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The Role of Art in the Liminal Setting of Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the role of art in negotiating hybrid identities among refugees in the Nakivale settlement, Uganda. We highlight how refugees use artistic expression to navigate their sense of belonging and reconstruct their lives amid prolonged displacement. Our study explores the dynamic interplay between refugees' cultural practices and the influences of governmental and non-governmental organizations. By emphasizing the potential of bottom-up artistic initiatives, we challenge traditional views of refugee passivity and underscore the importance of supporting refugee-led cultural expressions to enhance policy-making and improve the quality of life for displaced individuals.

KEYWORDS
liminality; hybridity; refugee camp; identity; art

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, nous examinons le rôle de l'art dans la négociation d'identités hybrides parmi les réfugiés du camp de Nakivale, en Ouganda. Nous soulignons comment les réfugiés utilisent l'expression artistique pour naviguer dans leur sentiment d'appartenance et reconstruire leur vie au cours d'un déplacement prolongé. Notre étude explore l'interaction dynamique entre les pratiques culturelles des réfugiés et les influences des organisations gouvernementales et non gouvernementales. En mettant l'accent sur le potentiel des initiatives artistiques ascendantes, nous remettons en question la vision traditionnelle de la passivité des réfugiés et soulignons l'importance de soutenir les expressions culturelles menées par les réfugiés afin d'améliorer l'élaboration des politiques et la qualité de vie des personnes déplacées.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2013, there were 51.2 million forcibly displaced people worldwide (UNHCR, 2013). This figure has more than doubled. Of the 117.3 million forcibly displaced people at the time of writing, 43.4 million are refugees and 6.9 million are asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2023). Many reside in refugee camps, including the largest ones—Dadaab, Cox's Bazar, Zaatari, Kakuma, Bidi Bidi, and Nakivale—whose populations have also increased. The growing number of forcibly displaced people has intensified the issue of protracted refugee situations—circumstances in which at least 25,000 refugees from the same country remain in exile for over 5 years. These prolonged stays often lead to generations of refugees living in camps or makeshift shelters, limiting their ability to fulfill basic legal, economic, educational, and security needs, as well as their aspirations for the future (UNHCR, 2009). According to Hyndman and Giles (2018), approximately two thirds of the world's refugees live in protracted situations of extended exile. Durieux

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(2009) argues that the core issue in such cases is not merely the duration of exile but refugees' deteriorating quality of life over time due to the lack of durable solutions. This is more important as the growing number of refugees living in limbo has significant consequences for subsequent generations of people living in protracted conditions. For instance, in Uganda, children constitute 57% of the refugee population, with 40% under the age of 12. Older adults (age 60+) account for just 3%, while youth represent 24% (UNHCR, 2024).

The causes of this state of limbo are numerous. UNHCR attributes it in part to political deadlocks arising from both "political action and inaction, both in the country of origin … and in the country of asylum" (UNHCR, 2004, p. 1). These conditions continue because of persistent instability in refugees' home countries, while the prolonged nature of their displacement is largely shaped by host countries' responses, which frequently involve limiting their freedom of movement, restricting access to employment, and confining them to camps (UNHCR, 2004). UNHCR's role in refugee camps has primarily been to provide essential support, including food and shelter (UNHCR, 2008).

The protracted nature of refugee situations has sparked scholarly and political discussions on how to support refugee livelihoods in ways that promote self-sufficiency. Long (2011, p. 21) emphasizes that the international community must consider the specific cultural contexts of prolonged displacement when shaping policies and understand how refugees themselves define and pursue "integration."

This study explores these issues through the lens of identity, particularly its dimensions related to self-identification, personal preferences, motivations, and group belonging. Given the multicultural realities of con-

temporary refugee camps—where residents must navigate ambiguous social structures and frequently encounter the "Other," as seen in Nakivale—this study argues that the concept of hybridity offers a valuable framework forward. Faist (2000) suggests that hybrid identity fosters new forms of belonging that are both locally grounded and shaped by refugees' diverse cultural backgrounds. Rather than a simple blending of cultures, hybrid identity emerges through dynamic interactions within the complex contexts of refugee camps (Smith & Leavy, 2008). As a transformative process, hybrid identity plays a transgressive role, introducing change. Moreover, it can serve as a key to understanding how refugees cultivate subjectivity, particularly in contexts where political structures limit their agency and opportunities for self-determination—constraints that are especially evident in refugee camps.

Building on Bhabha's (2015) theories of hybrid identity and Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, we argue that art and artistic creation serve as catalysts for the crystallization and negotiation of new identity patterns in the context of prolonged displacement. We adopt a broad understanding of art, encompassing both formal and informal creative expressions that reveal complex, often nonverbal experiences (Hickey-Moody, 2017).

Following O'Neill (2008), Wolterstorff (1987), and Molotch (2004), we view art as more than a reflection of society—it generates new experiences, inspires hope, and introduces transformative ideas. Works of art are embedded in human intention and action, serving as tools through which individuals engage with the world and one another. Art offers refugees a medium to bridge their past and present experiences, enabling them to transcend binary cultural distinctions. Through this creative process, they construct narratives that honour both

their heritage and contemporary realities, helping them navigate the complexities of displacement and reimagine their identities (Bardhan, 2012, p. 150). By reframing refugee identities through the lens of hybridity, we underscore the creative and resilient strategies that displaced individuals employ to navigate their lived realities. In doing so, they forge spaces of belonging that go beyond the constraints of displacement, contributing to empowerment and fostering their capacity to rebuild their lives.

Our research is based on fieldwork conducted in the Nakivale refugee settlement, located in southwestern Uganda, in the Isingiro district. This article was written as part of a project exploring patterns of hybrid refugee identity within the Nakivale settlement. Four research trips were conducted to Nakivale: the first in August/September 2019, followed by visits in April 2022, September 2022, and January–March 2023. Inspired by Geertz's (1973) argument that gradually building relationships positively influences research quality, we adopted a strategy of frequent field visits to gain respondents' trust. During the intervals between trips, we engaged in digital ethnography, using remote fieldwork techniques. The primary research methods used during fieldwork included participant observation with thick description and interviews.

The Nakivale settlement is managed by the Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda (OPM), with most administrative matters coordinated by the camp commander, who has semi-autonomous management powers and liaises with UNHCR. Tasks related to the management of the health, education, and access to water sectors are carried out jointly by representatives of various ministries and international organizations. The OPM and UNHCR co-manage accommodation issues, supply of essential foodstuffs, settlement planning, electricity supply, environmental concerns, and infrastructure.

Nakivale's origins date to the 1950s, when Tutsi refugees from Rwanda sought asylum in Uganda, fleeing ethnic conflict between 1959 and 1961 (Bagenda et al., 2003). The establishment of Nakivale was an early example of the colonial policy of creating refugee settlements in unpopulated areas, which limited the resettled population's participation in the economy, access to transportation, and broader political integration. Malkki, in her book **Purity and Exile (1995)**, analyzed the effects of this policy in Tanzania. The book draws attention to the adaptation and health challenges refugees faced as they tried to adapt to difficult and dangerous conditions in uninhabited, infrastructure-less areas. We observed similar challenges in Nakivale.

Nakivale is also a highly diverse camp, with nearly half of its residents coming from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Other ethnic groups include Burundians, Somalis, Ethiopians, Eritreans, Sudanese, and Rwandans. In such a multicultural environment, inhabitants of Nakivale navigate a complex landscape of intersecting cultures daily.

Refugees in Uganda benefit from progressive refugee laws. As a signatory to key international agreements on refugee protection—including the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1967 New York Protocol, and the Organization of African Unity Convention—Uganda grants refugees the right to work, freedom of movement, and integration with local communities. Refugees also have access to free health care and primary education, as guaranteed by the 2006 Refugees Act and its subsequent amendments, which extend to land access as well. Refugee protection has also been incorporated into Uganda's National Development

Plan for 2020–2030. Its goal is to support refugee-hosting regions by promoting sustainable livelihoods, peaceful coexistence initiatives, and environmental protection (Omata, 2022).

However, the reality of daily life for many refugees does not always align with these rights. The population of Nakivale is currently approaching 200,000. As the number of displaced people has surged in recent years, the strain on Uganda's limited resources has become increasingly evident. In 2018, the amount of land allocated per refugee plot was reduced from 50 × 50 metres to approximately 30 × 30 metres to accommodate newly arrived refugees (Ntale & Ahaibwe, 2018). Omata (2022) notes that the economic conditions of most refugees have worsened over the past 5 years.

In the following sections, we review the literature on the consequences of life in refugee camps and explore art as a means of negotiating new patterns of identity. We then introduce a theoretical framework grounded in the works of Homi Bhabha. Building on this foundation, we examine how refugees in Nakivale use art, structuring our analysis around three key arguments: (a) art can be used as a tool for rebuilding lives and mitigating the initial trauma of displacement, (b) art as a mean of fostering collective identity and belonging, and (c) art can be an avenue for developing political subjectivities, expressed through works that either reimagine perceptions of Nakivale or serve as acts of resistance and protest. We argue that through these processes, refugees navigate evolving identities, weaving past individual and collective experiences into new forms of self-understanding shaped by their protracted circumstances. Finally, we conclude with a discussion and closing reflections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Life in refugee camps is often characterized by prolonged temporariness, as these spaces frequently develop into "protracted" situations where residents lack access to stable, long-term solutions such as integration, resettlement, or repatriation. Refugees living under these conditions exist in a state of uncertainty, deprived of the social and legal structures that typically foster a sense of belonging and identity.

The roots of protracted refugee situations can be traced to the forms of assistance provided to displaced populations. Since the 1960s, refugees in the Global South have commonly been directed to camps in the first safe country they reach, where their rights—particularly freedom of movement, access to basic needs, and employment—are severely restricted (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014; Smith, 2004). These conditions contribute to the prolonged vulnerability and stagnation of refugees, complicating their ability to form identities and develop a sense of agency.

Numerous studies have explored the difficult realities imposed by settlement structures. Agier (2010) argues that camps embody a particular form of exclusion, treating refugees as social outcasts—unwanted entities without a voice or rightful place in the world. Those in prolonged displacement are frequently left in a state of waiting as a result of the international refugee regime's "temporary" interventions, which frequently fall short of their needs (Hyndman & Giles, 2016). McConnachie (2016) describes camps as spaces deliberately designed to limit mobility and isolate refugees. He references examples from Thailand and Kenya, where rights are severely restricted, as well as Uganda, where residents of settlements experience only partial freedom, creating a clear separa-

tion between refugees and the surrounding society.

Ramadan (2013) emphasizes that life in camps hinders personal development and blocks pathways to long-term solutions, trapping refugees in a liminal space—suspended between crisis and stability. This issue is particularly relevant to refugee settlements in Uganda and across Central and East Africa. Kibreab (2014) contends that, contrary to the assumptions of international organizations and policy-makers, these settlements are not designed to promote long-term inclusion. Instead, they aim to keep refugees geographically and socially isolated until conditions in their home countries are deemed safe for return. Rather than resolving refugee status, this system perpetuates a state of limbo, reinforcing displacement. Kibreab (2014, p. 580) further argues that such conditions sustain the emergence of a distinct refugee identity, which he frames as a form of enduring "otherness." Agier (2008, p. viii) raises a critical question regarding these conditions:

> Whether these people will remain without a voice, or whether their space of an outcast life … could be transformed into a site of social life and political expression, thus also transforming its victims … into recognized subjects with a kind of citizenship in practice.

The concept of reimagining refugee camps and settlements as spaces that cultivate "practical citizenship" and empower refugees to rebuild their lives remains, however, largely theoretical. A review of existing research highlights a significant gap in comprehensive, systematic studies examining how to foster positive identity transformation and co-operation within the multicultural and protracted environments of refugee settlements.

Art, proposed in this study as a tool for identity transformation, is widely recognized as a powerful and therapeutic medium with diverse applications. It enhances quality of life, aids in trauma recovery (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017; Huss et al., 2015; Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005; Koch & Weidinger-von der Recke, 2009), promotes well-being, supports education (Andemicael, 2011; Chilton et al., 2015), preserves cultural heritage, and fosters new forms of belonging (Catalani, 2021; Gonçalves & Susana, 2016). Additionally, it empowers refugee perspectives and voices (Blomfield & Lenette, 2018) while challenging dominant narratives by creating spaces for resistance and reimagining perspectives on displacement (O'Neill, 2008). Moreover, artistic expression plays a pivotal role in the social and political mobilization of marginalized groups, including exiled, racialized, or ethicized populations (Martiniello & Mescoli, 2024). It also reshapes local artistic landscapes and fosters innovative creative practices (Martiniello, 2022).

Despite these recognized contributions, the significance of artistic activities remains largely under-explored within the context of protracted living conditions in refugee settlements across Central and East Africa. There is a pressing need to investigate how creative initiatives originating from refugees themselves can foster more inclusive and positive identity formations, promote co-operation, and strengthen social interactions. Viewed through the lens of heterotopias (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986), these settlements function as distinct spaces for displaced populations, where identity construction, behavioural adaptation, and social engagement are continually negotiated. This study seeks to bridge the existing research gap by exploring how refugee-led artistic initiatives can reshape identities, enhance development opportunities, and contribute to rebuilding lives in contexts of prolonged displacement.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and Victor Turner's concept of liminality offer valuable frameworks for understanding the complex experiences of refugees in camps as they navigate new and challenging environments. Bhabha (2015) argues that hybridity creates liminal "third spaces," where individuals grapple with asymmetrical, fragmented, and conflicting forms of identification. These spaces encourage dialogue and interaction, enabling individuals to challenge dominant cultural narratives and forge new hybrid identities (Bhabha, 1994). Hybridity, as a form of subaltern agency, emerges in the crevices of power structures and on the peripheries of society (Brunsma & Delgado, 2008). It allows refugees to construct complex, layered identities shaped by interactions with both host and displaced communities.

The third space parallels Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, which refers to a sociocultural zone that is "neither here nor there … between positions imposed and regulated by law, customs, conventions, and ceremonies" (p. 95). Both liminal and third spaces can be sites of empowerment and liberation, serving as "anti-structures" that free human capacities for cognition, emotion, will, and creativity from the normative constraints of specific social roles (Turner, 1982, p. 44). The third space enables the negotiation of hybrid identities that blend cultural roots with present realities, resonating with Turner's (1969) idea of liminality as a space of both risk and opportunity.

Bhabha (1994) emphasizes that culture is not a fixed entity but an active, expressive process. Identity, he argues, is constructed through cultural interactions that dissolve traditional boundaries, opening up new possibilities for agency and belonging. Drawing on V. S. Naipaul's characters from novels such as *A House for Mr. Biswas (2002)* and *In a Free State (1974)*, Bhabha suggests that art plays a crucial role in psychic survival, preserving historical complexities and traumas. In an "unhomely world" of alienation and displacement, fiction and art convey ambivalence and ambiguity. For Bhabha, cultural intersections generate unexpected, transformative forms—acts of rebellion that mix, translate, and reinterpret the past while shaping the present.

Following Bhabha, we interpret art and artistic expression as dynamic tools for negotiating and translating refugee identities in Nakivale. Art creates a space where refugees can reimagine themselves, bridging cultural gaps and asserting agency within the complex landscapes of displacement. This is particularly significant in the diverse context of the Nakivale settlement. In this environment, hybridity offers a framework for understanding how refugees navigate their sense of self amid the instability of prolonged displacement. Through the layering of cultural influences—local, regional, ethnic, national, and even religious or political—refugees shape identities that honour both their roots and their present realities (Smith & Leavy, 2008). This process enables refugees to transcend the binary cultural distinctions that often define their pre- and post-displacement lives, fostering a more fluid sense of belonging.

METHODOLOGY

Our data gathering and analysis were based on constructivist grounded theory, starting with the collection of inductive data, which were carefully selected and evaluated (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Data were primarily collected through participant observation (Bernard, 1988) and thick description (Geertz, 1973). We analyzed everyday lives of residents, humanitarian workers, and

government officials, focusing on interactions within families, communities, and social groups, as well as in public places like schools, churches, and public organizations.

The study incorporated a variety of interview techniques, including narrative, unstructured, and informal interviews, together with regularly recorded observations, ideas, and information in a research notebook. In addition to interviews and notes, we gathered pictures to illustrate the artworks and initiatives mentioned in this study. The images were collected with respect for privacy, ensuring no person could be identified, in line with ethical principles.

A total of 41 informal interviews were conducted, including 17 interviews with members of community organizations, 31 with refugees (ensuring diverse representation), and 15 with representatives of international organizations and government officials. In the sampling process, we used a variety of techniques: initially, non-probability sampling (Bernard, 1988), which involves interviewing individuals recommended by trusted contacts and representatives of social organizations; snowball sampling, in which close collaborators referred additional participants for interviews; and purposive or judgement sampling, a method aligned with the principles of grounded theory that emphasizes selecting individuals who can shed light on the research problem and help further explore emerging theoretical concepts (Charmaz et al., 2009; Glaser, 1978; Vann-Ward et al., 2017).

Additionally, we collected over 70 pages of research notes, which included descriptions, medical records, and various documents. Through data analysis (using open, selective, and theoretical coding), we created 85 memos and codes to interpret the collected data. During this process, the code of artistic expression as a means of navigating and negotiating belonging gained particular significance, as numerous observations and interview testimonies focused on this theme.

We adhered to established ethical principles and codes of conduct (Clark-Kazak, 2019). Approval for this research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Makerere University's School of Social Sciences and the Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology. Additionally, permission to reside in the settlement during the fieldwork period was granted by the OPM. Each participant received a consent form in one of Nakivale's primary languages—French, English, Swahili, or Kinyarwanda. The form outlined participants' rights, provided researcher contact information, explained participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time, and described data processing, pseudonymization, the study's purpose, and how the results would be disseminated. Consent was obtained either verbally or in writing, depending on participants' preferences. Data and research findings were regularly shared and discussed with participants throughout the research process, particularly with peer researchers from the Nakivale Researchers Network, a refugee-led organization in Nakivale that collaborated in the execution of this study.

FINDINGS: REDEFINING REFUGEE LIFE THROUGH ART

One of the key challenges of liminality in Nakivale is the pervasive sense of suspension and uncertainty (Griffiths, 2014). While the settlement is undeniably a harsh environment, marked by inadequate food rations, limited educational resources, and corruption (Bjørkhaug, 2020; UN-Habitat & UNHCR, 2020), it is also a space where refugee life transcends mere survival. Amid the signs of trauma and hardship, we observed numerous instances of agency, transformation,

and hope. These observations resonate with theories of liminality and the concept of the third space: while liminality is often characterized by discomfort and uncertainty, it simultaneously holds the potential for change (Harris, 2009). One pathway to nurturing such change is through art.

In the following section, we present examples of how refugees in Nakivale have used art to (a) rebuild their lives and counter the initial trauma of arriving in the settlement, (b) foster a sense of community and belonging, and (c) develop political subjectivities that manifest in artistic works—either reimagining perceptions of Nakivale or serving as forms of political resistance and protest.

Art as a Catalyst for Healing, Rebuilding Life, and Agency

Upon arriving at Nakivale, many refugees struggle with adaptation, facing long waits for refugee cards, loss of social status, and a harsh environment. One interviewee recalled how, when he arrived in 2005, "there was virtually nothing here." Reflecting on the present, he mentioned, "It's hard to imagine, but none of what's here now was there. There was no taxi park, no buildings, bars, or schools. People used bicycles to transport others."

In conversations about the life stories of our research participants, a gap often appeared. For instance, someone might have spent 10 years in the settlement but referenced activities only from the past year or two. What happened before? These experiences were difficult to uncover. One participant, coming from a place bustling with artistic activities and communal gatherings, found Nakivale devoid of similar opportunities. The absence of artistic outlets left him "without hope":

I lost hope many years ago, that I would be here. The first 4 years were really difficult. I was drunk. I drank a lot and tried to forget about the situation. And there was no way I was going to be successful because of what I saw in the environment.

A turning point occurred when he joined a trauma healing group led by a foreign journalist. This experience introduced him to the concept of trauma, which was new to him. Understanding his trauma reignited his passion for art, which he had previously abandoned. He created a comic book about a girl overcoming trauma, drawing inspiration from his own experiences and those of his community:

Because I'm someone who always want to support the community. So with this information and knowledge that I have I wrote the comic book about trauma. I know that with the images someone would like to read. In Congo most of the time I could also make some comic about HIV awareness.

This was one of the first examples we encountered in Nakivale of using artistic expression to cope with trauma. It is important to note that traumatic memories are often stored in a nonverbal area of the brain, causing people to experience them as vague sensations and images rather than clear, linear stories (Harris, 2009). In this case, art played a crucial role, allowing him to express emotions and experiences that were difficult to articulate verbally.

His life story exemplifies the difficulties of adapting to Nakivale, facing trauma, and using art to manage negative emotions. He went on to become an important community leader, using his skills to build a centre to train youth in painting and entrepreneurship. This artistic endeavour helped him reclaim his creativity and process his traumatic experiences. It also served as a tool to educate and support others in the camp, aligning well with Bhabha's (1994) idea of art as a socially constructed language that embodies

Figure 1

View of the Artistic Centre in Nakivale Base Camp's Library.
Source: Authors.

various roles, interpretations, and contexts across different communities.

Nakivale provides more examples of using art to address the trauma of past experiences. Many artists in Nakivale are organized around the library artistic centre (Figure 1)—the only library in the settlement, serving multiple purposes. Children can learn and refine their artistic skills there. The first author (MMK) was invited by an art teacher to a workshop where various forms of artwork were presented. He emphasized the importance of art, saying, "The soul, just like the body, needs to eat." Some pieces (presented in Figures 2 and 3) depicted sadness, past traumas, and the burdens that have shaped the lives of the artists showcasing their work at the library's artistic centre. Our interlocutors agreed that the purpose of their work was to express often hidden, unexpressed ideas, affects, and emotions. This aligns with

the arguments of Huss et al. (2015), who explain that art is seen as emotionally rehabilitative. Its practice extends beyond therapy rooms, integrating into community life and education, allowing individuals to gain an outsider's perspective, analyze personal events, and strive for growth.

Art as a Medium for Building Community and Negotiating Belonging

Secondly, as part of our research project, we explored community development in Nakivale and how interactions among diverse refugee groups—based on various identity markers (ethnic, religious, territorial, linguistic, etc.)—shape their understanding of "being a refugee" in Nakivale. The development of new relationships and the transition from a state of flight to life reconstruction can be seen as a process occurring in Bhabha's third
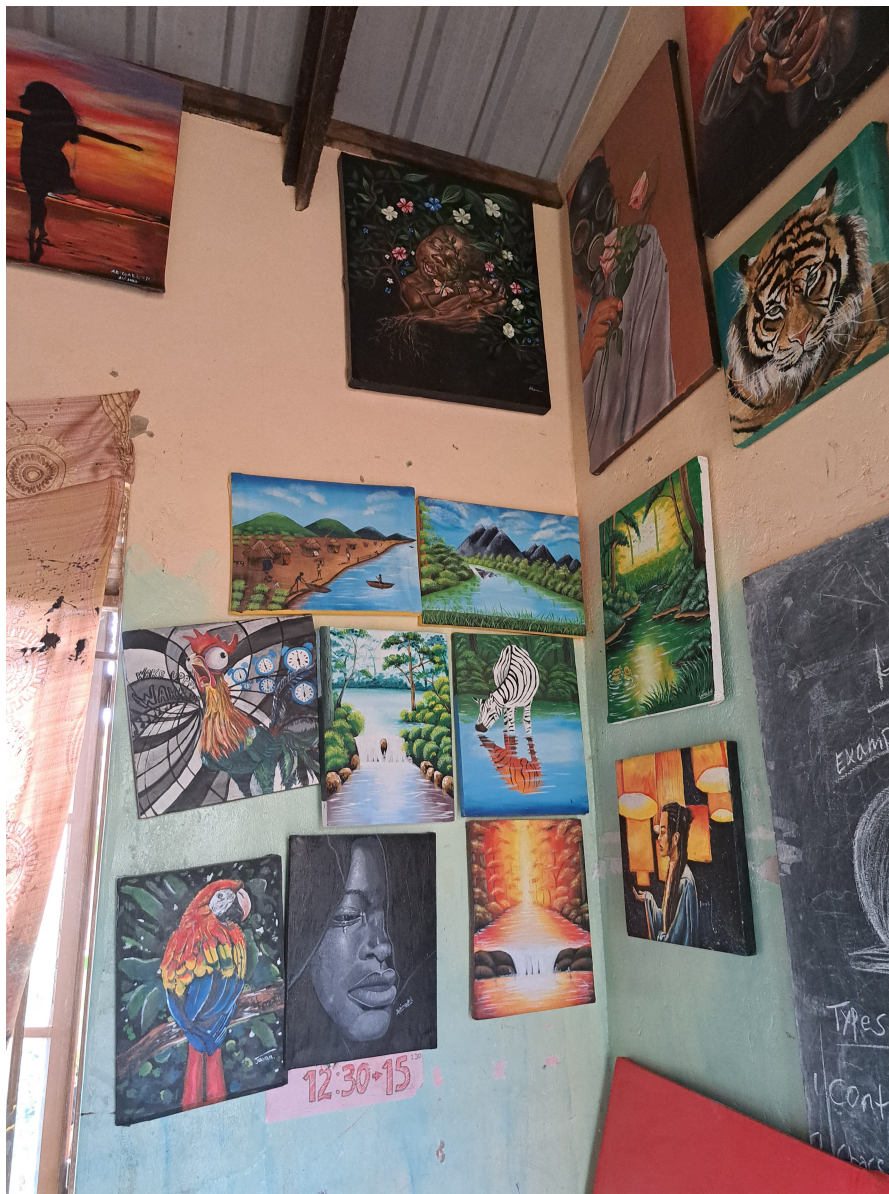
Figure 2

Displays of Art in the Library Centre in Nakivale Base Camp.
Source: Authors.

space. This space allows for the emergence of a multicultural community where new identities are formed, linking refugees' past experiences with their present situation and future aspirations.

Community emerged as a significant focal point in research, underscored by numerous testimonies from refugees who recognized the value of contributing "for the community." One interviewee explained his activism by saying, "The children in the community, the community itself, the parents, really appreciate what we do. … That's what pushes us to keep going." This sentiment reflects elements of Turner's (1969) concept of communitas, emphasizing the importance of recognition as a driving force for agency.

We argue that examining refugees' and migrants' leisure activities beyond purely economic or functional perspectives can shed light on how they navigate hybrid identities in new environments. Through adaptation,

Figure 3

Art Display in the Library Centre in Nakivale Base Camp.
Source: Authors.

fostering a sense of belonging, and creating a feeling of "home," these activities reveal profound processes of cultural negotiation and integration (Lewis, 2015).

One such example was the cultural festival called Our Talent, Our Opportunities, organized by the Wakati Foundation, in collaboration with the commander's office and community-based organizations within the settlement. During the festival, artists from various communities showcased their talents, such as traditional singing in costumes from the DRC, drumming performances from Burundi, and traditional dances from Ethiopia and Somalia.

During the event, I spoke to an attendee who had observed Burundians playing their drums and Ethiopians dancing to their traditional songs. When I asked how they were familiar with these cultures despite being from different countries, they explained that they interacted with members of these

cultures regularly and now had the chance to witness and admire their talents first-hand.

The festival supported refugees' identity and belonging in two key ways. First, it reconnected refugees with their traditional cultures, which may have been disrupted during migration (Andemicael, 2011). Second, it brought people together to celebrate each other's cultures.

When asked if this led to discrimination, one informant denied it, stating, "No! We are all refugees and have our own cultures. It's fascinating to learn about others." This response aligns with Bhabha's concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism (1994, pp. ix–xxv), which describes how marginalized or peripheral communities create hybrid cultural forms. By blending local and global influences, they maintain a strong sense of their own identity.

This perspective is particularly valuable in analyzing differentiated spaces like Nakivale, where people of diverse languages, ethnicities, religions, and nationalities coexist. The informant's comment also reflects Turner's (1969) concept of communitas, where political and social differences give way to a sense of community among refugees, celebrating cultural diversity.

One interviewee, a leader of a local organization promoting social cohesion, described the settlement during the festival as a space where people connect, share their culture, and showcase their talents. By expressing themselves and celebrating their traditions, they find strength and motivation to persevere:

> Music, culture and art, I think it's one of the most important things that keep us alive. Because of course you think about basic needs like food and water, but people also need to experience art, culture, their culture that they are sharing here tonight. Sometimes they might even skip a meal to have the opportunity to experience art, culture. It's amazing.

Another example of artistic expression that reconnects refugees with their traditional cultures and forges a diverse community is found in the religious activities in Nakivale. These activities employ various artistic expressions, such as music and dance, in their rituals. Turner (1969) argued that relationships among individuals generate symbols, metaphors, and comparisons, with art and religion emerging from these interactions rather than from legal and political structures. In artistic and prophetic works, we glimpse the untapped evolutionary potential of humanity that has yet to be fixed in structure. Spaces created for cultural and ritual expression also offer the potential for healing and reintegration, creating social bonds that transcend the normal understanding of time and place (Turner, 1975).

During field research, the first author (MMK) spent considerable time in various churches in Nakivale, mainly evangelical churches attended by believers from the DRC. Services usually started with the elegantly dressed choir performing. The women lined up in front of the altar and sang first, followed by the children dancing and singing. People danced exuberantly, shouting with their eyes closed, and the music was fast and intense. This expression of faith and emotion is characteristic of many evangelical churches, especially those belonging to the Pentecostal movement. Participants engage with their whole bodies, manifested in vigorous dancing, clapping, and singing.

Art as a Means of Political Resistance and Agency

Thirdly, art can be a form of manifesting political agency, understood, after Bhabha, as a means of resistance to dominating and oppressive power structures. In **Debating Cultural Hybridity**, Bhabha (2015) describes cultural hybridity as a construction of subal-

Figure 4

The "Promise Hub," a Skilling Centre in Uhuru Land, Nakivale.
Source: Authors.

tern agency, a concept introduced by Gramsci (1971) to explain cultural hegemony, which systematically excludes certain social actors and groups from society's socio-economic institutions. This exclusion is intended to deprive them of the ability to actively participate in and influence colonial politics. This phenomenon

> emerges in the interstices of power blocs, at the margins of political society, in the liminal times and spaces between what Gramsci (1971, pp. 200–202) calls the "dialectical nexus" between social contradictions that are organic and those that are conjunctural. (Bhabha, 2015, p. xi)

In Nakivale, refugees engage with artistic expression in various ways as a form of transformation and resistance. Uhuru Land (Figure 4) is a well-known area in Nakivale, founded by the Opportunigee organization. In analyzing the subaltern role of this place, we aimed to explore the aspirations of its cre-

ators. Important insights can be drawn from the name itself. As the founder of Uhuru Land explained, the term **Uhuru** translates to "freedom" in Swahili, symbolizing the aspiration to liberate visitors from the trauma and suffering they may have encountered in Nakivale. He described Nakivale as a place of specific traumas and forms of oppression. He mentioned the long wait for a refugee card and the feeling of being labelled, stating, "I think there was a lot of discrimination against refugees. And somehow, I had a rebellious mind. I wanted to retaliate."

Uhuru Land was envisioned as a place to free its inhabitants from the trauma of living in Nakivale. However, we propose an alternative interpretation that suggests Uhuru Land, as a distinctive sanctuary built by the Nakivale community, reimagines the concept of a settlement and its potential. This aligns with the creators' vision and

Figure 5

Love Mural in the Base Camp.
Source: Authors.

represents an act of resistance against the specific social structures in which they—the refugees—found themselves. In this form, Uhuru Land embodies agency and transformation, acting as a mediator in the process of rediscovering identity and meaning within the refugee experience.

A similar role of transformation and resistance is played by various murals spread around Nakivale (Figure 5). Crafted by artists within Nakivale, each mural addresses everyday challenges. For instance, some depict well-known pop-culture figures adorned with protective masks to raise awareness about diseases, particularly COVID-19. Others serve a more indirect purpose, seeking to redefine Nakivale and reshape people's perceptions of Africa. This perception strongly influences how refugees feel about their security and sense of belonging.

The primary purpose of the mural is to counteract negative perceptions. By intentionally combining words such as peace, love, freedom, and Africa, the mural adds beauty to the environment (Mijić & Parzer, 2022). While an isolated mural may not work wonders, street art serves as a visible symbol of development and a deeper connection to the place. This connection fosters a sense of belonging by creating something with which individuals can identify. By challenging negative associations with life in Africa, it aims to transform perceptions, replacing the prevailing image of conflict and violence with that of peace and love. As one friend from Nakivale aptly expressed, "It's not that people hate Africa. They've simply had unfortunate experiences. We need to help them develop."

Finally, the role of art as a form of agency and resistance is evident in various forms

Figure 6

Christmas Tree Made of Plastic at Nakivale Base Camp.
Source: Authors.

of protest, as illustrated in Figures 6 and 7. One local refugee-led organization collected 4,000 plastic bottles around the camp and created a Christmas tree (Figure 6) and a plastic figure with a sign that read: "Ban every form of plastic before plastic bans every form of life on earth" (Figure 7). The goal was to draw the attention of international organizations and the OPM to the problem of environmental pollution in Nakivale.

Research shows that the presence of refugees in Nakivale has a significant impact on local communities. The increasing population in the region poses challenges related to limited environmental resources. Changes in land use around the lake's wetlands, especially the shift from pastoralism to sedentary agriculture, led to soil erosion, agricultural pollution, land degradation, deforestation, drought risk, and loss of wildlife habitat (UN-Habitat & UNHCR, 2020). The lack of an

effective waste management system worsens the environment. Ronald (2022) raises concerns about the sustainability of the current refugee settlement model, given environmental and economic tensions.

This form of protest highlights both personal and communal agency. The organization leader himself has a daughter suffering from a respiratory disease related to pollution in Nakivale. This personal connection motivated him to dedicate his professional life to advocating for change in his community. The importance of this initiative lies in the idea of rebuilding living conditions. In this case, art is used to communicate complex motivations and ideas effectively.

Another example comes from 2016. Although Nakivale settlement is now semi-open, it was not always like this. Access to institutions was much more restricted a few years ago. In a political act of resis-

Figure 7

*"Bodies Become Plastic" Exhibit in Nakivale Settlement, Base Camp.
Source: Authors.*

tance against these spatial restrictions, artists from the refugee settlement organized an initiative where they created around 1,000 origami paper birds and placed them around the wire fences, symbolizing their longing for freedom. This act not only highlights the negative impact of these structures on their lives but also brings about a visual change and a sense of ownership of the place they inhabit. The initiative is based on their belief that artistic work is powerful enough to renew perspectives on landscape perception and imbue it with significant political influence. Today, few barbed wires can be found in the settlement, and access to institutions and organizations is mostly free.

DISCUSSION

Throughout this article, we have presented three main arguments.

Firstly, we highlighted the empowering role of art for refugees, illustrating how it enables them to reclaim dignity, assert their

identity, and engage with their communities. This is particularly significant in Nakivale, where the liminal identity imposed by camp life often deprives individuals of agency and autonomy. Empowerment through art offers refugees a means to transcend the restrictive structures of the camp, reasserting their dignity and humanity in an environment that otherwise tends to dehumanize and homogenize them. By engaging in artistic expression, refugees actively resist the invisibility and marginalization imposed by their circumstances, transforming art into a tool for self-definition within the "in-between" space of their lives.

Secondly, our findings challenge Agamben's concept of "bare life" in refugee camps (Agamben & Attell, 2005). In agreement with Owens (2010), we argue that Agamben's perspective oversimplifies the complex realities of camp life by failing to acknowledge the cultural and political agency of refugees. While it is true that refugee camps, as liminal spaces, can isolate individuals from societal structures and limit autonomy, our research demonstrates that refugees do not remain passive in this state. On the contrary, they actively challenge their conditions through cultural practices, rejecting the reductive notion of bare life. Bhabha's (2015) concept of hybridity provides a useful lens to understand how art enables refugees to resist imposed, passive identities. Within the camps, refugees create "hybrid cultural spaces" that blend influences from their homelands and host environments, producing dynamic, fluid forms of belonging that challenge the rigid constraints of camp life.

Thirdly, we call for a paradigm shift in how refugees are perceived: from passive subjects of study to active participants shaping their own histories and lived experiences. Andemicael's (2011) report for UNHCR critiques the traditional focus on external organiza-tions' involvement in refugee arts programs, emphasizing the need to centre refugees' agency in artistic activities. While external interventions can provide psychosocial support, they often risk perpetuating stereotypes of refugee passivity. In our research, we observed institutional barriers that undermined refugee agency. For example, some refugees expressed concerns that their contributions would be credited solely to external organizations, leading to a reluctance to collaborate. As one interviewee noted: "When it comes to international NGOs or the local leaders, for sure, nothing we expect from them. They don't support things like this." Such practices erode the trust necessary for refugees to feel valued as contributors.

A striking example of this tension was the destruction of a Christmas tree—a symbol of pride and resilience in the face of the refugees' liminal conditions—under unclear circumstances. Speculation suggested that individuals affiliated with aid organizations disapproved of the tree's symbolic resistance. The destruction of such a symbol underscores the precariousness of liminal existence, the fragility of hybrid spaces, and the risks of erasing refugee contributions when their agency is undermined. This incident further reflects the broader tension where power imbalances and institutional barriers hinder the authentic expression of hybrid identities.

While our findings demonstrate that art can be a powerful means of resilience and self-expression, its success depends on a range of factors, including the institutional environment that either supports or hinders the transformative impulses of refugee communities. Moreover, it is important to note that art is not universally accessible to all refugees in the same way. For some, engaging in artistic practices can reopen traumatic memories, posing significant challenges. One participant, for instance, shared that despite

being an artist, he had been unable to create for years due to the effects of trauma. This highlights the need to acknowledge the varying capacities of individuals to engage with art. While art holds immense potential to inspire hope and foster optimism (Catalani, 2021), integrating it into refugee support programs with sensitivity is essential. A trauma-informed approach is crucial, ensuring that art is offered as an option for healing and empowerment, rather than imposed as an expectation.

CONCLUSIONS

This article explores the transformative role of art in helping Nakivale residents navigate belonging, negotiate their identities, and create meaningful lives within the constraints of protracted displacement in refugee camps. By examining the artistic expressions of Nakivale's residents, we demonstrate how art functions as a powerful tool across multiple dimensions.

First, we show how art helps address the trauma of displacement and facilitates the process of rebuilding lives. It allows residents to reconnect with their former identities, bridge past experiences with present realities, and imagine new futures. Through this creative process, refugees move beyond passive roles and actively engage with their personal narratives.

Second, we highlight how art fosters community and a sense of belonging within Nakivale. Refugee-led initiatives—such as festivals, religious rituals, artistic projects, and even interventions in the physical landscape—transform art into a collective endeavour. These practices strengthen social bonds and create shared cultural spaces, exemplifying Bhabha's (2015) concept of hybridity, wherein refugees construct "third spaces" that blend elements of their home cultures with new in-

fluences. These spaces enable the formation of adaptive and resilient identities.

Finally, we underscore art's role in shaping political subjectivities and fostering agency. Through artistic practices, refugees challenge power dynamics, critique oppressive structures, and engage in acts of political resistance. These activities reimagine perceptions of Nakivale, assert refugee agency, and contribute to a dynamic cultural and political discourse. Our findings emphasize the importance of involving refugees in the design and implementation of artistic programs, fostering trust while respecting their autonomy.

Hybrid identity emerges through the dynamic interactions within the multi-faceted contexts of refugee camps, shaped by both the constraints and opportunities these spaces present. We have demonstrated how artistic expression intertwines with the social and political life of Nakivale, reflecting the tensions, negotiations, and resilience of its residents. These creative acts are simultaneously personal and communal, serving as vehicles for self-expression and self-reflection while also cultivating a shared sense of belonging and community. The ongoing crystallization of new identities unfolds as individuals and communities navigate the fluid boundaries of culture, history, and displacement—a process facilitated by the transformative power of art.

For future research, we recommend exploring the diverse ways in which art impacts refugees' lives. In-depth studies are needed to examine how specific forms of artistic expression—such as music, dance, and theatre—contribute to psychological healing, social integration, and identity reconstruction. Investigating the long-term effects of community-driven artistic initiatives on fostering belonging within refugee settlements would also be valuable. Finally, studies

should consider how refugees are included in—or excluded from—policy decisions and initiatives related to cultural and artistic expression in different contexts. Such research would deepen our understanding of art as a vital force for resilience, identity negotiation, and empowerment within refugee settings.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

Permission to conduct the study in Nakivale was granted by the Research Ethical Committee of Makerere University and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. Additionally, authorization for the author's presence in the Nakivale settlement was obtained from the Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda, the camp commandant, and regional representatives.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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