Filling the Humanitarian Gap and a Plural Perspective on Humanitarianism: Communitarian Socio-Cultural Support Practices Among South Sudanese Refugees in Uganda

Emmanuel Viga
Department of Geography
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
vigaemmanuel@gmail.com

Eria Serwajja
Department of Development Studies
Makerere University Kampala
eserwajja@gmail.com

Abstract

Communitarian socio-cultural practices 'from below' that involve the sharing of material and non-material items play a vital role in the lives of refugees. However, these support practices are rarely discussed, documented, or acknowledged for their contribution to refugees' protection, livelihoods, and well-being. This article examines communitarian socio-cultural support practices among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. The article is based on fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2023 in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement and Uganda's capital city, Kampala. The objectives of this article are threefold. First, to document the practices that remain invisible in humanitarian discourses but are deemed valuable by refugees to get by in their everyday lives. Second, to examine how communitarian socio-cultural support practices change in contexts of displacement. Third, to discuss the lessons that can be learned from the ethical and philosophical principles informing communitarian socio-cultural support practices in the pursuit of more contextually oriented and inclusive humanitarian practices that recognize, support, and build on the existing capacities of refugees themselves. By documenting the multiple and intricate socio-cultural support practices, we conclude that these practices have the potential to fill gaps in humanitarian practice, such as drawing on resources among refugees to save lives and alleviate suffering, and that the theoretical foundations that inform these practices, such as togetherness, industry, solidarity, hospitality, and ethical and philosophical principles such as responsibility, reciprocity, honesty, humanity, empathy, and so on, can contribute towards expanding the ethical register of humanitarianism. This has the potential to inform debates and discussions on a broadened and more pluralist humanitarian understanding and practice.

Keywords: African communitarian care, socio-cultural support practices, South Sudanese refugees, Ubuntu philosophy, plural humanitarianism

About the authors

Emmanuel Viga is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. He has over ten years of research experience working with refugees and internally displaced people in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. His recent article, co-authored with Hilde Refstie, "From Accounting to Accountability: Socializing and Relational Accountability among Civic Humanitarian Actors in Uganda", examines understandings and practices of social and relational accountability among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. As someone who spent his early childhood in a refugee camp in South Sudan, Emmanuel is deeply invested in the plights of refugees and their struggles to attain a meaningful life. His research interests include humanitarianism, forced migration, integration, and communitarian practices among refugees and internally displaced people.

Eria Serwajja is a Lecturer in the Department of Development Studies at Makerere University, Uganda. He obtained his PhD in Development Studies in 2014 from the Institute for Social Development at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. He also holds a Master of Philosophy degree in Development Studies from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), and a Bachelor's degree in Urban Planning from Makerere University, Uganda. He is a development professional with an interdisciplinary background in Development Studies and Urban Planning. His expertise and research interests lie at the intersection of

development and society, urban and rural sciences, human-environmental interactions, and local economic development.

Introduction

> "We share and eat from the same plate." (Matour Manyok, interview, July 21, 2021)[1]

> "As South Sudanese, we believe in sharing and not begging." (Jonas Deng, interview, August 12, 2022)

The above interview extracts illustrate the practice of sharing among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. Unlike many countries in the Global North, with established formal welfare systems that provide social protection to households and individuals in distress, many societies across Africa have historically relied on communal resource sharing as a primary social security mechanism (Dhemba et al. 2002; Ngwenya 2003; De Coninck and Drani 2009). Such practices, deeply rooted in communal traditions, serve as safety nets during crises (Goldberg and Short 2012; Musa and Kleist 2022). Sandel contends that communitarianism thrives on the belief that individuals are socially constituted, and that social ties are constitutive attachments that individuals do not voluntarily incur (2010). McDonald argues that communitarianism emphasizes the role and importance of community in personal life, self-formation, and identity (1991). Through social and cultural practices, moral values are observed and passed to community members that protect and promote individual rights and freedoms. With regard to Ghanaian society and within public sector organizations in particular, Akouko notes that socio-cultural support practices such as funerals embody distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features (2009). Similar communitarian practices exist among many communities in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), such as the provision of social security and safety nets during distress and disasters. Such practices emphasize the interdependence of all people by stressing values such as compassion, collective responsibility, and communal wellbeing. However, although mentioned here as a sub-Saharan ethics, relational living and communitarianism are a global phenomenon and therefore should not be essentialized as a sub-Saharan practice.

The importance of socio-cultural support practices in immediate disaster response and protracted displacement is increasingly recognized in humanitarian practice and scholarship. For instance, Radice notes that 'civic humanitarianism', which involves commitments or attachments to specific places, institutions, or practices that align with broader notions of the public good, has received increasing attention (2022). 'Embedded humanitarianism' highlights humanitarian support practices within and among communities affected by crises that occur within local networks based on geographical cohabitation – whether among long-time neighbours or due to displacement – and that often rely on pre-existing relationships and social contracts (Cretney 2016; Brun and Horst 2023). Similarly, the literature on 'resilience humanitarianism' has explored the ability of individuals, communities, or systems to withstand, adapt to, and recover from crises through the promotion of self-sufficiency by leveraging a community's own resources and capabilities (Hilhorst 2018; O'Byrne 2022; Braak and Waanzi 2022), although the resilience paradigm has received criticism for its neoliberal stance and for pushing responsibility away from the state towards displaced persons (Ilcan and Rygiel 2015). Lastly, Brković (2017) introduces 'vernacular humanitarianism' as an *internal* form of humanitarianism, rather than from *below*, arguing that the 'helper' and the 'helped' are embedded within the same socio-political environment.

Following the above, Brun and Horst (2023), argue that the literature on socio-cultural support practices can be examined as

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[1] All the names of the interlocutors in this article are pseudonyms to allow the researchers to ensure the anonymization of the interviewees.

'relational humanitarianism', and as identified by other scholars, that 'relational humanitarianism' is not explicitly referenced in humanitarian practice (Mandalazi and Guerrero 2008; Raghuram 2016). In this article, we put emphasis on examining the subtleties of what constitutes civic humanitarianism as opposed to, or in conjunction with, communitarian and socio-cultural support practices that refugees carry with them into new environments. We also discuss "the reluctance to see such practices as humanitarian" (Radice 2022, 3). This we do by extending Brković's argument that in humanitarian scholarship, 'vernacular' forms of assistance are referred to as "aid provided for by local actors that are in tune with socio-historically specific ideas of humanness" (2017, 1). And Musa and Kleist note that these forms of assistance "[mainly] take place outside the official humanitarian system" (2022, 69).

Although the idea of saving lives and alleviating suffering is hardly a Western, European, or Christian creation, the origin of humanitarianism is historically situated within Western history and Christian thought (Barnett and Weiss 2008). Humanitarianism is thought to be largely inspired by Western Cultural Humanism, with inherent values of sympathy, empathy, benevolence, compassion, and mercy (Ignatieff and Gutmann 2001; Douzinas 2007). These values informed humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence and the institution of universalized minimum standards and reporting requirements (Barnett and Weiss 2008). Humanitarian principles, standards, and reporting are seldom adhered to or recognized in the provision of socio-cultural support practices, and socio-cultural practices undergo othering processes in humanitarian discourse (Mandalazi and Guerrero 2008; Brković 2017; Musa and Kleist 2022; Brun and Horst 2023). However, we illustrate in this article that socio-cultural support practices have the potential to inform a different understanding of humanitarian practice. By this we extend Hilhorst

and Jansen's argument that "humanitarian situations are not blank slates to be occupied by lone agencies but are shaped by social negotiations over inclusion and exclusion" (2010, 1121), as well as Raghuram's contention that there is a need to examine the "implications of the different meanings and geo-histories of care for humanitarian practice" (2016, 1).

The aims of this article are threefold. First, to document communitarian socio-cultural support practices among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. Second, to examine the spatio-temporal dimensions of communitarian socio-cultural support practices and their implications for humanitarian aid provision. Third, to discuss the lessons that can be learned from the theoretical, ethical and philosophical foundations of such practices. The aim of the article is to contribute to debates that advocate for a more contextually oriented and inclusive understanding of humanitarian practice that recognizes, supports, and builds on the existing capacities of refugees. This aligns with a pluralist perspective on developmentalism (Kothari et al. 2019) and humanitarianism (Raghuram 2016; Brun and Horst 2023). Subsequently, we build on Archer and Dodman (2017) to highlight the significance of acknowledging responses rooted in social tradition and culture. We draw on interviews and group discussions among South Sudanese refugees and host communities in Uganda between 2021 and 2023. We also draw on key informant interviews with national, regional and international organizations working with refugees in Uganda. In the article, we illustrate how communitarian socio-cultural support practices such as childcare, support during funerals, rotational agricultural schemes, and crowdfunding, play a major yet often neglected role in the lives of refugees in both urban and rural areas.

The article is structured as follows. We begin by presenting the theoretical, ethical, and philosophical foundations and principles that underlie communitarian socio-cultural

support practices in the African context. We then trace the migration patterns of South Sudanese refugees during the 2013 and 2016 civil wars and the influx of refugees to rural settlements and urban areas of Uganda. This is followed by a brief outline of the fieldwork and the data collection process, before describing examples of communitarian socio-cultural support practices. The article then concludes by exploring what mainstream humanitarianism can learn from the theoretical, ethical, and philosophical principles underlying socio-cultural practices, thus contributing to debates on a pluralist perspective on humanitarianism.

African communitarian care ethics and socio-cultural support practices

Care perspectives are diverse, context-specific, and vary across regions (Tran et al. 2015; Raghuram 2016). It is difficult to identify a singular African care ethic when cultures, traditions, and modes of organizing societies are diverse and differ significantly across different geographical landscapes. Moreover, culture is not static, but rather dynamic, and social practices change through socialization, assimilation, diffusion, and relations among communities. However, there are some dominant principles and practices that shape communitarianism in sub-Saharan Africa, which can be contrasted with western care ethics that place the emphasis on unrestricted "individualistic and utilitarian philosophy" (Bolden 2014, 1). These dominant principles and practices we use as indices for a broadened understanding of African communitarian care ethics. For example, among Bantu-speaking societies in Southern Africa, communal and cooperative living are considered essential for societal wellbeing (Maina 2008), and in many societies in East Africa, social security and social safety nets are considered the bedrock of society (Dhemba et al. 2002; Ngwenya 2003; De Coninck and Drani 2009). Therefore, it can be argued that among East and Southern

African communities, communitarianism is not only concerned with care but is a form of governmentality through which people live together as a group, in which sharing overrides moral, social, and political values and principles (Ikuenobe 2006). For example, in the Ubuntu philosophy, one of the strands of African communitarian care, personhood is constituted by communal reality – "a person is a person through other persons" (Bolden 2014, 1) – and not as some isolated and static individual with a strong will. Communality, as argued by Akouko, is constructed and defined through physical proximity and kinship and extended family networks (2009). Other examples of communitarianism can be traced within Somaliland communities, where social connectivity and embeddedness play a crucial role in how Somali pastoralists cope with disasters and respond to shocks and stress (Musa and Kleist 2022). Similarly, in Tanzania, when a household in the Masai community loses cattle due to drought or other causes, members of the extended family are expected to replace the lost cattle (Haleem 2016). In Botswana and Zimbabwe, burial societies through mutual assistance groups extend this notion of African communitarian care (Dhemba et al. 2002; Ngwenya 2003). In Uganda, intimate kin and close neighbours have, since precolonial times, played an important role for households in terms of exchanging food, providing shelter, and offering labour during the preparation and maintenance of agricultural fields in the planting season (De Coninck and Drani 2009). And in many sub-Saharan societies, the practice of taking in and caring for children from members of the extended family when parents are lost, or when the households cannot feed and provide education for their children, is common (Monasch and Boerma 2004; Mugadza et al. 2004).

Among many societies in South Sudan, the practice of sharing, as exemplified in the first quote, is very vivid. It is organized through mutual support: "mutual support and

collective welfare organised through extended family and clan structures, is an institution sustained not simply by moral accountability. It is a system that is fundamentally integrated into the economy and, accordingly, requires regular physical investment" (Kindersley and Majok 2019, 22). Many scholars have written about physical investment among SSA communities in which they have stressed the importance of financial, social, moral, and psychological support (Cockburn 2007; Shier 2009; Skeels 2012; Ruparanganda et al. 2018; Treleaven 2023). Specifically among South Sudanese, the classical work of Evans-Pritchard noted how among the Luo speakers, the Bari, and the Kakwa, who occupy large parts of East African, it is common for families to share food harvests, child upbringing, communal labour, and ceremonies, (Evans-Pritchard 1937; 1940), thus illustrating the homogeneity that characterizes such societies. However, recent studies have questioned Evans-Pritchard's work among the Nuer for summing up Nuer societies as homogenous (Hutchinson 1996), arguing that such societies are characterized by hierarchies (Li et al. 2024) and power differentials (Tverskoi 2021). In this article we move beyond these discussions to highlight the importance of socio-cultural support practices in the struggle for survival and livelihood among communities. We also illustrate that these practices, like other strands of African communitarian care such as the Ubuntu philosophy, put an emphasis on communality, sociality, and hospitality (Ikeuenobe 2006; Gathogo 2008; Imafidon 2022). The word Ubuntu originates from the Bantu people of SSA. More specifically, it stems from the Southern African Nguni linguistic group, particularly the Zulu/Xhosa, with parallels in many other African languages, and is also widely used in East and Central Africa. Ubuntu is translated as 'humanness' (Imafidon 2022, 5), and it underscores that a person is defined as such by their relationships with others (Metz 2021). The Ubuntu philosophy suggests that individuals cannot exist outside

of their society and that people's existence is not entirely based on individualism but rather is dependent on others, with interdependence as the norm (Mbiti 1990). A person's identity is thus intertwined with that of the wider community, and personhood is developed in the ongoing process of interaction between individuals and the broader community (Eze 2018). The cornerstone of Ubuntu philosophy lies in the significance of "care, sharing, and mutual concern as these are essential for fostering interdependence, solidarity, and harmonious co-existence within and among communities" (Ramosa 2006, 15).

As will be illustrated later, the socio-cultural practices among South Sudanese refugees discussed in this paper exemplify the wider communal living ethos in SSA. These practices, although difficult to trace to a particular South Sudanese culture and tradition owing to the diverse 'tribal' configuration of the country (Madut 2017), have their roots in ancient history in the South Sudanese practice of 'sharing' (Beswick 2004; Mandalazi and Guerrero 2008; Delmet 2013; Lebese et al. 2022). Mandalazi and Guerrero (2008) categorize sharing into two types: informal, regular sharing and formal sharing. Informal, regular sharing or 'eating groups' refers to the practice through which men over eight years of age come together in one central place while women and children have a separate and usually distant location to eat food. The Dinka people call the practice *buro*, and in this practice members of the Dinka community learn how to share not only within their 'eating groups' but with extended family members. Formal sharing, meanwhile, is practised both within and beyond the family and is embodied through rites of passage (Lebese et al. 2022), childcare (Zimmerman 2003; Cotton 2021), and marriage (Kindersley and Majok 2019), among other ways. For example, during marriage, bridewealth is paid through "martial social security" (Kindersley and Majok 2019, 23), where livestock is not only provided by the head of the bridegroom's

family, but also by his other agnatic and uterine kin. Similarly, "bridewealth is distributed among the bride's maternal and paternal kin" (Delmet 2013, 246), thus illustrating communing that is evident in the provision of social security (Dhemba et al. 2002; Ngwenya 2003) and Ubuntuness (Ikeuenobe 2006; Gathogo 2008; Imafidon 2022).

However, communitarianism is not akin to and should not be essentialized as a normative standpoint in SSA (Imafidon 2022). More still, through an overt emphasis on community, communitarianism undermines individual autonomy, self-articulation, and reflection and it also prioritizes collective welfare over individual concerns (Dalacoura 2002). Moreover, the practice of sharing food and 'eating groups' not only could perpetuate "hierarchies in African communities but challenges an understanding of relationality" (Imafidon 2022, 1), and it could breed "tensions and disputes about what is due to each person" (Delmet 2013, 246). Furthermore, communitarian practices are not static, as will be illustrated later; they are changing based on development of new digital and social media technologies, and through displacement, thus illustrating how cultures and traditions change over time, with implications for an understanding of social cohesion and the spirit of communalism.

South Sudanese refugees in Uganda

Uganda and South Sudan have a long history of cross-border refugee movements, dating back to the 1950s and 1960s (O'Byrne and Ogeno 2020; Cascão 2017). Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, South Sudan, which was then still part of Sudan, hosted Ugandan refugees who had fled the civil war that led to the overthrow of Uganda's dictator Idi Amin (Harrel-Bond 1982). Similarly, when South Sudan's struggle for independence started in 1988, many South Sudanese were hosted in Uganda until the signing of the comprehensive peace accord in 2005 that provided for a plebiscite.

In 2011, a plebiscite was held that granted South Sudan independence. However, in 2013, a civil war broke out in South Sudan between President Salva Kiir Mayardit's government, and those loyal to Vice President Riek Machar, over power sharing and political and economic concerns; this escalated in 2016, leading to a large influx of refugees into Uganda (De Waal 2015; Johnson 2016; Boswell et al. 2019). As of June 2025, there are 1,010,109 South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, constituting 56.6% of the total refugee population in Uganda (UNHCR 2025). In recent years, Uganda has adopted liberal policies towards refugees that allow for free movement, access to education, health care, and other services available to Ugandan nationals (GoU 2006, 2010). Refugees are also free to settle in urban areas as long as they can cater for themselves as self-settled refugees (Kaiser 2010). However, with humanitarian aid cuts and the wanning global focus on the refugee crisis in Uganda, many of the refugees in Uganda harness socio-cultural support practices to advance their wellbeing. It is these practices that we highlight in this article with a focus on two sites: the Bidibidi Refugee Settlement in the West Nile region of the country, and self-settled urban refugees in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda.

Bidibidi Refugee Settlement

Bidibidi Refugee Settlement is approximately 40 km (Hattem 2017) from the border between Uganda and South Sudan. The settlement was established in 2016 to receive South Sudanese refugees fleeing civil war. As of June 8, 2025, there are 241,848 individually registered South Sudanese refugees in Bidibidi Settlement (UNHCR, May 2025); however, these are official figures generated by UNHCR and are not likely to reflect the true number of refugees, as many refugees are not registered and live among relatives and friends. The climate in Bidibidi is hot and dry, supporting annual crops such as beans, maize, sorghum, and millet. Bidibidi receives a bimodal rainfall pattern

with an annual average range of 800–1200 mm and an average temperature range of 20°C – 35°C. The topography is generally low-lying with an altitude ranging between 618 and 955 metres above sea level (Ssentongo et al. 2024). The South Sudanese refugee population in Bidibidi is ethnically diverse; a vast portion are Bari speakers from Central Equatoria, including those who identify as the Bari, the Mundari, the Kuku, the Kakwa, the Pojulu, and the Nyagwara. There are also the Eastern Equatoria tribesof Madi and Acholi.[2] Other 'tribes' include the Nuer, the Shilluk, and the Dinka. Most of the non-Equatorian refugees in Bidibidi were living in Equatoria, primarily in Juba, in 2016 (Boswell et al. 2019).

Kampala

Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, hosts approximately 157,329 registered refugees, with the majority originating from South Sudan (Kanyeihamba 2024). There are an estimated 340,000 unregistered refugees, the majority of whom are South Sudanese (Kanyeihamba 2024). Unlike in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, we observed that the majority of our participants in Kampala belong to the Dinka and Nuer 'tribes', with pockets of other 'tribes' such as Kakwa, Madi, Acholi, and Baka, among others. There are no official statistics on tribal configurations of refugees in the urban environment. This could be explained by the lack of attention from the Ugandan government on the plight of urban refugees, as they are considered self-sufficient (Dryden-Peterson

2006). For example, Grześkowiak explains that "assistance to urban refugees thus remains a significant gap in the architecture of Uganda's humanitarian response" (2024, 103). Most of our participants recollected how they first lived in designated settlements before moving to Kampala. There is research that has explored refugee migration (Vertovec 1999; Horst 2006; O'Byrne and Ogeno 2020; Vancluysen 2021; O'Byrne 2022). Many other participants mentioned that they have lived in Kampala for decades, independent of the surges in conflicts in Sudan and South Sudan, and that they do not consider themselves as refugees. To examine familial forms of assistance, we interviewed the relatively rich South Sudanese who live in affluent enclaves of Kampala such as Muyenga, Munyonyo, and Kawempe and we compared these with the relatively disadvantaged refugee populations who lived in the suburbs of Nsambya and Ndege. The greatest number of our participants were drawn from Nsambya village, a suburb in Kampala.

Data collection process

This article relies on data gathered using a qualitative approach. A total of 38 interviews and 18 focus group discussions (FGDs) were undertaken within Bidibidi Refugee Settlement and among self-settled urban refugees in Kampala. The interviews and FGDs gave the refugees the opportunity to not only describe their migration journeys but also the people or the social networks that they relied on, and how they engaged in the simultaneous process of receiving and giving assistance during their journeys. Both men and women were interviewed (47 women[3] and 37 men) and their ages ranged between 18 and 50. Convenience sampling was employed to select the participants. This research was cleared by the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research

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[2] We acknowledge that the term 'tribe', which, according to W. H. Rivers (1914), is a "a group of a simple kind, always in Melanesia settled in a definite locality which speaks a common language and is capable of uniting for common action as in warfare", has been widely problematised in Uganda's humanitarian programming (Boswell et al. 2019). However, our engagement with the term 'tribe' is to underscore the essential role that 'tribes' play in the social, political, economic, and spiritual lives of South Sudanese through structures such as local traditional authorities, social justice systems, and social support networks.

[3] Parts of the project focused on refugee women specifically, which is the reason why more women were interviewed than men.

Ethics Committee (REC) and accredited by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). Data collection only proceeded after consent was obtained from the participants. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, the real names of participants in direct quotes have been replaced by pseudo-names.

The authors of this article are both Ugandan nationals. The first author was born and raised in Yumbe District, which hosts Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. During the first author's childhood, he lived in Southern Sudan as a refugee and therefore holds some knowledge of Juba Arabic and major South Sudanese languages such as Kakwa and Nyaragura, among others. Some of the socio-cultural practices discussed in this paper are practised by the author and this helped in drawing comparisons and nuancing some of the subtleties in the interviews. Moreover, his familiarity with the contexts also offered the opportunity to easily build relationships of trust with the participants. The second author is from Jinja in the Eastern Region of Uganda and lives in Kampala, where he has been interacting with refugees in schools, markets, and other social places.

However, despite the first author's familiarity with the contexts, he was still regarded as an outsider by the refugee population. To navigate the insider-outsider perspective, two research assistants were recruited, both of whom were refugees. One of the assistants lived in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, and the other lived in Kampala. The research assistants helped with organizing and translation during interviews and FGDs. In addition to the interviews and FGDs, participatory observation at key events such as funerals, the rotational tilling of land, and the 'Rabita presentation'[4] was conducted, practices that are discussed

in detail in the subsequent sections. Manual thematic and content analysis was employed to analyse the data. The transcribed responses are presented in the form of analytical discussions and quoted verbatim where appropriate.

Socio-cultural support practices among South Sudanese refugees

Communitarian socio-cultural support practices formed a central theme in the refugees' accounts of their journeys, especially in terms of how they had established themselves in the refugee settlement and in informal areas of Kampala. As illustrated in the following section, many of the interviewee's spoke of sharing food rations, reflecting similar practices back in South Sudan; taking care of each other's children; contributing to communal wedding arrangements; and the emotional and material support they offered and received during funerals. Other practices that were highlighted included rotational labour and gatherings, and the forming of associations through which women supported each other in terms of savings and/or property recovery. In the following section, we describe some of these practices in more detail.

Caring for non-biological children

Children living with relatives and members of the community other than their biological parents is a common arrangement in many communities throughout SSA (Zimmerman 2003; Cotton 2021). It is a social safety net for orphaned, abandoned, and/or destitute children (Goldberg and Short 2012). The childcare observed in Bidibidi and Kampala is different from foster care, which typically encompasses children who are taken in by individuals and groups not belonging to the child's immediate family, extended family, or kin (Font and Gershoff 2020). Although instances of foster care were identified in our study, the interviewees more frequently referred to childcare and protection that was occurring within

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[4] *Rabita* is a communal practice involving crowdfunding. Predominantly started by refugee women, *Rabita* has also attracted men, and it also involves the host community

nuclear and extended family networks and neighbours. This mirrors traditions deeply rooted in kinship ties and expectations of shared childcare (Monasch and Boerma 2004; Mugadza et al. 2004). It is exemplified in the African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" (Rhaiti 2016, 1). Although it is very difficult to tell which African community the proverb is associated with, regardless of its origin, the proverb does hold true to the spirit of communality, as it is more about collaboration. During the interview and participant observation, it was noted that despite the challenging circumstances marked by a lack of basic needs and an absence of social support mechanisms, many of the interviewee's spoke of taking on extra responsibility for caring for displaced children and the elderly. Abaayo Joan, a resident of Bidibidi, for instance, described how she came to care for numerous children in her household. Many of these children had been brought to the settlement by fellow South Sudanese refugees as they fled:

These are not my biological children. I do not know their parents. I took responsibility for caring for them from a neighbour, who returned to South Sudan in 2019 to unite with her husband. These children are among the many unaccompanied minors who came to the settlement in 2016. I am a Baka, and the children belong to the tribe of Mundari. They call me mother, and I call them my children. When I was young, my mother taught me how to take care of children. I have grown up knowing that women are supposed to take care of children. I am just performing my role as a woman in society. To me, it does not matter whether the children are my own or not. (Joan Abaayo, interview, September 14, 2021)

In Kampala, another refugee woman, Joyce Amira, described how she regarded caring for children as a fundamental duty within the extended family structure. At the time of research, she stated that she lived with two boys who were initially under the care of her late brother-in-law, who passed away in South

Sudan in 2018. Their family lived happily together in the suburbs of Kampala until the boy's mother was informed of their father's death. When the mother then travelled to South Sudan for her husband's funeral rites, she never returned to Uganda. Taking on these children as her own, Joyce Amira emphasized that the children were hers, denoting that this role was her moral duty as dictated by societal norms. Many communities in SSA commonly practise the collective upbringing of non-biological children, viewing it as the responsibility of the broader community. In this communal approach, extended families play a crucial role, with grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins, and siblings all contributing to childcare and acting as role models for the younger members (Rhaiti 2016). This communal ethos of child-rearing constitutes an important social security mechanism that becomes particularly important in displacement situations (Cockburn 2007; Shier 2009; Skeels 2012).

Material and emotional support at funerals

In many African societies "death is always a crisis even under 'normal' conditions" (Englund 1998, 1166). The passing of a loved one is often followed by an elaborate funeral to honour, memorialize, and celebrate the individual. Funerals normally involve cultural performances of rituals pre-burial, at burial, and post-burial. These rituals are believed to connect the 'natural body of the dead' with the performative aspects of social existence (Englund 1998) and enable mourners to undergo significant transformations in their life cycle. Hence, death is perceived as a dialogue between the living and the dead (Anderson 2000). The grieving process is inherently communal in nature (Bastide 1968), and thus a social event for the entire community in which the deceased lived (Jindra and Noret 2011; Baloyi 2014). It is also a meeting point for long-separated relatives and an avenue to dignify the deceased and

give comfort to the grieving family (Radzilani 2010).

The financial demands associated with conducting a funeral can be substantial, placing additional stress and responsibilities on the deceased's family. However, refugees continue to invest heavily in funerals and burial rituals, even in the face of limited resources and precarious circumstances (Harrell-Bond and Wilson 1990). In South Sudan, several 'tribes', such as the Kakwa, Nyaragwara, Baka, and Kuku, require that the body of the deceased be transported back to South Sudan for burial when an individual dies in exile (Braak and Waanzi 2022). As noted by Englund in the context of refugees in Malawi, "trauma often arose from the impossibility to observe under conditions of both war and exile, the full range of procedures that enable people to regain their wellbeing after their loss" (Englund 1998, 1168). Therefore "death and funerals continue to pose problems even during displacement" (Englund 1998, 1168). For many refugees, the aftermath of losing loved ones can be followed by a haunting sense of guilt, compounded by the inability to observe appropriate mortuary and funeral ceremonies.

This notwithstanding, some of our interviewees emphasized that grieving served as a uniting force, bringing together diverse mourners: family, neighbours, distant relatives, government officials, local traditional and political leaders, and representatives of aid organizations. For example, at one of the funerals observed by the first author in Bidibidi in July 2021, the UNHCR representative contributed cash and food. The Refugee Welfare Council (RWC)[5] mobilized relatives of the deceased and coordinated with staff of

international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) for extra support. Local host community members brought in food contributions, and young boys from host and refugee communities alike dug the grave. At another funeral attended by the first author in Bidibidi Settlement, mourners and close relatives contributed towards the transport costs to carry the remains of the deceased to South Sudan. And, at another funeral in Kampala attended by the second author, OPM facilitated the transportation of the corpse to the burial site in Kampala, together with food and cash contributions. At all three funerals, fellow refugees and host community members consoled the grieving families and offered emotional and material support. Monetary assistance was extended by individuals and groups directly to the family or raised collectively through social media. As stated in one of the interviews:

> It is a common practice for us here. In bad times, especially during funerals, we put up announcements in our WhatsApp group and on our Facebook page. When such information is shared, members of social media groups start contributing money and making pledges. (Josam Alier, interview, August 12, 2022)

Therefore, while funerals can impose a burden on refugee families, they also serve as transformative events in offering reassurance of societal support as mourners offer material, emotional, and psychological support to grieving families. This highlights the significant role that communal support plays in the lives of refugees, as emphasized within the social security ethos (Dhemba et al. 2002; Ngwenya 2003) and Ubuntu philosophy (Gathogo 2008; Imafidon 2022). These forms of assistance initiated 'from within' play an instrumental role in helping the grieving family to cope with their loss and in fostering a sense of 'weness' (Bessant 2018, 87). While the assistance

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[5] Refugee leadership structures parallel to Uganda's own local governance model, which is composed of ascending levels of Local Councils. At the village level, there is a RWC1; at the cluster level, RWC2; and for each zone, an RWC3. These are decided by elections overseen by OPM. The RWC at each level is headed by a chair (de Simone 2022).

provided by mainstream humanitarian actors is widely acknowledged, these 'everyday' informal support forms often go unrecognized in humanitarian practice.

Oya – 'Communal labour events'

> Early on August 8, 2021, after a rainy night, I headed to the community centre in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement to meet my research assistant. Along the way, I saw men working together in a garden, their rhythmic labour drew me in. Watching them, I realized how such communal work – known as Oya – offers deep social and emotional benefits. (Emmanuel Viga, Mini-Ethnography, August 8, 2021)

Oya, translated as 'communal labour events', is a collective farming practice among many 'tribes' of South Sudan, from the Nilotic groups such as the Dinka, Nuer, and Atwok (Kindersley and Majok 2019) to the Shilluk (Delmet 2013). Participants from Bari-speaking groups explained that the process of *Oya* involves sending invitation to kin, friends, and neighbours to come and collectively engage in handling a specific task such as ploughing, weeding, or harvesting. The Dinka and Nuer interviewees explained that *Oya* entails joint construction projects or the mud-walling of houses or kraals. On an agreed day and time, local community members are invited to contribute labour to undertake a specific task. On that date, while participants engage in *Oya*, the host prepares a meal accompanied by a local brew. Participation in *Oya* is voluntary and unpaid. Invited individuals can choose to accept or decline the invitation. However, if someone declines without tendering a reason or apology, they may find it less likely that their own *Oya* invitations will be honoured in the future. One interviewee stated that *Oya* reinforces the sense of communality as it is embodied in meals, drinks, and merrymaking.

Moreover, the hosts derive pride in offering an arena for communing (Simon Agar, interview, September 5, 2021).

Our participants recollected that although *Oya* was common in South Sudan, refugees encountered challenges in maintaining this tradition, both in rural and urban refugee settlements, due to inadequate land for farming. However, this inadequacy has prompted refugees to craft new forms of *Oya* as illustrated by quote below:

> For us here [in Kampala], *Oya* means having dinners together. We do this on a rotational basis. This is also not frequent as it would be back in South Sudan. We are refugees. We don't have resources and money. (Francis Buoy, interview, August 4, 2022)

In Bidibidi Settlement, although refugees have access to land, the plots are typically small (30x30 metres), making communal farming less viable, and therefore alternative *Oya* arrangements have also mushroomed such as collective dinners. This reconstitution of *Oya* is what Lund et al. describe as "new types of formalisations" (2006, 5) in refugee camps and settlements. However, in Bidibidi Settlement, because of the nostalgia for *Oya*, some interviewees reported that they took either an individual or a collective initiative to access land beyond the settlement boundaries. This involved leasing land from the hosts or utilizing abandoned land left by other refugees who had either returned to South Sudan or sought employment in urban areas. As explained by one of the participants:

> When I settled here in 2016, we were many and there was not enough land. I barely had land for cultivation. But now things have changed. As you can see [pointing to empty plots of land], most of my

neighbours have left the settlement for South Sudan. I normally plough these lands to grow sorghum. But sometimes I cannot do much alone. So, I need support from my neighbours. And I cannot invite my neighbours without preparing something for the day. So, instead of slaughtering a cock or a goat as demanded by tradition, I buy two kilograms of meat and prepare some sorghum bread. Instead of drinks, as we would have in the cultural and traditional sense after the meal of *Oya*, we sit and tell stories as entertainment. (Abel Chaat, interview, August 16, 2022)

Another interviewee, Ruth Ngor, shared the story of how they formed a group of eight women and decided to lease a piece of land from the host community in Likico, a village neighbouring Bidibidi Refugee Settlement. The women collectively worked on the land, considering the endeavour as their way of practising *Oya* in their new environment. Working together, the group of women not only cultivated the land but also shared meals and engaged in storytelling sessions, effectively nurturing both their agricultural efforts and their social friendship bonds. Despite the agricultural yields falling short of expectations by the end of the season, the women deemed the experience highly productive. What mattered the most to them were the tangible and intangible covert and overt connections that were crafted within and among the group members, transcending their diverse tribal backgrounds.

Therefore, *Oya* as a socio-cultural practice offers a social space for fostering networks, relationships, and bonds, even in unfamiliar territories and amidst precarious circumstances. Through *Oya*, refugees engage in social contracts (Cretney 2016) and articulate their personhood (Metz 2021), and these relational aspects of 'being' are essential in

navigating challenges in refugee settlements, as they offer a platform not only for sharing experiences but also a momentary escape from the skirmishes of the civil war while reconnecting with others. Therefore, *Oya* goes beyond material support to social healing, rebuilding lives, and preserving a sense of self-worth. These intangible contributions of *Oya* were reported by interviewees as invaluable within the context of displacement and exile.

Lokita – 'Rotational labour'

> After a month with my host in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, I joined him one morning as he and his peers tilled a friend's garden. He handed me a hoe, and we worked side by side. I later learned this rotating labour system is called Lokita. Participating gave me insight into the social bonds, mutual support, and unspoken rules that sustain it. (Emmanuel Viga, Mini-Ethnography, July 8, 2021).

Lokita, translated as 'rotational labour', was a practice widely mentioned by interviewees. Various participants gave different names to rotational labour practices depending on their 'tribal' dialect. Bari speakers called it *Lokita*, the Nuer referred to it as *Nyuak*, the Madi termed it *Leyi* or *Lobilendu*, the Lutoko called it *Akithia*, and the Lango named it *Romo*. Despite linguistic differences, *Lokita* essentially means rotational assistance and labour. In its embodiment, individuals take turns to aid one another on a daily or weekly basis, and the activities of *Lokita* vary among tribes based on the predominant occupation. For the Bari-speaking communities, *Lokita* was commonly practised during the farming season, and it involved communal tilling, planting, weeding, and harvesting. The idea is to compliment a household's labour during the planting season. One of the participants from the Kakwa tribe explained that during *Lokita*

"we come together in groups ranging from as few as two to over ten members. We take turns digging for each other" (Henry Obur, interview, September 6, 2021).

Lokita is more structured and formalized than *Oya*. In the formative processes of *Lokita*, close-knit households, often comprising relatives or friends, select a chairperson to oversee the activity, and such a person should be able to foster unity and bring to order any unruly members. This is followed by participants agreeing on a set of rules that will govern the *Lokita*. This could include, among other matters, when to undertake the *Lokita* and the size of the land to be tilled by each participant. For example, one rule might dictate that each participant is responsible for tilling a plot of land measuring 4 metres by 70 metres per working day, and the task must be completed by the day's end. Such a rule, the participants argued, serves as a yardstick to ensure uniformity in *Lokita*, as well as to instil responsibility. When asked about the consequences of a *Lokita* member failing to complete their assigned tasks, the following response was recorded:

> If a member does not complete their task, such a member is required to request either that the group suspend the next *Lokita*, to allow him or her to fulfil his part of the bargain, or that he or she gets an appropriate time to complete the task. (Isaac Modi, interview, August 16, 2022)

Refugee environments have changed the traditional and cultural understandings and practices of *Lokita*. Women participants from the Lango tribe explained that *Romo* has changed from engagement in agricultural activities before the civil war in South Sudan to rotational firewood collection in the refugee settlement. This change, they explained, was due to inadequate land for cultivation and the pressing need for wood fuel for cooking.

The women recounted how they normally organized themselves into groups and highlighted that the collective approach not only improved the amount of wood fuel collected but that a bigger number of women going for wood fuel helped to minimize risks of attacks and sexual harassment by men when women ventured alone to and from the bush. Many of the female participants also explained that collecting firewood in groups provided them with comfort and emotional, social and psychological support as they shared stories and empathized with each other. In urban environments, rotational labour practices appeared to be less prevalent. The lack of land in the urban setting makes conventional ways of organizing *Lokita* practically impossible. However, while refugees in urban environments did not engage more frequently in *Lokita*, they expressed a strong desire to preserve the practice and lamented their inability to engage in *Lokita*.

What sets refugee-led rotational labour practices apart within humanitarian contexts is their grounding in the communitarian socio-cultural traditions that are embedded within kinship and familial lineage (Ruparanganda et al. 2018; Kindersley and Majok 2019; Treleaven 2023), Ubuntu philosophy (Metz 2021; Ramosa 2006), culture, and traditional values (Archer and Dodman 2017). This uniqueness makes socio-cultural practices particularly worth understanding within the context of humanitarian support. Moreover, our research findings also underscore the pivotal role played by *Lokita* in offering not only psychological and emotional support, but also material support. This supports Torre's argument that "subsistence farming and small-scale market activities within the settlement constitute the main pathway to the achievement of independence from humanitarian assistance" (2023, 717).

Rabita – 'Crowdfunding'

In August 2022, after interviews at the community centre, we were

invited to a local event called *Rabita* – meaning 'crowdfunding'. At the venue, people gathered, set up chairs and items, and the event began with prayers, speeches, and the handover of essentials like mattresses and flasks. Music, food, and dancing followed. I attended another *Rabita* in July 2023. These events offered deep insight into how refugees rebuild their lives and strengthen community bonds through collective support. (Emmanuel Viga, Hilde Refstie, and Eria Serwajja, Mini-Ethnography, August 8, 2022).

Rabita translated as 'crowdfunding' is a communitarian socio-cultural practice. It therefore illustrates how socio-cultural practices are dynamic and evolve in response to changing social and economic circumstances. *Rabita* draws inspiration from savings methodologies advocated by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in refugee camps and settlements: "NGOs advocate for cash injections into for instance *sandouk* (collective savings) projects" (Kindersley and Majok 2019, 18). The practice of *Rabita* combines this with communal traditions of sharing, support, and celebration. During crisis, "refugees often described the total destruction of their property and businesses" (Poole 2019, 12), and *Rabita* serves as a means for refugee households to replace their lost property. In Bidibidi Settlement, *Rabita*, which mostly involves women, starts with the selection of the leaders for the *Rabita* initiative. Subsequently, group members collectively agree on the amount of money to be contributed every two weeks or at the end of each month. A raffle is then held to determine the first beneficiary. Households are given the choice between receiving cash or material contributions, or a combination of both. If a household opts for material items, the leaders of the *Rabita* visit the household before the scheduled distribution event to consult on the household products that should be purchased. The leaders then make the purchases in advance. These items may include vacuum flasks, mattresses, sheets of corrugated iron, or bed sheets (see Picture 1 below). During the *Rabita* presentation event, which is often held on weekends, the group organizes a formal handover ceremony. This is accompanied by a celebration, including food, drinks, and dancing. Such events are also known locally as *Bunis* or *Discos* and they involve dancing to a mix of traditional South Sudanese music, music from the host community, and/or modern music.

Figure 1: Formative Stages of Rabita Presentation. The presentation of an event taking shape at the homestead of a member. Photo by Emmanuel Viga, Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, August 8, 2022.Figure 1. Factors influencing access to NGOs (Saharan et al. 2021, 4).

Figure 2: Items bought for the host family. An assortment of items bought for the host family using the Rabita savings. Photo by Emmanuel Viga, Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, August 8, 2022.Figure 1. Factors influencing access to NGOs (Saharan et al. 2021, 4).

Rabita combines NGO-advocated strategies with a strong tradition of communal support, showcasing how refugees adapt both cultural practices and external tools to their current circumstances. This approach fosters innovative mutual aid and community building, even amidst hardships. It underscores refugees' resilience, demonstrating their ability to forge connections and reconstruct lives disrupted by displacement. *Rabita,* therefore, reinforces Stites et al.'s (2021) argument that refugees create new social connections based on proximity and shared experience and through these networks' critical material and non-material support is garnered to cope with hardship. *Rabita*, therefore, not only ensures the replacement of lost property, but it also incorporates broader processes of healing and rebuilding lives wrecked by civil war. This was well articulated by a *Rabita* participant who argued that "when we dance, we momentarily escape from our circumstances and experience genuine joy" (Betty Ochilo, Interview, July 8, 2023). It is therefore instructive to consider the material, emotional, and psychological benefits of *Rabita* in humanitarian discourse.

What can mainstream humanitarianism learn from refugees' communitarian socio-cultural support practices?

Amidst diminishing international humanitarian aid in prolonged crises and in the face of current humanitarian aid cuts, the everyday acts of resource sharing discussed in this paper, such as caregiving for non-biological children, extending emotional and material support during funerals, offering labour to fellow refugees, and crowdfunding, significantly impact the lives of refugees and have the potential to not only fill gaps in humanitarian practice but also to inform debates and discussions about a more pluralist humanitarian understanding or on the need for a humanitarian reset. Socio-cultural practices are grounded in communitarian African care ethics entailing community and cooperative living mechanisms (Maina 2008). They are a social security mechanism (Dhemba et al. 2002; Ngwenya 2003; De Coninck and Drani 2009) and follow wider SSA ways of communal living embodied in the Ubuntu philosophy (Ikeuenobe 2006; Gathogo 2008; Imafidon 2022).

Communitarian socio-cultural support practices hold significance for refugees not

only in material terms but also psychologically and culturally, helping them to cope and live meaningful lives. Despite this, such practices do not receive much attention in humanitarian discourse and debates. As noted by Musa and Kleist, these forms of assistance are discussed as being (mainly) taking place "outside the official humanitarian system" (2022, 69). They are often regarded as predominantly relational, and as "acts of duty" (Barnett 2011, 11). This view, we argue, is to uphold a narrow Western understanding of humanitarianism that privileges humanitarian principles, standards, and reporting mechanisms. However, while humanitarian principles may be good and relevant to ensure help in emergency situations and to promote the equitable distribution of aid, their ideals often fall short within the humanitarian sector itself (Barnett 2011). Furthermore, constraining the definition of humanitarianism to only encompass external support may lead to a neglect of diverse individual and communal coping strategies employed during crises (Tugal 2017; Bhatta 2020). As noted by Hilhorst (2018), moving away from this would therefore require broadening an understanding of humanitarianism to include research on responses and adaptations during crisis. The socio-cultural practices discussed in this paper offer useful insights to these discussions, especially considering that they can help to rethink humanitarian principles and offer a way towards envisioning plural humanitarianism.

Like other non-traditional humanitarian practices such as 'civic humanitarianism' (Radice 2022), 'embedded humanitarianism' (Cretney 2016; Brun and Horst 2023), resilience humanitarianism (Hilhorst 2018; O'Byrne 2022; Braak and Waanzi 2022), and 'vernacular humanitarianism' (Brković (2017), we therefore argue, together with Brun and Horst (2023), that socio-cultural support practices can be grouped under 'relational humanitarianism' and these we contend require more attention and empirical studies. Moreover,

socio-cultural practices fulfil the humanitarian imperative – to save lives and alleviate suffering – in several ways. Firstly, they facilitate material assistance. Secondly, they provide emotional, psychological, social, and cultural support. Thirdly, regardless of whether they are classified as humanitarian or not, these practices and the values underpinning them, such as communality, hospitality, solidarity, and responsibility, we contend offer valuable lessons to humanitarian actors, especially in rethinking the ethical humanitarian agenda.

Moreover, humanitarian assistance has traditionally focused on the provision of emergency relief that thrives on the assumption that crises are short-lived, and that normalcy will return soon. In recent times, crisis landscapes have changed, and many scholars have problematized the emergency approach of humanitarian practice. Brun (2016), for instance, contends that the temporal approach in humanitarianism means that people are stuck in the humanitarian system for years. She argues that such protractedness calls for an integration of spatio-temporal dimensions into humanitarian practice. This includes considering how refugees can live socially and culturally fulfilling lives, supporting their efforts to maintain important parts of their social practices and culture in displacement. In this paper we take this argument further by illustrating how socio-cultural support practices offer invaluable support for refugee populations. Braak and Waanzi have also documented similar practices, illustrating how elderly Zande refugee women in Kiryandongo Settlement in Uganda advise the young to take "*actions* like farming, childcare, and faith" as mechanisms to attain resilience (2022, 1). Therefore, together with Archer and Dodman (2017), this paper extends the argument that socio-cultural support practices need to be recognized in collective crisis responses. However, caution should be taken to not coopt them into mainstream humanitarian practice, but they should be considered as response mechanisms

rooted in social tradition and culture; this, we contend, is important in order to explore innovative ways to 'do' humanitarianism. It is especially important in charting ways to understand how existing humanitarian aid can be used to strengthen the capabilities already present within refugee populations. This is in line with Viga and Refstie's contention that humanitarianism should not be concerned with binaries and boundary-making but more with the plight of crisis affected communities. By incorporating their social and cultural practices into humanitarian discourse, "there is a need to reconsider in policy how boundary mapping relies on unsettled binaries that possess their own inclusion and exclusion dynamics" (2024, 8). We believe this is crucial if the humanitarian sector is to reach several of the goals stated in the New Agenda for Humanity (UN 2016), one of which, as Barbelet (2018) notes, is to provide more localized, contextualized, and appropriate aid.

Steps towards achieving the above objective could include acknowledging and supporting refugee-led child protection or establishing humanitarian support for burial transportation – a practice that is already implemented in parts of Uganda. It could also involve recognizing the importance of social networks for refugees, enabling more nuanced assessments of who benefits from various schemes and who does not. This is especially vital in the context of implementing refugee self-reliance models, where vulnerability assessments often focus narrowly on individuals and households, overlooking broader community dynamics. Ultimately, it is about promoting a more inclusive form of humanitarianism that recognizes the wide range of humanitarian actions present in crisis situations. As Brun and Horst contend, this could help "expand the humanitarian ethical register that informs humanitarianism in ways that are closure to social practice" (2023, 67), ultimately paving the way to achieving the goal of humanitarianism, which, according to Imafidon, is "building

human relationships, improving lives, fostering solidarity and togetherness" (2022, 7).

Conclusion

This article has described several communitarian socio-cultural support practices that South Sudanese refugees engage in, such as communal childcare, the provision of material and emotional assistance during funerals, rotational work, and collective savings and property restoration. These practices are shaped and informed by African communitarian care ethics which emphasize the virtues of communality, hospitality, empathy, responsibility, as opposed to the Western ethics of care which focuses on the individual. Socio-cultural practices are relational in nature and form an essential component of survival mechanisms for South Sudanese refugees, especially in Uganda. These practices are not static but rather evolve over time and adapt according to geographical, contextual, and technological shifts. They do, however, continue to constitute vital support systems for the refugees, enabling them to navigate daily challenges in communal and social ways.

Although not widely considered as 'humanitarian', socio-cultural support practices offer a new way of thinking and an entry to examining alternative understanding and knowledge on humanitarianism – a pluralist's view on humanitarianism, as these practices are informed by a different care ethics that is specifically situated within SSA communitarian care ethics (Ikuenobe 2006; Gathogo 2008; Imafidon 2022). Such an approach, we argue, is in line with what Raghuram (2016) contends is the need to examine the different global geohistories of care, and what Archer and Dodman (2017) argue is the need to examine the distinctive traditions and cultures of care as central in non-professional humanitarianism. This way of thinking has the potential to kindle alternative humanitarian scholarship that moves beyond what Brun and Horst refer

to as the temptation of engaging with a "narrow understanding of humanitarianism as a Western project to help 'strangers in need,' abiding by humanitarian principles. It is based on racialised perceptions of who engages in aid and who benefits from it, while excluding the possibility that practically anyone can both provide and be in need of assistance" (2023, 66). And in the face of recent humanitarian aid cuts, such practices have the potential to provide new directions on aspirations towards the need for a humanitarian reset.

We therefore argue that socio-cultural practices offer empirical data for the theorization of plural humanitarianism. This could entail drawing on the African communitarian philosophical principles of communality, hospitality, solidarity, and the responsibility to expand on humanitarian principles and standards. This approach will ensure that humanitarianism is nuanced and holistic and that crisis response mechanisms recognize, support, and build on the existing capacities of refugees themselves.

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