University of Groningen

Broken citizenship

Angucia, Margaret

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THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE CONFLICT IN NORTHERN UGANDA

2.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the historical background to and context of this research, beginning with a discussion of the development of the conflict in northern Uganda and the conflict itself, in addition to the intimate and lived experiences of the war. Finally, we will discuss the use and involvement of children in the northern Ugandan conflict, with the goal of showing how the involvement of children in conflicts makes their lives difficult, destroys their sense of citizenship and thus justifies the need for reintegration.

2.2   BACKGROUND TO THE NORTHERN CONFLICT

2.2.1   The mythical and colonial conflicts

The approximately two-decade long (1986 – 2006, though conflict and its impact cannot be neatly fitted into dates) conflict and unrest in northern Uganda is not the first of its kind in the region. According to Veale and Stavrou (2003: 9), 'northern Ugandan history has witnessed endless wars and incursions'. As confirmation of this position, in an informal discussion with an elder in the community near Gulu town he referred to the mythical conflict between the Acholi and the Alur, who are believed to be descendants of two brothers, Labong and Gipir respectively. The brothers had to part ways because of a conflict over a spear and a bead. The elder also talked about the Acholi rebellion against the British colonization project, which he said is now known as the Lamogi rebellion, led by the Acholi chief, Awich. According to this elder, in the present conflict, history was merely repeating itself, because conditions such as internal displacement and encampment were also present during the Lamogi rebellion. Allen (2006) concurs with these ancient roots of conflict in northern Uganda, stating that 'a point often overlooked in discussion of this region of Africa is that war and mass forced displacements are even older than they first appear to be' (2006: 25). These revelations show that, amongst other events, modern day Acholi history has been significantly influenced by conflicts. We are aware, however, that Acholi society today is not purely a product of conflicts, even while sympathizing with the history of the Acholi people as involved in conflicts from mythical and colonial times. What is common to these conflicts and thus significant is

that whether mythical or not they had an apparent impact on the essential meaning of life for the Acholi people.

The history of modern conflicts in the Acholi region is recorded from the 1850s, when the Arabs invaded the region looking for ivory and to engage in the slave trade (Allen, 2006; Veale and Stavrou, 2003; Behrend; 1999). According to Allen (2006), Veale and Stavrou (2003) and Behrend (1999), the conflict brought about by the Arab slave and ivory trade, which continued for two decades into the 1870s, left the population devastated. According to Allen (2006), slaves were used to transport ivory and partly to cater for the sexual appetites of the slave drivers and their private armies, while the ivory was used by industrializing Western countries to make piano keys.

This period of the slave and ivory trade was followed by the Anglo-Egyptian colonization project (Allen, 2006; Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 1989) – euphemistically called exploration – led by the first British man to reach the area, Sir Samuel Baker, and later Emin Pasha and Charles Gordon (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 1989). Allen (2006) and Lwanga-Lunyiigo (1989) further show that this project was characterized by extreme violence and marked the introduction of the Nubian people into the Acholi region by the agents of colonialism. Affirming the violent introduction of the Nubian people, Veale and Stavrou (2003: 9) write that 'the arrival of Nubian troops saw numerous atrocities committed against the Acholi'. However, this is not to say that they were masters of the Acholi in their own right. According to Lwanga-Lunyiigo (1989), although the Nubian people did not come to northern Uganda as slaves, they were ex-slaves of Arab slave drivers. This fact does not remove, in our view, the truth of the indelible mark they made on the Acholi people on behalf of the Arabs through extreme atrocities which they committed in the region. Pursuing the arrival of the Nubian people in this region, Allen (2006) posits that the British colonial government continued to use and abuse the Nubian people in the numerous resistance wars against colonization in East Africa. What would be the long-term cumulative effect of this long exposure to violence on how the Acholi perceived themselves and their society? The studies we have mentioned above merely describe the atrocities committed against the Acholi community during this period and do not relate any remedial activities which might have addressed the wounded population.

2.2.2   *Post-colonial conflicts and northern Uganda*

Uganda's post-colonial history has been marked by several interlinking conflicts (Kasozi, 1994; Kumar, 1989). Northern Uganda has had a unique position in these conflicts due to what Allen (2006) describes as an almost stigmatizing identity of a whole group of people with a leader who comes from the region. The first two presidents of Uganda, General Idi Amin and Milton Obote both came from the northern districts of Uganda. Against this

background, the issues that are important in the post-colonial conflicts are British rule and the myth of the Acholi as a martial race, as well as the coups and counter coups.

2.2.3   *British colonial rule and the martial race myth*

According to several sources (Allen, 2006; International Crisis Group, 2004; Refugee Law Project, 2004; Veale and Stavrou, 2003; Okot, 1989; Ginywera-Pinchwa, 1989; Nyadru, 1988), the divide and rule policy of the British pitted the economically and politically powerful southerners, especially the Baganda, against the economically and politically impoverished northerners, who then found consolation in joining the military. Pursuing this idea, Veale and Stavrou (2003) state that soldiering was a source of prestige, employment and identity for young males from the Acholi region and they were significantly represented in the military under British rule. The military became a replacement for economic opportunity. According to Kasozi (1994), on becoming the first president of independent Uganda, Obote capitalized on these differences and consolidated his government on the strength of an army whose personnel mainly came from the northern ethnic groups. Kasozi (1994) claims that there then developed a myth of the Acholi as a martial race and a war-like people. Dolan (2005: 71) confirms how this myth was reinforced in the post-independence period, stating that 'the promotion of Acholi to major positions in the security establishment … was after independence, reframed as proving that they were militaristic, a notion which many Acholi themselves bought into'. Although it is quite unfortunate that the Acholi believed the notion, Mazrui (1976: 258), quoted in Finnström (2003: 114), called it the 'militarised ethnicity' of the Acholi. Could it be that such a myth was built around the traumatizing experiences of the Acholi people due to their violent contact with the Arabs and their agents, the Nubian people?

Based on these sources, our view is that the martial race myth is questionable. We would like to think that it might have developed on the basis of skewed political-military facts. It also appears that the myth is limited to the stereotypes that often define people in a process of othering them. As Kasozi (1994) usefully points out, the myth of the Acholi as a martial race has since been laid bare, after Museveni's Bantu-dominated rebellion took to the bush and defeated the so-called martial race. In addition, the branding of the Acholi as war-like is sometimes attributed to the atrocities committed in the Luweero Triangle during Museveni's guerrilla war, allegedly by the Acholi-dominated UNLA, as expressed by Allen (2006: 29):

> Here the NRA was able to secure considerable local support, and the UNLA response was to treat most civilians as collaborators. They were herded into camps, and were frequently abused and killed. How many died

> is still a matter of debate but it was certainly thousands. The killing went on in Luweero until Museveni seized power …

Even from this it seems better not to draw any tentative conclusions about the character of the Acholi people. What is important, however, is that war killings and conflicts generally lead to painful experiences and raise the issue of people's social security as well as reinforce brokenness wherever the war occurs.

2.2.4   *Coups and counter coups*

More than a decade earlier than the Luweero war, Idi Amin's coup, which removed the independence government of President Obote, marked the beginning of a politically turbulent period in the history of Uganda. According to Allen (2006), the coup was a result of Obote's dictatorial tendencies and increasing dependence on the army. The socio-economic result of the coup included the expulsion of the Asian population, an economic war and desperate socio-economic and socio-political conditions (Kasozi, 1994) for which Uganda became world famous. Further commenting on the aftermath of the coup, Kasozi (1994) relates that many prominent members of the Ugandan elite either fled the country or were killed. Consequently, with the help of the then Tanzanian president Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, they organized the overthrow of the Amin government in 1979. Following this, numerous short-lived governments, including a second stint for Obote, whose election in 1980 had been disputed, characterized the following years. This period from 1979 to 1986 saw coups and counter coups in Uganda, as different military groups vied to have their turn in governing the country. The last of the coups by the NRM/A, in January 1986, was led by Yoweri Museveni (Museveni, 1997; Kasozi, 1994).

The general perspective of the writers cited is a concentration on the political development of the events which characterized the years of turmoil. What they fail to emphasize is the impact of the wars on ordinary people and that the period also saw people living in extremely difficult circumstances, with their livelihoods disrupted and a general breakdown of society.

2.3   THE NORTHERN CONFLICT

2.3.1   *Genesis of the conflict*

The year 1986 has generally been used by scholars of the northern conflict (for instance, Dolan, 2005; Finnström, 2003) as a unique date to start chronicling the conflict. Prior to the January 1986 coup by the NRM/A, Museveni had disregarded the December 1985 Nairobi Peace Agreement which had been initiated in particular by President Tito Okello Lutwa.

Finnström (2003: 101) states that 'Museveni eventually signed a peace deal with Okello, but simultaneously decided to continue fighting'. Citing Ngoga (1998: 104), Finnström (2003: 101) adds that Museveni's NRM/A 'had little interest in peace negotiations for anything but tactical purposes…'.

Since 1986, when President Museveni's rebel movement took over government, Uganda has been considered to be a relatively peaceful country. According to Finnström (2003) and Allen (2006), writers such as Hansen and Twaddle (1994), Woodward (1991) and Bayart (1999) have propagated this relatively peaceful international image of Uganda. In contrast, Eichstaedt (2009), Allen (2006), Dolan (2005) and Veale and Stavrou (2003) show that there was in fact another wave of civil war that was on-going in the northern part of the country. Of further note, however, is that other conflicts also occurred, such as the West Nile Bank Front rebellion in the West Nile region and the Allied Democratic Forces rebellion in the Rwenzori region of Uganda, especially in the early years of the present government. However, the uniqueness of the conflict in northern Uganda lies in its very long lifespan. To qualify this, however, since 2006, when the Juba peace process started, up to the time of the writing of this report, the situation has been characterized as one of neither war nor peace.

Apart from the government of Yoweri Museveni, the other immediate protagonist in the two-decade conflict in northern Uganda is Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA. The LRA is, in our view, a long-term end product of the 1986 NRM/A coup against the Lutwa government. Feeling betrayed, the defeated national army, which at the time of the coup was dominated by the Acholi ethnic group, fled homewards to the north (Allen, 2006; Dolan, 2005; Finnström, 2003; Veale and Stavrou, 3002). Commenting on this period of Ugandan history and the resulting sentiments between the Acholi and Museveni, Allen (2006: 30) writes:

> Acholi soldiers seized power, and Tito Okello became president. He immediately started negotiations with Museveni and a peace agreement was signed in Nairobi. But the NRA proceeded to ignore it, and marched on Kampala – a source of deep-seated grievance among some Acholi who claim that it shows President Museveni cannot be trusted.

Eventually, this defeated army – the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) – organized itself into the rebel group, the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA). Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement, which also arose at the time, in turn mobilized military support from the vanquished and fleeing UNLA soldiers of the Acholi-led Lutwa government. This then became the breeding ground for variously mutating rebellions in the north that fed into each other but ultimately coalesced around Kony's LRA (see for instance, Eichstaedt, 2009; Allen, 2006; Finnström, 2003; Behrend, 1999).

2.3.2   *Stolen cattle, destruction of foodstuff and sexual molestation*

Meanwhile, the NRA became the national army after the coup (and was later renamed the Uganda People's Defence Force, UPDF). The NRA has generally been perceived to be a disciplined force (Allen, 2006). Nevertheless, most Acholi people remember the military activities of the NRA after the capture of Acholi land in 1986 as nothing less than a planned and premeditated strategy to devastate them (Finnström, 2003). People refer with particular bitterness to the stealing of their cattle by the newly arrived NRA in the course of 1987. According to Finnström (2003: 106), 'people in the war-torn north saw the army's looting of their cattle as a deliberate strategy'. As one old man put it, 'they removed the cattle to make the Acholi poor, to be able to control the Acholi'. There are also some allegations of either looting or destruction of granaries in addition to sexual molestation of both men and women during the period (see for instance, Dolan, 2005; Finnström, 2003; Veale and Stavrou, 2003).

   Of the literature referred to above, Allen's (2006) work mainly focuses on the political developments in the conflict to set the stage for his interest in the LRA indictment by the International Criminal Court, while leaving aside crucial insight into how these conflicts influenced people's daily lives. However, the research by Dolan (2005), Finnström (2003) and Veale and Stavrou (2003) show in different ways how the conflict in northern Uganda did influence daily lives. All of the studies compliment each other in exploring the historical development of the conflict, providing the context for our research on the social reintegration of formerly abducted children. As indicated earlier, this study aims to examine the experiences of children who were abducted by Kony's LRA, seeing them as a product of this history and concerned with their social reintegration in northern Uganda.

   Thus far, we have seen that the conflict in northern Uganda relates to a false perception of a martial race, feelings of political betrayal and an immature political system, all leading to insecurity and painful experiences for the Acholi people. Stated differently, Veale and Stavrou (2003: 9) say that 'the causes of the conflict lie in political disenfranchisement, 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'. These issues appear to be closely linked to different citizenship concerns. We therefore assume that the conflict has caused a citizenship crisis in the region (The Woodrow Wilson School, 2006). On the face of it, the perception of a martial race held by the general Ugandan population and feelings of political betrayal expressed by the Acholi appear to be the causes of the present conflict and the resulting social crisis in northern Uganda.

2.3.3   *Mutations of the conflict and community support*

The genesis of the conflict might be complex and historical (Allen, 2003; Dolan, 2005; Refugee Law Project, 2004; International Crisis Group, 2004; Finnström, 2003; Veale and Stavrou, 2003; Okot, 1989; Nyadru, 1988) but its development over the two decades in which it has continued has different, equally complex features. From the defeated and fleeing UNLA (later UPDA), through Alice Lakwena to Joseph Kony (Eichstaedt, 2009; Dolan, 2005; Veale and Stavrou, 2003; Finnström, 2003) it can be seen that the conflict has mutated several times. Even under Kony alone, one could hardly say the conflict has been characteristically constant. The period immediately after the NRM takeover in 1986 precipitated the formation of the UPDA, while Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement and later the Lord's Resistance Movement already saw displacement and looting by both the NRA and the different rebel groups (Allen, 2006; Dolan, 2005; Finnström, 2003; Veale and Stavrou, 2003).

Living in the Catholic mission in Gulu at that time, I remember people coming to spend the night in some of the spare space we had. I also recollect one afternoon when our place was a battleground sandwiched between the NRA and the rebels on either side. On numerous occasions we had to surrender fuel, foodstuff, or other items on the demand of the rebels. The main mission hospital (St Mary's Hospital, Lacor) which was not located far away was also forced to supply medicines to the rebels on many occasions. A few times medical personnel were taken to the bush, allegedly to treat the rebels. Although this was tantamount to a war taking place in the community where people lived, in comparison to later periods it appears that the rebels were more accepted by the general population during this period.

While it might thus be tempting to say that during this period the rebellion received genuine support from the population, we are inclined to take Finnström's (2003) view that this really points to a paradox in the relationship between the Acholi and the LRA. Finnström writes that 'as a paradox of life many of the things that the LRM/A says make sense to people in northern Uganda but their violent practices do not' (Finnström, 2003: 314). Allen (2003: 49) agrees: 'there was little enthusiasm for the LRA among the Ugandan Acholi population'. At the end of his study, Finnström (2003: 317) concludes that people in northern Uganda 'do not actively support the rebels, only ... the rebels claim to be fighting for free basic primary healthcare for all ...' makes sense in the view of many people. What all this shows is that although there might have been no overt support for Kony, sympathy for the cause for which he purported to fight cannot be ruled out. In spite of this, what is of interest here is that this scenario of people living through a war in the midst of the community and in which their own were used against them is the unique element of this conflict.

In other words, what characterized the LRA is their meting out of violence against their own people and the extremely violent use of children to perpetrate this brutality (Eichstaedt, 2009; Dolan, 2005; Finnström, 2003; Veale and Stavrou, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 1997 and 2003), all the while making politically correct statements to the Acholi people (Finnström, 2003). This unique character of the conflict also poses complex questions about internal Acholi social wellbeing – How can people live together again? Is there still a sense of 'Acholiness' among the Acholi people? It further reveals the broken condition of the Acholi community, therefore posing questions about how to deal with this brokenness in the later phases of the conflict when the need for social reintegration had become apparent.

2.3.4   *Mutilations*
In the early 1990s, the LRA started to mutilate and maim civilians (Dolan, 2005). People's noses, lips and arms were severed. Sometimes lips and women's private parts were padlocked (Eichstaedt, 2009; Finnström, 2003). However, mutilations and extreme physical violence in war seems not to be specific to northern Uganda. Similar mutilations are reported in Mozambique (Honwana, 2006), the colonial Congo (Zaire) (Hochschild, 1998) and Rwanda (Gourevitch, 1999). Reports of mutilations in Sierra Leone and Liberia are also in the public arena thanks to the media. These early mutilations and maiming of civilians in northern Uganda could be considered as expressions of the lack of safety and security in the lives of the Acholi people. These kinds of experiences usually call for extensive psychosocial reintegration activities in order to recreate meaningful lives and livelihoods.

2.3.5   *Betty Bigombe peace talks and presidential ultimatum*
The mutilations and maiming of civilians were followed by a lull in the conflict from around the end of 1993 to the beginning of 1994 (Dolan, 2005). This lull was mainly attributed to the efforts of Betty Bigombe, the then State Minister for the Pacification of the North, who attempted to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the conflict (Allen, 2006; Dolan, 2005). The Bigombe peace talks collapsed in 1994 after President Museveni gave an ultimatum of seven days for the rebels to surrender or be destroyed (Allen, 2006; Finnström, 2003), which ushered in a new wave of violence, according to both Allen (2006) and Dolan (2005). Many deadlines announced by both President Museveni and senior military commanders during the course of the conflict, suggesting the defeat, termination or crushing of the rebels by a certain time, came and went. According to Allen (2006: 48), this was because 'President Museveni's attitude to the talks was not very enthusiastic'.

Additionally, many Acholi people see the 1994 ultimatum to the rebels as an act in bad faith. Allen (2006: 50) actually refers to it as a humiliation.

This was on top of Betty Bigombe's ministerial appointment which, according to Allen (2006: 44 and 47), was 'motivated by the desire to show the president's power over Acholi masculinity and was deliberately provocative'. It is often talked about as evidence that Museveni could not be trusted and that his agenda was not to end the war (Dolan, 2005). Allen (2006) goes on to show, however, that far from the perceived motivations of Bigombe's appointment, her initiation of and performance in the 1994 peace talks was commendable. Nonetheless, the idea here is that this kind of perception about the leadership further complicates relationships and expectations between local communities and the state or its leaders in conflict countries. It also raises the polarizing issue of the responsibility of the state to guarantee meaningful security to its citizens against the reality of providing that security in the face of rebellion.

2.3.6   International dimensions of the conflict

The mid to late 1990s thus saw major political-military activities; even introducing bold international dimensions to the conflict. Allegations of Uganda government support for the SPLA and Khartoum's support of the LRA (Allen, 2006; Dolan, 2005; Finnström, 2003) became frequent and the reality apparent to the people of northern Uganda. Dolan (2000: 5), quoted in Finnström (2003: 120 -123), states that 'when large numbers of Sudanese rebels assembled in Gulu army barracks and at the nearby airport for training, I have noticed the Ugandan army closes roads in the area. During certain periods, the Sudanese rebel leader, John Garang, has been a frequent visitor to Gulu town'. The presence of the SPLA in Gulu and the fact that the rebels were based in the Sudan, where those abducted were taken, therefore became public knowledge. Major escalations in violence by the LRA, such as the Atiak massacre (Allen, 2006), the ambushes on the Pakwach-Karuma road leading to the West Nile, and later the internationally publicized abduction of the Aboke girls (Eichstaedt, 2009; Allen, 2006; De Temmerman, 2002) became the hallmarks of the conflict.

Since the late 1980s, people had been intermittently commuting to trading centres, towns and missions on a more or less voluntary basis (Dolan, 2005; Veale and Stavrou, 2003). Commuting in the context of the conflict in northern Uganda means the daily mass movement of the population to safer places, such as towns, churches, large institutions such as hospitals and schools, to pass the night. According to Dolan (2005), the year 1996 marked the enactment of a government policy which created protected villages characterized by 'a military presence (a "detach") for the ostensible purposes of protection from the LRA'. By this time, the LRA had its bases in the Sudan (Allen, 2006; Dolan, 2005; Finnström, 2003) and could therefore visit violence on the population and retreat back to the Sudan. These

protected villages consisted of a conglomeration of people who moved from smaller villages into large settlements of thousands (Eichstaedt, 2009) – a quasi urbanism. Most of these events are communal experiences and readily remembered by people who lived through the conflict in northern Uganda, but for purposes of coherence, Dolan (2005), Allen (2006) and Eichstaedt (2009) as well as others, have documented them.

Up to this point of mass displacement through policy, although the LRA bases were already in the Sudan, an international profiling of the conflict had generally been absent. Dolan (2005), however, presents important instances of international concern regarding the conflict, such as the 1997 founding of GUSCO with the financial support of DANIDA, a visit by the all-party International Development Committee of the British House of Commons and a UGSHS 44 million donation to GUSCO following this visit. Later, Mrs Clinton, former First Lady of the US and the Obama administration first Secretary of State, also announced direct financial support of USD 500,000 for the Concerned Parents Association. Were these acts of international recognition of the conflict in the north also recognition that people were '*Living in bad surroundings*' (Finnström, 2003)? Were they pointing to the need for reintegration?

Worth noting is that international attention at this juncture did not concern high-level political engagement with the government of Uganda about the conflict, but rather entailed gestures of humanitarian solidarity, which were important and necessary at that point in time. However, relatively high-level political and diplomatic engagements to stop the war would have brought more relief to and had more meaning for the people of northern Uganda. As such, it is tempting to state that the main injury inflicted by the international community on the people of northern Uganda was its long silence, failing to engage the Museveni government on the war in northern Uganda for close to twenty years. Faced with indifference from the international community and a security quagmire involving government military actions and the violence meted by the LRA (Finnström, 2003; Veale and Stavrou, 2003), the Acholi population gradually began to lose its ability to sustain itself and came to have what Dolan (2005) calls a debilitating dependence on NGOs, both international and local. Dolan (2005), quoting UNOCHA, indicates that the number of agencies giving relief assistance increased from five in mid-1996 to over 60 by the end of 2000.

Notwithstanding the above situation, according to Veale and Stavrou (2003: 12), an opportunity for relatively high-level political and diplomatic engagement with the Ugandan government and the LRA about the conflict in northern Uganda presented itself in 2001 through the Canadian government. It launched an initiative aimed at securing the release of abducted children as a result of the September 2000 International Conference on War-affected

Children held in Winnipeg. However, Veale and Stavrou (2003) demonstrate that very little happened in relation to actual negotiations for their release, even though a protocol had been signed.

2.3.7 Recent international dimensions of the conflict

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 also affected northern Ugandans, already caught in a security nightmare, finding themselves dependent on others, and experiencing a general sense of hopelessness in profound ways according to Dolan (2005). He argues convincingly that the war on terror 'translated into very concrete anti-LRA actions on the ground which previously would have been unthinkable' (Dolan, 2005: 89). Allen (2006) explains that the LRA was listed as a terrorist organization. Veale and Stavrou (2003: 12) also note that in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks 'Museveni successfully lobbied the United States to have the LRA officially labeled a terrorist organization'. Allen (2006) further points out that another impact of 11 September in the region was that Sudan under Bashir was blacklisted by the US as a country that supported terrorism and Osama Bin Laden. The 1998 US missile attack on Khartoum after the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania had left the country nervous. In the aftermath of 11 September, according to Allen (2006), Bashir was forced to build bridges and demonstrate he was making an effort to combat terrorism. Perhaps President Museveni, who had long been a US regional ally in the fight against Islamist tendencies, also felt he had to show continued support and good will towards US strategic interests in the region in relation to the war on terror. In this regard, both Allen (2006) and Dolan (2005) posit that their positions quickly resulted in Uganda and Sudan signing the protocol for Operation Iron Fist in 2002, which aimed to flush out and defeat Kony and terrorism once and for all (Dolan, 2005). Although it is true that the LRA was listed as a terrorist organization after the 11 September attacks, these accounts giving 11 September as the reason for Operation Iron Fist do need to be qualified. However, our sustained interest here concerns the impact of the internationalization of the conflict on the real-life experiences of the Acholi people.

2.3.8 Operation Iron Fist

The impact of Operation Iron Fist on the population in northern Uganda was appalling, as is explained by Allen (2006), Dolan (2005) and Veale and Stavrou (2003). The operation did not succeed in killing or capturing Kony. Commenting on this, Allen (2006: 52) writes that if Operation Iron Fist 'was aimed at resolving the situation once and for all, it has to be judged a failure'. According to Veale and Stavrou (2003), the LRA bases in Sudan were

destroyed and many of the children abducted over the years were killed. Many of the formerly abducted children in this study who had been taken to the Sudan experienced this period in which there were so many deaths and so much suffering (see chapter 5). Veale and Stavrou (2003) reveal that the operation also drove many of the abducted children back to Uganda, and a good number were given a chance to escape once across the border, the distances making this more plausible.

However, in relation to the population in northern Uganda, Operation Iron Fist unleashed a new level of insecurity and saw an unprecedented number of abductions, as Allen (2006), Dolan (2005) and Veale and Stavrou (2003) show. An estimated 1.8 million people (80 percent) were displaced and moved into the IDP camps in the period (Dolan, 2005). Operation Iron Fist also resulted in the massacre of Barlonyo, allegedly by the LRA in 2004, as well as numerous other killings, ambushes and looting (Eichstaedt, 2009). Allen, who has been involved in research on northern Uganda for a long period, gives an insightful assessment of Operation Iron Fist, explaining the importance attached to this operation by the government of Uganda:

> President Museveni himself has directed some of the Iron Fist campaign from a base in the north. With US logistical support, and using helicopter gunships, an estimated 10,000 Ugandan troops have been involved. LRA bases in Sudan have been destroyed and hundreds of people killed. Understandably, the Ugandan government has called those who have died 'rebels' but it is clear that many have been abducted people, including children. Kony and almost all his senior commanders, however, evaded capture. Some retreated deeper into Sudan while others divided into small units and moved south of the border. As fast as abducted people died or were captured/freed, more were taken. If Iron Fist of 2002 really was aimed at resolving the situation once and for all, it has to be judged a failure. … Given the apparent investment in Iron Fist, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the Uganda government had other agendas. Doubtless the LRA capacities were underestimated, but also many of the troops used had recently returned from Uganda's controversial intervention in the Congo. They were allegedly infected with diseases and ill disciplined. Some analysts have argued that President Museveni just wanted them out of the country. (Allen, 2006: 51-52)

In 2000, there had been a mysterious outbreak of Ebola virus disease in Gulu. There were no official answers as to where it had originated from. Did the transfer of the soldiers who had been to the Congo, and who were alleged to have diseases, have anything to do with it? Was there an attempt by the government to cover up the facts in relation to allegations that the outbreak of Ebola hemorrhagic fever had been introduced by the bodies of dead soldiers that had been brought in from the Congo (Finnström, 2003)?

Finnström (2003) aptly presents the rumours that were circulating at the time and the discussions that were going on in northern Uganda as the Ebola fever took its toll on the population. What could have been the reasons for the government to send soldiers returning from war on to another war in another country, rather than resting them?

The Ebola questions apart, capturing the sense of the cost of Iron Fist which officially began on 8 March 2002, in terms of soldiers' lives, Dolan (2005: 89) pictures the scenario in dramatic terms.

> Although 10,000 Ugandan soldiers were deployed in south Sudan, and by the end of March claimed to have 'captured' all four main rebel camps, this was at the cost of many UPDF soldiers' lives and an escalation of civilian suffering to new levels – seen from northern Uganda the only signs of military activity were trucks carrying live soldiers northwards and corpses southwards.

2.3.9   A new international dimension

Following Operation Iron Fist, the next major event in the conflict was the relocation of the LRA to the Garamba Forest of the DRC (Schomerus and Tumutegyereize, 2009; Eichstaedt, 2009) – thus giving this conflict a new international dimension. According to Schomerus and Tumutegyereize (2009), the conflict had changed from being located in two countries to becoming a truly regional conflict, covering northern Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sudan and the Central African Republic. In the context of this new dimension, 2006 saw the beginning of the Juba Peace Talks. This peace initiative, negotiated by the government of South Sudan, spanned two years. While formal discussions were concluded, Joseph Kony failed to present himself for the official signing of the agreement three times (Eichstaedt, 2009; Schomerus and Tumutegyereize, 2009). According to Schomerus and Tumutegyereize (2009), President Museveni had always preferred the military option to end the war, even when the peace process was going on. Perhaps Kony's refusal to sign the peace agreement has indeed vindicated the president.

According to Schomerus and Tumutegyereize (2009), on 14 December 2008, the UPDF, the SPLA and the Congolese Army launched another military attack, code named Operation Lightning Thunder, ostensibly to defeat Kony and force him to sign the Juba Peace Agreement, or kill him, once more ending the war 'once and for all'. The operation took about three months. Perhaps with the exception of covert action using small number of soldiers, officially the UPDF has since returned home without achieving any of the stated objectives to arrest, kill or force Kony to sign the agreement (Schomerus and Tumutegyereize 2009; Eichstaedt, 2009). With the formal 'end' of the conflict in balance due to the non-signing of the peace agreement,

the security of the Acholi, and indeed people in other areas and countries now involved in the conflict, could also be assumed to be in the balance.

2.4   INTIMATE AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THE WAR

The above historical overview of the war outlines some of the major events that characterized the conflict and also explains the possible influences of the conflict on societal cohesion and tension in broad terms. However, these broad facts and history do not give a complete picture of how war affects people's daily life experiences at an intimate level. In addition to broad factual outlines, a war is also lived through the experiences of individuals and communities. It affects individuals' lives in terms of what they can or cannot do. This can create a painful social and personal situation. During the war it was actually the personal/individual and communal experiences that were more disturbing than the major historical events. For instance, during the period that I lived in the conflict region, the 'rumours' or stories about a village being attacked, people being abducted, vehicles being ambushed on certain roads resulting in a certain number of deaths, or a family, school or mission being looted, sent chills down one's spine and brought a real sense of fear, insecurity and terror to the population. These stories spread so quickly through the community that everyone was on security alert. Often these personal, intimately lived experiences of war and conflict are ignored or not recorded in detail, in favour of the broader historical facts. Dolan (2005) has recorded some of the intimate and lived experiences of conflict by some 13 women in Gulu. I reproduce them (sic) in order to show the kind of 'rumours' or stories that drove the real sense of the war in the community at the height of the conflict.

Table 1: Intimate experiences of conflict at family level[2]

1986	4 of my children were abducted by Lakwena. They returned after 4 months 2 of my children died of a hand-grenade attack by the NRA 2 brothers were killed by NRA (1 with a molten jerry-can, the other through beating)
1987	- My cattle (20 head) were taken, I was beaten and four girls were taken by Lakwena - Karamajong took 38 cattle belonging to my grandfather - My husband was arrested by the NRA for two weeks, came back ill and died 3 years later 2 of my brothers were killed by Lakwena - I was beaten, my son was abducted (returned after 1 year), and 5 goats were taken by Lakwena - My husband was killed, 28 cattle were taken, 4 huts and 6 granaries were burnt by

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[2] Source: Dolan (2005: 93-94).

	NRA
	• My son, who was married with a daughter, was abducted and is still in captivity (LRA)
	• My brother drowned himself after NRA took 100 cattle
1988	• I was abducted and lived in captivity for 3 months. Some of my property was taken, others destroyed, one child taken who returned after 6 months
	• 3 of my brothers were killed by Lakwena and household property robbed
	• 10 goats robbed by Lakwena, 50 cattle by cattle rustlers
	• My husband was killed
	• 8 sons of my brothers were killed by NRA, who also took 30 head of cattle
	• UPDA burnt one hut, 2 sacks of millet, 8 sacks of sunflower, household properties, 2 granaries
	• 2 of my grandsons were abducted, one returned after 1.5 years, the other is still in captivity
	• My arm was shot by the NRA and had to be amputated
	• My brother was abducted by the UPDA
1989	• 4 of my brothers were burnt alive in their huts by the NRA who accused them of being collaborators
	• NRA burnt property including 4 huts, 3 granaries, 40 iron sheets, because the rebels had camped in the area
	• I was hit by a mine and my leg was amputated
	• My brother's son was killed by the LRA
1990	• 6 children killed by Lakwena (Bobi)
	• 1 man was killed by the NRA
1991	• My sister's daughter was abducted by LRA and died in Agweng, Lira district
1992	• NRA took our maize mill
	• NRA took my brother's sons maize mill
	• NRA took my uncle's maize mill
	• My brother's house was used as an army office; to date there has been no rent payment made
1993	• LRA abducted my brother-in law's son from Sir Samuel Baker School, he returned 1 year later
1996	• I was hit by an anti-personnel mine and lost my lower leg
1997	• I was hurt in the hip by a UPDF bomb
	• My brother-in-law's son was shot dead in the market place by the UPDF
1998	• LRA took 2 of my sons, they are still in captivity
	• LRA killed my father while he attended some funeral rites
1999	• LRA abducted 7 children (1 girl, 6 boys), the girl returned after 2 weeks
	• LRA took 20 goats
	• UPDF burnt 5 huts
	• LRA abducted 2 of my sister's children

Table 2: Memories of intimate experience of conflict at community level[3]

Year	Incidents
1987	• 9 women and children were killed by UPDA, left unburied and eaten by pigs • Children were massacred while dancing in Lawiyeadul village
1988	• NRA killed 8 men and dumped their bodies in a stream
1991	• LRA kill 6 • Serious NRA operation with people taken forcefully to various places for screening
1995	• Brutal killings (Atiak, Palaro, Alero, Pabo, Paicho, Patiko, Acoyo, Pawere, Awere)
1996	• 10 boys (10-12 year olds) abducted by LRA, return after 2 weeks • 2 school girls abducted by LRA • 80 huts were burnt by the LRA • Neighbour's shop was looted 3 times by LRA • 2 boys abducted but returned • Individuals were displaced in Gulu town
1997	• 9 children abducted (1 girl, eight boys: seven boys return, one killed) • 3 men killed by LRA • UPDF shoot dead a man when he failed to give the money they demanded
1998	• After the LRA had passed through, the UPDF destroyed tobacco being fire-cured as well as other properties • 7 boys were abducted, 2 returned (LRA) • Dispensary looted (LRA) • 2 boys shot but survived in hospital (LRA) • 8 UPDF soldiers raped a woman in Laliya
1999	• February: 1 girl abducted and items looted by LRA • LRA shot dead a catechist and his wife

These tables showing the incidences of acts of war recounted by 13 women represent the intimate and lived experience of war by the people of northern Uganda. The tables only record events up to 1999, a period which was much less violent than the Operation Iron Fist years. If such a record had been made in relation to the latter, it is possible that the stories would have been even more horrific. These experiences cause a thousand deaths for those who repeatedly go through them. They elicit deep fear, guilt, a sense of hopelessness and resignation, and they create deep-seated trauma that continues to have an effect years after the experience. For instance, knowing that the corpse of your neighbour or daughter was not buried but was eaten by pigs brings a sense of social guilt for failing to perform a duty to the dead, a sense of desecration, fear of cultural wrongdoing, abomination and psychological torture. These experiences break the fibre and backbone of the community – resulting in a broken community. They are the experiences that are likely to rob individuals and communities of the chance to live meaningful lives. Along with a broken community also comes the broken being of the

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[3] Source: Dolan (2005: 94-95).

individuals who constitute it. In general, people will remember and continue to live in a broken community long after peace agreements have been signed and even coalition governments formed. In the case of northern Uganda, this brokenness is further lived inter-generationally, due to the use of children, most of whom were forcefully abducted to fight in the war.

2.5   THE NORTHERN CONFLICT AND THE USE OF CHILDREN IN WAR

We have thus far shown that the northern conflict, as a distinct phase of the turbulent history of Uganda, began in earnest in 1986. From 1986 to around 1998, not much was known about this conflict outside the war zone itself. However, in 1997, before the rest of Uganda and the international community came to acknowledge the massive scale of abduction and abuse in northern Uganda, Human Rights Watch had already detailed these abductions and abuses by the LRA in *The Scars of Death*. This report included several accounts of abduction experiences by children in northern Uganda, the general impact of the conflict on the Acholi community, and the religious, economic and historical origins of the conflict.

According to Human Rights Watch in *Abducted and Abused* (2003), six or seven years later the LRA had stepped up the level of abduction, killing, looting and general destruction, which were accompanied by massive displacement. The report also specifically states that from June 2002 to around July 2003 approximately 8,400 children were abducted. Abductions were always the gateway to despicable atrocities, committed to and by children. The report also reveals that the surge in LRA activities in general and the abduction of children in particular during this period had now come to be attributed to the 'failed' Operation Iron Fist, the UPDF campaign that was intended to wipe out the LRA from its bases in southern Sudan.

The Scars of Death and *Abducted and Abused* explained the abduction and abuse of children as one of the general characteristics of the conflict. However, in *Stolen Children* the key issues explained are abduction, the brutality meted out to the children, life in captivity and how the children were trained as soldiers and used in battle. In addition, *Stolen Children* revealed the experiences of girls as sex slaves, 'wives' and mothers, and the children's escape and/or release (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Significantly, the report also exposed the recruitment of children by the Ugandan forces, especially for Local Defence Units and the UPDF, as well as the recruitment of former LRA abductees into government forces. This revelation tells of the dual processes of recruitment of children in northern Uganda. It is significant because, when talking of children and war in northern Uganda, the usual

picture that comes to mind is one of children roaming the bush with the LRA in northern Uganda and southern Sudan against their will. This Human Rights Watch report exposes the two-sided use of children in the conflict in northern Uganda, although they experienced different degrees of brutalization from the two parties.

World Vision (2004) asserts that what took place in northern Uganda was a mass hostage-taking involving over 20,000 children, where the protection of children was not a priority of the government despite national and international legal instruments guaranteeing children's rights and protection. Children had become 'pawns of politics', being used for military and political purposes in the ongoing power struggle, argues World Vision (2004). Pawns of politics they were indeed, but the impact of the conflict on their personal lives appears to be more overwhelming.

This twenty-first century use of children as pawns was not the first in the history of Uganda. Veale and Stavrou (2003) show that the first prominent use of children as soldiers in Uganda was during Museveni's National Resistance Movement guerrilla war of 1981 to 1986 – Ugandans have since called Museveni's child soldiers *Kadogos* (derived from Swahili, meaning small ones). The authors give an estimate of approximately 3,000 children recruited during that time, while acknowledging the difficulty of knowing how these children were treated due to lack of documentation and few oral accounts. However, an insight into that era of childhood with the NRA guerrillas, and later the government army, is given in the biography of China Keitetsi, entitled *Child Soldier: Fighting for my Life*. In one of the instances of sexual harassment and abuse of young girls it is explained that:

> We female soldiers had to offer sex to more than five officers in one unit…. It would have been a little easier on us if it had been one or two afandes, but everyday in the week we had to sleep with different afandes against our will. If we refused…the abuse would turn violent and we would get extra duties….
>
> The NRA gave us weapons and made us fight their war. They made us hate, kill and torture and they forced us to sleep with them – we had no choice. Museveni had a choice – but it was to look the other way. (Keitetsi, 2002: 128)

Thus, life within military camps for Ugandan children had long existed. This time the location had changed from the jungles of the Luweero Triangle to the bush of northern Uganda and southern Sudan, and the armed group that recruited them had changed from the NRA to the LRA. However, as already noted, the brutality and abuse experienced by the children under the LRA was unprecedented. These experiences show that children have constantly been violated in Uganda's history.

2.6 THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT IN PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of this chapter has been to profile the northern Ugandan conflict as a grounding for our current research on the social reintegration of the children who have been affected by it through abduction. We have learnt about the history of a conflict that has affected or created problematic conditions for real-life experiences.

In its unfolding, the chapter shows that real political issues lie at the heart of this conflict and the ensuing problems of the impact of war and painful experiences. For instance, although Uganda was led by presidents from northern Uganda in the early days of independence, the feeling of many elite northerners under the present government is that the north has not been economically or politically assimilated into Uganda. This perception has been exaggerated by the impact of the conflict, which has further alienated the region. Ginywera-Pinchwa (1989) calls this alienation 'the northern question', explaining that the political dominance of the north in the post-independence period had little real chance to develop the region due to the political, educational and economic disadvantages created during the colonial period. This same sentiment was expressed in an interview in *The Daily Monitor* (10 March 2008) with Norbert Mao, former member of parliament and now leader of Gulu district and a respected politician: 'I personally believe that the north is not adequately represented in national policy making (sic) bodies. Let me say it plainly, we are not there in the juicy positions'. It is easy to dismiss such expressions as politicking.

However, when people perceive themselves to be politically marginalized in this way it has far-reaching economic consequences and implications for how people see themselves in relation to the country. Perhaps some of the socioeconomic reasons for which the people feel marginalized, especially during the war years, are observable in the marked differences in economic and social infrastructure between the north and the south. Richards would say this conflict is 'a type of text – a violent attempt to "tell a story" or to "cut in on the conversation" of others [southerners in this case] from whose company the belligerents [northerners] feel excluded' (Richards, 1996: xxiv).

To summarize the main issues thus far, we have seen that the abduction of children became the hallmark of the conflict, the people had very difficult daily living conditions and in the Acholi community people had what Dolan (2005) describes as a debilitating existence due to insecurity in all its forms. These are issues closely related to citizenship – in this case a broken one. The issues further call for a candid consideration of the reintegration of children who have become part of a war that was fought to make a political statement concerning political recognition.

The historical-social context and the lived experiences of war discussed above show that the scale of the impact of the war on the community – which includes the massive internal displacement of the local population, human rights violations, insecurity in all its forms, and abductions (for instance, Eichstaedt, 2009; Allen, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Finnström, 2003; Veale and Stavrou, 2003) – is unprecedented. This was a situation where members of the same ethnic community violated each other; an expression of what has come to be known in the post-cold war era as a 'new war' (for instance, Munkler, 2005). The notion of new war partly explains Richards' (1996) concept of 'new barbarism'. From this we learn that the conflict in northern Uganda is a unique conflict, where the Acholi people are negatively affected by the actions of members of their own community. Such a scenario has unique consequences for citizenship and unique demands with respect to reintegration.

With knowledge of this history, we can further appreciate that the Acholi community and society, once well-knit (Finnström, 2003; Behrend, 1999), although always faced with its own challenges, no longer feels like a community. The cohesion of the Acholi community was built around its clans and its chiefs, homesteads and elders (Harlacher *et al.*, 2006). However, the war has broken these bonds and thus the community's cohesion, with displacement and abduction taking place on a massive scale. The importance of elders and traditional social structures as reference points for social cohesion faded when these elders and families were forced to leave their homesteads for IDP camps. Clan leaders and elders around which the community once thrived could no longer live among their people, and thus they are now no longer known or relevant to their people (Baines, 2005), especially to the members of the young generation who were abducted and have not known a life outside this conflict. The war conditions have curtailed the original responsibilities, roles and relevance of the elders in relation to teaching the younger generation communal values and maintaining a socially stable and peaceful community.

In other words, this chapter reveals that the social conditions became very fluid during the war years. In such circumstances people do not have real social and economic structures to cling to, by which they can support their lives. Through the highs and lows of the conflict, there was nothing permanent enough on which to build a life. Livelihoods were destroyed, and livelihood strategies could no longer be passed on from one generation to the next, as insecurity and a disabling dependence on aid agencies became a way of life. Coupled with these problems are what Baines (2005) indicates as an increasing attraction to the money economy, social disorder and disharmony, over-consumption of alcohol, prostitution, child abuse and other forms of domestic violence. These conditions reveal the challenges facing citizenship.

This study sees this fluidity in the socio-economic conditions of the population as having a negative effect on the positive attributes of the citizen, and it reinforces the urgency of the need for the reintegration of formerly abducted children and the rehabilitation of the broken community from which the children were taken and to which they have now returned.

In summary, here we have encountered issues such as the lived experiences of war, both communally and personally, the impact of war on people's daily lives, the massive scale of abduction of children and the broken community. These issues are related to the concept of citizenship. We have also encountered the apparent lack of intervention in the face of such a crippling social problem, which in turn is closely related to the need for reintegration. We will therefore use these two concepts – reintegration and citizenship – in the next chapter as the bases of our theoretical framework which explains further the reintegration of formerly abducted children in the conflict in northern Uganda.

We were given heavy loads to carry on the heads and on the back. You are not allowed to complain

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"Then about the difficulties that people's children face from the bush, it is unbearable. In that when you were abducted young, they will never treat you as the young ones are being treated from home. Because if they tell you to perform any task however big it is, they will not consider your age and you must accomplish the assignment. You can even get too hungry to carry a luggage but they do not mind; they will even continue piling more and more on your head. Like on our way to Sudan there was no water, nothing like food. But in case you get tired or weak on the way, they will throw you down and just step on you until you die and it's your fellow abductees who will be forced to step on you; anyone who fails to walk … and the commander of that group was called Pascal he was a very bad man. There were very many battles being fought … I also narrowly survived, I could not walk any more but luckily enough, I was handed over to a kind person who gave me only a radio to carry and the only problem I faced was running in the battlefield and traveling because I was to follow him wherever he could go. And the other problem was the killing of your fellow abductees. When they order you to kill you must do it, even if the person was related to you - in the process he will have to forgive you, because it was not your wish to do it but it was order from above. It is a must for you to kill that person, even if she was related to you, in case you refuse to kill they will instead kill you."

(child mother, GUSCO)

Girls are given to the rebel commanders as wives. They are sexually exploited

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