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### Violated by Rebels, Violated by Family: Returnee Girls of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda

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In the prologue to his book *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa*, Richard Reid recounts how in the first few years of the third millennium, the region of North-East Africa has been enmeshed in conflict. This region which includes Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Southern Sudan has experienced intermittent violent conflicts and destruction by wars based on reasons and excuses ranging from ethnicity and religion, to political disagreements caused by thirst for power. This region also includes Northern Uganda, particularly Acholi-land, which was caught up in the throes of violent conflict since the mid- eighties, between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda. For more than three decades, Acholi-land was engulfed in untold suffering, unleashed upon its population by foes from without and, tragically, attackers from within! An historical occupation of being exceptionally good soldiers that had stood them in good stead in colonial and post-colonial times turned out to be a curse they would always true!

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## INTRODUCTION

In the prologue to his book *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa*, Richard Reid recounts how in the first few years of the third millennium, the region of North-East Africa has been enmeshed in conflict<sup>1</sup>. This region which includes Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Southern Sudan has experienced intermittent violent conflicts and destruction by wars based on reasons and excuses ranging from ethnicity and religion, to political disagreements caused by thirst for power. This region also includes Northern Uganda, particularly Acholi-land, which was caught up in the throes of violent conflict since the mid- eighties, between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda. For more than three decades, Acholi-land was engulfed in untold suffering, unleashed upon its population by foes from without and, tragically, attackers from within! An historical occupation of being exceptionally good soldiers that had stood them in good stead in colonial and post-colonial times turned out to be a curse they would always true!

As Harlacher put it,

*As in most modern wars, the civilian population has suffered most from the hostilities. Many thousands have been killed, maimed, and abducted. By 2005, nearly two million people had been driven from their homes and fields and relocated into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.... the population languished in squalid, disease-ridden camps, mostly unable to cultivate, and dependent on food aid for survival.*<sup>2</sup>

The effects of the horrendous violence upon the communities of Northern Uganda are still

manifesting themselves in new and worse ways including diseases hitherto not known such as the debilitating nodding disease. The region was brutalized by both the government army in pursuit of the elusive LRA, and also by the LRA rebels who felt betrayed by the refusal of the population to join them *en masse* in fighting the government army. Caught thus between the rock and the deep sea, the population was subsequently herded into camps, ostensibly to protect them from the rebels, but this was also possibly done to deny the rebels the fertile ground from which they were abducting new recruits and getting their food supplies. It is hard to determine which of the two was worse: life in the villages under the threat of abduction and torture by both LRA and government army, or in the terrible IDP camps, once described by the UN chief humanitarian officer Jan Egeland as '*a human tragedy*', '*a moral outrage*' and '*the biggest neglected humanitarian emergency in the world*'<sup>3</sup> One of the hallmarks of this war was the callous abduction of young boys and girls to fill the ranks of the rebel outfit, and to procure wives and sex servants, respectively. This was because the LRA could not get people who were willing to volunteer easily anymore, possibly because they violated the Acholi core values by killing and committing all sorts of atrocities against the very people they were supposed to protect.<sup>4</sup>

## LITTLE CHILDREN FORCED INTO WAR AND VIOLENCE

It is now slightly more than twenty years since the country woke up to the horrendous news of the abduction of 139 school girls from St. Mary's College Boarding School Aboke, in Northern Uganda by LRA soldiers on the tenth day of the tenth month in 1996. These were little school girls of Forms 1-3 who were between 12 and 15 years of

<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa: Genealogies of Conflict since 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Harlacher et al., *Traditional Ways of Coping in Acholi: Cultural Provisions for Reconciliation and Healing from War* (Kampala: Intersoft Business Services Limited, 2006), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana, *Where are the Girls? Girls Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique: Their Lives during and after War* (Montreal, Quebec: Rights and Democracy, 2004), 28.

age. The rebels also looted the clinic of drugs, and attempted to burn down the school. By some twist of fate, the rebels missed the dormitory housing the older girls of Forms 4-6. Because there were maize cobs drying in front of this building, the rebels possibly concluded it was a maize store.<sup>5</sup> In an act of unbelievable bravery and daring, their deputy headmistress, Sister Rachele Fassera followed the rebels into the bush, caught up with them and begged them to release the girls. She offered them money and asked to take their place in captivity instead. Surprisingly, and almost miraculously, the rebel commanders finally relented and gave her 109 girls back, but retained thirty girls to become wives for their commanders.

This paper focuses on one aspect of the war in Northern Uganda, namely the situation these unfortunate girls faced in captivity, and later on when they returned to their families. On the one hand it explores the socio-cultural factors that informed this conflict, and on the other the religious dimension of the different players. In particular, it assesses the roles played by religious leaders in midwifing justice, fairness, and in giving hope to those whose futures had been violently snatched from them by abduction, those who suffered physically, mentally, emotionally, and economically.

The girls were violently torn away from their school and their parents, and their futures destroyed in a flash. They faced violent abduction, were marched off into the unknown, brutalized, traumatized, raped, and were forcefully married off against their consent contrary to the traditional Acholi cultural norms, to men sometimes old enough to be their fathers. Many became pregnant at a tender age and bore children for rebel fathers whom the girls' parents did not know or approve of in accordance with their Acholi culture. They were made to fight a war that was not of their own making, often with babies strapped on their backs. As a means of alienating them from the community, many of these girls were forced to kill members of their own families and neighbours, or to watch while the rebels butchered their relatives.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Els De Temmerman, *Aboke Girls: Children Abducted in Northern Uganda* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2001), 12-13.

It was a war they possibly did not understand nor subscribe to. They certainly did not understand the intricate cycle of violence that had scarred their motherland and turned the 'Pearl of Africa' into a killing field. And when they finally escaped or were rescued by the government forces, often with children without fathers, one would have expected them to be comforted by the family and made to feel at home and forget the vicissitudes they had endured in captivity. Unfortunately, life in the bosom of their communities away from armed captivity was not a bed of roses. Their culture portrayed them as 'investments' to bring home cows and other economic benefits in *nyom* (bride-wealth). But they now returned home with children begotten with rebels who had brutalized, maimed, and killed innumerable members of the community. Rebels who had cut-off limbs, lips, noses, ears, and breasts of women, and had committed cannibalism and genocide against their own. The children were referred to as *olum* (children of the bush), bastards, and offspring of rebels, unruly like their rebel fathers.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, many of these girls who had turned into women and mothers at a tender age were faced with yet another form of violence: the heart-rending spectre of rejection, of being seen as a liability their respective families would rather do without.

Even though they had been married against their will, they were mothers, and these were their children, their own blood. And the children were innocent of their fathers' sins. In the face of all this, some of them found it better to go back to the bush to rejoin their rebel husbands and fathers of their children. It was better than living in a community where they were patently unwanted, derided, and ridiculed, and their children picked on, insulted, and looked down upon. It was indeed a case of double jeopardy for these girls now turned single mothers or/and widows at a tender age.

### Profile of the Acholi Community

The war in northern Uganda needs to be placed in perspective and context, especially by giving the

<sup>6</sup> McKay and Mazurana, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Villagers of Namkora, interviewed by author in Kitgum, Eight Hours, November 14, 2015.

profile of the community involved in this theatre of hostilities. As Harlacher put it:

*...Acholi history is ...a history of numerous groups who migrated, interacted, and mixed with others, exchanging and assimilating aspects of each other's culture and language in the process. It is also part of a broader historical narrative of the origins and spread of Luo-speaking peoples, which emphasizes long-distance migrations and epic splits leading to the founding of Luo-speaking groups that are today called 'Acholi', 'Alur', 'Jopadhola' and the Kenya 'Luo'.<sup>8</sup>*

The colonial power Britain preferred to recruit soldiers from Acholi, given their sturdy stature and dark complexion which made them look fierce and imposing as compared to their southerner counterparts who were lighter in complexion and less sturdy. This sturdiness could be partly attributed to the Acholi's staple millet and sorghum bread, eaten with the plentiful fish from the Nile which snakes through their territory, and cooked in simsim or groundnut stew. Conversely, their southern compatriots who feed on the staple soft and mushy matooke (bananas) which the northerners consider 'water' were seen as unfit for the military and were instead recruited into the less energy demanding civil service. This division between the northerners as fighters and southerners as cowards heightened and politicized ethnicity and reinforced tribal stereotypes which led to serious issues in post-colonial times,<sup>9</sup> setting in motion a competition, a feud, that would eventually explode with devastating results. Uganda as a country was split into north and south, with the bridge over the River Nile at Karuma being a natural 'mental boundary' between the Bantu south and Luo north.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, more Acholi men were serving in the army than any other ethnic group in Uganda. By the end of World War II in 1945, there were 5,600 Acholis serving in the army, representing 20% of the poll-tax paying population<sup>10</sup>. This north-south divide served the

British interests. Atkins puts it very well when he states that:

*...images in people's heads demarcating Acholi from neighbouring tribes were increasingly operationalized, reinforced, and reified...and the Acholi as a collective entity competed with other tribes for scarce social and economic investments and opportunities. All these served the interests of those in power...the Acholi and their neighbours increasingly saw themselves as different and distinct from each other, and acted as if this were so<sup>11</sup>.*

Therefore, at the end of the colonial era when Uganda attained its independence in 1962, the Acholi were the most strongly represented ethnic group in the Ugandan national army. Furthermore, their prominence grew during the first administration of Milton Obote, himself a northerner of Langi extract. Obote had negotiated a coalition with the king of the more populous Baganda, Sir Edward Mutesa, and subsequently formed the first post-colonial administration, with Mutesa as President. But the mutual suspicion between these principals, engendered by the British 'divide and rule' policy, soon played out into a military confrontation in 1966, where Obote with the help of his dominant Acholi compatriots in the army, commanded by Idi Amin, himself a northerner, overran the Kabaka's palace. The Kabaka escaped into exile in Britain, while his Baganda loyalists were left at the mercy of the Acholi dominated army who, allegedly mercilessly butchered them into submission. This was possibly the last straw that broke the camel's back. The die had been cast and the game had been let out of the bottle! The fuse had been lit and the time bomb was ticking between the south and the north.

When the Kabaka mysteriously died several years later in London on 21st November 1969 as it was reported:

*Buganda propagandists ... discreetly exploited the sad news to besmirch President Obote, by claiming that it was him who had assassinated Muteesa by poison. They claimed that the*

<sup>8</sup> Harlacher, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Harlacher, 23.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.populstat.info/Africa/ugandac.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity: The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1999), 7.



*conduit of poison was a Muganda girl sent by Obote; who administered it to Mutesa as he wined on his 45th birthday...in London.*<sup>12</sup>

It is, therefore, easy to understand why the Baganda praised and hailed the same Idi Amin when he overthrew his boss Milton Obote on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1971. To cement his rapprochement with the Baganda, Amin who had only recently overrun the Kabaka's palace in 1966 at Obote's bidding, sanctioned the return of Mutesa's body from London on the 31st of March 1971 for burial in Uganda. For overthrowing their arch enemy and nemesis Milton Obote, and indeed for returning the body of their beloved Kabaka Sir Edward Mutesa, the Baganda hailed Amin as saviour, and composed songs in his honour.

Violence was used in 1966 when Obote in a showdown with Mutesa, sent Idi Amin to ransack the palace of his political rival. It was also employed in 1971 when Idi Amin violently overthrew his boss Milton Obote and used his Kakwa tribesmen to massacre Obote's ethnic Langi soldiers. Violence as a weapon for securing power seems to have been tested and approved.

This seems to have been confirmed by the brutal overthrow of Idi Amin himself in 1979. Even before Kampala fell to the so called 'liberators' aided by President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Amin's Kakwa, Lugbara, and Southern Sudanese loyalists, real or suspected, were being lynched on site even by civilians. The stage had been set for violence and military power as the most dependable means of procuring and/or keeping power.

Indeed, after Obote was declared winner of a flawed election presided over by his protégé Paulo Muwanga in 1980, Museveni went to the bush in the jungles of Luwero Triangle, and a protracted war ensued, leaving tens of thousands of skulls strewn all over the Luwero Triangle. Tragically, Obote's second government was overthrown in July 1985 by the army led by his commander Okello Lutwa. President Daniel arap Moi of Kenya attempted to broker negotiations between Okello's government and Museveni's rebels. In the infamous Nairobi Peace Talks, dubbed *'The Nairobi Peace Jokes'*,

Museveni pretended to negotiate while moving his soldiers into positions to take over power by force. He knew the formula for getting and keeping power was not negotiation but violent military conquest. He achieved this a few months later when his 'rebel' force overthrew Tito Lutwa on 26th January 1986.

The north was subsequently given a dose of their own medicine in what one military chief is said to have termed 'equal distribution of atrocities'. It was the first time that the northerners, hitherto considered the military elite, had lost the coveted position that had come to define them for many decades. The 'brave' northerners had lost military power to southerners, considered 'weaklings and cowards'. It is, therefore, understandable that the northerners had to fight to take back what historically belonged to them. From this standpoint, it is easy, indeed logical, to understand why the LRA would take the refusal of their fellow Acholis to support their cause so personally. Indeed, why they took such drastic measures to bring them to order.

#### **'Resistance' by the 'Hunter', 'Resistance' by the 'Hunted'**

It is interesting to note that both Kony's and Museveni's outfits were labelled 'resistance armies'. Yoweri Museveni used the term 'Popular Resistance' which later became National Resistance Army (NRA/M), to denote the armed struggle against the brutalities visited upon the population of Uganda by the army dominated by northerners. And Joseph Kony used the appellation 'Lord's Resistance Army' to denote the north's armed opposition to Museveni and the southerners' violent 'usurpation' of military and political power. Kony made his outfit look like it was a holy war, hence the Lord's Resistance Army. The population became the victims.

The great River Nile draws a natural border between the two regions with a bridge at Karuma. When this bridge was crossed in 1986 by the formerly 'rebel army' of Yoweri Museveni, after overthrowing the Okello Lutwa government, it was not to unite the north and south, but to deepen, underline and indeed underscore this mental cleavage more than ever

<sup>12</sup> 'Mutesa: The Last Days', Daily Monitor, Sunday November 24, 2013.

before. It marked the eventual ‘evening’ of the Acholi dominance of the military. But the Acholis were not about to creep under the stone and die quietly. They had to defend what they had grown to regard as their own heritage, earned with the shedding of blood by their forefathers who had fought wars for the British in foreign lands: Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt, Burma etc. The stage was set for yet another showdown of apocalyptic proportions: a confrontation between the old battle-scarred bull in the kraal (the Acholi), and the young pretender and ‘usurper’ bullock (Yoweri Museveni and his southerners).

The ‘Museveni ‘rebels’ who had ‘only recently’ been hunted in the jungles of the Luwero Triangle by the Acholi led army were now the hunters. Not only were the Acholis routed and their government overthrown, but they were pursued through their native Acholi-land into Southern Sudan. They passed through their homesteads, not returning with loot and trophies as had been the case hitherto, but in disarray, desperate to save their very skins.

But there is an old African adage among the Bamasaaba of Mt. Elgon which admonishes that, “when you chase a fellow man, you should reserve some energy for running back in case he turns on you.” The old ‘bull’, with his slighted ego, wounded pride, frayed nerves, and pent-up emotions, did not just fold its tail and limp away. It turned around, ready to do battle to death. There is yet another proverb which says that when two bulls fight it is the grass that suffers. There were myriad factors at play: the manhood factor, the long history of Acholi valour, the stereotype of the southerners as ‘weaklings and cowards’, all spurred the Acholis to fight back and redeem their ‘birth-right’. Unfortunately, it marked the dawn of a ‘holocaust’ for the region, and the sun is yet to set upon the conflagration that this region has hitherto experienced, and continue to feel, albeit in different forms. The active military expeditions may have waned after Kony and his LRA relocated to the jungles of the Central African Republic, Southern Sudan, and Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, but the aftershocks continue to reverberate through the region.

<sup>13</sup> ‘LRA Rebels Cut off my Lips, Ears, Nose and Breast’ *Daily Monitor*, Saturday July 16, 2016.

The IDP’s have spurned a generation of young people whose lives have been destroyed by alcohol and drugs. A region that used to produce simsim, groundnuts, cassava, shea-butter and had more than enough for themselves, selling the surplus, has been reduced to depending on relief food.

In normal circumstances, in armed conflicts women and children are spared the bloodshed, but might be carried away by the victor to become slaves and concubines. In the case of northern Uganda, it was not the victor who carted away the women and children to become slaves and concubines. They were abducted by the army which claimed to be fighting for them. Boys were conscripted into the ranks of the LRA while girls became wives of rebel officers, and sometimes given as prizes to fighters who had demonstrated exceptional courage and valour in battle. Yet others were taught how to fight and kill.

Margaret Aciro, a 32-year-old woman was such a victim who had been escaping the atrocities of LRA for some time until her luck ran out one day in 2005 when the rebels kidnapped her as she headed to her farmland in Ali Village, Paicho Sub-County, Gulu District. She was seven months pregnant at the time. The rebels cut off her ears, nose, breast, and lips.<sup>13</sup> But this was a lighter punishment compared to what those who had committed what the LRA considered more grave sins got. These were often cooked and their counterparts made to eat their flesh before they in turn were killed. Dominic Ongwen, an LRA commander arraigned by ICC was accused of crimes against humanity, and was accused of ordering hostages to “kill, cook, and eat” civilians, using rape to coerce children into becoming soldiers and burning children alive ([www.icc-cpi.int](http://www.icc-cpi.int)).

### Returnees and Community at a Loss

It is important to examine the reasons that would account for the situation where both the returnee girls/women and the community seem to have clashing expectations. What went wrong, when, and where? As mentioned earlier, the people of Acholi-land have suffered immensely from insecurity, looting, torture, abduction, and finally from the pain of being incarcerated in IDP camps, some for more

than a decade. Traditionally, for the Acholi, life was centred around the *wang oo* (central fireplace). *Wang oo* was considered one of the most important institutions of Acholi culture, the informal school through which the cultural heritage of the community was passed-on by elders from generation to generation. Information on taboos, rituals, and the correct behaviour was communicated to the younger generations through relating proverbs and folk tales. *Wang oo* brought them joy and pride, and contributed to people's resilience in times of difficulties.<sup>14</sup>

At the height of the fighting, the Acholi were dispersed into different directions. Many people were in the bush, voluntarily or through abduction, some fled into exile across the border into South Sudan, while the majority lived in the squalid conditions of the IDP camps. *Wang oo* was no more, and the 'informal school' system was disrupted. Many children, therefore, grew up without the benefit of this essential education on community, morality, sociality, and cultural etiquette. When people had been denied social education by elders, brutalized, dehumanized, and denied the very essentials of a decent life in camps for long periods, it is understandable that they would behave antisocially.

According to the Acholi, everybody is supposed to belong to a clan: normally the clan of the father, for they are patrilineal. Marriage was a very important communal responsibility, and incest was strictly prohibited. Pregnancy before marriage was taboo and a man who impregnated a girl before marrying her was expected to pay *luk*, (a fine) imposed by the clan of the girl. Only after the *luk* had been duly paid, would the girl's clan be invited to view and choose the cows for *nyom* (bride-wealth). These traditions were unfortunately inverted by the conflict. On the marriage situation of the returnees, Archbishop Odama is explicit when he says:

*...the sex relations and marital procedure used by LRA to marry these women were culturally ambiguous. In Acholi traditional culture, legitimate marriage is a communal event which*

*must follow the traditional procedures ... Hence the status of LRA marriages and their identity and status as married women is questionable in the light of the Acholi traditional cultural norms. The identity of their children is currently a problem and needs solution. Boundaries of legal and illegal children are clearly defined within the Acholi traditional culture.*<sup>15</sup>

According to Steven Odongo,<sup>16</sup> the Acholi did not accept a child to be absorbed into the mother's clan as this was believed to bring misfortune to the entire clan. A maternal uncle was, so to say, a 'male mother' to his sister's children, so this special relationship had to be exercised with caution. The child has the special privilege of 'jokingly insulting' the maternal uncle and his children. But culture also gave the maternal uncle special responsibility as his anger or 'bad' words towards the sister's children was tantamount to a curse. Because of this teasing relationship, there was need for some avoidance to forestall familiarity. The children from the bush were 'bush children' who had grown up amid chaos, fighting and violence, had neither school nor cultural education. The rebel fathers of these children were not known, had not paid *luk* for impregnating the girls, nor were they available to pay *nyom*. Just like it was double jeopardy for the returnee mothers, the undefined status of these children in the mothers' clans posed cultural issues, not to mention their undisciplined upbringing and the cost of their upkeep.

In interviews with concerned and affected villagers and former LRA abductees in Kitgum in 2015, villagers and returnees were asked to talk about their experiences and dilemmas. On the question of returnees being incorporated into the community, the girls fear to live in the community after life in the bush because they are stigmatized. Children returning from the bush do not get formal education because they had many years of disrupted education. They also face stigmatization from the community, so coping within the formal education system is difficult for them. Moreover, schools are

<sup>14</sup> Harlacher, 37-38.

<sup>15</sup> Emeline Ndossi, *The Reintegration of Female Returnees from Lords' Resistance Army in the Acholi Society: Socio-*

*Cultural Challenges and Opportunities* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Makerere University, Kampala, 2015), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Odongo, interviewed by author in Kampala on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2017.

reluctant to admit them because they are extremely violent.

Female returnees find it hard to remarry because in the new marriages, children born out of war are not accepted, and are denied access to resources including inheritance, leading to separation. These girls are stopped from reuniting with their bush husbands as these are always considered perpetrators- the ones who abducted and raped women. The Acholi traditional rituals such as *nyono tonggweno* have helped them to cope through cleansing, and have equipped them psychologically against spirit attacks and nightmares.

Some returnees are orphans, and unlike those who returned and found their parents alive, their relatives have not accepted them and have denied them resources such as land. Whenever there is a problem in the community such as stealing, rape, or murder, all the blame goes to returnees (scapegoating). There is also consistent recurrence of spiritual attacks among returnees, and alcoholism has become a coping mechanism as they grapple with their harrowing experiences. This has led to high crime rate and sometimes suicides.

## THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF THE CONFLICT

The unique and overpowering force of religion includes the removal of the dichotomy between the physical and the metaphysical worlds: the visible and the invisible, this world and the next seen as being immensely better. It explains actions in this world as intended to procure tremendous rewards in the next, and therefore, takes away, or at least reduces fear, or sanitizes the believer as the sense of loss one would otherwise have when performing acts that have negative consequences upon the perpetrator and the victim reduces. It justifies the action by recourse to the difference between the actor and the victim: the actor is holy while the victim is a sinner. It also rationalizes the apparent loss by promising immense rewards in the next world, making the sacrifice trivial compared to the rich reward that awaits them. This world is shown

as finite, full of misery and tribulations, while the afterlife is eternal and devoid of suffering.

Indeed, religion plays multiple roles in this conflict, and was used especially for its instrumental dimension. For instance, Kony used religion, most notably the Old Testament narratives for mobilizing followers and for ‘motivating’ them to carry out the ‘mission’: fighting the government army, overthrowing the government in Kampala and ruling according to the ‘Ten Commandments’. It is the same narratives he used to justify the torture, maiming, and killing of fellow Acholis who did not join his rebel group. Emeline Ndossi reports that in the beginning the Acholi population supported the LRA but over time, this sympathy diminished when LRA violated the Acholi core values by killing and committing all sorts of atrocities against the very people they were supposed to protect.<sup>17</sup> One of Kony’s former commanders cum catechist, argued that some killings are bad, but not all killings are bad. According to him, killing innocent people is bad, but those who have broken the Ten Commandments should be killed as a punishment because they have disobeyed God.<sup>18</sup> Kony and his commanders used the biblical narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah to justify their actions, and apparently convinced the followers that since what they were doing was biblical, they were only carrying out God’s command. Christopher, an ex-LRA member in charge of operations, is quoted as having said:

I heard the story and the teaching that there were a lot of problems in Sodom and Gomorrah. And...Satan had become too much that he had overpowered God. Then God sent fire to go and burn Gomorrah and Sodom. So, you must know that God could come and say that ‘today you people are sinners and I have come to punish you!’ God uses people to punish people so they can reform. The LRA is using ammunition, and you know very well ammunition plus ammunition fires human beings. That is why they say we are killing, but we are just fighting to protect the commandment.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Emeline Ndossi, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Helen Nkabala Nambalirwa, ‘The Lord Destroyed the Cities and Everyone Who Lived in Them’: The Lord’s Resistance Army’s Use of the Old Testament Sodom/Gomorrah

Narrative’, in Bard Maeland, ed., *Culture, Religion, and the Reintegration of Female Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2010), 184.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 183-4.



It shows they were not remorseful about the atrocities they had committed against the population! It seems that he believed that what they had done was ‘justified’ because they were only obeying God’s command. They were not just killing as such, but they were God’s instrument in punishing sinners. This stand was corroborated by yet other former LRA fighter, arguing that what they were doing is even written in the Bible, and LRA was just defending the Ten Commandments as following:

*Just like in Sodom and Gomorrah, God used someone to destroy the sinners. Even now, they use human beings to go and fight and you hear people saying God has punished the clan of these people, but you find it is not God fighting but fellow people.<sup>20</sup>*

What is chilling is that these individuals had left the Lord’s Resistance Army, so one could not say they were speaking under the fear of Kony. One could safely conclude that though they had returned to civilian life, they were still adherents at heart, subscribing to the religious ideology inculcated into them in the bush. In a word, they were back with the community, yet still living in the ‘bush’. Yet one could also argue that it was a safe line to hold as it shielded them from the overpowering guilt of the horrific actions they had perpetrated against the population. Be that as it may, unfortunately the population would certainly have been more comfortable if these returnees had confessed and made peace with them, rather than justifying their actions using a spurious ideology the villagers did not subscribe to. Since many of them were abducted at a young age, it would be relatively easy for the community to forgive the returnees and see them as victims rather than perpetrators. With this attitude, it would be difficult for the community to forgive them.

To the Kony ‘rebels’ therefore, the war in northern Uganda is what Kenneth Carlston calls ‘retributive’ conflict: action visited by one group upon another for offences committed upon its members.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately the government army was

also fighting a ‘retributive war’ against the Acholi for the sins they committed over the decades when they controlled the military, particularly the scorched-earth operations they carried out in the jungles of Luwero Triangle to flush out Museveni’s resistance army. It is, therefore, understandable why a settlement would not be easy to reach as each party feels they are the party sinned against.

The difference is that religion was used by LRA to justify their excesses against the local population of northern Uganda seen as traitors to the ‘divine’ mission of Kony whom Nkabala casts in the role of Moses sent to deliver the Israelites and lead them to the Promised land. To them this was a war of retribution against their enemies, nay, sinners who had disobeyed God’s commandments and ‘needed’ to be punished. Indeed, religion was used to indoctrinate the malleable abducted children and set them towards the target. As to why rebels use children in wars as soldiers, Alcinda Honwana offers several possibilities:

*...the systematic preference for children as soldiers is based on the assumption that children make good soldiers because they are especially susceptible to ideological conditioning, they are easier to manipulate and control, they are readily programmed to feel little fear in combat or revulsion at atrocious acts, and they can simply be made to think of war and only war. Their abductors and commanders believe that children possess excessive energy so that, once trained, they carry out brutal attacks with greater enthusiasm than adults.<sup>22</sup>*

Temmerman recounts how when Sister Rachele caught up with the rebels and the girls, and when talking to the commander one on one, he (the commander) asked her for a picture of Our Lady. She took a crucifix from her bag and gave it to him. He held it for a while in his hands and then put it in his breast pocket. Then when she took advantage of this confidential moment and asked him, “Mariano, why don’t we stop this war? Our people have suffered enough.” He bent towards her and told her,

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>21</sup> K. S. Carlston, *Social Theory and African Tribal Organization: The Development of Socio-Legal Theory* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1968), 77.

<sup>22</sup> Alcinda Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 44.

“We will stop this war when Museveni agrees to rule the country by the Ten Commandments.”<sup>23</sup>

Mariano is certainly a Roman Catholic Christian name of Italian origin, and as a Roman Catholic, he seems to draw relief from the picture of Our Lady. Italian missionaries, priests, brothers, and sisters have worked in the north of the country for over a century. True to the three-pronged approach, they have built churches, hospitals, and schools, ranging from primary, secondary, technical and Teachers Colleges. St. Mary’s Girls Boarding School Aboke was one such school. They are responsible for much of the development in northern Uganda, and most of the prominent Acholis have gone through these institutions. This could also partly explain Sister Rachele’s confidence that if she would talk to the rebel commanders, they would possibly release the girls. Indeed, release them to her they did, at least the bulk of them.

### Ritual as a Coping Mechanism

One of the most striking contributions the church leaders made towards the returnees was the combination of coping mechanisms, ranging from psycho-social to ritual processes. Acholi society, like many other societies in Africa, has and still continues to experience change and transformation at all levels. At the religious level, her traditional beliefs have undergone change, especially with the advent of Christianity and Islam. Therefore, an average Acholi has a combination of the traditional and western beliefs and value systems, often clashing in his/her breast.

In the traditional religion of the Acholi, as in many other African communities, the ancestors played a central role. The Acholi have a variety of rituals for maintaining the equilibrium in society, and religion permeated every crook and cranny of life, and was neither separate from politics nor from practical affairs more generally, but penetrated the society in all its dimensions.<sup>24</sup> The returnees needed to be cleansed of all the taboo and ritual guilt procured during captivity, ranging from being raped, to killing and other anti-social acts committed in the

course of their membership of the LRA. What is commendable is that the various religious leaders transcended their individual faiths to look for a common stand to help these vulnerable returnees.

But the Acholi are now mostly Christians, with a substantial number of them following the Islamic faith. In terms of coping and healing, therefore, there was an inter faith initiative known as Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) consisting of bishops from both the Anglican and Catholic denominations from Kitgum and Gulu, plus Muslim Khadis from the same regions. The core actors in the ARLPI’s inter-faith initiative were the Anglican Bishop of Northern Uganda, Rev. Nelson Onono-Onweng; Catholic Archbishop of Gulu Diocese, the Most Reverend John Baptist Odama; the Anglican Bishop of Kitgum Diocese, the Reverend Macleod Baker Ochola; the Muslim Chief Kadhi of Kitgum, Sheikh Suleiman Wadriff; and the Muslim Chief Kadhi of Gulu, Sheikh Musa Khalil.

The roles of ARLPI in conflict resolution were stated as conducting peaceful mediation and conflict resolution, conducting research and documentation, education, networking, collaborating with other organizations and capacity building and recording. The religious communities played a role in the resolution of conflict, formation of amnesty law, and sensitization programs.<sup>25</sup>

The mission and objectives of ARLPI were to, among other things, actively engage the entire Acholi community to effectively participate in the process of healing, restoration, reconciliation, peace, and development in Acholi-land. They were also charged with the duty of bringing about a transformation of the violent armed conflict by promoting sustainable reconciliation and peace building activities. It is notable that these bishops and Khadhis have been actively involved in all the peace initiatives. They have also been able to work collaboratively with the local leaders, members of parliament, local and international NGOs and all community-based stakeholders to promote the

<sup>23</sup> Temmerman, 22-23.

<sup>24</sup> Harlacher, 42. See also Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. 1959), and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process:*

*Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1979).

<sup>25</sup> Ndossi, 36.

culture of dialogue as a basis for resolving and transforming conflicts within communities.

The multiple coping strategies the religious and cultural leaders used reflect and reinforce the fundamental reality that contemporary Acholi society is both complex and in a continuous process of change. In many instances, traditional rituals and ceremonies were considered the last option, which people only agreed to in a certain state of desperation, after prayers and medication had failed. These efforts have included preaching peace in their churches and mosques, and indeed to take part in the Acholi traditional rituals including *nyono tonggweno* (stepping on the egg), *lwoko pik wang* (washing away the tears) organized by the Acholi cultural leaders (*Ker Kwaro Acholi*), and *mato oput* (reconciliation ceremony after a killing). It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the intricacies of these rituals, including their efficacy and/or otherwise, given the present circumstances where many of the participants may not necessarily understand and/or subscribe to some of these rituals. It is, however, commendable that these religious leaders have been able to transcend the confines of their respective faiths to work with one another, and with other stakeholders including clan elders and the community mobilisers. They have chosen to use all tools available to them to engender peace and reconciliation among the people of northern Uganda in general, and Acholi sub region in particular.

## CONCLUSION

However many and varied our problems are, and conflict is certainly part of life, if our communities adopted the multi-sectorial approach that the leadership in Acholi sub-region used in finding a solution to the unprecedented calamity their community has experienced, there is light at the end of the tunnel. Religion was used by the rebels to wreak havoc upon a region in general, yet religion has also been used in conjunction with positive elements of their culture by regional leaders to find healing and re-integration for girls who have suffered captivity, molestation, and the ravages of war. The wealth of the cultural values and knowledge found in Acholi culture have gone a long way in providing a way forward for these unfortunate victims.