals. Since independence, South Sudan is no longer subordinated—i.e. peripheral—to the North. However, its extremely low development indicators and continued climate of social instability and deprivation situate the new nation as peripheral to the other countries in the African region in which it strives to be integrated. The narratives of many diaspora youth acknowledge this differential position, sometimes expressing a consciousness of superiority, especially among the "elite" group who acquired the language, skills, expectations, and cultural style associated with a core region.

As Van Hear has noted, extended stays in refugee camps can have the effect of shifting young people's expectations and aspirations, especially as they relate to education and employment. This is certainly the case among the young South Sudanese returnees in my study who hope that their academic credentials will help them to avoid a dependence on

subsistence agriculture and pastoralism. Even among those who stayed in the country, this aspiration has motivated many to move to urban areas such as Juba in search of waged labour. Many young returnees, including the majority of Khartoumers and many diasporic youth, are choosing to resettle in urban locations either because they lack the skills necessary to work as farmers after years of living in northern cities or refugee camps, or because they lack interest in returning to an agro-pastoralist lifestyle—or have never actually done so in the case of those who were born and raised in cities and towns. Most anticipate that economic and educational opportunities will be superior in urban locations. Objective socio-economic and infrastructural conditions have generated a real and imagined centre-periphery structure in South Sudan, where rural areas are objectively and subjectively construed as peripheral to urban centres. Indeed, colonial legacies have combined with the country's economic struggles to perpetuate the tendency to favour the development of education and other services in urban centres at the expense of the rural (Usman 193). Subsistence farming—*digging,* in common parlance—figures prominently in discourses of peripheral consciousness, which have become part of young returnees' articulations of identity.

Policy also plays a critical role in providing symbolic imagery of what is considered to be indicative of the centre as opposed to the periphery. In post-independence South Sudan, language has become an important maker of identity, and a primary identifier of centre/periphery positioning. Arabic—specifically the Juba Arabic dialect—has been the lingua franca for South Sudanese of different ethnicities whose indigenous languages are not always mutually intelligible. After the 2005 CPA, both English and Arabic continued to be used as official working languages in government and education circles. As South Sudan prepared for independence, the new country's Transitional Constitution declared English to be the only official language, which "sparked alarm for many and promoted the perception that English-speaking youth with some degree of educational accomplishment had gained a crucial advantage" (Sommers and Schwartz 12).

Khartoumer youth, together with those who grew up in Cairo, Egypt, where the language of instruction is also Arabic, are likely to face difficulties adapting to the English-based curriculum currently implemented by the new South Sudanese government. Diaspora youth who lived as refugees in East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia) and beyond are often fluent in English and identify themselves as Christians of various denominations. English and Christian Religious Education (CRE) are both core subjects in the new South Sudanese post-independence secondary education system, giving returnee students a clear advantage over their Khartoumer counterparts—and in some cases, also over local youth. As already discussed, better educated elite diaspora youth are believed to have monopolized highly desirable government positions and jobs with the many international organizations operating in South Sudan. While arguably positioned at the core, elite diaspora youth express

concern over the increasing gap between the needs and aspirations of young people in South Sudan and their capacity to achieve them more forcefully than other more peripherally-situated groups. Interestingly, however, youth of all other backgrounds complain that government officials and international agency staff alike take the concerns and aspirations of elite youth as representative of South Sudanese youth as a whole. The limited government efforts to address the needs of their huge youth constituency may foster additional forms of contestation and instability as young people are placed at the crossroads of multi-layered local and transnational interests and forces. While empirically grounded in the realities of post-conflict South Sudan, my findings support those of other Africanist scholars who have similarly highlighted the critical importance of adequately understanding and addressing the needs and aspirations of the continent's young, displaced and war-affected populations (Hart 2008; Tefferi 2007).

Concluding Thoughts

Youth are central to negotiating continuity and change in any context, and constitute the focal point of the many changes that characterize the contemporary African scene. In the current *zeitgeist* of shifting values and boundaries, understandings of youth's social *lifescapes* often reflect competing moral agendas. Increasing attention to issues of agency and context has led to a broadening of interest in the lives of young people across a wider range of global contexts including conflict-related displacement and reintegration, which have important implications for research, as well as policy and practice, on forced migration (Ensor 2010).

   The position of South Sudanese youth as stakeholders in the nation-building process is not an easy one, given the events that have shaped the prevailing view of youth as both victims and perpetrators of violence. As their country endeavours to put behind decades of conflict to become home to its diverse cohorts of displaced populations, a number of lessons can be learnt. Young people's migratory trajectories and diasporic experiences clearly illustrate that they are not merely passive victims of the societal crisis that pervades the world in which they grew up. Rather, they are searching for their own ways to reconcile simultaneous processes of differentiation and integration while navigating the border areas between the multiple cultural realms in which they participate. Identity acts as a structure of common difference to serve the construction of both individualised and collective discourses of selfhood, reflecting two metacultures of modernity—namely, a metaculture of similarity and a metaculture of difference (Hannerz 1992). This structure of common difference is particularly critical for youth culture, which is ideologically construed to continuously articulate new identity at an individual and at a broader cultural level (Fornäs 1995). In the South Sudanese context, this

search for selfhood manifests itself in the process of positioning oneself in relations to a multitude of cultural opportunities. Negotiating a positive identity that celebrates both uniqueness and belonging is made more difficult by the mutual scapegoating and enmity among Khartoumer youth, diaspora youth, and youth who remained in South Sudan during the war. The internal cohesion between these groups, and the ways in which they relate to each other, reflect geographies of displacement and emplacement regulated by core-periphery relations often symbolically expressed through style.

The cultural practices of youth are increasingly being recognised as symbolic spaces for identity articulation, with local contextual differences determining the particular way young people engage with global or transnational ideologies. The constructions of local versions of youth culture are, at the same time, restrained by the combination of local and transnational structural commonalities. Youth as a transnational concept is expressed through symbolic tokens (Giddens 1991). Symbols, imagery, music and style contribute to the articulation of local youth culture by facilitating an envisioning of identity that goes beyond but includes local interpretations of "globalness," expanding the range of cultural options available (Appadurai 1990). In this sense, local hip-hop music and style, as re-interpreted by diaspora youth in South Sudan, serve the dual identity function of signifying both similarity in terms of shared global imagery, and difference from other places in the world in terms of appropriated local meaning. Thus, at a youth cultural level, hip-hop exemplifies a structure of common difference (Ntarangwi 2009; Wilk 1995).

Shifting gender dynamics are another aspect of identity highlighted in most youth culture narratives as a powerful shaper of selfhood. Constructions of masculinity are undeniably changing in the post-conflict period, owing at least in part to the influence of returnee youth for whom owning cattle or wielding a weapon are not the primary identifiers of maleness. Similarly, notions of femininity are experiencing a slow but steady transformation. Females of all ages are typically ascribed lower status than males in South Sudanese society, as illustrated in the often-cited proclamation by the late John Garang, founder of the SPLN (Sudan People Liberation Army), that women are "the marginalised of the marginalised." The non-traditional roles many returnee female youth have assumed both outside and within the household, and their provocative style and cultural attitudes, are pragmatic and symbolic manifestations of the counter-hegemonic identities they are embracing. By crossing borders of gender and tradition, these female returnees manage to subvert structures of domination, while simultaneously positioning themselves at the margins of local society.

The organisation of identity discourses around centre-periphery relations illuminates the relational nature of youth culture. My study reveals centre-periphery structures as fundamental in the articulation of the individual and cultural identities created by the various patterns of displacement. The articulation of identity occurs from a given perspective

of a locality's position (whether geographical or social, or both) in a centre-periphery relation. For returning youth in post-conflict South Sudan, centre-periphery discourses reference available social positions in terms of reintegration opportunities. Elite groups enjoy not only greater access to desirable resources, but also identity formulations that justify and celebrate their higher status. For those in more deprived positions, such as non-elite returnees, personal and group identity narratives may reflect a longing for material and symbolic resources that are—or are imagined to be—accessible to others but not to them. Reintegration in the periphery (rural as opposed to urban; manual labour and 'digging' in relation to white colour jobs; educated versus unskilled; fluent in English compared to Arabic) is thus interpreted by young returnees as being situated within a discursive realm of marginalisation. After all, being peripheral is synonymous with being marginalised—i.e. literally, to be positioned "at the margin."

A deeper understanding of the experiences of young South Sudanese returnees draws attention to local interpretations of youth culture and their potential to influence the reconfiguration of the society and post-independence polities. These young people are experiencing "everyday ruptures" (Coe *et al*. 2011) in their lives brought about by historical processes of decolonisation and independence, the mechanisms of global capitalism, and the consequences of violent conflict and uprootedness. Yet, most have managed to successfully navigate local and transnational structures to advance their interests in conditions of conflict and peace, displacement and repatriation (Ensor 2012). Often less constrained by tradition and the weight of the past, South Sudanese returnee youth display remarkable resourcefulness and capacity for innovation. An analysis of their cultural practices and identity narratives suggests that many are engaging in counter-hegemonic initiatives and opposing what Christiansen, Utas and Vigh term "gerontophallic post-colonial Africa" (21). As they reconfigure the "geographies of exclusion and inclusion" (Honwana and De Boeck 1) they encounter in their journeys of displacement and emplacement, and navigate the economic, social and political turmoil that pervades their country, young returnees have a significant role to play in South Sudan's post-independence nation-building project.

Notes

1. In South Sudan marriage may not necessarily mark the ending of the category "youth," with social maturity being recognized on a more individual basis (Leonardi 2007, 394).

2. More specifically, research sites were Cairo, Egypt, where I worked from 2007 to 2010; Kampala and Adjumani in Uganda where I conducted fieldwork in the summer of 2011; and three South Sudanese locations:

Rumbek in Lakes State, and Juba and Yei in Central Equatoria State, where I was based in the summers of 2009 and 2011.

3. The legal status—IDPs; refugees—of those remaining in the North after it effectively became a separate country is a complex issue involving definitions of formal citizenship still to be resolved.

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