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LIST OF ACRONYMS

LRA – Lord's Resistance Army

HSM – Holy Spirit Movement

UCDA – United Christian Democratic Army

NRM – National Resistance Movement

UNLA – Uganda National Liberation Army

UPDA – Uganda People's Defence Army

UCDA – United Christian Democratic Army

IDC – Internal Displacement Camp

SPLA – Sudanese People's Liberation Army

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund

WNBF – Western Nile Bank Front

GUSCO – Gulu Support the Children Organisation

KICWA – Kitgum psychosocial support programme

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The presence and participation of children in war, as casualties and soldiers, is not a new phenomenon. Between 1998 and 2001 children were being used as soldiers in at least 87 out of 178 countries – including both conflict and non-conflict situations[1]. In Uganda, forced conscription of children into conflict as soldiers and combatants first gained prominence during 1980, when Museveni's resistance force had recruited an estimated 3,000 kadogos. Uganda was chosen as a case study because of the continued abduction of children by rebel forces and the ongoing prevalence of violence against ordinary people, resulting in an increasing incidence of refugees and mass internal forced displacements. The presence of Ugandan Government military forces in Sudan is an added dimension to the regionalisation of the conflict.

In the mid- to late 80s, two successive armed opposition movements picked up the remains of decommissioned Acholi fighters from Musseveni's resistance movement. Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement was succeeded by a breakaway-armed group led by Joseph Kony, which emerged as the focus of military opposition to the government in the Gulu District. Like Lakwena, Kony claimed to be possessed by religious forces, which used him as a medium. In this manner he was able to create a charismo-ideological notion that gathered support and momentum. The name of the movement was changed to the United Christian Democratic Army (UCDA). This army was responsible for several thousand child abductions to bolster its ranks, as well as serious human rights abuses against civilians in Northern Uganda.

Although estimates vary, most would suggest that by the end of 2000, over 15,500 children have been abducted since the beginning of the war. Less than 6,000 of these children had managed to escape or have been liberated from captivity.[2]

According to the testimonies of escapees, extreme violence was used as a tool to coerce civilians into providing support and as punishment for not obeying the laws set down by the LRA. Newly abducted persons were terrorised by

LRA commanders to ensure that they stayed with their captors. Moreover, senior LRA combatants systematically used sexual degradation as a form of control and authority. The UN Secretary General reported that at least 85% of girls who arrived at the Gulu trauma centre for former LRA abductees had contracted sexually transmitted diseases during their captivity.[3]

Psychosocial rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for youth who have escaped or were released from the LRA have been established since 1994 and are reasonably well integrated locally, both with communities and as part of the Government's overall demobilisation and amnesty programme. While some former abductees return directly to communities, the majority pass through one of several non-governmental rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

In spite of the culture of peace and discourses of forgiveness and reconciliation within recipient communities, there are real tensions around reintegration and reconciliation surrounding the return of ex-abductees. Experiences within the LRA may have fundamentally altered the manner in which ex-abductees function as members within a family or as constituents within a community. Community members have concerns that this may be negative, and that ex-abductees may be aggressive or violent as a result of the violence they themselves were exposed to. Teachers and community leaders noted another side to this story. Some of the children who returned were stronger and more confident than children who were never abducted and their experiences in the bush coupled with the success of escaping gave them a newfound confidence from which leadership qualities have grown.

Reintegration occurs in the context of family relationships that are conducted under a state of uncertainty and emergency. Few social services and infrastructure, no matter how rudimentary these may be, could be considered as functional. Schools have ceased to function in many areas, water supplies are constantly disrupted and transport networks are contingent on the security situation and thus unreliable. The economies have been shattered and linkages to the greater region highly disrupted, if not completely severed. Subsistence agriculture has come under pressure as people have been squeezed into ever decreasing geographical spaces as a result of voluntary or forced relocation to IDP camps or into towns. Where remnants of 'normality' exist, they operate under conditions of extreme stress. This monograph highlights the process of reintegration of LRA abductees in this context: it may hold the seeds of future conflict or contribute to future peace.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: THE INVOLVEMENT OF AFRICAN CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

> The reception was so good for me because they had no hope that I was alive. They welcomed me but it seemed they had some fears I had done atrocities so they kept asking all these questions. I was not forced to kill anybody so I told them everything that had happened…I didn't like it because they wanted to know in detail all that had happened and I was not free about it. It made me sad.[4]

According to United Nations' estimates, a quarter of a million children under the age of 18 years serve as soldiers in national and guerrilla armies in conflict across the globe. In the past ten years, more than two million children have been killed in armed conflicts and almost three times as many – some six million children – have been seriously injured or permanently disabled. These conflicts have challenged comfortable, Western assumptions about war and about children: that war, while not always desired, is sometimes "necessary"; that war is fought between trained, adult soldiers; that casualties of war are primarily soldiers, not civilians; that there are clearly defined aggressive and aggrieved parties; and that children are innocents in need of benevolent state protection during war. The presence and participation of children in war and conflict, as casualties and soldiers, is not a new phenomenon. However, during the last few decades, a shift has occurred from using children and adolescents, not only as adjuncts to or the last line of defence in conflict, but also as 'principal' participants in many of the globe's wars. Between 1998 and 2001 children were being used as soldiers in at least 87 out of 178 countries – including both conflict and non-conflict situations.[5]

The increase in the use of child and adolescent soldiers is directly related to changes in the value chain of weapons technologies, or, in other words, the proliferation of small arms. There are two points that need to be made here. The first is a design and development issue. For much of the 20th century, weaponry was either too expensive and/or too heavy for children to handle. Technological developments, facilitated by sophisticated information and communications technology-enabled design tools, have provided the means to manufacture simpler and lighter weapons. The second is a supply issue.

The post-Cold War era has resulted in the wholesale flooding of redundant, cheap but efficient weapons in Africa.

A further significant change has been the recruitment and inclusion of girls, alongside boys, as soldiers. There are confirmed reports of girls under the age of 18 in government forces, paramilitaries/militias and/or armed opposition groups in 36 countries between 1990 and 2000.[6] The use of girl soldiers is revealed in an additional 10 countries in the 2001 Coalition to Stop the use of Child Soldiers Global Report – bringing the total to 49 out of 178 countries between 1990 and 2001.[7] Children under the age of 18 who serve in armed forces and armed groups around the world are vulnerable to serious physical and psychological violence. For some child soldiers the dangers faced include sexual violence.

Child soldiers serve within militaries and armed groups in which complete co-operation and obedience is demanded, in contexts where moral and legal safeguards against their abuse may have broken down. In this context sexual violence becomes sexual exploitation. For young girls, participation, voluntary or coerced within either formal military or militia structures, holds an ever-graver picture and has often said to be comparable to sexual slavery. Evidence suggests that in many of Africa's wars sexual slavery is imposed on most abducted girls, with possible exceptions of some pre-pubescent girls.[8] In northern Uganda, for example, the majority of girls and women in rebel camps have syphilis or other sexually transmitted diseases, against 60% of boys and men. The vast majority have been infected during their period in captivity.[9] People who work with former child members of the rebel movements verify that female abductees inevitably become victims of rape by those to whom they are allocated or by senior soldiers.

Worldwide therefore, changes have occurred in the extent and nature of the participation of children conflict and war and this means the issue of the reintegration of children and youth that have been distanced or cut-off from their communities of origin as a result of their participation in military units presents a challenge for social and political processes in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

The war in Northern Uganda

In order to understand the context in which children are being reintegrated, it is important to explore the dynamics and causes of the present conflict.

These lie in political disenfranchisement, long term economic under-development of the Acholi region, over-representation of Acholi in the military and the existence of a war economy in which ongoing conflict meets the vested interests of specific groups.[10] To some extent, the present conflict also has its roots in the failed reintegration of earlier waves of demobilised soldiers.[11]

Northern Ugandan history has witnessed endless wars and incursions, some of which are highlighted in the paragraphs to follow. In the 1850s, Arab slave traders established posts in Acholiland and plundered the resource base of the local population. Twenty years later, in 1872, the arrival of Nubian troops saw numerous atrocities committed against the Acholi, and Nubian troops were again used by the British colonial administration as a means of asserting power.

Soldiering or involvement in military activity has played a significant part in the social and economic life of the Acholi region over the past hundred years. Under British rule, the Acholi were significantly represented in the military. Soldiering was a source of prestige, employment and identity for young Acholi males in the absence of other economic opportunities. Given the complex military and political history of Uganda, the Acholi found themselves at times as part of the national armed forces and at others, as fighting as parts of various rebel groups against the Government of the day.

Uganda gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1962 under Milton Obote, whose army was dominated by Acholis. Nearly ten years later, in 1971, Idi Amin Dada, the military commander of the mainstream army ousted Obote. Amin in turn was removed in 1979 by a coalition of forces from Tanzania and Ugandan opposition groups. After a brief transitional period, Obote was reinstated in 1980, but was once again overthrown five years later by the military.

Many of Obote's soldiers during his second regime were Acholi from Northern Uganda, with a significant proportion drawn from Acholiland.[12] During his time, General Tito Okello did little to change the composition of the army. However, a few years later, in 1986 Yoweri Museveni, the country's current President, removed Okello from power.

President Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM), drawn primarily from the southwestern region of the country, started the process of decommissioning the Acholi. In their pursuit of ousting the last vestiges of opposition, they used violence and committed gross human rights violations

(of mostly Acholi), which ignited the fuel that resulted in a low-level conflict that simmered for years. Many Acholi members of the previous national army, the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) fled north when the army disintegrated and some regrouped in Sudan, as the Uganda People's Defence Army (UPDA).

Alice Lakwena began mobilising small groups of these deserting rebel soldiers, mostly Acholi and Luo, along with some civilians into the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM). Lakwena's movement gained popularity and support through a powerful combination of political disenfranchisement with local spiritual ideology and Christian beliefs. During the second half of 1986, the HSM engaged in numerous attacks on civilians and government forces. A year later (by the end of 1987), the HSM was defeated.

Following this defeat, a breakaway-armed group led by Joseph Kony, emerged as the focus of military opposition to the government in the Gulu District. Like Lakwena, Kony claimed to be possessed by spiritual forces, which used him as a medium. In this manner he was able to create a charismo-ideological notion that gathered support and momentum. The name of the movement was changed to the United Christian Democratic Army (UCDA). This army was responsible for several thousand child abductions to bolster its ranks, as well as serious human rights abuses against civilians in Northern Uganda.

The abduction and forced conscription of children into conflict as soldiers and combatants, however, first gained prominence during 1980, when Museveni's resistance force had recruited an estimated 3,000 kadogos (Bugandan for "child soldier"). All kadogos were under the age of 16 years and approximately one-sixth were young girls. It is difficult to form an accurate account of how these children were treated, as little documentation and few verbal accounts exist. Studies undertaken after the NRM came into power however, suggest that beyond insufficient training and exposure to risk, most children were treated the same as the adult soldiers.[13]

The history of conflict in Uganda has been tainted with brutality that extends into the heart of civil society. The initial NRM counter offensive in Gulu District reaffirms this. Government soldiers confused the Acholi for the UCDA and were responsible for a number of extra-judicial executions. Furthermore, in order to limit the UCDA's access to Acholi resources, thousands of people were relocated to internal displacement camps and their homes and granaries destroyed. The local economy – based on agricultural commodities like cocoa, vanilla and coffee – collapsed when farmers were forced to abandon

their land and take refuge elsewhere. Despite these 'military efforts' the UCDA forces were not defeated and by 1991, in yet another major military offensive, the north of the country was virtually sealed of from the rest of Uganda.

During the same time, the UCDA continued to plunder the local populace, abducting their children and utilising their resources. Some of the laws passed on local civilians in the countryside included: a ban on riding bicycles (persons on bicycles could quickly reach army detaches); habitation near roads (where people may witness landmines being planted or ambushes being laid); and keeping pigs (which appeared to be a response to support from the Islamic Sudanese Government). Punishment for breaking these laws was death. Despite these measures the campaign failed. As such, in 1992, a more politically orientated counter-insurgency strategy that sought the co-operation of Acholi civilian authorities was initiated.

By early 1994 a political solution was sought with Kony and his forces, now known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Before any progress could be made, the Sudanese Government – in response to Ugandan support for the mainly Christian Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) rebels in the south of that country – formally offered the LRA military and logistical support. This resulted in an increase in the scale of violence and child abductions. To compound matters, since mid-1996 nearly half the population of Gulu District – approximately 200,000 people, who normally resided in communities of scattered farms – have been forced to flee their homes. They sought sanctuary in Gulu Town, or other outlying trading centres, small army posts (known as detaches) in so-called protected villages and Internal Displacement Camps (IDCs).

Conflict in Uganda continued until 1999, when for no given reason, the LRA almost completely ceased their activities. Relative calm returned to the area and many civilians were allowed to return to their villages. The LRA resumed operations in 2000, when violent acts against civilians and child abductions escalated once more. Although estimates vary, most would suggest that by the end of that year, in total since the beginning of the conflict over 15,500 children had been abducted since the beginning of the war. Less than 6,000 of these children had managed to escape or had been liberated from captivity.[14] According to the testimonies of escapees, extreme violence was used as a tool to terrorise civilians into providing support, or for not obeying the laws put down by the LRA. Newly abducted persons were terrorised by LRA commanders to ensure that they stayed with their captors. Moreover, senior LRA combatants systematically used sexual degradation as a form of control and

authority. The UN Secretary General reported that at least 85% of girls who arrived at the Gulu trauma centre for former LRA abductees had contracted sexually transmitted diseases during their captivity.[15]

During 2001, the Canadian Government launched the first serious initiative aimed at securing the release of abducted children. This initiative came as a direct result of the September 2000 International Conference on War-Affected Children held in Winnipeg. Delegates released a 14-point plan to end the suffering of children caught in war zones and launched an optional protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child calling for nations to raise the minimum age of military service.[16] Lloyd Axworthy, the (former) Canadian Foreign Minister, brokered a deal between Uganda and Sudan, aimed at putting aside differences and encouraging the LRA to release the abducted Ugandan children still in held in their camps. Negotiations were extended to include the disarming of the LRA and the relocation of their camps to distances of one thousand kilometres outside of the Ugandan border. In return, Uganda was required to stop support for the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The SPLA based in southern Sudan is itself engaged in a war of liberation, in the hope of disengaging the southern and pre-dominantly Christian part of the country, from the predominantly Muslim north.

Although a protocol was signed, which allowed access for the friendly Ugandan forces to execute limited military operation within the borders of Sudan in order to deal with the LRA problems, in reality, very little happened following the conclusion of these negotiations. By 2001, the LRA had curtailed their operations and relative calm returned to the region. The Ugandan government also began to relax its restrictions on the civilian population and some villagers were either allowed to return to their homes or to extend their farming activities in areas around the IDCs. However, following both the desire to exploit mineral resources in southern Sudan and in the wake of the 'September 11' terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington in 2001, Museveni successfully lobbied the United States to have the LRA officially labelled a terrorist organisation. The impact of the Sudanese government's cutback of aid to the LRA was to weaken the rebel group, but did not lead to its disintegration. In response to this, in late 2001, the LRA began moving from its bases south of Juba to Upper Talanga, a remote area of the Imatong Mountains on the Sudan/Uganda border. During this time the LRA also attacked and looted southern Sudanese villages for food.

In March 2002, impatient with diplomatic efforts to end the war in the north, Uganda launched a massive military offensive to ensnare the LRA. With

limited support by Sudanese government forces, "Operation Iron Fist" was initiated. The initial targets for elimination were four LRA base camps on the eastern bank of the White Nile in southern Sudan. The UPDF committed a full division of 10,000 soldiers to an offensive into southern Sudan. Frequent clashes with the rebels saw several hundred LRA combatants being killed.[17] It was estimated that there were no more than 2,000 LRA combatants in Sudan.[18]

In addition to eliminating the LRA as a 'terrorist' force, another objective was to facilitate the release of captured children. However, after the first seven months, the military effort failed to rescue any of the abducted adults, youth or children. While the LRA released 100 captive women and children in mid-June, no further individuals were released or liberated by the Ugandan military. In effect, the LRA displaced from their bases in southern Sudan scattered into smaller bands and fled into mountainous terrain, leaving violence and destruction in their wake.

Relocating in northern Uganda they sparked a ferocious counter-attack that led to hundreds of casualties and forced thousands more civilians to flee their homes, adding to the already large number of displaced. One report suggested, that as of September 2002, an estimated 552,000 Ugandans were displaced or at risk of having no harvest.[19] In addition to which, at least 24,000 Sudanese refugees were seeking refuge in northern Uganda having been forcibly displaced from southern Sudan by Ugandan forces. UNICEF estimated that, at the end of June 2002 a total of 5,106 children remain unaccounted for.[20] These figures, however, could not be verified, because United Nations agencies, international relief organisations and independent media were denied access to the area to monitor the situation.

It is also worth noting that the LRA is not the only armed group operating in the north of the country. In the northwest of the country, the Western Nile Bank Front (WNBF), which is also reported to use children as soldiers, is allied with the LRA and was also supported by the Sudanese government. The WNBF has launched incursions from bases in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In the northeast of Uganda, armed members of the Karamojong, a marginalized minority group, have also reportedly abducted children for similar reasons. Armed gangs of Karamojong rustle cattle and ambush and raid vehicles. This is said to happen over a geographic area extending across the borders into Kenya and Sudan and on numerous occasions provoking serious incidents with neighbouring countries. Other armed opposition groups include the Ugandan National Rescue Front, which

operates in the northwest and the Tabliqs, a Muslim group with an estimated strength of about 400 men.[21] It is not known whether these groups recruit or use under-18s as soldiers.[22]

The Current Impasse in Northern Uganda

At the time of writing, there were no signs of LRA-abducted children emerging, even as prisoners of war, with Ugandan troops. The war with the LRA would appear to have reached a new stage and the UPDF has admitted that during military combat, its forces were unable to protect civilians in southern Sudan. It also admitted that children were being killed rather than rescued.[23] In response to international criticism, instead of committing to minimising child casualties, a UPDF spokesman emphasised that the children had been militarised, indoctrinated and trained to resist. Such statements served to legitimise in the spheres of the general public and other governments, the massacre of the captive children by Museveni's armed forces and government.

Undoubtedly, many of the abducted children have been forced to participate in atrocities and military combat and are thus 'legitimately' considered soldiers or even terrorists. As such they are viewed as justifiable military targets – forced to fight and are attacked for fighting. However, some of these children have embraced the doctrines of the LRA, because they believe that this is the only way to maintain their way of life, or even to survive.

Chris Dolan, who spent more than two years as a researcher in the war-ravaged north of Uganda for the London-based Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development, has questioned the accuracy of estimates on the numbers of "child soldiers" recruited by the LRA. Commenting on the fact that not a single child-soldier had been released, he said, "If there were 10,000 children, I can't believe 10,000 soldiers couldn't catch some of them."[24] Countering the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) April news web site, which stated that some 5,550 children were still missing, he claimed that the number of children working for the rebels was unlikely to exceed 900. Furthermore, he argued that focus on the rebels' recruitment of children diverted attention away from reports of the UPDF's own use of child soldiers since 1998 in conflict in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo.

It has also shifted attention away from the conditions of more than 500,000 people defined as "in need" in Uganda's northern area. These individuals were uprooted from their homes and were heavily dependent on food aid

supplies from the United States. Dolan suggests that the emotional impact of abducted children creates an enormous capacity for generating funds. Although not minimising the notion that child abductions for military or other purposes are both deplorable and traumatic, Dolan argues that the heavy emphasis on this single factor has done little to help resolve the country's 15-year long conflict and has diverted attention from the extreme needs of tens of thousands of children and adults.

Notwithstanding current developments, LRA leaders have on a number of occasions sent word through religious leaders in the north that they wish to discuss a peaceful end to the conflict. The Ugandan Government has indicated a desire to listen to the most recent of these, but has refused to suspend military operations while talks take place. However, if previous attempts to resolve the conflict are to be considered, the prospects are very dim indeed. The war has continued and although peace talks have been mooted, the impasse continues.

The most recent efforts were initiated during the last week of October 2002, when Museveni appointed the highest level delegation ever convened by the Ugandan government under the aegis of the First Deputy Prime minister and minister of Internal affairs, Eriya Kategaya, to head the Government's negotiating team. The Archbishop of Gulu, John Baptist Odam, who is the chairman of religious leaders and elders peace initiative, said (on October 23th), that Museveni wrote to him, saying the government had initiated an indirect dialogue with Kony and were exchanging letters. According to Odam, "after naming their team, the LRA and the government will then agree on the venue, time and agenda of the meeting." He said he was waiting for further developments before trying to send emissaries to talk to the LRA leadership. The following week however, the Ugandan government claimed that Kony had only narrowly escaped capture.[25]

The LRA and the Acholi community: the position of abductees

Contexts of conflict are often discussed as if there are clear and identifiable groups with no ambiguity or contradiction. In Northern Uganda, the war is generally portrayed as a conflict between the opposing forces of the LRA, the UPDF and more recently the SPLA as the conflict has, over time, become embroiled in Sudanese politics. The civilian population is portrayed as passive and as a resource base that is terrorised and plundered. The terms 'rebel' or 'soldier', and 'civilian' are used dichotomously as a person is constructed

as either one or the other. The relationship between the warring factions and civil society then seems clearly demarcated. However, in a conflict like that in Northern Uganda, where perhaps as many as 90% of the 'rebels' are abducted children and youth of local communities, the relationship between the rebel group and civil society has to be much more complex than traditional language allows to be conveyed. As a child or youth is abducted and becomes part of the adui (rebels), he or she remains a son or daughter, brother or sister, niece or nephew to adults in the community. This has clear, but complex implications for reintegration.

At the core of most conflicts lies either an ideological discourse between competing forces, or a desire to impose hegemonic control of one of the forces over the other, in order to control either a spatial entity or limited resources. Neither the precursor of the LRA, Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement nor Kony's Lord's Resistance Army have presented political programmes that are readily comprehensible to western lay analysis, beyond the call for Uganda to be ruled according to the biblical Ten Commandments. While political marginalisation and long term economic underdevelopment of the Acholi region may be root causes of the present conflict, the LRA has not expressed a coherent political agenda in those terms. Many rebel groups have the tacit support of the communities out of which they operate; this is not the case with the LRA.[26] The rebels are not representatives of the people, nor do they attempt to articulate an agenda that could be construed as such. In addition, the LRA would seem neither to have the attitude nor structure of an effective military unit, but rather their combat effectiveness is largely symbolic and reliant upon evocation of fear, in both their abducted 'soldiers' and in the Acholi community in general.

In conflicts that take the form of civil war, there is an internal/external dynamic with respect to who the 'enemy' is. The conflict between Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement and the Ugandan Government forces initially had this structure. However, with the failure of Lakwena's movement to overthrow the Government, and the HSM's defeat and dissolution, Kony's LRA emerged in a political vacuum. While the LRA's stated enemy is the Government and is integral to Kony's account of why they are rebels, the present conflict does not have the dynamics typical of a civil war. It is more accurate to say that, as the LRA are almost entirely organised around the magnetism of Kony, it takes on the structure of a warlord and his militia. The relationship of the LRA with the Acholi community is therefore more accurately viewed through that lens.

In defining "warlodism", Mackinlay notes that warlords are a wholly negative phenomenon and should not be confused with insurgents fighting an ideo-

logical or political war.[27] The former deals with the local population in a rapine and predatory manner, while the latter has to use the population as its resource, often with civil society's tacit support. Insurgents may use some of the trading techniques of warlords, but if they really are insurgents with a long term political agenda, they will eventually return to a political end game, for at some stage they will either have to opt for co-existence or submit themselves to the electorate. The LRA are not insurgents and by labelling them a terrorist organisation, the Ugandan government has legitimised their existence when, arguably, there is no legitimacy at all.

Returning to the question raised above, how can we understand the relation of the LRA to Acholi civil society? In most cases, the conflict is referred to as a 'war', the targets of the LRA being both Government forces of the UPDF and the Acholi communities that it terrorises. However, the LRA is not at war with the community, but utilises the community as a resource base for both food and human capital – and uses terror as a mechanism to wield control and power. From the outset, Kony has acted as a warlord, plundering local resources and perpetrating human rights abuses. The web upon which the various relationships are spun is more complex than what is currently portrayed. Certainly, some accounts of the present attacks by the LRA on Acholi civil society relate that Kony is 'punishing' the people for withdrawing their support and the fighters feel isolated and abandoned. Kony's dedicated band of followers reject and ignore internationally accepted rules of conduct governing the relationship of the officer to the soldier: treatment of the wounded; custody of prisoners and the protection of non-combatants. At the core of their impunity lies the use and abuse of children as slaves, either for soldiering, transporting or sexual gratification. This is yet another characteristic of warlordism. Therefore there is a complex identity between the Acholi civil society and the LRA, which is assumed to be mainly composed of abducted children and youth of its communities. These dynamics are arguably central to the issue of reintegration.

Methodology

Fieldwork was carried out over a two-month period in June-July, 2002. Narrative interviews were undertaken with ten formerly abducted youth, seven males and three females, who were invited to participate in the research by staff of GUSCO or World Vision centres. These were youth that had previously gone through their programmes and were now living back in the community for a period of two years or more. The objective of the

research, namely to understand the lives of formerly abducted children after they had been reintegrated into their respective communities, was explained to each participant. Participants were encouraged to ask questions of the researchers. In nearly all cases, their questions related to what would the research be used for. We explained it was commissioned by the AU and was to be part of a report for African governments on youth, conflict and reintegration. Only one youth decided not to be part of the study. At the start of each interview, each participant was told they were to indicate if there was any question they wished not to answer, or if they wanted to withdraw from the interview at any point. Interviews were loosely structured around the participant's life before abduction, social structures in the LRA, and experiences on reception and reintegration. The rest of the interview was governed by an individual's story.

Focus group discussions were carried out with teachers, local authorities and parents. In identifying parents for focus group discussions, we initially thought that, for ethical reasons, it would be best to run separate groups for parents of formerly abducted children who were returned from the bush, and for parents whose children were still in captivity. In practice, the reality was more complex as many parents have experienced the abduction of more than one child, one of who may have returned while one or more were still in the bush, unaccounted for or dead. Key informant interviews were conducted with staff in Gusco and World Vision reintegration centres, with local authorities, an IDP camp worker, and a traditional healer.

CHAPTER 2
CHILD SOLDIERS IN NORTHERN UGANDA: EXPERIECE AND IDENTITY

There are said to be three primary aspects to rebuilding war-ravaged societies: disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. Disarmament entails the collection, storage and disposal of weapons, as well as the demobilisation, formal registration and release from duty of combatants (including provision of assistance to help them meet immediate needs and transport to their home communities).[28] Reintegration, the third step in this process, is defined as ... "the process of helping former combatants return to civilian life and readjust both socially and economically.[29] Implicit in this definition is the assumption that that to which former combatants return is a stable, suitable and desirable form of society. It is worth reflecting upon the usefulness of this definition of reintegration, since it assumes among others, the following:

- That the process, if there is one, is a unified and effective one, able to achieve the goal of the child's social an economic "readjustment"
- That "social readjustment" is possible and desirable; and
- That "economic readjustment" is possible.

It does not take into account the possibility that the identity of the returning individual may have been charged and changed through the violence experienced and through being identified with the group perpetuating violence on the host community. Reintegration has to involve reciprocal 'readjustment' by both the individual and community. This element of reintegration has generally been overlooked. In order to further the analysis being developed here, namely to attempt to understand the complex relationship between child abductees, the LRA and civil society, which comes together at the point of reintegration, a process account is outlined examining the implications for children and their communities from abduction through to reintegration.

The Abduction: violence and trauma

On the walls of a classroom in the World Vision rehabilitation centre in Gulu is a series of murals, based on the common elements in children's own drawings that depict the 'story' of abducted children. The first picture is of a peaceful rural domestic scene, with a mother pounding grain outside the door of the family tukel (huts) and children playing in the compound. The next image is the arrival of the rebels in military uniform, terrified figures running in all directions, squawking chickens, and tukels on fire. The third is of a column of children and youth, against their will being marched into the bush, carrying the food stock of their own village on their heads, with heavy, sorrowful faces.

As returned children tell the account of their abduction, there is a striking similarity to their stories. This serves both to hide the way each child experienced their own fears and horrors, as well as to put children's experiences out in a public domain where they are accessible to the whole community. This must give children that have been through such an experience a sense of 'normality' of the abnormal that is common in war affected societies. It also becomes part of the imagination of the community, while children who have never been abducted can look at the murals, tell the story depicted and fear such a fate – which at some point might become theirs.

One 21-year-old youth who was abducted in 1995, when he was 14 told the following:

> On the day I was abducted, it was about 8 am in the morning. I had gone to the field to cultivate. I was heading home in order to go to school. I heard a noise from the direction of ___. When I looked, I saw some men in military uniform. They were coming, as if they were passing by. They signalled to me, calling me to go to them. I didn't know who they were, I never knew they were LRA since they were dressed in that combat clothes, I thought they were Government soldiers, so that is how they abducted me, and forced me to join the captives.

Another youth spent one year in the LRA before escaping. He recounted his abduction as follows:

> In my family, we were 6 brothers and 6 sisters. I was abducted when I was 17 years old. It was during nighttime. They came during nighttime when I was asleep with my brothers. They took three of us. Of

> the three, I am the only one that escaped; the other two are still there. One is 7, one is now 11.

Other youth tell similar stories; of being abducted from school, from cultivating in the fields, from fetching water. One 22 year old gave the following account:

> It was in 1996. I was still asleep. It was approaching 6 am in the morning. The rebels of the LRA stormed in and forced me out and forced me to join the captives. They were about 15 in number.

The details are imprinted in their memories as they recall, "It was a Saturday", or the exact hour of the day. The moment of abduction is a marker that signals the end of a life they previously knew.

One of the defining features of present day conflicts, in which civilians are the primary targets of violence, is the impact of such violence on the daily lives and routine of the community. Children's accounts demonstrate that there is neither place nor time of day that is safe. Abductions occur during the day or at night, in school, in the fields or at home -the familiar places in which daily life is conducted become infused with fear. There is no predictability to the abductions. The impact of child abduction on the social and cultural life of the community is profound, because fear of abduction disrupts normal routines and the daily transitions of the community.

In an interview with an adolescent returnee and his father in an IDP camp on the outskirts of Gulu town, the disruption of civil society caused by child abduction is evident. He gave an account of how he, together with six other youth from his village, was abducted. His brother had been abducted a year before him. Other children that had escaped came back and told the family he had been killed. The youth already knew his brother was dead before he himself was abducted. They told of the family's efforts to stay safe, while trying to retain normalcy and their economic independence.

Interviewer: How did your own life change after your brother was abducted?

Youth: We were too scared to stay in the home after that so we moved away to the camp.

Interviewer: So you were living in the camp when you were abducted?

Youth: I was living in the camp, but we still went to the village to cultivate. So I had gone to the fields to cultivate, and I was abducted there.

Interviewer: Did other members of the family still go to the fields to cultivate?

Youth: They continued to go after I was abducted, because there was no other way (to survive). But many times they heard rumours that these people are around.

Interviewer (to father): At any point, did you decide not to go to cultivate?

Father: The abductions continued so much during those years that it was difficult to do so, so we stopped going there, and we had to live by whatever means we could.

Violence has a corrosive impact on community's strategies to balance safety with survival, to retain daily routines and traditional agricultural practices. Attempting to do so is an expression of hope over helplessness. The power of the threat of child abduction is that it attacks at the heart of families and communities, in the case of this family forcing retreat. For the rebels, abduction a tool to assert control and punish whole communities.

Child abduction has also affected the power dynamics between children and others in communities as those in positions of authority over children, such as teachers, live with a constant awareness that this power balance could be reversed. In a focus group discussion, teachers discussed the impact of abductions on their relations with children in the classroom. There is awareness that if a child feels he or she has been treated badly by a teacher, if that child is abducted then "(that child) can have revenge on you, even kill you. Teachers definitely have that fear." They said they do not beat children as punishment, but instead give them some work to do, such as sweeping the compound. In serious cases, they may call the parent to school and abdicate the punishment to the parents "the parent now gives the kind of punishment that is fitting." Teachers also live with the fear that they themselves may be abducted.

> I was a primary teacher at __ primary school. I was abducted one the 3 January 1999 from the village during school holidays. It was nighttime and I was sleeping. In my case, it was a bit different (to other abductions). When I was abducted, some of my school kids identified

> me as a teacher. When they heard of that profession, they couldn't leave me behind so I suspect they took me because I was a school-teacher. Two of my sons were also abducted. One died. One is alive; he is still with the rebel group. I was 34 years old.

This teacher spent 9 months in captivity. During this time he was not trained as a soldier, but had to teach the children of the rebels. This was one way the LRA attempted to recreate some social structures in the camps.

Abduction is a key tool in military strategy. Kony's soldiers have abducted a child from almost every extended family in Acholi, and these children are then used as pawns to prevent their parents and extended family from supporting the government.[30] The fear generated by this strategy infiltrates every element of community life and in spite of efforts at normalisation, the possibility of abduction fills the imagination of the community, even those who have yet to experience abduction. As the above account clearly demonstrates, this ultimately results in displacement, fragmented social relations and the breakdown in agricultural practices and traditional ways of life.

Within the Lord's Resistance Army: powerlessness, contradiction and resistance

This section attempts to explore the meaning of life within the LRA for children and youth. It will focus on the social structure they were forced to become a part of, their understanding of what the LRA represents, the conflict experienced when forced to fight as soldiers and their survival and escape. The reports are based on individual interviews with ten formerly abducted youth in addition to key informants close to the LRA. As such, it does not claim to be representative beyond these individual accounts, but instead serves to give some insight into the highly complex world in which children are forced to negotiate their survival – given that nearly half of abducted children have died or been killed. If youth are released or are successful in escaping, 'reintegration' begins from these experiences.

One of the characteristics of movements that abduct civilians to use as fighters is deliberate psychological brutalisation. The primary tool is fear against which individuals are forced to make impossible choices, or face retribution. Moreover, the isolation experienced by the youth, in the face of such brutalisation, forces them to become dependant on their abductors. Such strategies have been common in Liberia[31] and Sierra Leone[32] as well as northern

Uganda.[33] One youth recounted his experiences of the first hours of being abducted:

> They tied me with a rope. They asked very difficult questions and expected me to answer. Who are the rich people here, who are the business people? Take me to their homes. I would tell them I don't know, there are no rich people around here, and then they would slap me.

Every moment of the first few days were lived in a paralysis of fear as he was beaten, witnessed 'them' killing other people and didn't know if he himself would be killed. Another participant recalled how in the first few weeks, "they gathered villagers and they killed them. The children were also forced to kill" but distanced himself from these actions by saying "I wasn't…", implying they had escaped killing, but experienced conflict about it. Another youth told how, following the abduction of six children from his village, they were called together by the commander and told that some of them were going to be killed. According to the commander those who were going to be killed were the younger children, below 12 years, because they were unable to carry heavy loads. After being subjected to this state of terror, all were caned 15 strokes each, although none were killed. These forms of psychological torture serve to render the abductees powerless.

The rebel social structure into which the children are socialised is highly militarised, with battalions and companies, although the camps are modelled on a village. The basic unit of the LRA 'family', consists of a soldier and his wife or wives, together with abducted children.[34] The younger children (below 13 years) are called 'siblings'. When asked about how abducted children become assigned to structures in the camp, one explained:

> Whenever the LRA are sending soldiers to go abduct children, you will find they will pick children from different battalions, and whichever child has been abducted by a rebel soldier, he will keep that one as a position for his battalion. The child will be within that battalion.

Commanders are known as 'teachers'. Child abductees are often used for labour similar to the work they would have done in their home village, such as guarding goats (which have been captured) and taking them to graze. The only difference would be that they themselves are being guarded. For respondents this provided a sense of normalisation, which co-exists in this brutalising environment.

A former teacher asked whether they (the abductees) had seen young girls "given" to rebel officers as wives against their will in the same way as they would normally in the village. In response a participant replied, "*Of course, as far as I'm concerned, I don't see any difference between wives from here and wives from the bush, the only difference is lack of certain commodities and proper homes*." This statement, however, does not address the reality of the girls, who are forced into sexual slavery linked to reward systems in the power hierarchy of the LRA[35] but rather captures the process by which the abnormal becomes normal in the course of daily routines. One young woman, who was 'given' as a fifth 'wife' to a commander, was asked about living conditions. She maintained that "everything (was) like a normal village". They had huts to live in, cook in, and "I used to keep mine very clean every day." The latter statement she said with some pride. This posed no contradiction for her to the fact that she felt happy when she heard that her 'husband' had been killed in fighting after her escape.

Initiation Into the life of a 'rebel soldier'

Within a few weeks of abduction, children and youth reported their training as 'soldiers' began. New abductees are known as 'recruits.' A participant said he was trained for one month in how to assemble and use guns, marching, how to attack, ambush and to fight. One of the girls said a woman rebel taught her to assemble a gun and it was her duty to carry that soldier's gun. She told how:

> We were taught how to shoot a gun, to lay ambushes when you go to attack the army, and how to enter the detach of the army. When you lay ambushes, and when a motorcar comes, how even to shoot a motorcar."

Learning how "to shoot a motorcar" is powerful, even overwhelming knowledge. Despite this powerful knowledge, LRA commanders can in a moment render 'recruits' totally powerless through random acts of violence and killings. A participant said, "There was a lot of killing of children. Whoever tries to escape will be killed, for walking ahead, you will be killed, and even for a minor mistake children will be severely tortured."

Another participant explained, "Life was really horrible because there was a lot of fear in my heart because everyday you didn't know if you would be killed. Everyday we see them killing other people."

He said that it was during the training that he suffered the most: "They beat us all the time. Even when you tell them you are sick. They asked us to beat other children if they have done something wrong. Other children were asked to beat me."

In these accounts, there is still the existence of 'us', the abducted children and the 'they' of rebel commanders. However, any solidarity children may feel because they share the same plight or are from the same village is systematically and brutally broken down as children are forced into positions of extreme isolation. All former abductees interviewed felt they could not trust anyone while in the LRA. The teacher whose two sons were also abducted indicated that he could not trust his own sons. Mistrust, fear, isolation and the breakdown of personal allegiances within the group of new 'recruits,' are forcibly created and deliberately manipulated to reduce the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Simultaneously, the training in military techniques changes the perceived status of the children within the LRA from 'recruit' to 'soldier'.

Interviews with former abductees gave some insight into how they grappled with the identity of 'soldier' – an experience thrust upon them. One girl said she was given a uniform and a dress. She was afraid of the uniform, because it tied her to the identity of a soldier. She felt she would never get out of the bush and feared being killed in fighting – "*I felt I was a soldier and would go for war*". She was then asked how this made her feel – happy or sad? She explained, "*for the first time, I was so sad and then if you stay for a long time, you become happy, a bit happy.*" In a subsequent discussion it appeared that because she was a female with no children, she was not perceived as a mother, who could be exempt from fighting, but as a soldier.

Another former abductee spoke about his feelings towards getting a uniform. He responded as follows:

> I didn't feel well because I didn't want to be a soldier. Before you are trained and given a gun, you are treated as a captive, and they are always beating them. But when I became a soldier and I had a gun in my hand, at least the level of mistreatment declined.

The military uniform serves as a powerful external symbol that also creates internal conflict for abductees. This is captured in the way the youth struggled to express the identity transition they had experienced: "I didn't want to be a soldier" is followed by "but when I became a soldier", and "I felt like a

soldier" with "they look at me as a soldier". Resistance to this identity is conveyed through communicating that it is imposed. There are rewards to this identity transition – beatings and violence become less frequent and having a gun confers power in contrast to the complete powerlessness of the new abductee. This is the start of a process in which the new abductees have to individually negotiate this starting position of 'them' and 'us', and the complex issue of how, in order to survive, one must pass as 'them' while maintaining a representation of self as 'not them'. One youth explained, "It's very difficult to know if someone wants to come home or not, because no one talks about that. You have to pretend as if you don't want to". It is likely that for some abductees, their survival strategy is identification with the aggressor, as they become socialised and integrated in the rebel structure.

Interviewer: Who is a 'rebel soldier'?

Youth: We were the coreta, the trainees to become full army man.

Interviewer: Do some children eventually become rebels?

Youth: A few become rebels. You become a rebel when you are already a soldier and you go and …(raid) houses, you abduct children, you do the killing, you are already a rebel.

The 'ideology' of the LRA

One of the most infamous aspects of the HSM, which was the forerunner of the LRA, is the spiritual or cult-like basis to the movement, mixed with a political aim of overthrowing the Government. Under Kony, the character of the movement changed substantially as the level of violence, abductions, punishment and personal vendettas on Acholi civil society increased. He continued to maintain a spiritual base to the movement, with a stated aim of the LRA being to destroy all forms of evil and promote the Ten Commandments. In the LRA, rituals and communication with spirits are tied in with initiation of new 'recruits', preparation for war, and the 'cleansing' of bad spirits or *cen* after war.

Behrand (1999) gives detailed accounts of the rituals initiated by Alice as part of the HSM. To a large extent these appropriated traditional Acholi beliefs and Christian symbolism. She describes examples of ceremonies for new initiates in which the initiates walked around in a circle, were sprinkled with water, prayed and sang. "Later they had to spit in the mouth of a pig that absorbed

all the evil onto itself, just as, in the New Testament, Jesus exorcised the evil spirits and diverted them into swine. The pig, usually a boar, was then killed and burned".[36] Initiates were then required to mould human figures of clay, which represented the *cen* or spirits of people killed by war. These clay figures were carried to a spot under a tree while the following prayer was said "Sir, here before you are your soldiers. Bless them so that all bad things in them remain under this big tree. Cast out all demons (*cen*) that may want to possess them".[37] The clay figures remained under the tree.

Kony claims to be possessed by an angel that speaks through him. Behrand lists the various spirits of Kony, including a female Sudanese spirit, Silli Silindi, who served as operations commander; a Korean spirit who controlled the bullets of the NRA; a spirit from the USA, King Bruce, who led the support unit; and others such as a trickster spirit who switched sides and fought with the NRA to punish Kony's soldiers for their transgressions.[38] She gives the following account of a typical encounter.

> All these spirits spoke through Kony, their sole medium. When a spirit possessed him, he wore a white kanzu and a rosary round his neck – like Alice. Kony would sit in the yard on a metal chair holding a glass of water in his hand. He dipped his finger in the water and made the sign of the cross. Then he rose slowly, the expression on his face changed, and his eyes turned red. Then the spirit that had taken possession of him began speaking out of him. As under Alice, here too a chief clerk wrote down whatever the spirit had to say.[39]

Former abductees who were interviewed spoke about their experience of initiation rituals. It was difficult to ascertain what meaning, if any, children gave to these rituals and the impact on their sense of belonging to the LRA. The rituals were not carried out immediately after abduction, but once the group had arrived to a place of safety.

> There is that ritual cleansing. When a child is abducted, he will not be allowed to eat together with the LRA rebels until that initiation ceremony is completed whereby they smear using the shea butter oil; that is cleansing oil. From time to time they would do it, especially when a group is being sent for a mission, there would be the smearing of oil and sprinkling of water.

The ceremony initiated by Alice was a means of cleansing and rehabilitating ex-soldiers of the impurities and bad spirits that haunted them as a result of

any violence they may have carried out. It is not clear what role these cleansing ceremonies play in the LRA with respect to the initiation of abducted children. Individually, youth had different perspectives on the spirit and ideological beliefs of the LRA. One girl, when asked if she believed Kony, responded

> We believe everything he says. I saw him once. ___ (a friend) also saw him. He looks so different. We both thought he had great power. His face is very strange, strange eyes, so we avoided looking at him straight. And if he looks at you straight, you get scared.

She firmly believed that Kony was possessed with spirits and thought spirits also possessed others, but not in the same manner as Kony.

One of the youths, however, felt that Kony's spiritualism was a form of political propaganda.

> There was that kind of propaganda where Kony himself would talk to the children, the captives – that the Acholi are no more, they are not there, they are already killed. That Joseph Kony would send some soldiers to wipe out the whole community of Acholi, because they are not supporting him so he will continue sending his soldiers to kill them. So for those captives who were there in Sudan, they will give birth in order to begin another generation of Acholi because those that are there will all be killed.

He believed this was a way of exerting control on the abductees and to dissuade them from attempting to escape. The message received was, "If I go back (to my village), Kony will send his soldiers to go and kill all (my family and villagers) …. And that will include me."

Political ideology can act as a powerful motivational force for youth in the contexts of conflict and can support psychological resilience and impact upon post-conflict reintegration.[40] The self-reports of former abductees here is consistent with claims that the LRA have no clearly articulated political ideology. One report notes how the rebel commanders said the recreation of 'family' kinship among 'recruits' was the only ideological input he had to make.[41] However, while the lack of a clearly stated political ideology, combined with its particular spiritual base, appears to distinguish the LRA from many groups involved in conflict and make it seem irrational, even schizophrenic, it is possibly not as unusual as it initially appears. Nordstrom, based on observations in Mozambique, argues violence is locally constituted, that it is immediate

and personal and "military process becomes infused with local level culture and individual motivation- in fact, political ideology and commitment can be lacking almost entirely among ground troops."[42]

An overt political ideology did not emerge in youth's accounts, while belief in the spirit base of the LRA was mixed, with some believing in Kony's spirit possession, while others cynically viewing it as a propaganda tool for manipulation and control. It is evident from the interviews with youth that part of the purpose of what children are being told, is to recast the Acholi community itself as an enemy entity. Certainly abductees are told that the Acholi are the potential aggressors and that their communities will likely kill them, should they leave the LRA.

The conflict of being a 'soldier' as discussed above also mirrors a conflict with respect to who is the 'enemy'. On Sudanese soil, what meaning did it have for abducted children to be part of the LRA? More complexly, once being part of an active unit on Ugandan soil, how did the abductee experience the crisis of being a child of their village, a member of the Acholi community, while simultaneously being identified as external to it – as the aggressor, the source of fear, the rebel soldier of the LRA? As the youth's narratives unfolded, these issues emerged and the interviews could then explore the question of who the 'enemy' was? It is not possible to give a comprehensive analysis of these complex questions, based on our small sample that escaped from the LRA, but the discussions offer some reflections on these issues.

The individual accounts of children forcibly recruited as soldiers who later escaped had a shared theme: their primary task was to survive. Put simply, the enemy is anyone who threatens your survival. This can be within the LRA or externally in combat. Unlike many guerrilla movements, the 'enemy' is not defined on ideological grounds as part of achieving a political aim, but pragmatically in terms of survival.

One young woman, who was in the LRA for 2 years, gave the following account:

Youth: I fought against the SPLA when we were going for food.

Interviewer: Were you given bullets?

Youth: Yes. If you want to carry 10 magazines, you are free to. [And you?] Six. It depends on how long the fighting lasts. If it is long, then you use four or five magazines. In my case, I'd use three.

Interviewer: How did you feel going back to camp?

Youth: You feel happy, because you take things that can feed you.

Interviewer: Did you know who the SPLA were and what kinds of things they were doing?

Youth: No. We were just told to go and fight the SPLA.

Interviewer: What kind of things made you sad?

Youth: When you met the UPDF you were sad, because they are our enemy. When you do not shoot them, they shoot you. You shoot them in order to survive.

For her, fighting the SPLA did not create conflict in the same way as fighting the UPDF. An outcome of fighting the SPLA was getting food that could feed you. The UPDF is Ugandan, as she is Ugandan, and fighting the UPDF is a source of sadness, because they fought to kill the enemy – but in order to survive. Another interviewee expressed conflict as follows:

Youth: When fighting against the Ugandan Army, I felt partly as army, partly as civilian.

Interviewer: You used to steal food from Ugandan families. What did you feel when you steal food?

Youth: I feel very bad cause the food I am going to steal is my father or guardian, my brothers or sisters guardian.

Another interviewee highlighted the constant fear of being killed in combat: "It would be very good if they got food from the villagers but there was also fear you might be shot dead by people."

For these youth, this dual role as 'soldier'/abductee could not be resolved. One report told how, during an interview with 'John', an LRA rebel commander, he justified the looting of food from Acholi communities because he "had 200 mouths to feed every day" and that some of the food they were taking from families "was used to feed the families' own abducted children anyway."[43] This was one way of rationalizing the fact that violence and looting caused suffering in one's own community.

There were some suggestions from discussions with members of civil society that some former abductees maintain sporadic contact with their families, and that the links between a minority of formerly abducted children and their family or community of origin is more fluid and more complex than is often recognised in the literature. The youth in our interviews identified their key task as survival in a world where daily life is permeated by violence, in which the religious and spiritual beliefs of their home communities had been hijacked as a form of political propaganda, fear instillation and control and their identity with home and community had been fundamentally compromised.

Escape From the LRA

Escape offers the only chance for many abductees to leave the LRA. In these cases, the main opportunities for escape presented themselves once LRA units were operating within Ugandan territory. While a cross-border reception, return, rehabilitation and reintegration programme has been established in Sudan to receive Ugandan children who have escaped, fewer escapees than expected have been reintegrated through that route. One of our interviewees explained that "From there (Sudan) if you escape, it is a long way to here, it is difficult, you will be killed. Escaping from Sudan is very difficult".

A new development arose just before this fieldwork was conducted. The LRA voluntarily released 100 individuals, mainly women and young children, with instructions that they were to be looked after by the community. The 'release' of abductees into the custody of the relief agencies had never occurred before. Possible reasons for this release of personnel were that the LRA were under military and political pressure as a result of Operation Iron Fist and the drying up of support from the Sudanese government. While the reasons behind the release are unclear, the release, with its message to the community, highlights again the complex relationship of the LRA viewing themselves as from the community and having an ultimate responsibility for its members.

We discussed with escaped respondents what escape meant and the details of their own escapes. Stories of the consequences of trying to escape if caught were well known. One youth escapee told us the following story:

Youth: My friend was beaten to death, stoned to death, after knowing he wanted to escape.

Interviewer: How did they find out he was trying to escape?

Youth: We had been talking – one among us had been talking – go and tell the secret to the army man; and they called the man. You, you want to escape, we want you to be an army man, we take the government but we have no prison to keep you here, the only thing is dying. You are going to die. And they called four or five and they stoned that man to death.

Knowledge of the thought of escaping is sufficient to merit the order of a death warrant. The choices laid out in this story are stark; 'you want to escape, we want you to be an army man'. Again there is the dichotomy of 'you are with us or against us', which translates in this story into 'we can let you live, or we can ensure you die'. In spite of this, the youth in this research, who were all escapees, continued to keep in mind the idea of escape. For some, however, the realisation that they were likely to die in the bush, whether they tried to escape or not, provided the impetus and then motivation to escape. All reported waiting for the right opportunity, as the following two accounts illustrate:

> An abducted child will continue to persevere through all those kinds of problems, starvation, torture, sleeping in the rain, each time he will think of escape but due to the distance, (and) the security you wait for an opportunity. In my case, we had already crossed over to Uganda, and they sent us to the observation posts to watch the UPDF approaching, but we said 'Since it is raining, can't you give us a tent', but they said no, that would make us almost equal to them, and it was raining so, so heavily, and it gave us an idea, that was our opportunity to escape.

> Since we were already trained and given guns and then we were sent back to Uganda for a mission; one say I was shot on the leg and they took me and kept me until I recovered, and we continued. Another time, I was again shot. I thought, one day I will be killed in the (bush), I think it is time for me to escape so while we were in a certain sub-county there was a UPDF detachment, so bearing in mind the idea of escape was always in my heart, I thought, the time is now.

The accounts of survival are harrowing and give an indication of the experiences borne by those that have survived to tell them.

Interviewer: How did you escape?

Girl: Even when we were taken there, they let us even to go and get food from a Sudanese civilian, and from there we went on safari (journey), and there was no water, even the grasses are burnt already and the other is dried totally and we went there, and we got very many food, goats, peanuts, sorghum, many things, then when we collected all those things, then on the way coming back, people were about to die of thirst, even me, then we walked, walked, then when we were about to reach the camp, people were totally thirsty, others started drinking their urine, they would urinate and drink, urinate and drink, then they ran to those that were in the camp to bring water to those that were dying of thirst, then we started drinking that water, then others survived; others died-many people had died, young children what have you, and the big men also ..

There is also significant fear about how the Acholi communities will receive those that are out of the LRA, a fear stoked by the LRA itself as a form of control.

> I asked about three poor people, civilians, 'where do I go? If they find me, will they kill me, what will the reception be like?'. The first person I reported to was the Local Counsellor and he took me to the army. I was so scared. They said, don't worry, we won't harm you and I began to relax.

Political amnesty and reception

The Ugandan Government established an Amnesty Commission in 2000 based on the Amnesty Bill, which offers immunity from prosecution to those engaged in fighting the Government since 1986. Initial proposals for a limited amnesty, which would not apply to those who had engaged in serious crimes, was not supported by Ugandan communities and a ground-swell of opinion pushed for a blanket amnesty based on principles of reconciliation.[44] The Government acquiesced. The Amnesty Commission was established to deliver school fees, resettlement packages and Amnesty certificates to those who left rebel groups and came forward, known as "reporters".

The procedure for reporting is that the escapee or 'reporter' has to report to the UPDF or the LCs (local counsellors). 'Reporters' then had to spend some time in the UPDF barracks as part of a reception and debriefing process. More recently, the length of time spent in the barracks has decreased from a few

months to an average of 5 to 10 days. Most 'reporters' spend about a week in this reception programme. From there, the majority of 'reporters' are directed to one of the three major rehabilitation and reintegration psychosocial programmes. Some return directly to the community.

To April 2002, the Demobilisation and Resettlement Team of the Amnesty Commission of Gulu recorded a total of 372 'reporters' in the Acholi region.[45] Of these 'reporters', 243 were adults, many of whom were likely to have been children or youth on abduction and the remaining 129 were children. In a survey of 184 ex-LRA respondents who were part of the amnesty, 43% reported to the LC, 29% to the armed forces (UPDF, SPLA, or Sudanese Armed Forces), 15% to community leaders, and 15% to NGO's.[46] Only 4% did not report to any formal structures and returned directly home, indicating that reception is mainly experienced as formal, with structured referral to non-government rehabilitation programmes being a part of the process, before returning to community settings.

CHAPTER 3
RECEPTION, REINTEGRATION AND RECONCILIATION

The first point of reception after their one week debriefing in the UPDF barracks for many returnees, is a psychosocial reception centre. Psychosocial rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for youth escaped or released from the LRA have been established since 1994, and are reasonably well integrated locally both with communities and as part of the Government's overall demobilisation and amnesty programme. While some former abductees return directly to communities, the majority pass through one of three non-government rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. Those from Kitgum province are referred to the Kitgum (KICWA) psychosocial support programme. Those from Gulu, Lira and other provinces may be referred to the Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO) psychosocial programme or World Vision War-Affected Children's Programme, both based in Gulu town. Presently supported by various international non-governmental and donor organisations, all have their roots in local initiatives aimed at responding to the sense of desperation and needs resulting from the effects of conflict, abductions and internal displacement. They have grown in size and stature and their combined influence is now established as part of the support structures for reintegrated children within protected settlements/displacement camps and to some extent, in urban and rural communities.

Reintegration: the role of psychosocial interventions

Within Gulu, where the research was conducted, there are two main psychosocial rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for war affected and formerly abducted children. These are World Vision War-Affected Children's Programme and GUSCO, which is an indigenous local organisation formed mainly by a group of local women who sought to respond to the needs of abducted children who escaped from the LRA. Both programmes have reception centres to receive children and youth once they come out of the LRA and have group and individual counselling programmes, skills training and family support programmes central to their rehabilitation and reintegration strategies. However, the focus between the two centres differs slightly. The World Vision

programme works intensively with children in centres for a number of months before supporting their reintegration to communities. Although the GUSCO programme also uses centres, they move children to communities and identify themselves as a community-based programme.

It may be useful to give an indication of the psychosocial tasks identified as integral to rehabilitation and reintegration by outlining in brief, the activities of the centres. GUSCO, for example, was established in 1994 and has developed as a community-based programme, with a reception centre to receive and rehabilitate abducted children and then reintegrate them in communities. Over time, the programme broadened its mandate to establish an education programme for war-affected children in communities. This was because in their experience, when the programme narrowly focused on former abductees, reintegration into the community became problematic due to local envy. The programme has trained community volunteer counsellors at a parish level, supported by community development assistants at a sub-county level. This team works together with a district psychosocial team, consisting of the heads of Government Departments from Health, Education, Social Work and Planning. At a national level, there is a national core team for all agencies working on psychosocial programmes for war affected children under the Ministry of Gender, including UNICEF, Save the Children Norway and Denmark, the International Red Cross (IRC) and other agencies.

The GUSCO compound is located in Gulu town and during the time of our field visits, the centre had recently received a number of young women with their children, released by the LRA. This was unusual, for the current group of ex-abductees fell outside the recent norm. Project staff at the Gulu centres noted that the profile of abductees and youth received in the centres has changed over time. In 1997, centres were predominantly receiving 15–18 year olds, but by 1998 and onwards, as the LRA began abducting younger and younger children, the age profile decreased. Moreover, the recent release of young mothers with their children has resulted in a new profile of youth to be reintegrated; those of young female headed family groups.

During one of the visits to the centre, about eight women sat outside their tented accommodation on mats, playing or nursing their infants or toddlers. A few of their children were older, about 4 or 5 years old. Of the 63 children and youth under the care of the programme at the time, 24 were under 6 years. In another part of the compound, a group of youths were in a classroom engaged in group-work where they had the chance to talk about their

time in captivity, discuss the things they did and experienced. Four others helped out in the kitchen, as part of the rehabilitation is communal work and to have something to do.

An intrinsic part of the rehabilitation programme is the creation of a normative routine, since waking and sleeping patterns of youth were completely disrupted through frequent moves, forced marching and operations at night. The project's primary aim is to facilitate social reintegration, so the stay at the centre is usually between 4 and 6 weeks. Young women who are pregnant are not reintegrated until after the birth of their baby. This is because the staff needs to monitor the attitude of the mother to the child and assess the support the new mother may need once she has settled in a community. The project staff is aware of the fact that young women with children may not want to return home or may not be accepted at home. As such, they focus on helping the young women, if they so wish, to live independent lives in Gulu town, while trying to secure their physical and financial security.

When former abductees first arrive at the centre their immediate physical needs are taken care of. Most return in very poor physical health, suffering from malnutrition, injuries or stress and trauma related physical illnesses. Thereafter, individual and group counselling, recreational activities and communal work form part of an integrated programme of rehabilitation. Family tracing, assessment, preparation and counselling are done at the centre to prepare families and youth for reunification and reintegration. The need for tracing is rare for as soon as families hear that new children have arrived, they come to check for their own children.

Follow-up support is regarded as an important component of the reintegration work and is provided in communities through community volunteer counsellors or caregivers. Volunteers receive a bicycle to facilitate their work but are not paid. Follow-up is usually provided two weeks after their return to the family and community, then again at three months, six months and a year later if necessary. For follow-up purposes, a risk assessment procedure is carried out, which categorises youth according to low risk or high risk. Criteria associated with low risk include having stayed in rebel capacity for a short period, such as a few weeks, not having been involved in serious atrocities, lack of serious health problems and having one or both parents still alive. High-risk criteria include girls who were mothers who have come out with or without their children and abductees with very serious health problems such as HIV, or are injured or disabled as a result of conflict.

Former abductees are encouraged to return to school and teachers have been trained to provide psychosocial support within the schools in order to ensure educational reintegration. Others receive skills training, such as tailoring, bicycle repair, carpentry or joinery. A micro-finance scheme operates for young mothers, and youth that want to start some micro-enterprise. Advocacy and information raising is an important component in mobilising communities to accept youth back and they encourage the promotion and strengthening of traditional means of conflict resolution.

According to one project staff member, the aim is to promote the message of peace and reconciliation. Community development is engaged through "action plans", which is a new development in the programme. The aim of the action plans is to bring the community together to define their needs and problems and mobilise resources to address these. Recent work emanating from action plans has been the re-generation of some schools and health units, with international donor support. The evolution of the programme has been more and more towards incorporating a community development focus as a way of facilitating understanding, acceptance and reintegration of individual abductees. The model of reception centre care, with education or skills training, family reintegration, community advocacy, community volunteers and follow-up support are similar in the World Vision programme.

Across various war zones, there has been consistent debate about the role of centres in the reintegration of war-affected children to communities.[47] Some of the staff in centres in Gulu reflected on this. One argued that some form of medical screening is crucial before reunifying children with families, and centres are good for this, particularly for diagnosing STDs that would otherwise go undetected and untreated, as well as injuries resulting from bullet wounds. The staff also felt that centres were important in "re-orienting the child's mind", especially re-establishing normative routines, sleeping and waking patterns and dealing with overt aggressiveness. Issues still under review concerned the best manner in which to conduct follow-up visits. Some reports from children indicated that follow-up visits from social workers attracted attention to children in the community as being 'different'. Their experience was that community volunteers were able to move among families with more ease. They also reported that reintegrated youth should play a greater role in supporting new arrivals to the community.

Available evidence emerging with respect to the impact of centres on children's rehabilitation and reintegration in Northern Uganda, suggest that children who spent time in centres have better mental health and psychosocial well being,

compared to children that are returned directly to communities.[48] Former abductees interviewed told us of the distress they experienced after they had escaped. Many had nightmares, were disturbed, felt anxious and afraid, and were not settled in their minds. One youth said he found the counselling helped, in particular to reduce the nightmares. Another said, "World Vision cared for me and gave me everything I needed. The most positive thing was it helped me how to live in the community. I don't incite other people, I am obedient to my parents, I don't mix with other bad boys, I live a good life. The counselling was good, they taught us about child rights and that people should love one another."

One counselling programme promotes the notion of collective forgiveness, and this was a theme in some youth's accounts of their own coping strategies. For example, one youth, asked if he feels angry if someone refers to him as a rebel responded, "No, because they have been counselling me to forgive, to forget about the past, think about what we are doing today".

From the accounts of staff and former abductees, it seems that trauma symptoms such as nightmares only become pronounced once abductees return to the community, and over time, due to counselling or traditional ceremonies, the dreams lessen. There is a recognition in the community that children who have been through the psychosocial programmes are less 'rude', have more respect for people and elders (except if they are provoked), are less disturbed in their minds, and that in the centre, their character is changed so they can fit into community, unlike those who did not go to a centre.

One of the boys who had never been through a centre felt that it was easier for former adbuctees to readjust if they had been to a centre. He indicated that they had been cared for, given things such as resettlement kits and received education. For youth who had been through the centres, the one thing they most appreciated was education and skills training, since this facilitated their transition into the labour market.

Return to the Community: a changed environment

> If you are under 20 and living here, you have known virtually nothing else in your whole life but what it is like to live in a community enduring armed conflict-conflict in which you are a prime target.[49]

Community reintegration implies a removal from a community of origin and then a physical and psychological reinsertion back into that social and

psychological space. Continuously, in the process of the fieldwork, the question that kept re-emerging for the formerly abducted youth, the community, and for us as researchers was 'reintegration into what'? There is no community, in terms of what was. In addition to the abductions of thousands of children and the deaths of children and adults, sixteen years of conflict has resulted in the destruction of homes and villages, forced the overwhelming majority into IDPs or other forms of displacements and destroyed essential services, such as health units and schools. In essence, the conflict has broken down the very fabric of Acholi society.

People are living in constant fear, which has undermined traditional customs around which the rural Acholis built their value, ethical and normative base and are no longer followed. Safe protective family environments within which family's function and children should be developing no longer exist. In addition to the forced witnessing and participation in atrocities against their own communities the repeated insecurity in the region has led to wanton destruction of property and social infrastructure, such as schools, community centres, churches, markets, and homes. This in turn undermines the economic base upon which Acholi society has functioned on. All the major sources of income in the region have crumbled due to the destruction and looting. The cattle population in the district of Arua and Kitgum in 1985 were about 285,000, but by 1997 the combined herd for both districts was estimated at just 5,000 head. The total number of cattle is less than 10% of the pre-insurgency herd size, and there has been almost 100% loss in four years.

The insecurity has had many effects on family structures, frequently resulting in family separation. From time to time, when the rebels are raiding, people are frequently displaced or dislocated temporarily. During such times, families live on the run, many of them sleeping in the bush, with no time for cultivation or normal life. These hidden sleeping places in the bush are referred to as 'aloofs'. Some displaced people have migrated to towns and stay there; others oscillate between the towns and their homesteads. The usual, non-displacement size of Gulu municipality was about 38,000 people. During periods of insecurity, between 12 to 16,000 people mainly women and children, commute to and from Gulu town, between 5:30 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. daily. These shifts have also affected parental care, since parents do not sleep with their children. Family members disperse and are frequently left to fend for themselves.

One outcome of the conflict has been the establishment of large IDP camps, which has led to overcrowding and the breaking down of important cultural

traditions. Some of the IDP camps are quite substantial in size, for example, Pabbo camp in Gulu had up to 33,000 residents, while Pajule camp in Kitgum had 24,000. Such numbers are particularly significant when one considers that, culturally; individuals are accustomed to residing in dispersed rural homesteads or small villages of 100 households or less. Furthermore, none of these new settings are based on clanships and family structures, thus the alienation from traditional cultures is further increased. Few families regard their migration into urban centres as permanent and do not construct sturdy houses or good sanitation. Yet the reality is many have been living in such conditions for several years. The conditions for children and youth in these conditions are grim. The majority of youth do not attend school. Traditional livelihoods of land cultivation are not possible, and employment prospects for youth mainly consist of marginal labour such as charcoal burning, street vending, smuggling, vehicle washing, wheelbarrow pushing and boda-boda. Rape and 'defilement' of girls is commonplace, and there is increased domestic violence, child abuse and sexual and gender-based violence.[50]

Within the IDP camps, but also in towns, many people with different cultural backgrounds and different values are being mixed together leading to disruption of cultural norms. An immediate implication of this is that children and youth are neither versed in the traditions of their society and in many instances, lack the support and adequate care of both their parents and extended family. It is in the context of this already highly disrupted socialisation environment, which offers extremely limited opportunities for young people, that children and youth must negotiate their resettlement and reintegration.

Community responses: reintegration and reconciliation – cultural tools in violence resistance

In Nordstrom's writing about post-conflict community relations in Mozambique, she puts forward a cultural definition of violence as "the destruction of home and humanity, of hope and future, of valued traditions and the integrity of the community" as violence insinuated itself into society and culture.[51] It is in this changed and changing social landscape that reintegration occurs. What this implies is that there is no simple 'going back,' because the identity of the returnee and the community to each other, has been charged and is still changing through violence. Yet, in Uganda, as in many conflict zones, the individual is also of the community. The desire of the community and the individual in many cases is for reclamation.

Nordstrom's powerful observation from Mozambique is that reintegration has to be understood as a process that is situated in this culture of violence, but that, in reintegration, there is an opportunity for resisting the generative qualities of violence through creative reintegration resolution strategies. In Northern Uganda, communities' traditional means of survival have been massively impacted upon by the conflict, yet at the level of civil society, resistance to the destructive impact of violence is expressed in the community push for strategies for peace, a discourse of forgiveness, and local, community based strategies to promote the reintegration of returnees from the rebel forces.

In travelling through Northern Uganda and from talking to people from community leaders, LCs, teachers, elders, business people, mothers and youth in centres and in communities, there emerges a consistent sense of tiredness of violence and a strong desire, at the level of civil society, for a peaceful resolution to the present conflict. This has been systematically commented upon in virtually all reports that have emerged from Northern Uganda since 1997, which have strongly emphasised the existence of "a culture of peace" in Acholiland.[52] Even in our interviews, a desire for peace and the concept of forgiveness emerged again and again. The response of the abducted teacher in our sample was not untypical. When asked how he would feel if he met the rebels again, he responded:

Teacher: I have no grudge. I don't feel anything because I know, I understand we are in the same boat so I can definitely forgive.

Interviewer: So if you see the rebels, you won't feel angry?

Teacher: I can't simply just forgive…as I've passed all these stages, I simply know how to bear the hardship, so I can forgive.

The sense is people have already experienced too much hardship, almost more than they can bear. It is estimated that over 90% of people are currently displaced in Gulu and Kitgum, and there exists approximately 30 protected villages.[53]

Within civil society, the issue of reintegration of former abductees has been linked with issues of reconciliation and forgiveness. Influential groups such as the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative and the Concerned Parent's Association have articulated this as a necessary part of a movement towards peace. Rather than being a top down process taken by religious leaders, mobilising reintegration and reconciliation seems to stem from individuals and

communities themselves. Its roots lie in a Christian doctrine of forgiveness, in traditional Acholi cultural beliefs around spirituality, cleansing and social healing and in a political will to move beyond the personal and cultural destruction caused by conflict.

The reintegration process will also force abductees and community members to face their deeply painful personal histories. Pain reports an LRA spokesman saying, "The Acholi must be given the chance to amend the wounds among themselves. This must be done traditionally by the community."[54] From the position of civil society, a report by the Women's Commission notes, "in general, communities are willing to offer forgiveness and support the amnesty for LRA. Adults try to remember that the young people abducted by the LRA are not there by choice but on the threat of death."[55]

How do communities reconcile the positions held by the individual returnee? Pain discusses early peace talks in 1994, in which an LRA commander acknowledged the "cutting of lips, hands and deforming people" as revenge by fighters who felt isolated and disowned in the bush. He noted "It is the commission of these 'personal' offences and the guilt associated with them which is at the heart of the continuing conflict in Acholi. No resolution which will hold can avoid addressing these offences."[56] He reports on a meeting of the Rwodi-mo in which the discussion articulated how internally damaging the current war is, and their belief "there is no precedence in the history of Acholi for the current situation." It was mentioned what "the rebels are doing is so strange – it is never known in Acholi experience."[57] On this basis, he concluded that the assumption is that all clans and sub-clans are both victims and perpetrators, thus acknowledging it is not just individual returnees that have to be reintegrated with the community, but relations between families, subclans and clans are integrally tied up in the reintegration and reconciliation process. This sets out the highly complex task that communities are attempting when engaging in reintegration.

A core factor in meaningful reintegration is in trying to understand what the meaning of children and youth's involvement in the LRA, the impact this may have had on the children, and as a result, what measures are needed in order to reclaim their children, has for the community. According to one account, in 1986 when Museveni seized power and Acholi soldiers returned to their homelands, the community perceived the returnees as "internal strangers".[58] The notion captures the sense that these returnees were of the community, but had become alien to those who had remained at home. They were not trusted, because it was believed by the community that they were carrying

bad *cen* or evil spirits. Behrand argues that the Holy Spirit Movement in part, evolved as a result of a failed reintegration process of these ex-soldiers. The HSM served to reintegrate and rehabilitate a large number of these soldiers and offered them purification and redemption through the spiritual rituals and military actions of the HSM.

As illustrated in the above analysis, for formerly abducted children, there is a risk that their communities of origin could perceive the returning youth as 'internal strangers.' While families are joyous that their children have survived, they are filled with apprehension because their children's experiences in the bush have been so opposed and cut off from them and their community. A former abductee recollects his homecoming as follows:

> The reception was so good for me because they had no hope that I was alive. They welcomed me but us seemed they had some fears I had done atrocities so they kept asking all these questions. I was not forced to kill anybody so I told them everything that had happened…I didn't like it because they wanted to know in detail all that had happened and I was not free about it. It made me sad.

Another explained:

> (My family) were happy when I reached home, they were very happy to see me, they said 'Welcome back, you have been in the bush'. In the village, they treat me like a brother. But some people do not like seeing you. They call me rebel.

A community leader explained the dilemma facing parents as follows:

> You have to understand the fear factor that people live with. The fear is so high. First, when children are abducted and taken into captivity, what they are forced to do is terrible. They are forced to kill, they are trained to shoot, so mentally they get problems. So as a result of the mental affects, you find when children come back home, parents are afraid to interact with these children for their own safety. Parents find it difficult to control such kid's behaviour.

In spite of the difficulties and conflicts raised by returnee youth, in interviews with youth, parents, teachers and groups of ordinary men and women, there seemed to be a consistent sense of a constructive and dynamic approach to the task of reintegration. It appears to be underpinned by the responsibility of

the clan and community to actively reclaim their children and youth. According to the Acholi belief systems, the dreams and nightmares children experience were bad *cen* or spirits that disturb the child and these should be dealt with accordingly. One youth told the following story, which captures a sense of how *cen* or bad spirits work.

> I saw a boy who was forced to kill his sister-in-law. He tried to plead with these people- said this is my sister-in-law, I know this lady, but the commanders told him to kill the sister in law or if he didn't, he would be killed. So he killed the sister-in-law. So when he came back and was reintegrated in the community, he started having nightmares like the lady was speaking in his mind; 'You have killed me for no reason, I even knew you'; that was what happened.

Communities have a number of rituals, which can rid the child of the *cen* and restore peace to him or her. These ceremonies are intertwined with the language of forgiveness, healing and restoration. One specific ritual, referred to locally as 'the breaking of eggs, 'communities and youth frequently referred to is utilised to acknowledge children's physical and spiritual absence, return and cleansing. In this ceremony, the child walks on a path and is required to step on and break some eggs. Towards the end of the ceremony, the child walks through the door of the house, at which point water is poured over his or her head. By the time the child has completed the ritual process, the broken eggs are left behind and the child emerges as cleansed. One youth who had such a ceremony performed for him described it as "You step on the eggs to make you a member of the family".

Another ritual performed to rid a person of bad *cen* or spirits, is called yubo kom ('cleansing the body) and involves working with an adjoc or local healer. When a child has killed another person, that person's spirit comes back to haunt him or her. The adjoc facilitates the transference of the bad *cen* from the child to the adjoc. Once the *cen* has entered the adjoc's body he comes to understand what has happened, and the reason for the disturbance, and communicates this experience with the individual. After that the spirit may be placed in a goat and then the goat is killed, thus effectively killing the spirit and restoring peace Given the cost of a goat, yubo kom involves the whole clan, both in organising the ceremony and taking responsibility for it. This also gives the child a sense of being valued by the collective family. The ritual killing of the goat or ram is traditionally "accompanied by an abila presentation to ask the ancestors to forgive and protect the child or person. Without this cleansing process, it is feared that the victim's spirit will continue to haunt

the person, leading to delinquent behaviour and possibly even a tendency to kill again".[59]

Community members also referred to *mato oput*, a reconciliation ceremony performed when conflict exists between two families. This ceremony involves bringing the families of a victim and accused together. Elders are required to investigate the conflict. During the performance of the ceremony there is a clan or group acceptance of responsibility for wrongdoing, repentance, compensation, and finally reconciliation. This is marked by both sides drinking a bitter root extract, which restores relationships between the two sides.[60]

The concept integral to these rituals is that bad *cen* enters a person as a result of evil or bad deeds. Through performing specific rituals the bad *cen* can be cast out by acknowledging, the community witnessing, accepting and forgiving. In this way the acts of violence or 'badness' become external to the child and thus the child can be reclaimed. They serve as a cultural strategy to deal with the internal/external conflict outlined earlier, of abducted children both as victims and perpetrators of violence. These cultural rituals and beliefs acknowledge how internally damaging the impact of violence has been on both individuals and their communities, and work towards restoring personal and collective peace.

At a social and cultural level, discourses of forgiveness promoted by the Religious leaders, the Concerned Parents Association and psychosocial programmes are supportive and not in conflict with these cultural beliefs. Acholi cultural beliefs are essentially strongly anti-violence.[61] As such, these beliefs and rituals, when used in reintegration, can be viewed as violence-resistance in a culture now being simultaneously constituted and destroyed by violence.

Yet one wonders whether these rituals represent traditional belief systems, given that they were also appropriated by Alice's Holy Spirit Movement and later Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. It is difficult to get a sense of how former abductees relate to them and in our interviews, the attitudes expressed by youth with respect to traditional ceremonies was not consistent. Some viewed them as important in having helped them reintegrate, while others dismissed them with a shrug as not offering anything of relevance to them.

In a survey of 183 returnee respondents, about 50% performed traditional ceremonies in reintegration.[62] The study examined the fears of returnees, which bring home the fact that returnees are not being reintegrated to a post-conflict situation, but to a society still caught up in and experiencing ongoing

violence. Of their sample, 40% feared re-abduction; 21% feared they would be killed by the LRA – with those who stayed in the bush for longer the fear of being killed was greater; 11% feared the general insecurity. A further 4% worried about the trouble of starting a new life in the community; (4%) were concerned that the Government was not being serious about the amnesty; and (4%) worried about disease and poverty. Only 12% had no fears, of whom three quarters were with the LRA for one year or less.[63]

These fears were evident in our interviews and the impact of these on families often caused further dislocation. Once a child of the family returned home, it brought fear to the whole family that the LRA would come to the house of the family to re-abduct the child or punish the whole family by murdering the parents. This had been the experience of one of our respondents, who was orphaned by the LRA after his return home. Some parents reported they moved to 'protected settlements' after their child returned, because they feared they would be killed, or their child re-abducted. One camp leader explained the dilemma facing families and youth on reintegration as follows:

> The problem in the Acholi region is that when the children have been abducted, then again when the children have been returned, and passed through reintegration, and reintegrated into communities, they can come back and re-abduct them again. That is the major problem.

Although some youth said they dealt with the past by 'forgetting' and not talking about it, the ongoing insecurity continues to make psychological recovery difficult. One youth explained:

> I continued to have dreams, nightmares, sometimes I'm very sad. It still comes, most of the dreams I dream, I am still in the bush...dreams of moving with the rebels, beating people, all those activities I used do. When I first came out, I dreamed nightly, almost all of the time. I feel anxious now that the rebels will come.

Furthermore, and not surprisingly, in spite of the culture of peace and discourses of forgiveness and reconciliation, there are real tensions around reintegration and reconciliation at a community level. Teachers described some of the tensions that sometimes emerged in schools, where other children would refer to returnees as 'rebels', and their strategies to deal with this. One young woman explained, "If there is a misunderstanding, they would say, 'you have been in the bush, that is how your character is.' Even in the village, they sometimes say that".

Teachers and community leaders noted that returned youth tended to be more aggressive than those that had not been abducted – one explained it as "those children are bitter." This bitterness was linked to what he perceived in some youth as their difficulty in forgiving their family and community for allowing them to be abducted, for somehow failing to protect them adequately. This dimension to the concept of 'forgiveness' shows how complex the dynamics between those abducted and other community members are.

In general, Rodriguez et al., found that longer periods spent in the bush were associated with former abductees experiencing more problems on reintegration. They found that the extent to which a returnee was welcomed was linked to gender and duration in the LRA. According to this study, 70% of females claimed that they felt welcomed on their return, compared to 57% of the males. In addition, they found "Exactly half of those who reported feeling welcomed had been inducted for four months or less, and only 5% were inducted for four or more years". In total, 64% felt welcomed on their return, 22% initially felt welcomed, but later had bad experiences and 14% had some problems, but also some positive experiences. They found only 8% of those inducted less than five months reported bad experiences, whereas induction of six years or more represented 63% of the bad experiences, such as abusive language, being avoided or isolated, or feeling intimidated or threatened. "The final negative experience that returnees reported from the community is jealousy from those who are still missing family members and struggle openly with accepting those that have returned". Interestingly, with respect to our observations based on group discussions with community members, they concluded, "There is clearly a difference between how the community perceived how they are welcoming returnees and how returnees feel they are being welcomed…it is also hard to find examples of forgiveness".[64]

In spite of this conclusion, our interviews (in at least some if not most cases of youth we talked to) did indicate that reintegration was reasonably successful, in the sense of restoring social relations, in the immediate to short terms. One of the factors, which really promotes acceptance of former abductees, is the ongoing and constant awareness that "it can happen to any of us" and the collective meaning of the experience of abduction described earlier – that it is within everyone's imagination and understanding. The collective impact of multiple abductions in villages also gives people a common point of reference and understanding, and some children mentioned how this impacted on their acceptance and reintegration.

Interviewer: How did other people react?

Youth: They accepted me. They didn't disturb me. People said 'Welcome back, we thank God for you'. They were not asking many questions. I told (friends) not to go to the water. By telling them, they should know keep themselves safe, not to be attacked

Interviewer: Did people ever call you names?

Youth: No, in my village, 9 children were abducted and three came back. The others remained in the bush or maybe they are dead.

Interviewer: Have you met any of the six families?

Youth: Yes, I have met them. They live very close. It was so difficult because one of the 6, he was the one who helped me in the bush when I was sick".

Youth (2): "I told them whatever they asked but I was scared to talk of everything that happened.

Although based on a small sample, the shared insights of youth into their experiences of abduction and reintegration indicate how complex an experience it is for individuals and their communities.

Overall, it seemed that factors that contributed to successful reintegration were participation in the psychosocial programmes (in general, as it is difficult to be clear what element of programme activities contributed most to reintegration), the opportunity to return to education, skills training and support to become economically active or independent. The loss experienced by returnees as a result of their abduction is not just about the impact of their experiences, but also about lost opportunities and, as one youth expressed it, a loss of a future. When asked what of his experiences makes him most sad, the formerly abducted teacher replied, "The stage I am now in. I would have developed into something (in the community, in his work), now I have no chance." One of the most valued components of the psychosocial interventions was the skills training, for it restored some of this sense of a future with opportunity.

CHAPTER 4
A POLITICO- ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

This paper has documented how children and youth are at the epicentre of the conflict involving the Lords Resistance Army, the Ugandan government and the Acholi civilian population. As a result of abduction and forced participation in war and atrocities, children are the direct victims of the conflict. Their abduction tears at the hearts of parents, families and society as a whole, while the fear of possible abduction remains a constant threat to all. The defilement and rape of abducted girls serves as violation of families and the entire community, a transgression or act of pollution that distances abducted girls from their community of origin. Simultaneously, while adult fighters are thought to comprise a small core of the LRA, the bulk of the LRA is comprised of these abducted youth who are forced to perpetuate atrocities on their own communities.[65] The implications of these dynamics form one of the central cruxes of this complex conflict.

By late 2002, the Acholi have not only experienced the breakdown of their agricultural and economic base, but have also been systematically stripped of their cultural and traditional values. Furthermore, as a direct result of the LRA created instability and the Government's response through the creation of "protected settlements", the majority of the Acholi population are now internally displaced and also politically disenfranchised.

This issue of the centrality of children's experiences to the conflict in northern Uganda raises a very uncomfortable question-what is the function of children's stories in this conflict? More fundamentally, are the experiences and horrors perpetuated against children being manipulated-wittingly or unwittingly-by vested interests in this conflict?

As outlined above, the roots of this conflict lie in political disenfranchisement and the cultural breakdown of the Acholi people. The traditional agricultural economic base has been systematically undermined as a result of the LRA created instability and the Government's response through the creation of protected settlements, so that now 90% of the Acholi population are internally displaced. Yet the plight of children as abductees has become the local and

international symbol of the horrors of this conflict. In reading different accounts of the violence experienced by children, they take on a mind-numbing similarity. To a large extent, economic and political discourse has been put to one side as human rights and child protection voices dominate. The brutalisation of children by the LRA places the organisation beyond the moral pale. This sense of the LRA as a movement operating beyond the bounds of rationality is further supported by its spirit beliefs, its strange behavioural impositions on the population, and its recent branding as a 'terrorist' organisation, which has paved the way for the Government's response, 'Operation Iron Fist'. Arguably, the focus on 'children' as a symbol of this conflict serves to act as a smokescreen which deflects pressure from addressing the underlying political and economic roots of this conflict, the factors maintaining conflict such as the protected settlements, and the needs of special interest groups which profit from the war's continuance.

It has been suggested that the LRA are not interested in peace, political stability or the reconstruction of a shattered country. In spite of the existence of a political amnesty, it is quietly recognised that amnesty is unlikely to apply to the LRA leadership thus offering little real incentive to key LRA members for disarmament and disbandment. However it is possible that the amnesty would not be an incentive in itself to a group that matches more profile of warlordism than that of a political rebel group, as it continues to benefit from the pillage and destruction of Acholi society for its own continuity. However at a government and military level, this has frequently resulted in a lack of distinction between the rebels and Acholi society, which is evident in the continued political, social and economic marginality of the region while the rest of Uganda has developed and prospered. It has also been evident in the lack of political development or integration of other Acholi groups that could act as a political forum for the Acholi people. Further, it has often been alluded that "no rebel force could exist in that area if the civilians did not want them there".[66] The Ugandan government has sometimes referred to the northern Uganda conflict as "Acholi killing themselves", implying that the government has lacked serious motivation to engage in finding a solution to the conflict, and as a result, to the development of the Acholi region.[67]

Cyclically, the Ugandan government has sought a military solution to the crisis, which does not seem to be reaching any successful ending. The war with the LRA would appear to have reached a new stage and the UPDF has admitted that during military combat, its forces were unable to protect civilians in southern Sudan. Currently, there are no signs of LRA-abducted children emerging, even as prisoners of war, with Ugandan troops, instead, the UDPF

has conceded that children were being killed rather than rescued. In response to international criticism, instead of committing to minimising child casualties, a UPDF spokesman emphasised that the children had been militarised, indoctrinated and trained to resist. Instead of promoting movement to peace, it has deepened the destruction of Acholi society by forcing even more of the resident population in Gulu into IDP camps, where they have still not been safe from LRA attacks. Furthermore, it is claimed that UPDF soldiers have subjected them to arbitrary arrests, torture including rape, and other abuses. There would seem to be no end to this and as late as October 2002, with the renewed LRA offensive, the UPDF continued to order civilians in Acholi districts to leave their homes and move closer to these IDP camps. One argument put forward is that the conflict enables the UPDF to continue securing ongoing high levels of military funding.[68] However, given Uganda's recent involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the fact that Museveni himself came from the military, it is unlikely that this conflict would make much difference to military budget. One hypothesis is that locally based Government military units may have vested power and economic interests in the continuance of the conflict and there is anecdotal evidence that the local military has scuppered locally based peace initiatives by the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace initiative, thus dragging out and prolonging the conflict.[69]

The third group that would seek to benefit from an extended conflict of this nature are the business warlords who use the chaos both for illegal activities, money laundering, raw material exploitation, ammunitions trading and human trafficking. Once again, the economy of the area lacks the sophisticated mechanisms necessary for money laundering and there are no known mining or wildlife reserves, as in Sierra Leone. The gun trade is almost insignificant for there is a sufficient pool of weapons in the region that would totally undermine any commercialisation of the trade, and as such there is no evidence of human trafficking. This group may be profiting from the ongoing conflict but are unlikely to have major influence over any political outcome.

This research did not seek to investigate these issues and they are raised in the context of understanding the function of children's stories and experiences within the overall context of the conflict. The tendency of child-oriented programming is to depoliticise the position of children and call for a focus on child rights and welfare. However our conclusion is that, in this conflict, where abducted children are central to the dynamics of the conflict, it is useful to examine the political place of children in the discourse. Our conclusion is that the focus on the death, torture and brutality experienced by children has allowed a vacuum to emerge in which issues of political, regional, and

social development have been allowed to be sidestepped and the political development of groups that could be central to the peace process and the development of Acholi society ignored. A lack of differentiation between Acholi society and the LRA has justified a military campaign, which has turned the entire region into a large displacement camp that is economically, culturally and politically bereft. What is true is that Acholi society has been destroyed and that today Acholis in Gulu can be said to comprise a socially bankrupt, economically under-developed and politically alienated grouping of internally displaced peoples. The answer to one of the questions raised at the beginning of the research was "reintegration into what?" This is addressed in the concluding chapter.

CONCLUSION

Examining what is meant by reintegration necessitates clarification on two fronts. The first is the practical reality of trying to define the type of family, community and environment into which children are being re-integrated. It has been argued that prolonged warfare has meant that in many cases children have been born, raised and abducted from war effected areas where the vestiges of 'normal' society ceased to exist a long time ago. Reintegration occurs in the context of family relationships that are conducted under a state of social uncertainty within a political state of emergency. Furthermore none of the services and infrastructure, no matter how rudimentary these may be, could be considered as functional. Schools have ceased to function in many areas, water supplies are constantly disrupted and transport networks are contingent on the security situation and thus unreliable. The economies have been shattered and linkages to the greater region highly disrupted, if not completely severed. Even in soil-rich northern Uganda subsistence agriculture has come under pressure as people have been squeezed into ever decreasing spatial entities as a result of voluntary or forced relocation to IDP camps or towns. Where remnants of 'normality' exist, they operate under conditions of extreme stress. Ex-abducted children and youth are being re-united into environments that are fundamentally different to those they may have left behind. Current reintegration strategies are largely aimed at reunification into a family and community putting their energies into dealing with trauma and forgiveness. What is not adequately addressed is the question of whether ex-abductees are simply expected to resume their lives from that point at which they were abducted or whether the returnee is a changed person unable (or unwilling) to slot into a pre-determined role. An element of reintegration programmes that addresses these economic, and therefore social reintegration, is that of skills-training and income generation. Sadly, these elements of one project's reintegration programme are under threat of being discontinued for funding reasons.

A second ground for examining reintegration concerns local meanings of what 'reintegration' means. In northern Uganda, concepts of reconciliation and forgiveness are placed central to reintegration, promoted not only by the

psychosocial programmes, but also by religious leaders and other community-based organisations, among which the Concerned Parent's Association are prominent. Reconciliation and forgiveness support are not in conflict with traditional cultural beliefs nor can they be dismissed because traditional society has broken down. Reconciliation and forgiveness forces abductees and their families, as well as other families who have suffered losses of children and other community members to face their deeply painful personal histories and initiate a healing process. It recognises many of the psychosocial traumas that the ex-abductees have suffered are not theirs alone, but have been shared by their fellow community members also. A core factor in meaningful reintegration is trying to understand what this means to each of the stakeholders. While families are joyous that their children have survived, they are filled with apprehension because their children's experiences in the bush have been so opposed and cut off from them and their community and they fear continuing dislocation and what impact that this may have on the remaining members of the family.

Furthermore, and not surprisingly, in spite of the culture of peace and discourses of forgiveness and reconciliation, there are real tensions around reintegration and reconciliation in a locality to which ex-abductees return. Experiences within the LRA may have fundamentally altered the manner in which ex-abductees function as members within a family or constituents within a community and are possibly changed forever. Community members have concerns that this may be negative, and that ex-abductees may be aggressive or violent as a result of the violence they themselves were exposed to. However, teachers and community's leaders noted another side of this, that some of these children who returned were stronger and more confident than children who were never abducted and their experiences in the bush coupled to the success of escaping gave them a newfound confidence and leadership qualities. This offers both opportunities and threats for Acholi society. This newfound confidence that may find expression in both civic and political matters, could potentially bring ex-abductees into conflict with the rest of their society. Alternatively, this confidence would be harnessed in a political forum of peace-building and social development. Although little empirical evidence exists to suggest which outcome is more likely, it highlights the complex role of reintegration in being the seeds of future conflict-or in contributing to future peace.

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