



Tales of Loss and Sorrow: Addressing Methodological Challenges in Refugee Research in Uganda

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This article discusses methodological challenges in refugee studies through a case study of interactions between refugees and host-population in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda. The article suggest that one solution to the challenges identified is to make use of James C. Scott's theory of private and public transcripts to form an argument that public stories of victimhood are utilized strategically as a weapon of the weak to navigate the terrain of Nakivale. Victimhood is one of many social roles among the actors in Nakivale and the stories become performance narratives with shifting roles depending on the audience. To shift from a social pose as a hardworking refugee in everyday life to a public presentation of self as a refugee with uttermost needs to the researcher is a tactic move. We can successfully read and interpret how the actors in Nakivale navigate in a competitive terrain by listening to the meaning of the public stories, and thus also understand the powerful narrative(s) across the different groups that live within the settlement.

Keywords: methodology; narratives; refugees; host-population; victimhood; agency; Uganda

Introduction

Refugee Studies is a field with considerable methodological challenges: sampling, responses and access to information to mention a few. This article will address the challenge of how storytelling among refugees becomes a strategy through which they seek opportunities to connect to a more desirable social terrain. Scholars have been concerned with this for quite some time (see Block et al., 2012; Duvell et al., 2010; Jackobsen and Landau, 2003; Landau and Jackobsen, 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2007; Ochs and Capps, 1996; Rodgers, 2004; Voutira and Dona, 2007). Turner (2004) shows how refugees living in a camp shape their stories in the form of rumours and conspiracy theories and thus tease out, or try to sort out, some order in their lives. Turner (2015) also describes how it was important for the refugees in his field site to present themselves as 'living off nothing'. The challenge that I encountered while doing research in Nakivale refugee settlement in Uganda was that the stories presented were more dramatic and exaggerated than I had heard while doing research in other refugee camps (Bjørkhaug

and Bøås, 2014; Bøås and Bjørkhaug, 2012; 2014). The presentation of self as an extreme victim was striking. This article does not seek to question the hardship of life as a refugee, and the many challenges of living in Nakivale are indisputable. However, the aim is to confront and discuss methodological challenges in the analysis of the narratives shared by the respondents. It attempts to explain one way of analysing how actors navigate within the social terrain of Nakivale and how the presence of the researcher influences the narratives of the refugees. The article will delve into the empirical material from a fieldwork in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda and discuss how refugee narratives of extreme victimhood pose both a challenge and an understanding for researchers. This is not an attempt to expose lies or declare the truth about the stories, but to look beyond the concept of truth and thus enhance our knowledge of how communities seek a better future through their stories.

To conduct research in conflict environments with distrust and suspicion is challenging (Cohen and Arieli, 2011). In the field of forced migration, narratives have been one of the research methods used to gain information about the lived experiences or the respondents as changes. However, it also offers considerable challenges as a methodology (Eastmond, 2007, p. 249). Malkki's (1995) much-cited work on Hutu refugees in Tanzania refers to how the refugees were living the present in historical terms, and how they referred to a shared body of knowledge about their past in Burundi. Everyday events, processes and relations in the camp were spontaneously and consistently interpreted and acted upon by evoking this collective past as a charter and blueprint that informed the narratives of quite specific groups. The narratives were not necessarily a description of a past, but an interpretation that Malkki refers to as 'mythico-history' because it cannot be described as either a history or a myth. She argues that the aim of analysing narratives is not to make a distinction between 'the facts' and 'distortions', but rather to understand what is taken to be the truth by different groups. She shows how different circumstances generated different narratives. Eastmond (2007) further discusses how narratives are generated in a specific context of the present, and argues that narratives can become a strategic presentation of self rather than a documentation of reality. Narratives as representation are thus methodologically more complex than a documentation of reality, but can open up for a more dynamic view of the individual as a subject (Eastmond, 2007, p. 250). It can tell us something about how one makes sense of the world. In his book *The Politics of Storytelling*, Jackson (2013, p. 36) describes how stories are counterfactual or fictional. This is not because they aspire to mirror reality and fail, nor because they offer an escape from reality, but because they aid and abet our need to believe that we may discern and determine the meaning of our journey through life. If we assume this position, which I believe is correct, how can we come to terms with this in our research?

In this article, I suggest an approach that explores how different narratives in Nakivale refugee settlement unfold. It draws on Scott's (1985; 1990) theory of public and private stories and his concept of 'weapons of the weak' to show how storytelling is used strategically by the population in Nakivale to position themselves towards

different perceived future possibilities. The much-discussed asymmetric power relationship between the researcher and the informant (see Mackenzie et al., 2007) was further complicated in Nakivale by the common conception among the respondents that the research team represented the Norwegian immigration authorities. A few months before the implementation of the fieldwork, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration had been to the settlement to select a quota of 30 refugees for resettlement in Norway. The rumours started among the refugees once the team entered the settlement: 'Norway was back to select more refugees for resettlement'. For many of the refugees, our presence was seen as an opportunity for resettlement to a third country, while others perceived us as an authority that could bring their case forward.

The aim of this article is therefore not to discuss how to substantiate narratives, dividing them into objects that are true or false, but to discuss methodological challenges in a setting like Nakivale Refugee Settlement. Although Nakivale is unique, it shares a lot of commonalities with many other refugee settings. It represents a diverse refugee population which lives close to the national population, in terms of both proximity and interactions. Secondly, as elaborated in this article, it represents a setting which offers resettlement possibilities to a third country for a few selected refugees. The latter creates a situation where the individual has a small chance of social mobility that they would not have elsewhere. It is like a lottery; even if the chance of winning is extremely low, you have a better chance with a ticket than without the ticket. It puts the refugee within reach of the possible dream of an escape from social death (Bøås, 2013; 2015).

This article discusses one answer to these challenges by using Scott's (1985; 1990) theory of public and private stories as an analytical tool that allow us to analytically probe the context of the narratives. In line with Malkki (1996), the article challenges the 'notion of the refugee-experience' as a uniform condition, and the tendency to think of refugees as an undifferentiated, essentialized universal category. A refugee is not just a refugee, but a person shaped by the historical and political conditions of displacement. Thus, a narrative presented by the narrator as one of passive victimhood might be a strategic narrative, but not necessarily so. This article acknowledges that refugees have agency (even if this is within constrained choices) in determining their lives and thus cannot be perceived only as passive victims and dependents (also see Bascom, 1998; Demmers, 2012; Horst, 2006 and Bakewell, 2010; 2008; 2007). However, more important than 'having agency' is how people realize agency, given the social, economic and political conditions, constraints and opportunities they are faced with. Through everyday negotiations, people have the capacity to reflect on their situations, structures and actions in an attempt to look beyond severe limitations (Van Dijk et al., 2007).

A public story presented by refugees to the researcher is one way to negotiate their life in Nakivale, and thus exercise agency. The material presented in this article constitutes people's presentation of self, analysed within the context the respondents' lives. Scott's theory provides a heuristic device to help us understand why we share some stories in a public situation and what is left out of the public space. The public

stories define who they are and how they present themselves within the given context. However, the private and public stories can exceed one another: it is stories of pain and suffering on a continuum. A condition for gaining insight into the private stories is often related to the nature of equity between participants, an equity that might be difficult (and even impossible) in a relationship between a dominant or advantaged partner (the researcher) and a subordinate or disadvantaged partner (the refugee). In addition, policy-driven refugee research is challenged by the need for quick evidence-based policy, and therefore often conducted as a rapid assessment, which provides too little time for substantial data collection and analysis. That, combined with the researcher's urge for the 'real' and authentic story, might overshadow the insight provided by the everyday, public stories.

The overall research project in which I participated in Nakivale was part of an academic project on Economic Conditions of Displacement. The aim of this particular study was to enhance the understanding of how interactions between refugees and the national 'host' population create a social system of relative winners and losers in economic terms, and how interactions between refugees and the national population influence their different approaches to livelihoods. Nakivale represents a refugee setting that has become a permanent intrusion into the life of a host community. It is a community where refugees, nationals, international and humanitarian actors live together in a web of social roles, allowing the researcher an opportunity to understand everyday practices and relations in a complex social environment. I conducted qualitative research in tandem with a quantitative household survey. Both approaches have challenges, but, for the purposes of this article, the methodological challenges of narrative research method will be discussed.

The context – Nakivale Refugee Settlement

Nakivale Refugee Settlement is located in Bukanga County and spreads across Ruganga and Ngamara sub-counties in the present-day Isingiru District of Southwestern Uganda. It is located about 50 km south of Mbarara and provides shelter for approximately 50,000 refugees from nine different countries, mainly in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. In addition to being a sanctuary for refugees, it is also the home of Ugandans who claim ownership to the land they live on and farm. Thus, this creates a social environment where refugees and national residents live side by side. The estimated numbers of nationals who directly benefit from water, education, health and nutrition programmes in and around Nakivale are 35,000 (UNHCR, 2014). The correct numbers of national people who reside within the borders of Nakivale are more difficult to estimate. The land that marks the borders of Nakivale is gazetted by the Government of Uganda for the refugees who have been given protection by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), whereas the national population is not recognized by the Government (and thus not recorded).

This article investigates three subgroups in Nakivale: (1) the refugees who are (in theory) qualified for resettlement to a third country, but fear that they will not be selected by the UNHCR and would thus lose their ticket to the West (and consequently be trapped in Nakivale for the unforeseeable future), (2) the refugees who are not eligible for resettlement to a third country, but who fear involuntary repatriation to their country of origin, and (3) the Ugandan nationals who live inside the settlement area but are perceived as encroachers by the Government of Uganda, and who fear reprisals for farming the land they claim to be their ancestral land. Their greatest fear is to lose their land to refugees.

Nakivale Refugee Settlement was initially set up as a transitional solution in 1958, but the settlement has been in existence since and represents a refugee situation that has become permanently institutionalized. It started as a safe place offering protection for the Tutsi refugees as they fled from the Hutu-initiated 'social revolution' led by Grégoire Kayibanda in Rwanda. Conflicts in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa have brought refugees from Burundi, DRC, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan to Nakivale for more than 50 years. As a consequence, the refugee settlement has become a society of refugees who have different types of resources and coping strategies to secure their livelihoods.

At first glance, Nakivale seems like any other ordinary African rural area. It has a centre with small shops, some restaurants and even a hotel that provides lodging. The centre is surrounded by approximately 80 villages of which 68 villages are for refugees and the remaining villages are for the national population. To drive through the 185 km² settlement takes about three hours and most of the roads are dusty and poor, and it does not give an outsider the initial feeling of being in a refugee settlement. However, with different nationalities living side by side, Nakivale constitutes a multi-ethnic society under administration of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). UNHCR monitors the implementing humanitarian partners, both international and national organizations, which are involved in programme activities. The Nakivale Refugee Settlement is a busy place and is by no means isolated. Refugees and nationals live side by side in the settlement. In addition, there are a number of businessmen who regularly visit the settlement, a number of national and international staff live there (during the weekdays), and it is regularly visited by outsiders attending official visits, humanitarian aid workers and a few researchers.

Theoretical considerations: narratives of victimhood

Scott's (1985) conceptualization of *invisible power* is an argument in favour of listening carefully to the respondents, to their experience, to their values and understanding of a situation and he separates people's performances between being onstage and offstage, depending on the context. A public transcript consists of a set of claims to legitimacy and a series of discursive affirmations staged to demonstrate such claims (Robinson, 2004). To hide the private stories and only reveal the public stories can create a space

of negotiation for subordinated groups. Whereas the oppressed deal with the public transcripts in different ways, one of these is to create a ‘folk-culture’ of ambiguous forms which straddle the public and hidden transcript (Robinson, 2004). Scott uses the ‘weapons of the weak’ concept to examine modes of informal political resistance. Weapons, in the case that Scott analyses, are means to control a subordinate relationship to powerful landlords and can be shaped in many forms, and often without open conflict. Everyday resistance, according to Scott, is manifested through actions such as petty theft, sabotage, gossip and desertion. Stories we tell define who we are and where we situate ourselves. In the public space of Nakivale, it is essential to appear as the person with the utmost need in an environment where access to external resources separates between the *deserving* and the *undeserving* recipients of humanitarian assistance. It is a system where many feel subordinate because many of the decisions regarding their future lay with the authorities, in particular UNCHR and the OPM. A tear-generating story is perceived to be a necessary means to attract the attention of the authorities that hand out privileges. The result is that the stories become performance narratives, with shifting roles depending on the audience (see also Jeffers, 2008).

Public stories of victimhood

A collective, public story of victimhood can be a powerful instrument in an environment where the majority of the population are beneficiaries of humanitarian aid, but it also raises a number of challenges. Baaz and Stern refer to this dilemma by describing how women in DRC claim to be victims of sexual violence in order to access services and opportunities that would not be available without the label of being a victim, and thus *deserving* of humanitarian aid (Baaz and Stern, 2010; 2013). The life of refugees is not one-dimensional, but entails human suffering, on the one hand, and resourcefulness of individuals and communities, on the other hand (Hammar, 2008; 2015; Hammar and Rodgers, 2008; Rodgers, 2008). Common to all refugee settings is that everyday life has changed at some point for the people who have fled; they have been forced to uproot themselves from their homes and have to reorient and reconfigure their social environment and construct new ways of understanding their own reality (Merrill, 2007). A poorly contextualized focus on a phenomenon can lead to *commercialization* of victimhood for certain groups and thus neglect other vulnerable groups who could have been targets of humanitarian aid (Baaz and Stern, 2013).

Fieldwork is contextual, relational, embodied and politicized (Sultana, 2007). The *presentation of self* becomes a strategic representation of self, rather than a documentation of reality (Eastmond, 2007; Sandelowski, 1991). In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1956) discusses the theatrical performance that applies in face-to-face interactions:

Knowing that the individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favourable to him, the [audience] may divide what they witness into two parts; a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part in regard

to which he seems to have little concern or control, being chiefly derived from the expressions he gives off. (p. 7)

The UNHCR resettlement office in Nakivale recognizes how the stories in the initial resettlement interviews resemble one another. People who have been resettled share their story with their peers and unofficial leaders within the community who are familiar with the system as a success story. This keeps the public stories alive. Storytelling thus transforms itself into collective perception and experiences with the perception that the better the stories, the better are the chances of being resettled. At the time of the fieldwork, stories of male rape and homosexuality were reproduced among the refugees and used as an argument for resettlement. A UNCHR officer in Nakivale could be told very similar stories in a number of interviews by the refugees and describes it as a theatrical performance. It is stories produced by a public transcript, often implemented by interviewees as they perceive what the dominant group wishes to hear. The reproduction of the collective stories has, however, often the opposite effect. It leads to doubts among the UNHCR staff as to what cases should be considered for resettlement, and it can lead to resettlement for some and refusals for others. It is a challenging game where each actor strives to be seen by the UNHCR.

The fieldwork: method and methodological challenges

Scott's theory of hidden and public transcripts represents methodological challenges. When the private stories are hidden, they are not available to the researcher and the analysis thrives on the public story (Little, 1993). Private stories consist of offstage speeches, gestures and practices that confirm, contradict or inflect what appears to be public transcript (Scott, 1990). The private stories might leave the researcher with a feeling of having authentic knowledge, but access to such stories is rare and demands a relationship of trust that might be difficult to achieve in a fieldwork. As described in the Introduction, my nationality (as a Norwegian) created an extra distance between myself and the informants who were eligible for resettlement, because I was perceived as a potential humanitarian agent that could bring their case forward. They would happily share their public story with me believing that I might influence their lives, but would keep the private stories among their peers. I started the fieldwork in search for the private life histories that would give me the 'real' insight to life in Nakivale. As described in the empirical part below, this turned out to be a challenging task. After a while, I realized that the story presented to me provided enhanced knowledge on how they navigated their lives, and even if it was a public story tailored to me as outsider. I did not investigate the validity of the story, but listened to the story the way it was presented to me. The dichotomy between the private and public stories might not be obvious to an outsider and the public transcript might contain elements of private transcript, depending on the audience. Malkki (1995, p. 51) emphasizes this as she describes how:

the success of the fieldwork hinged not so much on determination to ferret out ‘the facts’ as to a willingness to leave some stones unturned, to listen to what my informants deemed important, and to demonstrate my trustworthiness by not prying where I was not wanted.

In all fairness, this is a normal code of conduct in any social relationship, regardless of context. Why is this different in a research setting among people who have had traumatic experiences? We all tailor our stories to the audience and share a selective version of our own transcript according to how we want to be perceived.

The research team, with two researchers from Norway and 20 research assistants from the University of Mbarara, Uganda, lived in guesthouses within the settlement. The fieldwork was implemented during September and October 2013. The author of this article was responsible for the qualitative interviews of the project, and it is the qualitative methodological challenges of personal narratives that are discussed in this article. As referred to in the Introduction, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration had granted resettlement to 30 refugees from the Nakivale Refugee Settlement three months prior to the fieldwork. Although it is outside the scope of this article to discuss these resettlement policies and practices, it has implications for the methodological aspects of the fieldwork. My nationality and the presence of the research team in the settlement mattered and shaped the context of the research. Fieldwork among refugees involves engagement in a highly politicized setting, with strong competition for resources. ‘What is the hidden agenda?’ was a question often posed during the fieldwork, often with great suspicion to what the fieldwork represented. It was a legitimate question, but it also raises a number of methodological issues regarding the validity of research. To what extent were the answers and responses affected by the interviewees’ perceptions about who we were? In a setting where access to resources is a key competing factor, it can be *expected* that the respondents will adjust their stories. The issue of refugees mistrusting the position of the researcher and offering a misinterpretation of themselves is a known but often overlooked issue. Strategizing to maximize one’s own benefits is a phenomenon implementing agencies face in the management of aid to refugees, and thus not only an issue for researchers (Kibreab, 2004; Sandvik, 2013; Schmidt, 2007). There can be multiple reasons why refugees might mistrust or misinterpret the role of a researcher involved in participatory research. Harrell-Bond (1986) describes how refugees believed she was a spy. Frydenlund (2005) writes about her role as a Norwegian researcher in the context of Sri Lanka. Norway’s participation in the Sri Lankan peace process was a highly debated topic in Sri Lanka, and Frydenlund’s nationality was both a gate-opener and a challenge during the fieldwork (Frydenlund, 2005). Such dilemmas must not be silenced, but rather be made transparent and explicitly discussed (Jackson, 2013; Nordstrøm and Robben, 1995; Scheyvens and Storey, 2003).

The research team came to Nakivale with formal research permission from the Government of Uganda, but it was the community leaders who provided the final permission to enter their village. Among the refugee population, we met little resistance

to participate in the study, but among the national population, this was different. Contrary to the refugees' perceptions, they did not perceive any benefits to participating in the study. They did not receive aid, and many felt deprived of their land, marginalized and even chased within the settlement. As I will discuss below, this required a different approach to the research. The qualitative approach was based on engagement and interaction with the people who lived within the settlement, including the national population. I was a guest on their terms, and therefore acted accordingly. Narratives were not only formal stories told in a formal interview setting. They emerged during informal conversations, while eating lunch at a restaurant owned by a refugee or attending a football match. Many of the refugees spent hours outside the UNHCR office in an attempt to get an interview with the protection officer in order to claim their need for protection and resettlement. It was a tedious process and many people had tried to get an appointment for months without any luck. Talking with me was a way of sharing their stories with a public audience, but I was careful as to how I selected respondents for the formal qualitative interviews. I would kindly, but clearly, deny interviews with those people who walked up to me and requested, even pleaded, for an interview.

One of the refugees I met on a daily basis in Nakivale was a young student who had been employed by a number of research organizations and NGOs as a translator and research assistant. He spoke fluent English and had a well-established network among the refugees and the staff who lived there. He had been selected for resettlement to a third country and was waiting for his departure date. He had worked as a translator on many projects and I asked him how he perceived the stories the refugees told the researchers. He said it was common to exaggerate the stories based on the general perception that 'the good stories increased the chance of being opted for resettlement'. He said the stories often had elements of the truth, but some parts were changed according to what the refugees thought would bring their case forward: The stories are thus tailored strategically to the audience, with elements of private and public information. Our research team lived within the settlement during the fieldwork. Our constant presence in the basecamp, eating at the local canteen and just stopping and talking to people became part of our everyday life. To some extent, this removed the suspicion surrounding who we were, but it did not necessarily take away the entire anticipation that our research team was a delegation from the Norwegian authorities. After all, it was better to be safe than sorry, just in case we were disguised as a research project with a hidden motive of selecting refugees for resettlement. Refugee stories are driven by existential needs rather than emotion, epistemology, eschatology or by ethics (Jackson, 2013, p. 104). The next sections will dwell into the empirical discussion of how stories are presented by the population living in Nakivale.

The tale of loss and sorrow: public stories of victimhood

The grand story among all subgroups in Nakivale was the *tale of loss and sorrow*. The *presentation of self* was arranged to present a victim, rather than someone with the

resources to cope with life. ‘I am a refugee and I need help’ was a recurrent theme among refugees. The refugees are in many ways socialized into an environment where the perception is that ‘the best story’, for example, the most tearful narrative, is most likely to further one’s own interests. With the ultimate goal being resettlement or the avoidance of repatriation to the country of origin (e.g. for the Rwandese), presenting themselves as being the most vulnerable became necessary to uphold the position within the refugee settlement. When they feel that their stories are not being heard, and therefore they are not seen and hence their needs are not met, they might exaggerate in order to try to achieve this type of visibility. They compete in an environment where people share traumatic experiences and it is only natural that each wants to bring his/her case forward. Good stories are therefore in demand and outside the OPM office in Kampala, there are ‘authors’ (called ‘case workers’). These writers designed tailor-made individual narratives of being in dire need of something for approximately 100 USD (e.g. for resettlement, non-repatriation, extra benefits, etc.). These people who call themselves ‘case workers’ are part of the environment that creates public stories; the stories are shared within the subgroups and used in different versions. Other studies refer to the ways in which the narratives of the informants in a group are influenced by the vocabulary of the group to which they belong, and how formulaic stories draw on cultural narratives to tell an acceptable story of victimization (Merrill, 2007, p. 19).

Eagerness to highlight the *loss and suffering* to the authorities was evident. In some cases, the refugees would have documents with them to support their arguments, but most of the time, these were hand-written police reports of unsolved cases and not be taken into consideration by the UNHCR. In Nakivale, I experienced most of the interviews as quite intense and they would involve quite grotesque reports of mass rape and death. In Nakivale, respondents would be willing to break taboos in their narratives, even in open focus groups, particularly when men shared quite descriptive stories of being raped by men. The nationals living within the settlement presented themselves as victims as well, but with a different character. Many have experienced being chased away from the land they considered theirs: *Land is the biggest problem we face. OPM (Office of Prime Minister) claim it belongs to the refugees. Refugees claim it belongs to them.* All nationals living within the established boundaries of Nakivale fear that they will be the next to be evicted from their home.

In the following sections, I present three types of narratives told in Nakivale that highlight *loss and sorrow* in different ways and present different aims for their lives but with the same aspiration for the future: a dream about a more dignified life instead of the one they have now where the present situation is perceived as being in-between a past and a future. The first type of narrative I refer to as *the refugee*. In this type of narrative, the aim of the respondent is resettlement to a third country. The second I refer to as the *non-returnee*; in this case, the aim of the respondent is to remain in Nakivale under the protection of UNCHR. The third group is *the national*, which refers to the national population who were considered encroachers by the OPM.

The refugee

I interviewed a Burundian father who held a position of authority in the village in which he resided in Nakivale. The research team had been in his village for two days and he was well informed about the study. After I had conducted the interview, I wrote the following in my personal notes:

His story has some clear contradictions. He reported that only one child came with them to Nakivale. However, on his ration card, he has three children aged 14, 9 and 7 years old. He has been in Nakivale for five years, and the timeframe does not add up with the age of the children. When he showed me the ration card I asked him about this issue, but he did not want to tell us why, and just replied that he had his own personal reasons for it. He also did not tell me about his second house (which the fieldworkers had informed me about). He has two houses, but to me he presented the story as if this was the only house he had. During the interview he started to share stories of how his daughter was raped. He brought his daughter into the room to illustrate the horror of the story. It was uncomfortable and I steered the conversation over to something else. I could not allow a situation where a child was present during such a traumatic story, regardless of whether the story was true or not. I therefore asked him to share the story when the child had left the room. There were some clear contradictions in the story about his daughter's rape as well. All he wanted to communicate throughout the entire interview was how the rape of his daughter had affected their feeling of security – and the only solution for them was resettlement to a third country.

He told us he had been interviewed for resettlement, but nothing had happened: 'Some white people also came and left me with some soap and his phone number. They came with a team from Makerere.' The respondent showed me the business card they had given him and it was that of an European Master in Migration and Intercultural Relations student at the University. This information left me with an ethical dilemma: was it my role to inform the respondent that this had not been an interview for resettlement, but for research? Would it make a difference if I told him? I started closing the interview and asked the respondent if he had any final remarks; once again, he stressed his family's need for protection in a third country.

The case described above is an example of a story where the past was shared to express his aim for the future. The 'voice of the refugee' is shaped in the intersection between the interpretation of his past lived life and aspirations for the future. His dream of being resettled was the dominating subject, a dream that could only be achieved if his past and present situation made him a subject of extra need for protection. At the time of the study, the Burundians were not a prioritized nationality for resettlement and he would have had to be selected as an individual case based on an exceptional need for protection, such as the rape of his daughter. His narrative was used to influence the perceived opportunities available within the structural conditions in the shifting connections between past, present and future. To return home was not an option he perceived as potential social mobility for himself and his family. He had left the land he once had in Burundi. In Nakivale, he had a better economic life than many other

refugees, yet he had higher aspirations for his family. Thus, the public story he chose to share with me resembled many other narratives shared by the refugees and provides an analytical space for rethinking and understanding the context to which the story belongs: The narrative of what makes you one of the *deserving* in Nakivale, a story which will hopefully lead to a better path in the future. It is the weapon he had at hand and without his daughter's need for protection, he would be just another refugee in Nakivale. My nationality mattered in this context because I was perceived as someone who could help him reach his goal. Clearly, however, a researcher should be cautious when their role is misunderstood. When the expectations to the researcher exceed what he or she can provide, the result can be enhanced mistrust towards researchers, and thus create a greater gap between the researcher and the respondent.

The non-returnee

The Rwandan community has a long history in Nakivale. The community does not have, and nor does it seek, the option of resettlement. Their fear is to be forced to repatriate back to Rwanda. This is the main concern in their everyday lives. The majority of the refugees who lived in Nakivale at the time of the study had come in the late 1990s or early 2000, a time when access to land within the settlement was more available. Today, the number of refugees has increased and the size of the plots that are granted to each family is remarkably smaller. This made the Rwandese the 'large-scale farmers' of Nakivale. Refugees from other nationalities were hired by Rwandese farmers to work on their plots in exchange for money or goods. Generally speaking, the Rwandese were more settled into life in Nakivale than many of the other nationalities. Repatriation to Rwanda might or might not be safe, but it could also entail the loss of income and insecurities of leaving the settlement behind. However, it is the insecurity of going back that is the only story that provides them with the right to remain a resident of Nakivale. One of my informants – with whom I hung out on a regular basis – was only 18 years old when he came from a refugee camp in Tanzania to Nakivale. He lost contact with his family during the flight from Tanzania, and had not heard from them since. He had come to the settlement in 2003 and thus remembers Nakivale as a place with more humanitarian resources available. He received his high school diploma, learned fluent English and married another Rwandese refugee – with whom he has three children. He worked for an NGO that provided a small, but regular income to his household. Many of the Rwandese refugees knew him by name. Life in Rwanda was unknown to him. He was socialized in the 'bubble of Nakivale' and his greatest fear was to start life all over again in Rwanda.

In November 2012, a tripartite agreement was signed between Uganda, Rwanda and the UNHCR to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of the refugees. The threat of the cessation clause by 30 June 2013 dominated the Rwandan community in Nakivale. The Rwandan refugees would lose their status as refugees under the protection of

UNHCR and thus become stateless if they did not return to Rwanda. To lose the status as a refugee would also mean to step out of the public role as a victim. The cessation clause was not invoked in Uganda. The government still anticipates the outcome of an ongoing discussion regarding alternative solutions, such as local integration or alternative legal status. Nevertheless, it is not unlikely that this will change in the future (IRIN, 2013).

There was competition between the refugees of having the most heart-rending story (being the person in the direst need) and the perception about the Rwandans was that they did not need to be in Nakivale. Thus, they had to defend their position in Nakivale to the other refugees as well as to the authorities. A Somali respondent said: ‘They make good business here, but many also travel to Rwanda for business there. They send their women for trading or to work on their plots in Rwanda’. They would try to share their perception about the Rwandese to put themselves in a better position, and thus question the story presented by the Rwandese. A Congolese woman in a focus group said:

Sangano [the area where Rwandese lived] is the place where the rich live. They are the Hutu people that killed the Tutsi. We are different from them. We used to hear the story of how 1.5 million were killed. In Somalia one million were killed. From DRC as many as five million have been killed. We do not want to collaborate with them. They killed people in Rwanda. The Somalis do not kill us, but they rape us. Lots of people keep quiet, because they are raped [...]. We do not want to stay and we do not want to go back.

In an environment where the competition for resources is high, the competition about the beneficial narratives intensifies, but conflicting stories do not have to be chosen one over the other (Sandberg, 2010; Tyldum, 2014). However, by undermining the other nationalities and their narratives, they would situate themselves as *the greatest sufferer*. The Rwandans were perceived as those who suffered the least, and thus had to defend their position in a more convincing act. The narratives of the Rwandese refugees were therefore of a different character, with emphasis on how life in Nakivale is bad, but going home is worse because they were unable to return to the place they had come from, back to a government that terrified them. However, the result is a life in social limbo where they do not know how long they are able to stay, but they do not have any plans for a life in Rwanda. Thus, to keep the public story of suffering becomes a matter of being where they perceive themselves to have the best future prospect: this is to stay as a refugee in Nakivale.

The National

The national population living within the settlement area has been affected by two factors in particular: (a) the recent policy implemented in 2013 by the National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) clearing any agricultural activity 200 meters away from Lake Nakivale, which is the main source of water in the settlement, for environmental protection of the lake and (b) their description by the Camp

Commandant (OPM) as being encroachers who are residing in the settlement area illegally. Research activities could easily be associated by local residents with events such as the Camp Commandant's recent raid in which harvests of some of the banana plantations owned by the nationals were cut down. The presence of the research team raised suspicion among the nationals that a new event would occur.

Whereas the refugees were generally eager to share their stories, the nationals preferred to be out of the limelight. They were not eager to share either the public or the private story. In many villages, the research team experienced initial resistance, and even open fear. In particular, the villages surrounding the wetlands of Lake Nakivale were suspicious of any outsiders entering their village. In 2012, a notice had been given to the villagers ordering them to move at least 200 meters away from the lake and in February 2013, NEMA evicted and demolished the villages that had not voluntarily been moved away from the protection zone. We used three of our Ugandan research assistance supervisors as gate-openers to the national villages. In two of the national villages, they knew the father of one of the assistances and this established the trust necessary to continue the fieldwork. The village leaders talked with one another and the information about our study went ahead of us as the fieldwork proceeded.

On my initial visit to a national village (without the research team), I had not fully comprehended the degree of sensitivity our research project engendered in them. This village had been totally destroyed as a result of the NEMA intervention. I came with a dual purpose for my visit: (1) to inform them about the upcoming study and (2) to conduct some initial qualitative interviews with some of the nationals. Due to the road conditions, we used a four-wheel drive and a local chauffeur, but we appeared as official visitors which was a symbol of bad luck among the national population because they feared that we came on an official errand to demolish their village. Our presence was welcomed in every refugee community and feared in the national communities. Anyone who represented an authority was seen as an ally of the government, and thus a threat to their community. My translator and I asked to see the chief of the village (called the LC1 chairman). They told me he was nowhere to be found, as were the deputy and the head of security. Eventually, we were able to speak with the secretary of the local council. He feared that this was an official errand. I therefore spoke informally with them and was genuinely interested in who they were and what they were doing. I did not ask any specific questions. The village had been totally destroyed by NEMA in February 2013 but most of the people had moved back, living in the ruined houses and illegally cultivating the plots they claimed they had lived on for decades. Towards the end of the discussion, they invited us to come back.

The following week when we visited the village, the rumours of my visit had circulated and a group of people approached me because they had a story to tell. Although the aim of their lives was to live without being disturbed by the government, they wanted justice for the life they lived. Finally, someone from the outside would listen to them. Again, as an academic researcher, I felt the dilemma of my role as an outsider. Some

of the members of the village were involved in a court case against the government and they pleaded with me to advocate their case to the government and bring justice to their lives: *Please tell the world that we are suffering, our children are suffering*. The expectations of my power to influence the local institutions exceeded what I could contribute to their lives. Their voices were not heard, and they needed someone else to communicate their public story on their behalf. The private story of how (or if) they had legal rights to the land they lived on was a dispute between them and the authority. Few could document ownership to the land, and regardless of how much proof they could provide, they were treated as encroachers by the authorities. This resulted in a situation where the national population recognized the refugees as victims, but perceived themselves to be even worse off. They were the greatest sufferers. At least the refugees received free gifts (hand-outs): *If you are given free food, you can sell what you produce. We now sell very little, and what we sell, is sold to the refugees*. The refugees were given free land and were not chased away by the government. The nationals placed themselves at the highest level of sufferers:

The matter has worsened. Refugees bribe the commandant. For 30000 to 50000 UGX you can buy one shy of land [1 shy = $\frac{1}{4}$ of an acre]. For the Ugandans it is a bit difficult. They are told that the land is for the refugees and not for the Ugandans. The high court wrote to the responsible authorities, asked them not to evict the nationals. The authorities still play the 'underground' game and evict them and give it to the refugees. It is a problem. A refugee can own 30 acres; a national can own 1 shy. Even the new refugees have large plots of land. Those who stay here add more land through the commandant. We do not have a problem with the refugees, but with the leaders that allow this to happen. We feel desperate and fed up with the situation. Our rights and our security are insecure. We do not feel like Ugandans. (Respondent, Uganda 2013)

The competition over access to legal rights, land and work is high. The shared narrative of victimhood among nationals justifies their position as lawless encroachers, and situates them within Nakivale in particular ways: 'We have decided to stay and wait to see what happens. There is nowhere to go. We were born here and grew up here. Where should we go?'

Conclusion

The research presented in this article began with my battling over the question of the truth: Can I trust the narratives of my respondents? However, based on empirical research and with examples from a specific refugee settlement, it rejects the search for the truth and suggests instead an alternative approach to narratives framed by Scott's theory of the distinction between private and public transcripts. How people present themselves enables the researcher to understand how differently positioned actors in Nakivale fight to keep their position intact in a web of social roles.

A researcher intervenes in the lives of the research participants and the power relations between the researcher and the informants automatically impose a *meaning*

to the environment and thus become part of the context that shapes the narrative. People in Nakivale negotiated their lives in the intersection between fear and opportunities, and presenting themselves as someone with a greater need than their neighbour was a tactical move. The researcher can analyse and shed light on how vulnerable populations exercise agency by listening to the public stories, which often also has elements of personal experiences as well. Among all three subgroups described above, it was essential for people to bring their case forward to an authority that could influence their life: To them, it was a matter of 'to be, or not to be'. The alternative, to be stuck in limbo for unforeseeable future, was considered the worst-case scenario. This way of narrating their stories is their coping strategy in a situation of constraints and uncertainties. Thus, the limitations and methodological challenges discussed in this article remain and we need to be transparent about the limitations of the study and ethical about how we interpret the stories we have been told.

Victimhood was perceived as the gate-opener to a future they longed for. It was a weapon of the weak, a tactical pose. To shift from a social pose as a hardworking refugee to presentation of self as a refugee with utmost need was a way of navigating within the social terrain. Performances are tailored to the audience and can therefore create different storylines. Although large segments of research on refugees challenge the stereotype of refugees as passive and dependent victims, the narratives of the respondents in Nakivale would have contributed to the tale of loss and sorrow if they were analysed at face value. People construct and reconstruct their lives in a context in which social agents and structures are mutually constitutive entities. It is the perception of 'self' and 'others' that influences the narrative of everyday life.

Behind the stories in Nakivale I met people who acted out of a position of weakness, but with the strength to manoeuvre and negotiate their everyday lives. However, I was always an outsider to them. At the end of the fieldwork, I was the privileged researcher who returned to my own country, leaving the settlement behind me. On one of the last days of the fieldwork, I participated in an official interview for resettlement and as a closing remark, the UNHCR representative asked the refugee if she had any questions for me. She asked: 'You were born in Norway and can travel here freely and leave again. I am a refugee. Where is the balance in life?'

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