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Social Suffering in Northern Uganda

Analytical Reflections on Psychosocial Healing
in the Aftermath of War

Erin Bernstein
College Scholars

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April 2009

I dedicate this paper to

Thomas Mullin Bresnan

My dear uncle, spiritual influence, and second father
who died April 13, 2008, during my semester in Uganda,
and who rejoiced in the beauty of life, despite his own suffering.

Uncle Tom, you're a riot.

Excerpts from “The Last Safari to Pagak”
in *Song of Lawino*, lamentation poetry by Acholi poet Okot p’Bitek.

...

*When your child is weak and listless,
When his energy fails him,
When he withdraws from the fight
For life, and gives up quickly,
It means his head has been captured,
And he is only a crawling corpse*

...

*All misfortunes have a root,
The snake bite, the spear of an enemy,
Lightning and the blunt buffalo horn,
These are the bitter fruits
Grown on the tree of Fate.
They do not fall anyhow,
They do not fall at random,
They do not come our way by accident,
We do not just run into them.*

...

*When Death comes
To fetch you
She comes unannounced,
She comes suddenly
Like the vomit of dogs,
And when She comes
The wind keeps blowing
The birds go on singing
And the flowers
Do not hang their heads.
The agoga bird is silent
The agoga comes afterwards,
He sings to tell
That Death has been that way!*

*When Mother Death comes
She whispers
Come,
And you stand up
And follow
You get up immediately,
And you start walking
Without brushing the dust
On your buttocks.*

...

*You do not resist,
You must not resist.
You cannot resist!*

*Mother Death
She says to her little ones,
Come!*

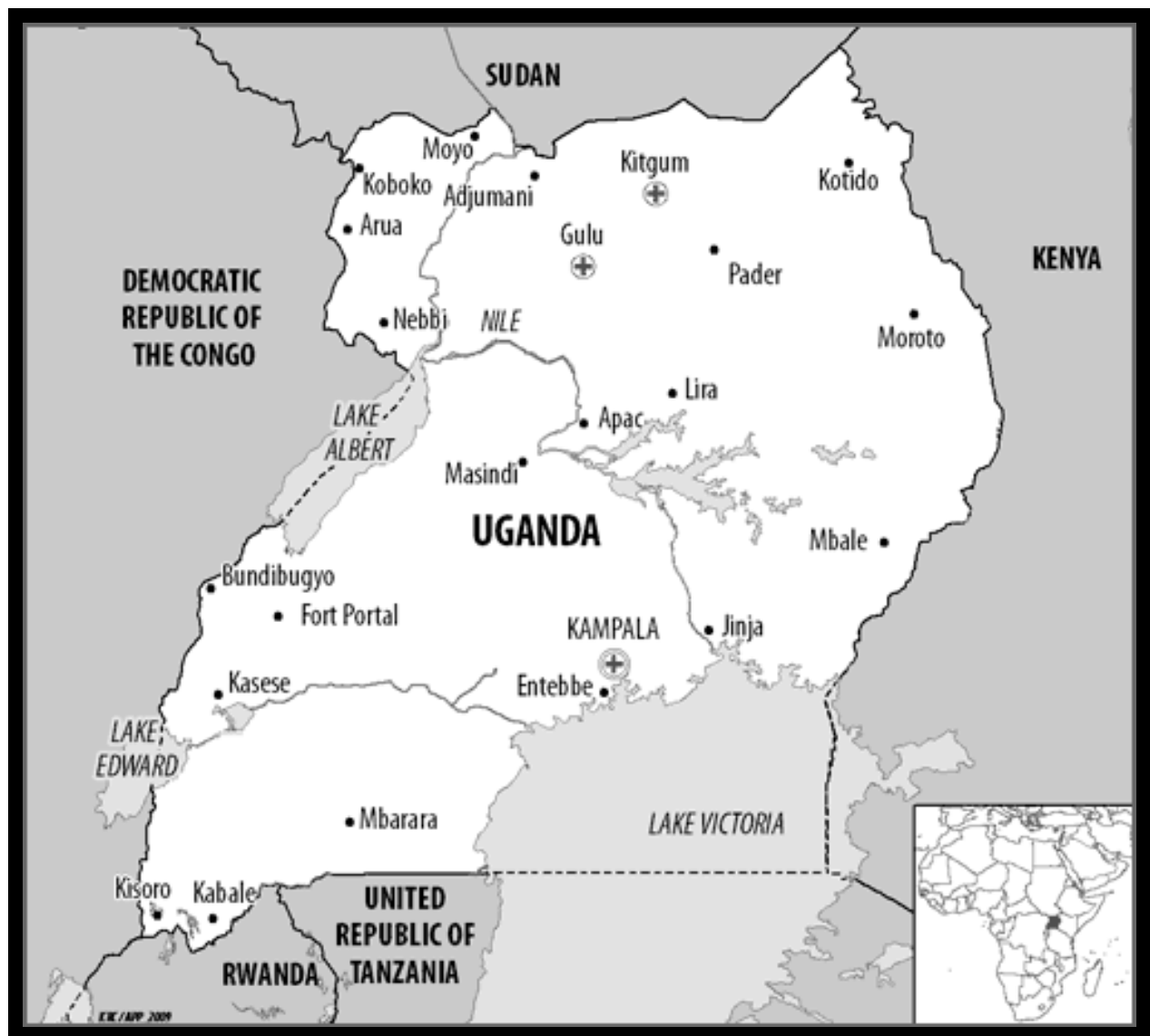
*Her little ones are good children,
Obedient,
Loyal,
And when Mother Death calls
Her little ones jump,
They jump gladly
For she calls
And offers simsim paste
Mixed with honey!
She says
My only child
Come,
Come, let us go.
Let us go!
And eat white-ants’ paste.
Mixed with shea-butter!
And who can resist that?*

*White diviner priests,
Acoli herbalists,
All medicine men and medicine women
Are good, are brilliant
When the day has not yet dawned
For the great journey
**The last safari
To Pagak.****

* “Pagak is the place of no return, Death’s homestead” (p’Bitek 149).

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International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC Uganda Map)

Acronyms

ARLPI (Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative): An interfaith organization bringing together Acholi Muslim and Christian leaders in northern Uganda to respond to the conflict through community-based peacebuilding and advocacy efforts

AVSI (*Associazione Volontari per il Servizio Internazionale*, or Association of Volunteers in International Service): An Italian NGO that supports human development in developing countries

DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo): Central African country bordering Uganda on the west; present-day site of massacres and bases of Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army

HSM (Holy Spirit Movement): Rebel movement founded by Alice Lakwena (formerly Alice Auma) in 1986 in response to the return of Acholi government soldiers to the north after Yoweri Museveni's rise to power; focused on spirituality; preceded the Lord's Resistance Army

IC (Invisible Children): Non-profit organization founded by three young filmmakers from Southern California in 2005, after filming a documentary (*Invisible Children: Rough Cut*) in northern Uganda in 2003, with development projects on the ground; focuses on activism for northern Uganda in the United States and other countries

ICC (International Criminal Court): The first permanent international court to prosecute perpetrators of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes; housed in The Hague, the ICC was formed in 2002 following temporary tribunals to end impunity in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda; has issued a warrant for the arrest of Joseph Kony

IDP (Internally Displaced Persons): People displaced within their own countries (refugees who do not cross an international border); often confined to IDP camps; eligible for humanitarian aid

LRA (Lord's Resistance Army): Rebel group formed and led by Joseph Kony in 1987 in opposition to Museveni and the Ugandan government; began in the wake of the Holy Spirit Movement; famous for child-soldiering

NGO (Nongovernmental organization): Group of people unaffiliated with the government that provides services for others, particularly in situations of humanitarian need

NRA/M (National Resistance Army/Movement): Museveni's no-party system installed when he became president in 1986

NUGEN (Northern Uganda Girls Education Network): Ugandan-run non-profit organization focused on closing the gap in education in the north due to the war, with a specific emphasis on girls

PRDP (Peace, Recovery, and Development Plan): Document by Museveni and the Government of Uganda identifying the recovery needs for northern Uganda and steps to address them to bring the north up to par with the rest of the country between the years 2007 and 2010

PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder): An emotional illness that comes as a result of experiencing a traumatic event

SC (Save the Children): An NGO founded in 1919 that focuses on needs of children in the United States and around the world

UPDA/M (Uganda People's Democratic Army/Movement): First rebel movement against President Yoweri Museveni and his one-party system in 1986; formed by northerners (Acholi, mostly) who served as government soldiers under Milton Obote and fled to the north of the country when Museveni took over by coup

UPDF (Uganda People's Defence Forces): Armed forces of the Government of Uganda (previously the NRA) which fought in opposition to the LRA

Foreword

*May 3, 2008*¹

My semester in Uganda was nearing its end.

I was leaving for Tennessee the next day—leaving Susan,² her laughter, and her African tea; leaving Jeff and the songs he found in the pain; leaving Anne, my sister, and the joy we shared; leaving Patrick; leaving Waya; leaving Sunday. I was leaving children who run towards me smiling or away from me screaming; leaving giddy strangers; leaving my local friends on my day-to-day walk to town. I was leaving dirty feet and cold showers; sweet flowers and lush fruit; the waves and “*muno!*”³ calls. Leaving the mango trees and roaming cows and moaning goats and tone-deaf roosters and pouring rain and cool breezes and soft sunrises and skies that will take your breath away. I was leaving everything I had grown to love about Gulu.

I was the only one awake in the car, except for the driver. My forehead pressed against the window, emotions raged inside of me. It was already early evening, but people were still hard at work. We passed thatched huts and overloaded bicycles and sugar cane stands and beautiful families and people who’ve seen too much and people who deserve to see good...and I started to cry.

It was the end of my second trip to Uganda, but I still felt so new. I was the green fruit I saw just now turning yellow on the giant mango trees that have stood firmly for over 21 years. Watching, listening, observing. Speechless.

And I...

I am speechless.

¹ All dated sections in this paper are excerpts from my personal blog during my trips to Uganda.

² Names have been changed.

³ *Muno* means “white person” in Luo, the native language in Acholiland



Mango tree in Busia, Uganda

*

I still have not quite found the words, but the following is an attempt to make sense of my thoughts and observations. Understanding what I learned in my three trips to Uganda and my time in Knoxville between these trips is the first step.

Background in Uganda

In July 2007, I traveled to Uganda for the first time with my mentor, Religious Studies Professor Rosalind Hackett, fellow student Lindsay McClain, and UT alumnus Josh Russell. Our goal was to secure connections with Ugandans for the Jazz for Justice Project, an initiative Dr. Hackett founded in 2006 that promotes music as a tool of healing and peacebuilding in northern Uganda. To this day, the Jazz for Justice Project has raised over \$20,000 for its partner, the Northern Uganda Girls Education Network (NUGEN).

During that month, we met with prominent Ugandans, including: Archbishop John Baptist Odama and Bishop Macleod Baker Ochola (two of northern Uganda's leading peacebuilders), Martin Alier (senior presidential advisor who sits on the boards of Coca-Cola Africa, Stanbic Bank, Monitor Publishing, Uganda Brewery, Gulu University, and others), the former Commander-in-Chief of the 1986 Uganda People's Democratic Army (whose name I omit intentionally), Acholi elders, Acholi musicians such as Bosmic Otim and Jeff Korondo, and various others. Most interviews were audio-recorded.

Lindsay McClain and I returned with two other University of Tennessee students for our spring 2008 semester, when we interned at the Parliament of Uganda in Kampala before moving to the north for the majority of our trip. There, I researched, through interviews and participant observation, marginalized, war-affected education. I spent the majority of my time with Gulu District Inspector of Schools Obot Robinson, who allowed me to attend meetings with local teacher trainers. After these meetings, I traveled hours outside town to rural parts of Gulu District—where most displaced schools had just recently returned to their original locations—to perform school inspections on behalf of the Ministry of Education. I traveled within Gulu District and to Lira and Kitgum Districts on other site visits to schools with NUGEN representatives and the Pincer Group, a Ugandan-based development consulting agency for northern Uganda.

In addition, I met with Norbert Mao, Local Council V Chairman of Gulu District and Democratic Party presidential candidate for 2011; Justice James Ogoola, the Principal Judge of the High Court of Uganda and a judge of the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa Court of Justice; the coordinator of the Commonwealth-funded Northern Uganda Youth Development Centre; the Director of the NGO Forum; NUGEN executives; various Members of Parliament; founders of the War Affected Children's Association, run by former child-soldiers; and Archbishop Odama, Bishop Ochola, and Jeff Korondo, who had now become my good friends. Interviews were manually recorded in my notebook.



Dagnan, McClain, and Bernstein with Justice James Ogoola in Busia, Uganda

Ten months later, in December 2008, I returned to Uganda for a third time. In an effort to encourage the university to support international service-learning programs and academic credit for students who wish to pursue such programs, Lindsay and I led nine UT students on an independent service-learning trip to Uganda and Rwanda over the winter break of 2008-09.

We had important meetings with the majority of those mentioned above, in addition to the Deputy Executive Director of Mulago Hospital, Uganda's main referral hospital, and the Parliamentary Opposition Leader. The team traveled to the source of the Nile River, spent a weekend in Rwanda learning about the 1994 genocide, and participated in a traditional wedding ceremony in Jinja, Uganda. Finally, we secured internship opportunities for UT students with Mulago Hospital and the Pincer Group.

Activism at Home

Uganda is never far from my mind. I actively try to engage the University of Tennessee and the Knoxville community in issues surrounding northern Uganda and similar regions or

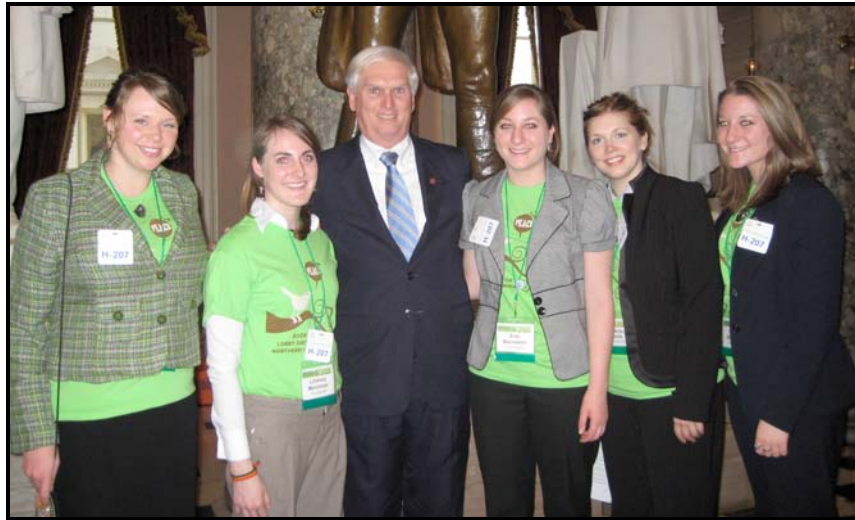


situations. As one of the student coordinators of the annual Jazz for Justice Benefit Concert, I have helped bring northern Ugandans, students, professors, community members, famous and not-so-famous local and international musicians together to raise money for NUGEN and to raise awareness about northern Uganda and Africa's Great Lakes region.

In October 2008, I organized an "Education and Trauma in Northern Uganda" workshop at UT, bringing together faculty members from Public Health, Educational Psychology and Counseling, Political Science, Cultural Studies, and Psychology, two NUGEN

executives, and Rita Geier, Associate to the Chancellor. I also brought together the Associate Provost and Director of the Center for International Education, Director and Assistant Director of the Howard H. Baker, Jr. Center for Public Policy, senior coordinators at the Programs Abroad Office, and professors in Religious Studies, English, Sociology, Law, and Educational Psychology and Counseling for a workshop on establishing international service-learning at UT. In April 2009, I organized a meeting on international service-learning at the Baker Center with Vice Chancellor for Research and Engagement Brad Fenwick.

Additionally, I have been to Washington, D.C. twice on behalf of northern Uganda—once in February 2007 for a service at the National Cathedral in memory of Ugandan martyr Archbishop Janani Luwum, and once in February 2008 as captain of the Tennessee delegation for Resolve Uganda’s 2008 Lobby Days for Northern Uganda, when I met with Senator Bob Corker, Congressman John Duncan, and representatives for Senator Lamar Alexander and Congressman Jim Cooper. Furthermore, I participated in Resolve Uganda’s 2009 Knock Knock campaign and spoke with David Leaverton, Field Director for Senator Corker’s Knoxville office.



With Congressman Duncan in the Capitol Building at the 2008 Lobby Days for Northern Uganda

Some might call me a seasoned traveler or an informed advocate for northern Uganda, but the more I learn, the more I realize how much more I need to learn. I am still only in the beginning stages of my learning. A student. Always. This thesis is a compilation of and reflection on my learning experiences and the friendships I made along the way.

So I begin where I left off: in Uganda, where my heart remains among the human relationships I formed with friends who not only know war, suffering, and trauma, but also joy, goodness, and love.

*

December 17, 2008

Walking through the terminal in the airport in Entebbe, that familiar smell of Uganda once again welcomed me. It's that smell that borders on unpleasant—that musty mix of smoke, dust, sweat, and a hint of sweet flowers. It smells like home to me.

When I left Uganda in May, I left when the mangoes started to ripen. I

never got to taste one from the tree next to my house in Gulu, but tonight, on that hour-long trek from Entebbe to Kampala, I got my first taste of Uganda's December mango. It sat low on the horizon—an orange-pink moon just ripe enough to pick.

Introduction

When I first traveled to Uganda in July 2007, I went with naiveté. I had just completed my second year of college, so, as much as I resented people who claimed this about me at the time, I was as idealistic as a young college student and new activist came—I thought I could change the world.

The second meaning to my Acholi name in northern Uganda—Acen—is “peacemaker,” fitting for a child of an interfaith family who dealt with anti-Semitism when living in New Jersey and the added burden of anti-Catholicism after moving to Tennessee. I remain steadfast in responding with tolerance instead of hatred, though. Education instead of judgment. Because of the tolerance my parents instilled in me and the hardship of being labeled and mocked, I sincerely care about people and try to deeply understand them.

In a sense, then, I still think I can change the world. I still believe in one love and one humanity and the utopia of a human family that exists in the hearts and minds of many but too few in this world. But my idealism these days balances itself with reality—the reality I witnessed during plenary sessions in Uganda’s Parliament; the reality I encountered lobbying my congressmen on Capitol Hill; the reality I experienced at Pagak Internally Displaced Persons Camp in northern Uganda.

It is the reality, first and foremost, that what we read about and see on television is real life. It is the reality that state- and non-state-generated injustice and marginalization are actually happening, whether in Uganda or Knoxville. It is the reality that the suffering is not just what I can see—that the real suffering happens not just because of lack of food or uprooted lives; the real suffering happens because of mismanaged power, neglect, and the long-lasting psychological effects that result.

Who am I to change the world anyway? I learned quickly in Uganda that my place as a 20-something year-old American is to observe and engage. To put down my camera and see the photo-ops instead as human beings. To use my hand for shaking hands instead of taking notes. To listen. To learn. To recognize that poverty is not a project and that suffering is not some movie plot or an idea for a senior thesis.

Indeed, the purpose of this paper is to understand how and why a people suffer as a result of institutional neglect, war, marginalization, and isolation. It will pay specific attention to the social suffering in northern Uganda, combining the theory of social suffering with an analysis of

historical events and present-day attempts to address the challenges of psychosocial healing in particular. My intention in writing this, though, is to use my academic and emotional journey between July 2007 and January 2009 to shed light on the human element I encountered in an increasingly researched post-conflict zone.

Social Suffering

Harvard Professor Arthur Kleinman first introduced the concept of social suffering in the 1990s in order to identify the individual and collective human response and coping mechanisms to political, economic, and social conditions as a result of war, disease, corruption, etc. I first heard the term as a metaphor in a local folk story in northern Uganda.⁴ Sources claim that northern Uganda has the highest depression rate in the world (Ford, 2008). It is fitting, then, to discuss social suffering and trauma in the context of northern Uganda and its recent 21-year war. I seek to integrate my experiences in northern Uganda into the wider discussion of social suffering by analyzing marginalization and the disruption of culture due to war, coupled with the rehabilitation and post-conflict reconstruction programs implemented to alleviate these problems.

As Iain Wilkinson writes in his book, *Suffering: A Sociological Introduction*:

The practice of ethnography is itself understood to make a positive contribution to the advancement of a ‘politics of recognition,’ in so far as it helps bring about the creation of public spaces in which sufferers may achieve a shared voice for recounting their experience and, most importantly, a social acknowledgement of the terrible events they endured. Indeed, in many instances, it is in the knowledge that others recognize and acknowledge what the trauma of suffering actually *does* to a person that suffering individuals and communities report being able to embark upon a journey towards recovery and healing (85).

Though this paper is not an ethnography, Wilkinson’s understanding of such a practice connects with me and what I learned in northern Uganda. Too often, suffering in the region is understood in terms of numbers or what is materially lacking. Bringing to the forefront the human experience of suffering, though, adds texture to the statistics and generalizations.

Thus, this paper is intertwined with personal accounts and observations, as well as thoughts, stories, and emotions from northern Ugandans as they were relayed to me. Recognizing that I cannot do justice to the suffering in the region, I write this with the intention of moving away from the typical social scientific or economic approach to understanding war

⁴ See chapter three

and suffering, and more with the idea of adding personal meaning. The intended outcome of this thesis is to offer a new perspective on approaching psychosocial healing based on an understanding of the history behind northern Uganda's suffering and what has and is being done to address this. I seek to also highlight the complexity of psychosocial healing in northern Uganda, all the while recognizing the open-endedness of such a topic and the need for further culturally-sensitive research.

The Journey

Writing this paper has been difficult. As I read article after article and chapter after chapter about northern Uganda, I came across people I know, similar stories I have heard, and places I have visited and lived. To link facts with my own encounters has been emotional, interrupting my book research with tears and my sleep with nightmares. I knew writing this paper would be unlike any other of my writing experiences in that it combined academic analysis with personal experience, but I was not prepared for the difficult extent to which this difference would reveal itself.

As anthropologist Michael Jackson describes in his 2004 ethnography *In Sierra Leone*, his role as observer and note-taker removed him from deeply understanding the culture within which he worked and prevented him from truly feeling at home in Sierra Leone. Not all people like Jackson feel this way. Many do, in fact, feel part of the communities in which they work. But even though I have made lasting friendships and yearn for Uganda as if it were my home, I only know the war through physical side-effects, stories, readings, and remaining scars. I am still an outsider. Jackson begins his chapter on the war in Sierra Leone with the following thought, a thought that resonated with me and my experiences in northern Uganda:

The most conspicuous thing about suffering is, as W.H. Auden once observed, its banality. The day is green, the sun is shining, someone is eating, or opening a window, a torturer's horse is scratching its innocent behind on a tree, and in a mere second someone we love is dead. But the cosmos does not comply with our grief, the sun going into eclipse, clouds lowering, rain falling in sympathy. And we are dumb to comprehend what has occurred, and how suddenly and irreversibly our life has been changed. When we try to describe it we are reduced to a spare recitation of events that moves the listener only because it so obviously fails to convey a fraction of our pain. In relation to others, and to language, our suffering is like an island lost in the mist, or an ice floe whose mass is all but invisible. This is why, when we talk about war—those of us who have not been touched directly by its horrors—we tend to fall back on the statistics, names, and dates

that float like so much jetsam in its wake, as if the experience of human suffering were at once too deep, too elusive, and too ineffable for us to fathom. (140)

I did not live through the war in northern Uganda, so I have found difficulty in looking past the numbers and statistics. My time in Uganda, however, has allowed me to see the humanity, to see the people I met as survivors—as human beings—not as victims.

I recognize that my perspective is limited as an outsider, but my connection to northern Uganda is alive. I did not go, research, type of my notes, and leave for good. Rather, I interacted with people and learned alongside them. I return to Uganda when the opportunity arises. I remain in contact with my friends. In addition, I realize I can by no means understand the extent of the suffering through which these people have lived—rape, torture, death, and dehumanization—but I have learned to use my friendships there and my ability to listen in order to connect with people in a genuine way—to at least make a sincere attempt to understand their pain.

Chapter One

War in Northern Uganda Twenty-One Years of Marginalization

*Peace, Peace, Peace!
When will you visit Northern Uganda again?
We long for you.
What voice must we use
To call for you, Peace?*

*Peace, Peace, Peace!
Have mercy on us, Peace
All our parents, ruthlessly perished
Grandparents burdensomely forced,
Packed with responsibilities in camps
Crowded like wondering Jews,
With young ones,
Fed on nothing, and without shelter,
But stale beans and porridge
From January to January.*

—Student (“Voices for Peace” excerpt), Gulu High School

Northern Uganda has seen 21 years of civil war. In summer 2006, a ceasefire halted hostilities and peace talks began between the Government of Uganda and the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army.¹ Every month, northern Uganda came closer and closer to peace, according to the international community, but when rebel leader Joseph Kony failed to sign the peace talks at every crucial stage beginning December 2007 and every month following until spring 2008, northern Uganda realized the call for peace was not yet obsolete. The effects of the war linger. From January to January.

July 25, 2007

Dr. Hackett, Lindsay, Josh, and I settled down for breakfast in the cool morning shade of the frangipani tree on the grounds of Acholi Inn. To our surprise, former Commander-in-Chief of the rebel Uganda People’s

¹ The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) is the final phase of the rebel movement in northern Uganda. Formed and led by Joseph Kony, the LRA arose during the time of Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirit Movement (discussed later in the chapter). The LRA emerged from the initial rebel movement beginning in 1987 against the corrupt Ugandan government and had a more spiritual face than a political one, but as Kony began to lose support in the 1990s, the LRA’s objectives turned political and its methods brutal. The LRA is described in further detail later in the chapter.

Democratic Army (UPDA)² joined us, ready to explain the thick leather-bound book he was carrying and had told us about the night before.

Judging by the dirt-stained edges of the pages and the flimsiness of the cover, it had most certainly seen better days. But then again, what would you expect of the single copy of a hand-typed war story that has lived with its author all over the world, in and out of exile since 1988? In it were detailed accounts of his experiences and photographs he had taken during his two-year stint in the bush. Fading words of villages burned and people killed. Fading photographs of the rebel soldiers with whom he fought. But no fading memories. Not his. Not northern Uganda's.

The previous night, we met him for the first time. He explained to us that the war "was started in 1986, on the 10th of August, and it started in a very simple way: Museveni [President of Uganda] insulted the Acholi [ethnic group that comprises Acholiland in northern Uganda—Gulu, Pader, Kitgum, Oyam, and Amuru Districts], and the Acholi don't like to be insulted. So, he had already by that time driven them away into exile" (Commander, personal interview).

Pre-War History

On a visit to Uganda in 1907, Sir Winston Churchill nicknamed the country "The Pearl of Africa." A place of lush land and vibrant people, Uganda is, without question, a treasure, but that is not to say that life there is a fairytale. In fact, since independence from British colonial rule in 1962, Uganda has seen decades of bloodshed, devastation, and corrupt leadership.

When Idi Amin—supported by various Western countries—overthrew President Milton Obote in 1971, he began a violent eight years as president, in which his regime carried out mass killings, particularly of Acholi politicians and government soldiers as a way to prevent an uprising of soldiers who had supported Obote (Allen 10). Tanzanian forces took down the Amin regime in 1979, installing a temporary Presidential Commission before restoring Obote to power in 1980, according to social anthropologist Sverker Finnström (2003, p.101). Claiming corruption in the 1980 elections, now-President Yoweri Museveni established the National Resistance Movement (NRM) to oust Obote. Two Acholi soldiers, General Tito Okello Lutwa and Brigadier Bazilio Olara Okello, got to Obote in 1985 before Museveni.

² The Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA) was the first rebel movement against President Yoweri Museveni and his one-party system in 1986. It was formed by northerners (Acholi, mostly) who served as government soldiers under Milton Obote and fled to the north of the country when Museveni took over by coup.

Shortly after, in 1986, Museveni and his National Resistance Army (NRA) took over by coup, establishing a no-party system (or one-party system, according to some Ugandans) under the NRM. Acholi soldiers, safe under northerner leaders Obote and Okello, fled to the north when Museveni, a southerner, rose to power. Museveni's army followed (Finnström, 2003, p.104).

The former Commander-in-Chief recalls:

Because of my tribe, I was forced to run away from Entebbe. And when I came back home here, I found that Museveni's people had taken all of my cattle—568 head of cattle and my brand new tractor, so I myself joined the insurgency and at once, I was appointed the chairman of UPDM [Uganda People's Democratic Movement] and also army commander of UPDA. (personal interview, 2007)

The UPDA formed as an accumulation of these former government soldiers who fled to the north.

Beginnings of the War (1986-1987)

The brutal fighting between the government and rebel armies that has defined the 21-year war in northern Uganda began even in its very early stages, as Chris Dolan (2000) identifies in his assessment of what people in the north remember. Both the UPDA and the NRA took part in robberies, killings, and abductions (Dolan, 2000, p.9). One of the most significant methods of “warfare” the NRA used in the beginning was cattle-looting, since the government associated anyone in the north with the rebels. This further fueled the UPDM since the Acholi, whose homes were destroyed and whose cattle had been stolen, began to support the rebel movement.

“These cattle were taken down south and some flown to Libya to barter with guns and things like that,” the Commander-in-Chief explained (personal interview, 2007). “It was to break the spirit of the people. Break the economy. Drive them away from their farms...A man with cattle is a real man. Take away his cattle, he's a woman” (Commander, personal interview, 2007). “To destroy the cattle population in Acholi is to destroy the wealth,” a Ugandan friend added. “Economic genocide” (personal interview, 2007).

The looting of cattle was a means of marginalizing the development of the northern region (Shaw and Mbabazi). In doing so, growth in Acholiland was halted, resulting, as the next two decades would reveal, in 21 years of backpedaling.

New movements began to emerge in addition to the UPDM. According to Finnström (2003), “the arbitrators of the local moral world, notably the elders, failed to reconcile many of the former soldiers with rural life. Culturally informed rituals to de-militarise the soldiers did not seem to work” (105). Elders not only knew of the crimes these returning Acholi soldiers had committed during their time in the government military, but they also foresaw Museveni’s new regime following the fleeing soldiers to seek revenge for the Acholi overthrow of Obote in Kampala before Museveni. The elders were right, according to Tim Allen of the London School of Economics. As a result, an Acholi woman named Alice Auma established the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) as a vehicle to heal these returned soldiers, who, she argued, were impure and immoral.

Alice claimed to have been possessed by the Christian spirit *lakwena*, meaning “messenger,” thus giving her the name by which she is known: Alice Lakwena (Finnström, 2003, p.110). The HSM was defined by spiritual rituals and beliefs. For example, Alice Lakwena convinced her followers that if they covered their bodies with shea oil, bullets could not harm them. If this did not work, the follower was impure. Many Acholi supported the movement as Alice Lakwena “preached a universal message of redemption, love and unity beyond earthly ethnic differences” (Finnström, 2003, p.110). The HSM supposedly began as a peaceful movement to heal people and oppose the NRM, but after marching in Kampala, Uganda’s capital, in 1987, Alice Lakwena and her movement met their end.

“During the period from late 1986 to mid-1988 the UPDA, Alice Lakwena’s HSM, and Joseph Kony’s HSM were all in existence” (Dolan, 2000, p.5). Alleged second cousin to Lakwena and former member of the UPDA Joseph Kony soon formed his own movement: the Lord’s Resistance Movement, whose forces go by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). During the time of the HSM, Kony is said to have also been possessed by spirits, including *lakwena* (Allen 16).

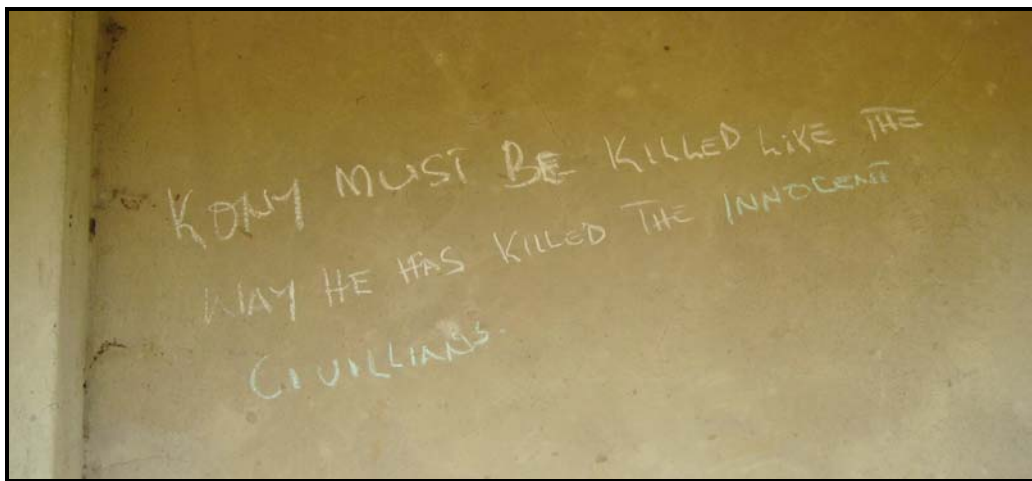
Kony dropped out of primary school after six years and was then trained as an *ajwaka*, the Luo word for diviner, signifying that his spirit possession was eternal. *Ajwaki* (plural for *ajwaka*), according to Tim Allen, “also asserted a strong Christian aspect to their healing, partly because their own experiences of the spirit world seemed to coincide with their interpretations of Christianity, but also to show that they were ‘good’ and that their spirits were pure” (12). During Kony’s rise to power and the beginnings of the LRA, he mostly focused on his ability to heal and

communicate with spirits, much like Alice Lakwena. In 1988, however, his movement took a more political turn when Museveni's NRA and the rebel UPDA signed a peace agreement, causing the UPDA soldiers who resisted to join Kony (Allen 17).

According to Amii Omara-Otunnu, UNESCO Chair for Comparative Human Rights, people in northern Uganda joined the HSM and later the LRA as a way to express their dissatisfaction with the social issues in Uganda at that time. These movements served as a tribute to their struggle and a medium for their redemption (Omara-Otunnu as qtd. in Finnström, 2003, p.112).

April 10, 2008

"Kony must be killed like the way he has killed the innocent civilians," read the outside wall of the classroom block at Labongologo Primary School. Surrounded by thick bush and an IDP camp five kilometers away, the school served as a base for government soldiers during the war. In 1997, the entire school was displaced from its rural location to Gulu Town, which is over an hour away by motorcar. In February 2008, two months before my visit there, the area was proclaimed safe again, and the student body returned to the dilapidated and vandalized building.



Chalk writing on wall at Labongologo Primary School

Poking my head into classrooms, I saw children—those who did not stay home to tend the fields since it was rainy season—sitting idly at their desks, waiting for one of the school's five teachers for over 200 pupils to rotate and teach their lesson for the day. The remaining obscene chalk writings and charcoal drawings on the walls added an eeriness to the air—an

eeriness that complemented the memories of pre-'97 gunshot-interrupted lessons, recalled the headteacher with whom I spoke.

Walking on the grounds of this former government hide-out in the bush of a former warzone, I wondered how a movement of "noble" beginnings could escalate to a lifetime of violence, brutality, and destruction. I suppose that is how most rebel movements begin, though. A vehicle for justice in the midst of state-induced injustice. An outlet for resentment. A voice for the marginalized. But, according to an African proverb, when two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled. And indeed, the Acholi have been trampled. "They never fought much," former Commander-in-Chief explained of rebels and the government when we spoke in 2007. "There was not much fighting. They just were killing people" (personal interview, 2007).

It is interesting, then, to call what happened in northern Uganda strictly a "war." Brutality did not just exist between the two warring parties. Violence was targeted against civilians. Thus, the two sides killed more frequently than they fought.

The War (1987-2006)

Claiming to run a spiritual movement as a continuation of Lakwena's religious movement against the impure souls of Uganda, Kony actually formed the Lord's Resistance Movement in opposition to Museveni's government. It was a political agenda hidden by religious terms, perhaps to acquire former followers of Lakwena.

After the peace agreement between the NRA (government) and UPDA (rebels) failed in 1988, many rebels joined the LRA, which was supported by the Sudanese government. Due to this connection and to LRA bases in South Sudan, the LRA fought with the Sudanese army against the rebel Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which was supported by the Ugandan government (Finnström, 2003, p.120).³

On the other side of the border, both the rebels and the government army (now the Uganda People's Defence Forces, or UPDF) increased their activities in northern Uganda, looting, burning villages, and killing civilians. Atrocities on both sides caused people to flee their rural homes and seek safety in towns. The war had become two sides against one (the Acholi), though the two parties involved claimed to be fighting each other. More often than not,

³ Sudan has seen decades of conflict over land between the Arab north and the non-Arab south. The Sudanese government is rumored to support the LRA because of the LRA's presence in South Sudan. In response, South Sudan supports the Ugandan government because they share a common enemy: the LRA.

as Dolan (2000) discovers in his assessment of people's memories, most people could not distinguish which act of violence belonged to which army. "The LRA abducted my niece," a Ugandan friend told me. "The UPDF killed her" (personal interview, 2007).

The conflict took a significant turn in 1993 when fighting somewhat subsided and peace talks, led by former Minister for Pacification of the North Betty Bigombe, began between the LRA (rebels) and the UPDF (government). The agreement failed in 1994, however, due to a seven-day ultimatum Museveni implemented at the last minute for the LRA to surrender all arms. Kony and his rebels of course did not comply, causing the conflict to flare up again (Dolan, 2000, p.5).

Severe crimes following the collapse of these early peace talks, like maiming and rape, are mostly attributed to the rebels, whereas forced mass displacement of civilians from rural villages to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps is credited to the government. The most noteworthy of human rights abuses, however, was the use of children as soldiers, of which both armies are guilty.⁴ Both sides are responsible for widespread brutality—the government predominantly in the early stages of the conflict and the rebels more so later on, as Kony began to lose civilian support, causing him to resort to abductions to fuel his movement. This "movement," however, had long abandoned its initial motives. With deliberate attacks on civilians by both the LRA and the UPDF, a clear definition of what each side was fighting for no longer existed.

Mid-2003 saw "unprecedented levels" of LRA "violence and abductions," according to Finnström (2003, p. 307), but by 2006, both parties agreed to a cessation of hostilities. Two years of peace talks began and were mediated in Juba, Sudan by the Sudanese government.

April 12, 2008

"PEACE DEAL OFF," read the front page of today's newspaper.

During my internship at Parliament in early March, the Uganda Media Center for Parliament invited my colleagues and me to travel with them to Juba to witness the signing of the peace agreement between the Ugandan government and the LRA, which was supposed to have happened three months

⁴ Child-soldiers are children who have been abducted and forced to fight in either the rebel or government army. Typically, the children witness or are forced to participate in the murder or torture of a parent, family member, or loved one before being taken captive. Internally displaced persons camps and child soldiers are discussed further in the following chapter.

earlier. The plan was to go at the end of March, but with each postponement since then, our enthusiasm for traveling there lessened.

April began in the Sudanese Consulate in Gulu Town, where we filled out visa applications under the watch of two Sudanese soldiers. Since early March, we had been contemplating whether or not we should go: It would be too expensive. But it would be worth it. We would have to sleep in tents. But it would be worth it. We would miss several days of research. But it would be worth it. We would get to witness history. But was it even our history to witness?

Then I curse my whiteness and I get so damn depressed. In a world of suffering, why should I be so blessed? These lyrics to Brett Dennen's song "So Much More" resounded in my head. I discovered for myself the situation in northern Uganda in 2006, after the war began, transformed, and technically ended. The war started the same year I was born, and it was not until just after my 19th birthday that I learned it had happened.

My privilege—as a white, middle-class American—allowed me to see the inner workings of the Ugandan government. My privilege granted me the invitation to Juba. My privilege brought me to hear President Museveni speak (and my colleagues to talk with him). My privilege—nationality, specifically—could evacuate me from the warzone if need be. My privilege brings me back to the comforts of the United States and my relatively just government after each of my temporary stints in Uganda.

Who was I, then, to have a prime spot in witnessing northern Uganda's history? My justification for wanting to go to the peace signing was that this would be a significant event for humanity. To say that it wasn't my history to witness was to add to the West-Rest divide, I thought. But when I recognized that this opportunity came to me because of the color of my skin or my nationality, I felt guiltier and guiltier for wanting to go. My good friends who have lived through the war, been abducted, known death, and seen peace fail time and time again deserved this opportunity more than I did. The fact that *they* didn't have the opportunity to witness this significant event in their lives turned my guilt into resentment. Resentment for inequality.

With International Criminal Court (ICC) charges of 33 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity and a warrant out for his arrest, Kony repeatedly failed to cooperate with the peace talks, which, according to various Western organizations, were bringing northern Uganda closer and closer to peace. In the final stages of the peace talks, however, optimism

seemed to dwindle. Kony would sign at the end of this week. No, the end of next week. Next week passed. There's no doubt this time; he'll sign this week. He didn't.

We stopped filling out our visa applications when we received a phone call telling us that the signing of the peace agreement had been postponed yet again. The signing was then set for April 15th with Kony signing yesterday (April 11th) in Ri-Kwangba on the Sudan-DRC border. It didn't happen. Kony instead fired the chief negotiator for the LRA delegation.

During March and April in Gulu Town, my colleagues and I expressed excitement with our Ugandan friends that the war in northern Uganda was nearing its official end. The peace agreement would be signed and all would be well. Newspapers circulated through town with enthusiastic headlines, but the people I encountered in the north just saw it as yesterday's news. They had already lived with over two decades of false hope and disappointment. They knew the reality.



Road from Gulu to Juba

Juba Peace Talks (2006-2008)

After the peace talks, or “peace jokes” as the former Commander-in-Chief calls them, “it will not be different,” he explained when I met him a year after they began. He continued:

Here on one side, you have the people who want peace. Here on the other side, you have the thieves who want money. And by having peace, you are denying them money. As simple as that. So whatever skills you have in negotiation and how to bring peace, whatever good intention, is counterbalanced by their determination for the world to hang

onto power. If peace comes, they will have no excuse of having emergencies and all these rough types of laws. So they have their reasons. To hang onto power, they have to have this situation continue. (personal interview, 2007)

Perhaps the Commander-in-Chief is right. Perhaps the government did thrive because of the war. But there were several other reasons behind the collapse of the peace talks, according to Julia Spiegel and John Prendergast of the Enough! Project, an initiative based in Washington, D.C. to end genocide and crimes against humanity. First, according to Spiegel and Prendergast, communication with Kony and the LRA had been complicated and unpredictable, causing difficulty in determining what Kony's motives were regarding his security and the actions of LRA rebels dispersed throughout the region. The murder of Vincent Otti, his second-in-command, and the firing of David Matsanga, chief LRA negotiator for the peace talks—in addition to the continuation of attacks and abductions in South Sudan at the time—demonstrated that despite the complicated communication with Kony, he really had no interest in peace in the first place.

Secondly, these divisions within the LRA caused infighting and loyalties to separate LRA leaders. In addition, Spiegel and Prendergast claim that during the two years of peace talks, Kony's reluctance to attend peace agreement signings was largely due to lack of pressure from the international community. This allowed him to continue with his business “without any fear of repercussions” (Spiegel and Prendergast 4). Finally, mediators had no direct contact with Kony but rather with representatives that were disconnected from Kony and the LRA in the bush. According to Spiegel and Prendergast:

The absence of a direct channel not only meant that the mediators could not access and therefore more effectively persuade, cajole, and pressure Kony, but also that they were at the mercy of second- and third-hand accounts of his positions—accounts that, according to numerous international officials engaged in the talks, were often exaggerated. (4)

The failure to bring peace to northern Uganda is also due in large part to lack of responsibility on behalf of President Museveni and the Ugandan government, plus the international community's negligence in holding the Ugandan government accountable for the atrocities they also committed during the war. Conspiracy theories circulating in northern Uganda suggest that Museveni and Kony are linked and that Museveni, as the former Commander-in-Chief believes, has no interest in ending the conflict for two reasons: continued marginalization of the Acholi and profit from the war. “The government does not want this war

to end because if it ends, they cannot embezzle money as much as they do” (Commander, personal interview, 2007).

I do not particularly believe Museveni and Kony are partners, but I do think that during the war, the Ugandan government profited and both Museveni and Kony recognized the Acholi as a common enemy. Museveni has since advocated for the arrest of Kony and LRA soldiers, but his approach is a militant one. Kony’s false promises during the waning peace talks led Museveni to threaten a return to military action after refusing to extend the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, which expired on April 15, 2008 (Matsiko and Nyakairu).

Northern Uganda and the LRA Today

With the failure of the peace talks in spring 2008, life in northern Uganda is much the same as it was during the peace talks: towns swarming with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), thousands of people still living in IDP camps, others attempting to resettle in their former villages, fear of an LRA return to the region, and poor social services, like education and healthcare. The region surrounding Uganda, however, has become increasingly violent. In addition to the LRA’s continued raids and abductions in South Sudan, Kony has moved his focus to eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where his rebels have massacred villages, murdered civilians, abducted children, and used rape as a weapon of war—all of this separate from other rebel militias in DRC. Currently, the governments of Uganda, South Sudan, and DRC are working on a cooperative military effort to force the LRA out of hiding in DRC’s Garamba National Park in order to arrest or kill them. Critics are skeptical of these governments, however, claiming that their true motivation in intervening is just a façade for the more powerful international actors.

It is important to note that, according to a February 2009 *New York Times* article, the United States played a role in this joint military mission, as it supported the Ugandan government in December 2008. The two armies planned an attack on an LRA base in DRC, but due to fog, the operation was delayed, causing the LRA to abandon its location prior to the attack and scatter to nearby villages, killing 900 Congolese civilians along the way (Gettleman and Schmitt).

*

For 21 years, northern Uganda was the site of brutal conflict—a conflict that led to the abduction of 66,000 children to fight as soldiers or serve as sex slave, the displacement of 1.7 million people (80% of the northern region) from their rural homes to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, and the death of approximately 1,000 people per week at the height of the war in the IDP camps alone. The total number of deaths since the war began is difficult to calculate since atrocities were so massive and scattered (“Consequences of Conflict”).

Though hostilities ended in 2006, the war continues. The marginalized people of northern Uganda have been dealt false promises for peace through talks that collapsed due to the rebels’ failure to sign and the government’s preference for retribution over reconciliation. This war, which victimized the Acholi, has left them traumatized, impoverished, and dependent on foreign aid. Now, though the perpetrators of the war have expanded to the wider region, northern Uganda still suffers the consequences of the past two decades.

Chapter Two

Social Suffering in Northern Uganda Relating Theory to Reality

*“After this war, we still have more wars.”
—Bosmic Otim, Northern Ugandan Musician*

July 26, 2007

I woke up to pouring rain this morning—a precursor to my emotions today.

Crammed in the back of a white SUV with my two travel companions and five Ugandan volunteers, I tried to prepare myself for what I would witness after this hour-long ride bumping over deep potholes on the muddy unpaved road. We rode in the second of two SUVs in a Norwegian Refugee Council convoy that also included two military escorts and two covered trucks carrying the food for NRC’s monthly food distribution. We traveled on a road that was once deemed impassable due to heavy rebel activity during the war. The only remaining evidence of this was a military checkpoint, where government soldiers carrying AK-47s and dressed in dark-green ponchos inspected the food trucks.

The rain stopped when we arrived at Pagak⁵ IDP Camp, leaving melancholy clouds hovering above the thousands of thatched huts that housed thousands of people and painful memories.

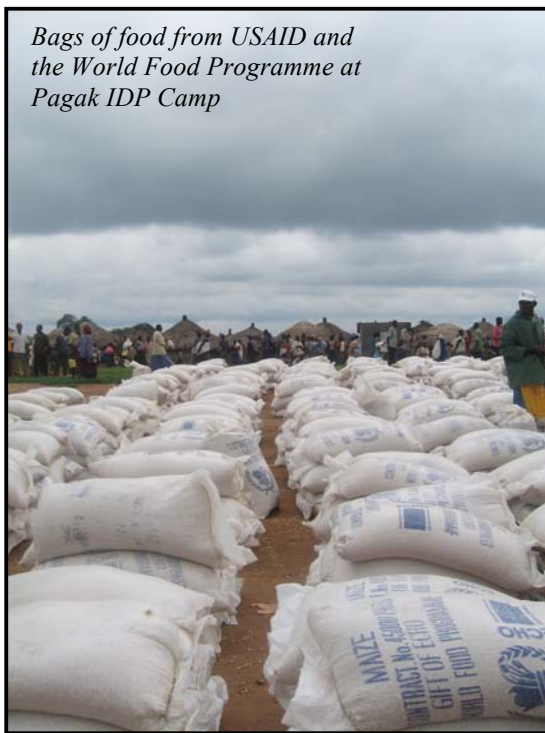
Trying to comprehend the reality of this camp has proven difficult, so putting it into words is almost impossible. But I will try. I always knew suffering existed. I had read about suffering. I had seen pictures of suffering. I had read about IDP camps. And I had seen pictures of IDP camps. But, of course, I have always been removed from the reality of it all. Even at my first visit to a small IDP camp. It seemed like a dream, just as former abductees have told me that their time in captivity felt like a dream. It just did not feel real.

But this camp—this was real. It was the first time I sincerely looked past nationality, history, and location and saw humanity. It was the first time I ignored circumstance and saw *myself* in these people, rather than seeing them as underprivileged “Others.” It was the first time that I questioned my reason for being there.

⁵ “Pagak is the place of no return, Death’s homestead” (p’Bitek 149).

Who did I think I was with my camera in hand, taking pictures of their sick children, their sad faces, their sorry lives? Who did I think I was photographing them as they lined up in the hundreds, herded like cattle into lines to receive food rich people far away brought for them in big trucks? Who did I dare think I was crouching close to the ground with my fancy camera so I could capture the young children collecting every pea or kernel of corn that fell before the goats got to them? I was ashamed of myself and knew that if I lived in Pagak IDP camp and had visitors come and take pictures of me, I'd resent those foreign "saviors" and the life I was forced to live.

When I finally chose to stop viewing real life through the lens of my camera, I stood amongst those with red ration cards in hand, trying to



Bags of food from USAID and the World Food Programme at Pagak IDP Camp

contemplate the trauma I could not see and feeling uncomfortable as I remembered what a resident back at the first IDP camp I visited said to my Ugandan escort: "Why do you want to show these white people our shame, like we are animals in a zoo?" Disaster tourism. But this camp was no tourist attraction and I was certainly no tourist.

I climbed back into the SUV before the others did, in a sense, I guess, trying to hide my foreignness or shame, or maybe it was to prove to the 15,000 people at Pagak IDP Camp that I wasn't there to exploit their suffering. I had just come to learn. But as I thought about the thousands of one-time foreign visitors this camp receives on a day-to-day basis and about the suicide rates and diseases and poor education and loss and depression that accompany a camp, that reason just didn't seem good enough.

Displacement

"The people in the camps haven't had anything for themselves and for their children. They've been reduced to total, total dependence, until they go back to their original places where they have lived and they begin to work in the fields to dig and so on," Catholic Archbishop of

Gulu District John Baptist Odama told me in 2007 (personal interview). The problem is, as the Archbishop later explained:

[People are] going from the camp back to their place where they originally came from, and there's nothing there. It is like being again sent from their home to the camp, a situation of camp. Some have become very desperate. When they don't get any support...they go here and they are not supported. We have many suicide cases. (personal interview, 2007)

In 1996, northern Uganda saw mass displacement. People in some districts relocated near trade centers and military bases in order to seek safety and escape rebel attacks in rural areas. In other districts, however, the UPDF (government) ordered civilians to move into "protected villages" on short notice. Anyone who remained in the rural villages was considered a rebel and would thus be subject to military attack. Finnström (2003) calls this move by the government "counterinsurgency warfare," as it cleared rural areas, making it easier for the UPDF to fight the LRA. In forcing people to move, the government burned houses and storehouses, killing civilians along the way (Finnström, 2003, p.125).

These "protected villages," or IDP camps, have not actually provided protection. In fact, during the war, they served as centralized locations for rebel attacks. Since camps were tied to the government, rebels would give people a week to leave and return to their villages. They would keep their promise and return a week later, burning huts and killing remaining people, who were seen as associated with the government.

If people stayed in their villages, they were seen as rebels. If they stayed in the camps, they were seen as government affiliates. Now, even though fighting has ceased, the village-camp dichotomy is still a source of affliction for northern Uganda. Some people prefer to remain in the camps, still afraid of a return of rebel activity to rural areas. Life in an IDP camp, however, is not ideal. With families crammed in huts that are dangerously too close to one another, diseases spread like the fires that so often destroy rows of huts at a time. Trauma from the war and pain from daily life have made suicide highly prevalent in camps. If people go home, though, trauma is heightened because home brings back memories of the war. It is where a man saw his wife raped. It is where a woman saw her children abducted. It is where a child saw his or her parents killed.

Furthermore, as the Archbishop mentioned, the Acholi are deeply dependent on aid in the camps. A famous northern Ugandan musician agrees: "We want to make our own food. Do they

enjoy seeing us with our plates, begging for food? We want to *dig*” (personal interview, 2008). Unfortunately, a decade without farming has left the people incapable of doing so. In an effort to restore normalcy in Acholiland, the government is now forcing people out of the camps and back to their home villages. With no tools or skills for farming, though, people are reluctant to leave. And with no land titles to reclaim the land on which others have now settled, people have nowhere to return.



Finnström (2003) recognizes that people should fear the emotional dangers more so than the physical ones. “Most people in the camps have survived,” he writes. “But more than the threat to their physical bodies, perhaps, life in terror and encampment threatens their humanity” (Finnström, 2003, p.224). IDP camps acted as a means for the government and the LRA to terrorize and control populations, and they still serve as the government’s hand in controlling movement in the region. Now, as mentioned before, another set of hands has a firm hold on the camps: the international community.

Communicating with the government of Uganda, NGOs and the United Nations distribute relief only to camps the government officially defines as “protected villages,” according to Finnström (2003). They “uphold the displacement structures,” he writes, “adding another dimension to the enforced domination of the displaced people” (224). Of course, NGOs can only be criticized so much. In order to reach the people, they must work closely with the government so as not to pose a threat to the government. NGO provisions have alleviated much of the

physical suffering in northern Uganda, but there is a need for improved psychological support—support that takes into account the meaning of death in Acholi culture.

Social Suffering

Anthropologists Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois explain in the introduction to their book *Violence in War and Peace* that the scale of violence and suffering can only be realized by recognizing the deep, non-physical effects that result from the physical effects of violence:

Violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality—force, assault, or the infliction of pain—alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim. The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what gives violence its power and meaning. (1)

Northern Uganda's internecine history has not only had profound economic and developmental effects on the region, but it has also left lasting psychological issues among the Acholi. Harvard University Professor of Medical Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Psychiatry Arthur Kleinman introduced the idea of social suffering as shared physical and psychological pain as a result of outside force. "Social suffering," he writes, "results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people, and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems" (Kleinman et al, 1996, p. xi).

This concept merges the medical and social, breaking down, as Kleinman identifies, the structures of these entities. For example, though such conditions as post-traumatic stress-disorder (PTSD) and physical pain can be classified as health concerns, they are also deeply linked to non-medical issues, like politics (Kleinman et al, 1996). Northern Uganda is a case-in-point of such interconnectivity. It was violence tied to ethnicity and politics that induced the physical and mental suffering in the region in the first place, and it is for ethnic and political reasons that addressing these new needs has been complicated. Thus, to call suffering "social" is to recognize individual pain, look at it in the context of political and economic forces, and also identify cultural and spiritual coping, shared experience, and collective memory. Social suffering refers to the way people culturally or spiritually interpret their suffering. In a sense, it is to acknowledge the physical suffering but also recognize suffering *beyond* hunger, poverty, and disease and realize the "*lived experience* of pain, misery, violence, and terror" (Wilkinson 83).

In northern Uganda, suffering comes as a result of witnessing or experiencing multiple war-generated factors, including: forced displacement, social isolation, civilian massacres, child-soldiers, economic disengagement, mutilation, abduction, rape, torture, etc. To couple these with fear, neglect, and aid dependency is to realize that two decades of war have paralyzed the region. This is especially true because, as Derek Summerfield writes, “emotional needs are overshadowed by the exigencies of immediate survival” (162). Recognition of trauma might come later, but in the meantime, depression, interpersonal conflict, and alcohol and substance abuse arise (Summerfield 161). Thus, to outsiders, suffering results from lack of food or medical attention, but to the Acholi, *suffering manifests itself in the personal—in understanding how the war’s atrocities have altered themselves and their culture.*

Acholi Concepts of Death and Suffering

In his discussion on Acholi concepts of fear, Finnström (2008) recounts a conversation with an Acholi elder who described to him how deep sorrow can cause “*ojii too*, which is serious and paralyzing fear, when your heart starts pounding out of fear (literally, the fear of dying)” (2008, p.236). This healer informed Finnström that the fear felt upon hearing gunshots during the night, for example, is *lworo*, “ordinary fear” (2008, p.236). According to the healer, this is due to the fact that those hearing the gunshots could not know at the time whether someone had died or not. *Ojii too* (the paralyzing fear) comes as a result of witnessing death. It is unclear, though, whether calling the fear upon hearing gunfire “ordinary fear” is actually a result of the normalization of violence.⁶

Finnström talks at length about the implications of war and violence on coping in Acholiland in his 2001 article about the anthropologist’s role in northern Uganda. According to Acholi customs, the dead must be buried or temporarily covered to calm their spirits. This was not often possible during the war because those who survived fled the scenes of attacks, leaving bodies of loved ones to decompose under the watch of the Ugandan army or rebels who carried out the ambush.

Finnström (2001) adds that the “Ugandan army [left] dead bodies to rot on purpose, as warnings, so that potential rebel supporters appreciate[d] the dangers of opposing the government” (250). The act of leaving bodies uncovered was not strictly due to carelessness or

⁶ Discussed later in the chapter

disrespect for those killed; the perpetrators used this method to cause further psychological harm to survivors. This is because *cen*, spirits of people who died violent deaths, are also known as “vengeance ghosts” (Finnström, 2001, p.251). In Acholiland, *cen* can return to haunt the person’s killer, someone who witnessed the murder, or someone who found the dead body. This would explain isolation and stigma against returning child-soldiers especially. The community fears that the evil spirits attached to returning soldiers will contaminate the community.

Furthermore, the deep sorrow (*cola*) that comes as a result of the death of a loved one must be reconciled or and defused through the ritual drinking of the bitter *oput* root at a funeral.⁷ “You drink the bitter mixture to swallow the sorrow,” Finnström writes (2008, p.236). If the sorrow is not settled, it will spread and negatively affect other aspects of daily life in the community, including people’s health or the fertility of the land and women (Finnström, 2008, p.236).

It is important to note that the conflict in northern Uganda was predicated mostly on politics with evidence of underlying ethnic tensions. The two-decade-long war is not as cut-and-dry as the stereotypical thought that African conflicts involve one “tribe” versus the other. To dwell on this is to simplify the complexity and interconnectedness of the war. With that said, however, it is also important to recognize how ethnicity and culture did, in fact, play a role in the devastation.

The Acholi had been marginalized by the government and were seen as primitive and belligerent. Interestingly, the LRA—mostly made up of Acholi—also had a tendency to target Acholi identity. For one, Acholi warfare in the past was based on clearly defined enemies and moral rules of war. The chaos of northern Uganda’s dirty war, particularly the targeting of civilians, was a new concept for the Acholi. Additionally, LRA rebels aimed to destroy aspects of life that were meaningful to their Acholi brothers and sisters. For example, Finnström (2008) writes that “clan elders, spirit functionaries, and diviners [were] killed, and ancestor shrines [were] burned along with whole villages” (205), when these are to be respected in Acholi culture.

Kleinman’s concept of social suffering is evident in this lived experience of violence. Social suffering in northern Uganda does not strictly refer to burned villages, IDP camps, loss of

⁷ *Oput* is discussed in the following chapter regarding the Acholi reconciliation ceremony, *mato oput*.

limbs, torture wounds, or babies born in the bush.⁸ Social suffering is a result of the deliberate attempt to disrespect Acholi culture by targeting symbols of Acholi values and spirituality. Social suffering is the result of the intentional act of leaving bodies unburied so as to spiritually harm the community. Social suffering refers to the deep-seated pain that people in northern Uganda are still forced to cope with as they learn to welcome seemingly their “contaminated” loved ones back into the community.

December 25, 2008

“I have mental problems,” she told me with a smile on her face.

She said the same thing to me when I saw her for the first time back in April. Just like I would in the States, I smiled back, introduced myself, and went on my way. That was that. I did not probe. I did not ask questions. Besides, I already knew this about her by the way she called every *boda boda*⁹ driver her father and the way other Ugandans in Gulu Town looked at her with a chuckle. She was humorously sweet, so even I, who she now called her sister, chuckled a bit, too.

At the time, I did not attribute her state of mind to the war. The few people I had encountered with severe trauma included men who walked nude through the streets, people who talked to themselves, and a man who sat behind me on the bus, ripping off his clothes and throwing them out the window. I suppose I thought trauma and psychological pain only really existed in the camps where evidence of physical suffering was more visible than on the streets of northern Uganda’s major town. Looking back, though, after reading article upon article of trauma, mental disorders, and personal stories in northern Uganda, I realize that her “mental problems” could most likely be a result of the war, which she has known for all 16 or 17 years of her life.

I refrained from thinking this at the time because I wanted to see people as people and not as victims. I did not want generalize the effects of war. She might very well have not acquired these “problems” from the war but rather from birth. After reading many cases similar to hers, however, I have begun to think I could be wrong.

⁸ Abducted women were often forced to marry commanders in the LRA or UPDF, so the children they gave birth to were born in the bush.

⁹ Motorcycle taxi

Psychosocial Effects

Just as social suffering combines two entities (the personal and the physical), so too does the term “psychosocial” in the fusion of the social and the psychological. According to the American Psychology Association, the term “psychosocial” “focuses on an individual’s orientation toward the self and others...and the social conflicts that arise from the interaction between the individual and the social environment” (“Psychology Matters: Glossary”). “Psychosocial” relates social conditions to mental health, hence one cannot understand the war and ensuing coping mechanisms in northern Uganda without understanding the psychological trauma. Furthermore, one cannot recognize trauma without seeing the social aspect behind it. Thus, to look at present-day northern Uganda in terms of social suffering and psychosocial effects is to acknowledge the severity of what happened and understand what it means to those who were affected.

Too often, as Kleinman and Wilkinson both discuss, trauma and suffering are “normalized.” This normalization of suffering results from what anthropologist Linda Green calls a culture of terror, or state-induced violence. Terror can lead to two things: terrorism or a culture of fear. In the case of northern Uganda, governmental terror has led to both: terrorism by non-state rebels, and, in turn, establishing a culture of fear in northern Uganda, where the supposed “state of peace” is actually a continual threat of violence and where this violence is not only normalized, but it is also a means of social control. The normalization of violence is evident in various facets of life, including “BEWARE OF LAND MINES” signs near IDP camps and “NO GUNS” pictures on NGO vehicles. In addition, while children in the U.S. and other parts of the world play “house,” northern Ugandan children play “war” or “abductions” or act out a scene of domestic violence, according to an Acholi friend (personal interview, 2007).

Kleinman et al (1996) pinpoint an idea that Psychologist William Ryan also identifies in his book *Blaming the Victim* (1971). “Cultural responses to the traumatic effects of political violence,” Kleinman et al write, “often transform the local idioms of victims into universalizing professional languages of complaint and restitution, and thereby remake both representations and experiences of suffering” (1996, p. xii). The victim is seen as responsible for his or her situation.

This is particularly evident in the fact that the Ugandan government blamed Acholi ethnicity for savageness, violence, and rebelliousness (Finnström, 2001, p.253). Many people in northern Uganda also believe that they are to blame for their post-conflict poverty and trauma.

With the advent of media and the West's preconceived ideas of Africa in general, suffering is known to mass audiences as an ordinary aspect of life in Africa. Suffering seems to have also become a normal part of life to the Acholi themselves since 21 years of war and over a decade of displacement can drive down a society's morale. The "routinization" of suffering through all-too-common cases of alcoholism, substance abuse, continued poverty, and further conflict among people has added to this (Kleinman, 1992). To the perpetrators, the Acholi brought violence on themselves. To Westerners, violence and poverty are innate in Africans. What many outsiders—non-northern Ugandans and the international community—sometimes fail to realize is that the "defect," as Ryan puts it (7), is not part of the victims' genetics. The defect is at the societal level.

In order for mass atrocities to occur anywhere in the world, the "victims" are often seen as less than human. It was dehumanization that allowed for the extermination of six million Jews during World War II, when people were designated as subhuman and objects of science experiments. It was dehumanization that allowed for the slaughter of one million Rwandan Tutsi in 1994, when people were seen as cockroaches. Many claim it was also dehumanization that allowed for the crimes against humanity committed against northern Ugandan civilians during the past two decades, when the Acholi were, and still are, understood as backward savages.

Despite what the perpetrators and reporters say, however, the Acholi are, in fact, human, and their suffering is atypical. Various news sources have reported on a 2006 study conducted by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in conjunction with Gulu University, which claims that northern Uganda has some of the highest rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression in the world (Ford, 2008). According to Benjamin Alipanga, a clinical psychologist in Gulu University's psycho-traumatology division, all of Acholi society is affected, whether due to firsthand experiences, encountering those who are traumatized, or worrying about what could happen and has happened to friends and relatives (as qtd. in Mazige and Muboka).

In a discussion with a former government soldier and current minister in the Office of the Prime Minister in July 2007, I heard my first direct account of the war. The minister told me of his adopted daughter:

The rebels came to her home when she was very young and killed her father. When she was 15, she and her mother were abducted. The rebels told her that the only way she could live was if she killed her mother, so she slit the throat of the only parent she ever knew. The rebels then gave her as a wife to a commander, who defiled her in public. While he was raping her, my group shot him, causing him to fall and die on top of her. She was recaptured by the rebels and given to another husband, but we followed them and killed the second husband. She then ran in the direction of our bullets because she figured that even though she survived every time she ran away from death, something terrible always happened. This time, she wanted to run towards death. (personal interview, 2007)

He rescued her and then adopted her. When asked why he is no longer a soldier, he said, “It is bad to believe you will die anytime for too long” (personal interview, 2007).

Indeed it is. The prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) according to the aforementioned study in northern Uganda verifies this. Over half of the adults interviewed in the study showed symptoms of PTSD, and over two-thirds showed indications of depression (Ford, 2008). Former Anglican Bishop of Kitgum District Macleod Baker Ochola described such lasting effects of the war about a former girl soldier:

One of the girls who came back...was taken back home. [Her] mother had a younger [son] and sent them [the girl and the boy] to collect sweet potatoes from the field. When they were there, [the young boy] got tired and said, “I’m tired now. I want to rest.” She said, “You want to rest?” He said, “Yes.” She said, “Come. Lie here.” So the boy came, and he lied there. He rests forever. She came back without any feeling at all. She was asked, “Where is the brother?” “Oh. I killed him.” As simple as that. (personal interview, 2007)

The post-conflict environment in northern Uganda has aggravated the trauma and cases of PTSD. Examples of this kind of violence arise frequently as a result of PTSD or trauma-induced substance abuse, thus slowing the recovery in the region.

According to Sister Dianna Ortiz, a human rights activist and survivor of torture in Guatemala, other side-effects torture victims face include guilt, humiliation, and fear of contaminating one’s family with evil spirits. The guilt they feel arises from watching the death or torture of a loved one in silence, participating in such an act, or the fact that they survived and others did not (Ortiz 17). Such guilt leads a person, Ortiz writes, to isolate themselves from their

family for fear of contaminating loved ones. While this is true in some cases—like a former soldier a Ugandan friend described who escaped but soon returned to fight in order to protect his family from his bad luck—northern Uganda appears to display more cases of isolation of the victim by the family or community that recognizes the potential for contamination.

Stigma

Stigmatization and rejection of war-affected people—particularly child-mothers and former child-soldiers—is common in northern Uganda, further affecting the healing process (Kanter 57). In a 2007 speech to the African Studies Centre in Stockholm, Sweden, Kleinman identified stigma as one of four major obstacles to addressing mental health and social suffering in Africa. Northern Uganda proves this. Women and girls who have been raped or return with a child are often disowned by their families. Former child-soldiers returning to school keep secret their past for fear of hatred by other students in case they (the former soldiers) were involved in an attack that killed the families of their peers. Even at Laroo Boarding Primary School for War-Affected Children—a school that is strictly for child-soldiers, child-mothers, and other children severely affected by the war—stigmatization arises. For example, boys at the school reject the girls because they know what happened to them in the bush. *Dok cen paga*. They “come from the bush” (personal interview, 2008).

Even though the school is to serve as a safe, non-judgmental location for peer support and joint healing, boys still view these girls as “unclean.” They are not attracted to them. Some of the girls, then, return to the fathers of their children during school holidays and re-marry them. These former husbands are UPDF and LRA soldiers. The girls know they are at least wanted there.

A Ugandan friend recounted the story of a man she met who had been in the bush for 15 years and returned to town in 2006:

He was telling me he has run away from his home, from the camp. You know now people are still living in the camps, yeah? So he said he was running away because of what people are saying about him. ...he had to do what he did...and he had to do it in order to live, in order to survive. So now he's come back and the society is pointing fingers at him, and he ran away. (personal interview, 2007)

Returnees have lost their identity in the community, thus adding further divisions in Acholiland. They have instead acquired what Erving Goffman refers to as a spoiled identity—an identity out

of which they cannot grow because it is so deeply embedded in them. Stigma dictates this identity, causing the stigmatized person to begin to believe the stigma. “Shame,” as Goffman writes, then “becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual’s perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess” (7). It is not just the community shaming and isolating the individual, then; the individual recognizes that he or she is unwanted in the community and can also isolate himself or herself.

*

Social suffering began when the war began, and it continues. It occurs on all levels: for those who lost a loved one, for those who were abducted, for those who were forced to kill, for those who returned, and for those who are still captive. It has caused the Acholi to lose their identity as part of the nation as their countrymen have been known to refer to them as “Kony” or “the people up there.” Psychological pain is exacerbated with the lack of reconciliation within the community, and it is intensified by the lack of solidarity with the rest of the country.

Chapter Three

“Stop dancing on the graves of our children!” Strategies for Psychosocial Healing in a Conflict Zone

GP: They have two beautiful analogies in the U.S. about the father whose children are caught in a burning house set ablaze by an arsonist. The father is chasing the arsonist for the last 20 years, while the house is burning.

WL: The government should have taken out the children first, make sure the children are protected, then start running.

GP: The question is, does the father consider those his children or not?

July 20, 2007

On my first night in Gulu Town, northern Uganda, I heard a Luo folk story, which was described soon after as a story of social suffering and collective healing. I tell it as it was told to me by Bishop Ochola, retired Anglican bishop of Kitgum District and leading peacebuilder in northern Uganda:

This is a story of Abam. Abam was the last born. There were five boys and four girls. The four girls got married, and the first four boys also got married because they had dowries brought by their sisters. But the last boy could not get married because there was no sister for him. So these people had children and whenever food was cooked, they send their children to go and call the father of so and so. They would enjoy the meals. Very delicious meals. And at the end of it all, they would remember, “Oh! We have forgotten our brother Abam! We have forgotten Abam!” This went on every day, every week, every month, every year. So Abam, in the mean time, was growing thinner and thinner and thinner.

So one day, they called for a big hunt. So many people were invited to go. So Abam for three days sharpened his spears until they were so sharp when fly sits on it, it cuts fly. Time came for people to go for hunting. Abam also went, but he looked very gloomy. Gloomy. The whole day people were killing, spearing animals. Abam never threw his spear at any, even some of them that fell at his feet. He did not want to waste his spear. Until in the evening, when the hunt came to a halt, and he could hear people murmuring from all over the place. In the arena, there stood a huge elephant whose ivory tusks were scratching the ground. So Abam said, “My time to die has come.” So all of a sudden, he started running towards the elephant. He ran like mad.

...People shouted, “Abam! Abam!” They wanted to stop him. But he did not listen. He went so close to the elephant, and the elephant does not see, but it senses. At that moment, when the elephant sensed the human being was near, spread its ears, and was ready to crush Abam to pieces. Abam left his spear wet and it went through the heart of the elephant and the

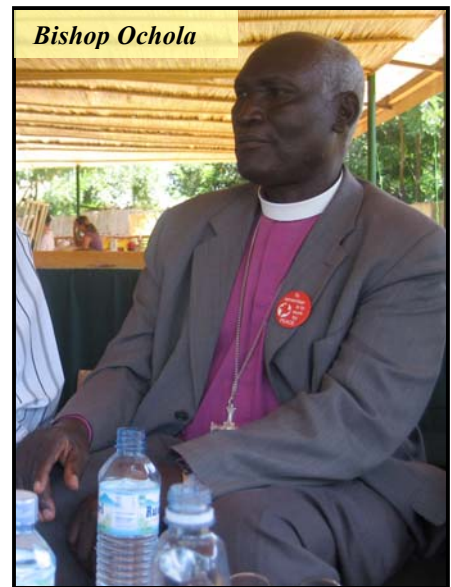
elephant jumped so high into space and fell dead. Then people thought Abam was dead.

After a few moments they heard Abam blowing his trumpet. So the people ran, including the king. The king also came. And the first thing the king did was to say to Abam, "My son, your problem has been solved. I have given my daughter for marriage for you. And ask these people to remove one of the ivory tusks for the dowry." So Abam got married immediately, right from the hunting ground there. And it has become a saying in Luo that when a bull or buffalo falls into the pit, it saves its life by losing its kids.

"The story behind that is a parable of social suffering," explained a Ugandan friend, "especially where the community is forgotten. Salvation will have to come from that community. If you are the forgotten people, you will have to save yourself" (personal interview, July 2007).

Social suffering is the way people identify their individual pain, understand the influence of outside factors, and interpret the pain in religious or cultural terms. In a sense, Bishop Ochola's story claims that suffering is induced by external factors and that healing must come from within.

Abam represents northern Uganda. Just as Abam was neglected by his family, so, too, has the north been neglected by its countrymen. The opportunity arose for Abam to take matters into his own hands, instead of feeling sorry for himself. He did so by participating in a large hunt and winning not only the hunt and the honor that comes with it but also a dowry and the king's daughter as his wife. Abam brought himself out of his own suffering, just as, according to Bishop Ochola and my Ugandan friend, northern Uganda must recognize its social suffering and develop its own ways to heal.



Local Efforts

For the majority of the war, according to Chris Dolan and Lucy Hovil, northern Uganda saw very little significant outside support. This was because, as they discuss, "the international community as a whole, ostensibly out of respect for government sovereignty, chose not to publicise what was happening there" (Dolan and Hovil 6). Perhaps this would explain why UN

Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland called the conflict in northern Uganda in 2003 the most neglected humanitarian crisis in the world. The government committed the same atrocities as the LRA. Respecting the sovereignty of the perpetrators, then, allowed for continued marginalization and state terror in the region.

The above story claims that the community must identify its own coping mechanisms and heal by itself. Thus, most interventions in the beginning were local ones, primarily among people in IDP communities who came together to address more physical needs, like agriculture, protecting orphans, and managing IDP camps (Dolan, 2005, p.186). When it came to addressing conflict, international actors arrived late. When it comes to addressing psychosocial needs, however, international actors have now arrived with controversial programs and projects, according to various people in northern Uganda.¹⁰

To heal someone exposed to death, Acholi healers seek to negotiate with the spirit and ultimately capture it. Finnström (2001) notes that the healing session is “not only one of individual healing but also a process of socialization in which the victim is incorporated and reconciled with the community of both living and dead” (251). This socialization and reconciliation helps to alleviate the stigma attached to such “contaminated” people.

Sister Ortiz discusses the post-experience effects of torture, which include trauma and guilt, among others. The transitional survival skills¹¹ about which she writes in “The Survivors’ Perspective: Voices from the Center” provide an interesting contrast to the post-conflict forms of social suffering evident in northern Uganda: alcoholism, substance abuse, prostitution, etc. Such effects have led to even worse side-effects of trauma, such as suicide. In Pagak IDP Camp, for example, as in many other camps, food distribution day is not particularly a blessing. Men who have turned to alcoholism often steal the already inadequate monthly food supply on which their families must survive for a month, and sell it in town for money to buy alcohol. This creates tensions within households, often leading to domestic abuse, and, at times, suicide of the wife.

Though not commending the severe negative consequences of such survival skills, Ortiz writes: “We may try to cope with the aftermath of our trauma by searching for ways to numb the pain, whether it be with alcohol, drugs, prostitution, continual sleep, or ‘normalizing’ our lives—

¹⁰ Addressed later in the chapter

¹¹ Habits (i.e., substance abuse, alcoholism) acquired to cope with a traumatic event

that is, denying that anything of consequence has happened” (23). Ortiz recognizes that temporary alcoholism, prostitution, etc. keeps people alive while they cope in their own way. Survivors need control over their own recovery.

Part of this recovery includes reconciliation between the perpetrators and the victims to allow for collective healing. Unlike the West, which believes in punishment for misdeeds, the Acholi favor reconciliation with perpetrators and reintegrating them into society rather than carrying out punitive justice. Thus, the Acholi often use compensation as an alternative to retaliation (Finnström, 2008, p.225). The Ugandan government, however, called upon the International Criminal Court (ICC) to intervene and bring justice to the country by looking into the human rights abuses committed by the LRA. The government, of course, neglected to include its own human rights abuses. As a result, the ICC issued several indictments and a warrant for the arrest of Kony but not for the government.

In a Western justice system, Kony’s sentence would most likely be death, which is why Kony himself prefers to partake in the traditional reconciliation ceremony, *mato oput*.¹² He, however, is not the only one who prefers traditional reconciliation to Western justice. Many Acholi and peacebuilders in the region do not support the ICC indictments; they put their faith in *mato oput*, which would allow Kony to publicly admit his wrongdoings, have a change of heart, and reconcile with his victims. Not only has the ICC arrest warrant prevented Kony from signing peace agreements or appearing in person at any of the peace talks, but it has also caused the people of northern Uganda to ask: “If the ICC kills Joseph Kony, whose justice is done?” (Ochola, personal interview, 2007). It seems as though Kony’s death would bring justice for President Museveni, the Ugandan government, and the international community.

The insistence on Western justice mechanisms, though, is yet another form of marginalization and disempowerment, particularly by the international community, which is discussed later in this chapter. Other northern Ugandans, however, argue against *mato oput*,

¹² *Mato oput* involves three communities—that of the victim, that of the perpetrator, and a third party—coming together to participate in series of symbolic ceremonial activities, including stepping on an egg (representing the purity of life), slaughtering lambs to be cooked separately and eaten together (encouraging sharing), and drinking bitter herbs (to “taste the bitterness of violence and death”) (Ochola, personal interview, 2008). *Mato oput* was originally practiced for cases involving the murder of an individual.

calling it outdated and irrelevant as the atrocities to reconcile are larger and more complicated than *mato oput* has dealt with in the past.¹³

Furthermore, Frank Afflitto (2000), author and researcher on social perceptions of justice and conflict, writes about Guatemala and the unifying effects of state terror, recognizing that from such terror, a national identity can emerge. With shared experiences of terrors in various parts of the country, various human rights movements surfaced in Guatemala, creating an alternative for nation-building and state agendas. Although the atrocities of the government and rebel armies were isolated to the northern region of Uganda, the Acholi are discussing plans for a center in the north that would not only memorialize the civil war, but it would also provide the history of all conflicts that have occurred throughout Uganda. The intended outcome of such a center is to allow for national reconciliation, drawing on a shared experience of violence, no matter where or when the violence occurred. By doing this, people in northern Uganda would no longer be viewed as “the people up there,” as someone in Kampala once described the Acholi to me.¹⁴ They would be seen as part of the country and thus subject to the same treatment and equal distribution of resources and rights.

Memorializing events and defining communal memory is a process. Typically, memorials for places of acts of violence intend to honor the victims and remember the war without privileging the perpetrators, but in northern Uganda, it is difficult to avoid privileging the perpetrators because many of the perpetrators were also the victims. Memorializing violence and difference, however, can also create further division amongst people. For example, feeling marginalized and neglected, northern Uganda could prefer to be cut off from the rest of the country.

Healing the deep emotional wounds of the war is largely complicated by the fact that many atrocities happened in the bush, away from the home. People were abducted and killed by faceless soldiers who could have been associated with either the government army or the rebel army. Who do you blame? Who do you forgive? Is your loved one really dead? In Acholi culture, a person must be buried where he or she died. There is no closure, then, for families

¹³ To use this for Kony and the LRA is somewhat irrelevant, then, as both the UPDF and the LRA committed mass atrocities against whole communities.

¹⁴ Rosalind Hackett, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee, notes in her 2004 article following a visit to northern Uganda, that “people are either afraid of the conflict, or have negative attitudes about the people to the north.” This was particularly evident in the way taxi drivers in Kampala asked her host: “Who goes to Gulu?”

who cannot find the body of the loved one they lost at the hands of war. Returning to a place to honor and remember this person proves difficult, if not impossible.

To ease this difficulty in recovering, cultural leaders are now performing burial ceremonies across northern Uganda. One such ceremony, held in Odek Sub-County, childhood home of Joseph Kony, was covered in an article, “In Burial Ceremonies, Uganda’s North Hopes for New Start,” in Ugandan magazine *The Independent*. The ceremonies are organized by the USAID-sponsored Northern Uganda Transition Initiative, and like *mato oput*, they are intended to integrate Acholi culture and rehabilitation for the people who want to return to their home villages. Author of the article Rosebell Kagumire describes the ceremony:

On the site, the remains are collected and wrapped in a white cloth, and the burial ceremony is conducted by a local catechist. After the bodies are covered, the cultural leader kills a chicken by hitting its head on the grave. Then a goat is killed, and its blood sprinkled on the grave. In the Puranga ceremony, songs were sung to signify that people can move on with their lives without fear of evil spirits. Finally, the cultural leaders move on to the next site...

The burial ceremonies, Kagumire writes, arose as per request of people who claimed to have been attacked by evil spirits. The burial ritual is to serve as a means of reconciling survivors with the past and laying spirits to rest.¹⁵ Assertions of spirit possession and attacks are not uncommon. According to an Acholi education organization with which I met in Gulu Town in April 2008, one child is not making any attempt to change, always claiming to be attacked by nightmares. He wants to go back to the bush with the LRA, I was told, and maintains that devils come at night and draw him back—devils of people he killed. The social worker with whom I spoke believed that the boy wants to remain unchanged because he does not want to study. The boy, who is sponsored by the organization, has requested traditional healing, which his parents cannot afford. Interestingly, this organization refuses to pay for it because, according to the social worker, the organization only deals with medical issues and feels abductees need counseling.

An article in the *New Vision*, a government-run newspaper in Uganda, also discusses claims of evil spirits, causing schools to close temporarily, but locals took this more seriously and utilized culturally-relevant measures to address the situation. “School authorities claim the children were possessed by ghosts of persons killed during the LRA insurgency” and “have been

¹⁵ Refer to section on *Acholi Concepts of Death and Suffering* in chapter two.

strangling people” and directing “their victims to get guns and axes to fight the rest of the children” (Ocowun, 2009). Traditional cultural leaders and Christian religious leaders joined together to conduct rituals at the school and rebury the remains they exhumed from a nearby mass grave (Ocowun, 2009).

Anthropologist Linda Green recognizes that “the act of unearthing the bones of family members allows individuals to reconcile themselves to the past openly, to acknowledge at last the culpability for the death of their loved ones and lay them to rest” (191). According to Kagumire, the government constructed monuments for mass graves in other parts of the country, but in northern Uganda, the burials function independently from the government as they are cultural affairs. In addition, “some analysts fear,” Kagumire writes, “that the lack of documentation of the deaths means the full effect of the war on the lives of people in the north will be excluded from the war history of Uganda.”

July 25, 2007

After our meeting on religious tolerance with Catholic Archbishop John Baptist Odama at his palace, we returned to town to meet our friend’s brother, Anglican Archbishop Henry Orombi.

The drumming and singing of his welcome parade became increasingly louder as it neared the hotel, where we awaited his arrival. Masses from the Anglican church in town sang joyfully with tree branches and Acholi instruments in hand. Men, women, and children had all gathered in celebration of the Archbishop’s arrival. *What a respected man!* I thought.

Archbishop Orombi finally pulled up in his shiny SUV, the words “HIS GRACE” embossed on the front license plate.



Role of the Church

Over 80% of Ugandans are Christian, with most people practicing Catholicism or Anglicanism and few who practice Pentecostalism (CIA). One controversy regarding the role of the Church in healing is exemplified in the emerging worldwide split in the Anglican Church. With the acceptance of homosexuality in Anglican churches in the West, Archbishop Orombi, a northerner himself, has spent more of his time and power on the fight to end the “injustice” of homosexuality, rather than focusing his attention on the war and post-conflict rehabilitation in the north.

He is criticized for his very few visits to the north, instead choosing to send charity. However, in a 2007 visit to churches in the north, he shared messages of peace and of hope: “There is a limit to what a gun can do. The land of Acholi has drunk the blood of the children of Acholi. God sees it and says, ‘If my people humble themselves before me and confesses their sins, I will forgive them and bring peace onto their land.’” He continued: “We have a God who sees our suffering, hears our groans and understands the weight of our pains. Many of you have lost your dear ones and are angry and traumatised: May the Holy Spirit put the prayers of our Lord in you. Lord, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing” (Orombi as qtd. in Ocowun, 2007).

According to Chris Ocowun, author of the *New Vision* article “God Will Lift Up the North—Orombi,” Archbishop Orombi claimed that his visit to the north was to proclaim healing in the region. ““And as a messenger of God I am bringing to you good news of peace and wherever my feet will touch will not remain the same,’ he declared” (Ocowun, 2007). Unfortunately, though, healing physically and mentally is not as simple as an inspiring sermon might imply, and healing cannot miraculously happen from the presence of a high church official.

Bishop Ochola talks of the dangers of the Church’s role in peacebuilding and healing efforts: “Those church people don’t know what they’re doing. [They do] a lot of damage” (personal interview, 2007). A Ugandan friend confirmed, saying, “They impose their values on you.” She continued from the perspective of those who have been affected by the war: “Maybe I’m not interested in your God. Maybe I’m very angry with this God who has done this to me. So I have to deal with my anger first. And they say, ‘No, no, no, you should not question God. That is how it was planned!’ It’s terrible” (personal interview, 2007).

The church has, however, also served as a place of peace for people. My first experience at a church service in Gulu Town, the priest asked anyone with grievances to come to the front of the church for a special blessing. One woman with a sleeping baby in her arms moved to the front, followed by another woman, and then a man, and soon, half of the church had congregated in front of the priest, eyes closed, hands clenched, ready for their blessings.

In addition, prominent religious leaders have emerged as the leading peacebuilders in the region, forming the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI). Sheik Musa Khalil, Catholic Archbishop Odama, and Anglican Bishop Ochola are the masterminds behind the initiative, understanding the need for peacebuilding within the community, focusing more on shared experiences than on religious differences.

Governmental Policies

In an effort to address the specific post-conflict rehabilitation needs of the north, President Museveni and the Government of Uganda developed the Peace, Recovery, and Development Plan for Northern Uganda (PRDP) to bring the north up to par with the rest of the country between the years 2007 and 2010. It was born out of one of the four core challenges facing Uganda in achieving its goal of becoming a middle-income country by 2017, as laid out in the government's 2004 framework, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). Interestingly, Museveni's foreword to north-specific PRDP document, as Chris Dolan also points out, mentions nothing of the government's role in the conflict:

Northern Uganda has consistently fallen behind the rest of the Country within the realm of human development. For example, access to basic services such as water and sanitation, as well as health facilities is poor by national standards. This has been attributed to decades of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency and the armed cattle rustlers from Karamoja. Fortunately, Government has largely overcome these problems. (Museveni)

The government, it seems, according to Museveni, played no part in the 20-year devastation. Despite this, the PRDP, launched in 2007, is an ambitious project and a bit reassuring in that it exhibits that the government does have some kind of a commitment to including northern Uganda in the national standard for development and also separately addressing the needs of the north. The problem is, however, this mindset only materialized after hostilities ended.

The PRDP is based on various projects already implemented in the north by various local and international actors and includes four specific objectives:

1. *Consolidation of state authority* by strengthening state institutions in the north through restoring security, law enforcement, and local authority to protect human rights
2. *Rebuilding and empowering communities* through programs that focus on facilitating the return of internally displaced persons, rehabilitating people, and meeting the needs of vulnerable populations
3. *Revitalization of the economy* by reviving economic sectors in the north that had thrived before the war, particular in agriculture and natural resources
4. *Peacebuilding and reconciliation* by “increasing access to information by the population, enhancing counselling services, establishment of mechanisms for intra/inter communal and national conflict resolution, strengthening local governance and informal leadership structures, and reinforcing the socioeconomic reintegration of ex-combatants” (Museveni et al, pp. x-xi)

Local governments are responsible for carrying out the framework laid out in the PRDP document, though a Policy Committee and a PRDP Coordination and Monitoring Unit at the wider national level is responsible for overseeing this implementation (Museveni et al, p. xi).

For the purpose of a discussion on psychosocial needs, I will focus on objectives two and four. One of the main strategies for rebuilding communities, as laid out in the second objective of the PRDP, involves improving conditions of IDP camps. To do this, large, crowded camps must be decongested, and so the UPDF is to create more camps closer to people’s homes. Interestingly, humanitarian organizations, in order to more easily access and provide service to IDP communities, consolidated the camps, which led to overcrowding and other problems that would result. The new “satellite” camps, as they have come to be called, though, pose more and perhaps worse problems for the people who reside there. Formal IDP camps have been in place for years, so an internal structure has also developed, including security, IDP schools, access to clinics, and camp governance and leadership, not to mention registration to receive food aid. Satellite camps, however, often display worse conditions since access to the above facilities and amenities is limited and sometimes nonexistent.

Additionally, objective two, discussing how to rebuild, focuses almost exclusively on material needs, like water, sanitation, agricultural tools, and food aid. The sub-section explaining health measures only includes HIV/AIDS services, improving maternal and infant

mortality rates, nutrition, and sanitation. Indeed, overcrowded living conditions lead to diseases and poor health, and in order to address the poverty of a region, health must be improved. A document that assesses all the needs for recovery in northern Uganda, however, the PRDP leaves out mental health needs entirely from this section.

To empower communities, according to the PRDP, and in order for healing to occur, life must return to normal for people in the region. Objective four, then, talks of the importance for peacebuilding and reconciliation, particularly for purpose of development. While this objective highlights reconciliation between families, clans, and communities, especially for returnees, it favors formal justice processes over traditional ones (Museveni et al 74). It does, however, pay specific attention to psychosocial needs, emphasizing trauma and counseling services. While the PRDP emphasizes the value of local religious and cultural leadership in reconciliation processes, it seems to rely on—or rather, recognize the “comparative advantage” of—outsiders in civil society organizations in providing psychosocial services (Museveni et al 74).

“Perhaps the president meant well,” a Ugandan friend who works with a development consulting agency told me about the intentions behind writing the PRDP (personal interview, 2008). The PRDP lays out a vague blueprint for reconstruction in the north, only explaining why such programs are necessary, without touching on the “who,” “what,” and “how.” To northern Ugandans, the government plan breeds more confusion than hope. “Is it a project, program, pot of money?” some wonder (Ugandan friend, personal interview, 2009). People are “wondering whether it’s a program or a slogan” Chairman Mao agreed (personal interview, 2008).

It provides an assessment of problems and the framework for how to move forward, but it neglects to include costs, technical people, or tangible projects that would be helpful in alleviating these problems. People in northern Uganda had expectations and hope in the PRDP, but no one has seen the fruits of it. “I don’t know if PRDP is going to make a difference,” a leader at the Ministry of Education bemoaned (personal interview, 2008).

The PRDP was halted in January 2009 to address the above concerns and develop more detailed plans and budgets, according to an article in *The Guardian* (Kelley and Ford). The article states that the “impact the postponement will have is unclear, as outside donors, which are part-funding the programme appear unaware of Museveni’s decision” and will continue their projects introduced under the PRDP (Kelley and Ford). Interestingly, northern Ugandans,

according to the article, were angered by the decision to postpone the PRDP claiming that it is important for the region.

Two months later, the government reinstated the program, a March 2009 article in Uganda's independent newspaper, *The Daily Monitor*, reports (Gyezaho). Though the government's earlier professed reasons for postponing the PRDP were to clarify and detail the program's structure and strategies, the article describes that this postponement was actually due to the government's failure to secure the funds needed to implement the PRDP. Now, the program is back on track, after securing the \$60 million needed for the plan, but northern Ugandan parliamentarians and local leaders are still wary about the merit of the PRDP and the sincerity of Museveni's motives.

One can hope that for the sake of thorough healing in northern Uganda, though, the PRDP is now restructured to include more of an emphasis on psychosocial suffering as comparable to other forms of social suffering in the region.

April 10, 2008

"That's enough," he said sternly as he turned off the music, trying to distract the children.

My colleagues, two Ugandan friends, and I visited the primary school two hours outside of town and were invited to sit in on child resilience program sponsored by Save the Children and run by four teachers who volunteer their lunch hours to work with the children. "Most of our children are violent children," the headteacher told me earlier in the visit (personal interview, 2008). The program, according to the headteacher, is designed for the most war-affected children who are identified by their teachers based on particular stresses or signs, including isolation, crying, and violence. "Severe cases are sent to experts," he told us, without explaining who these experts were.

Parents of the selected children are briefed on the program, and the children are then asked to participate in 15 sessions during the term. Once they "graduate" the program, they are asked to serve as mentors for the next round of selected children. The 15 sessions move through three phases: trust, stabilization, and finally, awareness and identification of the individual's issues.

I felt uncomfortable as the headteacher hustled us into the classroom in which the child resilience session was taking place. I wanted to see how

the program worked, but I knew we would all stand out. I hurt, then, for the children who had come such a long way to open up amidst the privacy of their teachers and selected peers. But there we were: four white Americans (and our Ugandan friends) standing along the wall with awkward smiles on our faces and our trusty pens and notebooks in hand.

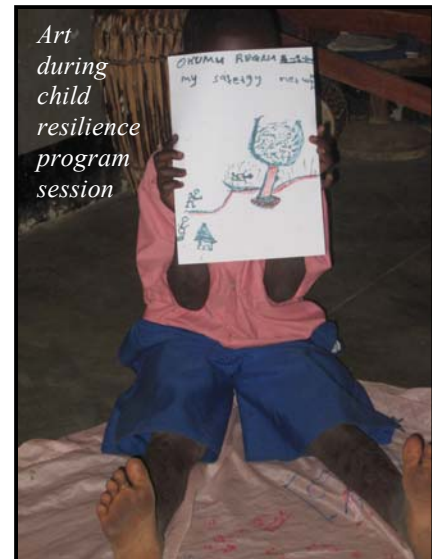
I must say, though, that the session was beautiful to witness. It was facilitated by the teachers who interacted with their students with understanding, calm, and gentleness. I had hoped to just observe for a bit and then slip out, but the teachers insisted that we sit on the floor with the students and participate in the next activity during which each student was to act out what it means to be sad, glad, and mad, which they had interpreted to mean "crazy." I felt quite strange when my turn came to act out the feelings, but my heart dropped when the last of our group participated.

My southern Ugandan friend is a kind soul. Caring, intelligent, talented, inquisitive. In an effort to relate to the children with whom we had spent the past hour, he interpreted "mad" in terms they might understand: he pretended he was a soldier shooting an AK-47. He meant well—I know that for sure—but his actions told the children that they were crazy. Anyone who fought in the war was crazy.

Judging by the shocked look on the children's faces, my own wincing, and the teacher's quick move to turn off the music to which we all had to act out our emotions, my friend's message was not taken well. He was only two days into the northern part of the country, which he had never before visited until then. Cultural sensitivity, even among countrymen, is something to be learned.

Nongovernmental Organizations

When cultural sensitivity is learned, it must be applied and integrated into any program an NGO implements, especially regarding the sensitive issues of trauma and psychosocial support. As Sister Ortiz notes, people on the "receiving end," so to speak, of aid or support need to be recognized as people, first and foremost, and not as powerless victims (20). They need to be understood as normal people who have suffered abnormal circumstances. "Most survivors are



not sick,” as mental health professionals Roberta Apfel and Bennett Simon write in their book on mental health and children in war, “and attempts to categorize them can recapitulate oppressive situations in which they were classified, numbered, and (literally) stamped as inferior, subhuman creatures” (13).

This is evident in northern Uganda. An Acholi education organization with which I met identified an issue of NGO assistance that many people I had come across mentioned: those sponsored by NGOs are stigmatized. I have learned that this is particularly true in schools among students who are sponsored by local and foreign NGOs. Some headteachers, I was told, charge students who they know are sponsored by NGOs more money for school fees. Whether intended to exploit NGO resources or isolate the children, stigmatization as aid recipients can often times instill a fear of being identified as a former abductee or child-mother, thus affecting the child’s performance in school and causing him or her to drop out (personal interview, 2008). This harks back to Erving Goffman’s idea of the spoiled identity—an identity that is given to a person and one out of which he or she cannot grow.¹⁶

Counseling Psychologist Jeannie Annan, in conjunction with Anne Paulyn Amuge and Sister Teddy Angwaro of the Kitgum and Pader District Psychosocial Support Program in northern Uganda, discusses the development of counseling in the region, beginning in 1997 with Italian NGO *Associazione Volontari per il Servizio Internazionale* (Association of Volunteers in International Service, AVSI). Recognizing that Acholi society is a collectivist society, AVSI specifically seeks to strengthen community methods instead of providing individual counseling. The focus is on interpersonal healing, community support, and finding meaning in suffering. In addition, AVSI trains community volunteers, teachers, and elders, an approach that “is based on the assumption that, even in the most adverse conditions, people have their own resources—both individual and collective—that they can draw on for survival, recovery, and development” (Annan et al 238). This is important for localizing the healing process.

Save the Children, an organization founded in 1919 that focuses on needs of children in the United States and around the world, also takes into consideration the importance of social groups, particularly in its field guide for psychosocial counselors, *Psychosocial: Care and Protection of Children in Emergencies*. Though the organization can be criticized for such old-fashioned and self-centered slogans as, “Feel Good. Sponsor a Child” (savethechildren.org), and

¹⁶ See chapter two.

for implying a salvific attitude, Save the Children (SC) is taken seriously in northern Uganda and its work is often commended by locals.

In the field guide, SC expounds on the importance of programs for addressing psychosocial needs, encouraging a holistic approach to healing by integrating emotions, behavior, and interactions within social groups. Kleinman would agree with the organization's method, especially in that SC takes into account emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual development, claiming that the latter four are not as highlighted as the former.

“Too much emphasis on emotional development alone,” the field guide authors Arnston and Knudsen argue, “often leads to an approach which fails to take into account the social and cultural context of children's development” (11). Understanding the child's life in an IDP camp, interactions at school, fears, memories, and cultural coping mechanisms allows for a more valid approach to providing adequate psychosocial support. Furthermore, they write about where other methods seem to go wrong:

...focusing primarily on a trauma orientation tends to lead to a focus on an individual's problematic reactions, and directs attention away from the person's strengths, resources and the current context of his or her life. As such, this kind of ‘Western’ approach can be potentially damaging and stigmatizing. (11)

Sister Ortiz—to reiterate the claim above that people want to be recognized as people, not in some classification of mental illness or depression—would also agree with Arnston and Knudsen. She verifies that mental health professionals need to be careful when getting people to talk and then diagnosing and treating them, imploring that these experts acknowledge what strength it took to undergo torture, death, rape, abduction, etc. and what strength it takes to live with those memories. She says that survivors “want to be recognized as normal people, people who were tortured and who have survived with tenacity, grace, and dignity” (20).

It can be argued that a standard field guide for psychosocial needs in all emergency areas—whether across the continent of Africa or elsewhere—is a naïve way of thinking. Suffering is not universal, neither are coping mechanisms nor the effects of conflict. The guide does, however, highlight the importance of local culture, recognizing the community as a partner in psychosocial development projects. SC intervenes in providing opportunities for healing, while empowering parents and members of the community to participate in supporting children the way they typically would, with or without foreign assistance (Arnston and Knudsen 18).

Most NGOs often act on good intentions, but sometimes their agendas turn into forms of Western imperialism, neglecting the resources of local culture. Invisible Children, a San Diego-based NGO focused exclusively on northern Uganda, is one such example. The organization formed as a result of a movie the founders created when they went to Sudan, originally, with the intention of finding a story in 2003. They did not find the story they were looking for, so they moved south to Uganda, where the story they claimed to have discovered had existed at that point for 17 years. The movie (*Invisible Children: Rough Cut*) was outdated by the time they began to screen it across the country, though with it, they still managed to create a movement of young “revolutionaries,” as they call themselves, consisting primarily of high school and college students. This movement is fueled by fancy media, trendy merchandise, and a cult-like following of young people who have labeled *Invisible Children* as their “cause” and who idolize the founders as demigods—three young filmmakers with no education in development, humanitarianism, human rights, or advocacy.



IC filmmakers and founders Bobby Bailey, Laren Poole, and Jason Russell on the Sudan-Congo border in April 2008. Photo by: Glenna Gordon (Cronin-Furman and Taub)

Now an established organization, Invisible Children (IC) has implemented various development programs that are actually highly commended by northern Ugandans. In addition, IC has been successful in motivating young people to care about the situation in northern Uganda, which had for so long been minimally recognized by the international community. From a psychosocial perspective, though, IC has demonstrated that the organization has the potential to do more harm than good. Its films and short videos often sensationalize northern Uganda in the way Joseph Conrad portrayed the Congo, depicting it as a dark, savage place with no means of helping itself.

Graham Hancock, journalist and author of *Lords of Poverty*, would agree. “Perhaps the worst aspect of charitable advertising,” he writes, “is the temptation, which few voluntary agencies can resist during disasters, to make ever more mawkish appeals. Undoubtedly these do

raise money but they also humiliate the supposed beneficiaries and misrepresent them as passive victims incapable of doing anything themselves” (18). This is particularly evident in IC’s rallying campaign for 2009, “The Rescue.” In preparation for the event, IC posted a 30-minute video on its website about the current situation in northern Uganda and eastern DRC, which focuses mainly on the reactions and accomplishments of the filmmakers, rather than on the vital information necessary for IC’s many followers to understand the current situation.

“ON APRIL 25TH, 2009,” the text reads dramatically with gripping music rising in the background, “THOUSANDS AROUND THE WORLD—WILL ABDUCT THEMSELVES—TO RESCUE JOSEPH KONY’S CHILD SOLDIERS—AND SEE THE LONGEST WAR IN AFRICA—FINALLY COME TO AN END.—BE PART OF HISTORY IN THE MAKING” (Invisible Children). “Come to the Rescue,” IC advertises for its double-meaning: to come to the event and to rescue the child-soldiers. This imperialistic language promotes a kind of neo-colonialism that riles up followers but instills the recurring idea of the so-called “white man’s burden”: save the African.

Returning to the discussion on the psychosocial damage to be done, IC introduced two controversial t-shirts to go along with the event, encouraging people to “wear one and wash one” for the month leading up to the event. One says, “I heart the LRA,” and the other is army green, intended to make the wearer look like a child-soldier with the image of an AK-47 across his or her shoulder and a teddy bear attached to the strap. IC staff, in recent phone conversations, claim that the shirts are intended to catch people’s attention and make them ask: “Why do you love the LRA?” Their justification is that 90% of the LRA is made up of children.

While this might seem noble or profound, these shirts are culturally insensitive and offensive, not to mention that the LRA is the institution and the children its victims. They glorify the oppressor when intending to promote solidarity with the oppressed. Messages like these normalize the violence, making it an everyday aspect of life in northern Uganda, thus lessening the severity of what actually happened and is now happening in surrounding regions. The shirts have the dangerous potential to re-traumatize people and open painful wounds if worn in Uganda, all the while mocking those who have been traumatized by the LRA and the Ugandan government for over 20 years.

Ortiz writes that healing and coping mechanisms must be relevant to the culture. Outside intervention can potentially do more damage. While this campaign and these shirts were not

launched as projects for psychosocial healing, they neglect to take into account trauma and the real potential to re-harm people. In the United States, it is encouraged to talk openly to others about one's experiences. It is common to publicize one's trauma so as to create change. In northern Uganda, however, it is culturally inappropriate to share such experiences, which are internalized for fear of stigmatization or isolation from the community.

Gulu District Chairman and Uganda Presidential Candidate for 2011 Norbert Mao denied, in an e-mail response to me, IC's claims that the organization had consulted Chairman Mao and other local leaders before releasing the t-shirts. "We warned Invisible Children against over-simplifying the issues in the north. The issues are quite complex and slogans will not suffice!" He continued to say that IC needs to "stop dancing on the graves of our children!"¹⁷

It seems IC has been blinded by its accolades and fan-clubs, paying more attention to what grabs the attention of West Coast hipsters, rather than seeking to know what would best work for northern Uganda. With a mentality like this, anything can be justified and anything goes. More problematic than its favoring of trendiness over cultural sensitivity is the evident inequality in power relations between the donor and beneficiary. IC seems to take a top-down approach, formulating ideas and convincing locals to adopt them.

To kick-off the worldwide event, IC hosted the first "Rescue" in Gulu Town, where hundreds of northern Ugandans marched through the streets, alongside the Ugandan military and international politicians, carrying white flags and demanding a return of Kony's child-soldiers. This is significant because the reintegration of child-soldiers must include solidarity within the community. Interestingly, however, one of the goals of the worldwide "Rescue" event is to capture the attention of media moguls and U.S. politicians and encourage them to support a military strategy to bring Kony and the LRA to justice. It is unclear in the "Search and Rescue" video on the Invisible Children website depicting the march as to whether IC informed the participating locals of this plan. Local politicians, including Chairman Mao, support a military intervention, but the local sentiment has not been articulated.

Hancock writes that humanitarian organizations in developing countries recognize the benefits of conflicts and catastrophes, sending these organizations into "public-relations overdrive" (3). He continues:

¹⁷ Mao later praised the slogan after a meeting with Invisible Children. This is discussed in the following chapter.

The fund-raising methods that generate Western charity can be as reprehensible as the uses to which that charity is put. All too often what underlies the strident appeals, the images of starving babies and shell-shocked refugees, turns out not to be a genuine concern for the wretched earth but, rather, a kind of capitalism of mercy in which aid organisations compete to boost their own size and prestige—with precious little reference to those who are meant to benefit from their programmes. It is doubtful in the extreme whether the end justifies the means, but this, in a sense, is irrelevant; what we have here is a situation in which the means has become the end itself. (16)

He argues that all organizations working in conflict or disaster areas need to correctly interpret the needs of the people whom they claim to serve to avoid dehumanizing them or making matters worse (7). Favoring raising awareness and making statements, Invisible Children has neglected to consider the damaging effects its t-shirts and videos can have on the region, particularly in a sensitive area where people are trying to cope with over 20 years of war, suffering, child-soldiering, torture, trauma, starvation, poverty, and death—over 20 years of social suffering and entrapment in the violence of two opposing forces.

Chapter Four

Peace of Mind Rebuilding Communities in Northern Uganda

“Hope is embedded in the anguish.”
—Norbert Mao, Local Council V Chairman of Gulu District

March 21, 2008

Sick from the humidity within the cathedral and distracted by the fact that the entire Catholic Mass was said in Luo, I sat in the stiff wooden pew anticipating the end of the Good Friday service two hours later. In my heart I wanted to be there, but my body seemed to have had enough.

Hundreds of people attended this service after processing through town for three hours, depicting the Stations of the Cross and literally beating the Jesus character before tying him to the wooden cross under the mango tree at St. Mary's Hospital. Unfortunately I missed the procession, but I did have the opportunity to experience through Mass one of the most significant days for northern Ugandans *with* northern Ugandans.

Foreigners, capable only of sympathy rather than empathy, often transform the situation in northern Uganda into something to write about or take pictures of. But sitting in that church on that Friday during Holy Week in Gulu Town, Uganda, I found the human element. I found human suffering.

Singing did not accompany the Mass until the Veneration of the Cross, when Jesus was exposed on the cross and the entire church congregation proceeded to the front to kneel or revere the cross in whatever way they felt was appropriate. Once Jesus was revealed, the many school girls who filled the front of the church broke out into a *capella* song—heavenly hymns that poured from their hearts and pierced my soul. They were the cries of over 20 years of pain and sorrow, and if you listened carefully enough, you could hear the optimism for hope—for new life.

The hundreds of people who filled the cathedral advanced to the front of the church, many crying, others dropping to their knees three times before kneeling before the cross when they reached it. And there I was, a privileged American, feeling so unworthy to be walking alongside people who have known such brutality for two long decades.

We venerated in twos, so when I reached the cross and knelt next to a teary-eyed woman, I acknowledged Jesus' suffering and wondered what kind of affliction the woman next to me had known. I found myself kissing the feet of Jesus, praying that He guide me to where I could be most useful in this complicated world.

At the end of the service, dozens of children—flooding in through the doors with the masses of people who could not find a seat inside the church—were invited to sit on the altar for the final blessing. They have suffered the most, after all. Victims of perhaps the most devastating crime in northern Uganda's history: deprivation of childhood, deprivation of life.



The solemnity of this service represented the gravity of the civil war and the pain that lingers. The Easter celebration two days later, however, provided the joy and hope that many northern Ugandans have adopted in order to survive the struggle.

Catholic Archbishop John Baptist Odama, a leading figure in the peace process, led us from the dancing and singing in celebration of Jesus' resurrection that Sunday into his residence, where we discussed the fragility of the failing peace talks and the optimism of a true end to this war despite it all. On his table sat his Bible and what he refers to as his second bible: a picture of one of the first meetings to spark the now-failed peace talks. It is of Minister of Internal Affairs Ruhakana Rugunda shaking the

hand of former LRA spokesperson Sam Kolo, who now lives in Gulu Town, where he has returned to school to study peace.

The Archbishop's two bibles embody the hope that emanates from northern Uganda, despite the destructive history. They both recognize suffering and pain and shine light on the resurrection from death to bring new life to humanity.

Local Efforts

It is important to recognize the power of the community in healing. As discussed in the previous chapter, people have their own ways in merging, for example, traditional customs with religious ones or applying specific meanings to suffering in order to move on. Anthropologist Christopher Taylor, who has done extensive research in Rwanda, identifies the importance of cultural meanings in structuring the psychosocial impact in post-conflict reconciliation. He analyzes the Rwandan genocide, identifying cultural meanings of blockage and flow regarding illness and healing Rwanda, and how this is critical in understanding the horrific actions of Hutu nationalists in 1994.

Taylor is correct in that it is important to realize the significance of cultural ideas that lead to patterned violence. His argument is also helpful in understanding the concepts of “othering” and dehumanizing the enemy. Such a point, though, seems to oversimplify the atrocities that occurred in Rwanda. The genocide was predicated on political, colonial, and international factors in addition to the cultural and ethnic ones. What kind of damaging effects could this analysis have on establishing memory? Could dwelling on these cultural ideas further polarize the two groups (the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, and the victims and perpetrators in northern Uganda)? How does this analysis help or disrupt healing?

On a January 2009 visit to Rwanda, I saw several churches—one that had only recently been entered since tens of thousands of people had been slaughtered there 15 years previously. Only within the past year had community members begun to clear the church of the rotting bodies and find a way to memorialize the genocide. This is where Taylor's idea of cultural meanings is important. To the community, displaying the skulls, bones, blood-stained clothes, rosary beads, bibles, and other belongings was its own way of honoring the dead and finding peace in the devastation. In northern Uganda, people have begun to do that through burial ceremonies, as discussed in chapter three.

Establishing cultural meanings also means recognizing the power of the arts in healing. Culture has been compromised in northern Uganda due to years of violence, mass displacement, and economic degradation. I recognize the stereotype that Africans have vibrant cultural dances despite their bloody pasts, but Acholi culture is, in fact, a rich one. Judy El-Bushra and Chris Dolan, of the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD), describe the importance of such in bringing together an oppressed population in what they call a “hidden form of activism” (49).

El-Bushra and Dolan approach this discussion from a more political perspective, acknowledging, first, that various external actors—the government, politicians, and even



NGOs—recognize the importance of music and drama in Acholi culture and exploit those performance methods for their own agendas. One example they cite is how, in 1999, Gulu District politicians held a competition calling groups to write and perform songs on various topics, including praising Museveni’s Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy, which, according to El-Bushra and Dolan, people

in northern Uganda saw as a governmental tactic to enforce a national identity devoid of Acholi input (44).

The Acholi have retaliated, in a sense, by using performance to create solidarity and challenge authority. “Thus performers are active shapers of their own history as well as their current reality,” El-Bushra and Dolan write. “By satirising alien presences and defying unacceptable relationships, they actively engage in dismantling intrusive aspects of that reality” (49). Activism, then, is hidden in performance.

In addition, these outlets allow for communal healing. Some dances, I learned at a performance in 2007, were used as entertainment and relief from experiences in the bush, particularly the greeting dances about friendship and reconciliation. The award-winning documentary *War/Dance* recognizes the power of music in healing: “Without music, there is no life,” 14 year-old xylophone-player Dominic says in the film (“The Kids”).

The movie follows three young teenagers in an IDP camp in Pader, northern Uganda who are overcoming the trauma of witnessing the murder of their parents or returning from the bush as a child soldier. They attend Patongo Primary School, which is preparing to compete in a national music competition in Kampala, Uganda's capital. "Songs make me forget about what is happening in the camp...all the disease, no food, people dying," 14 year-old Nancy says. "Dancing is like closing my eyes and being with friends. It feels like home" ("The Kids").

July 27, 2007

"She must have experienced the death of someone close to her in her family," my Ugandan friend explained to me, wiping away her tears as we watched and listened to the young girl sing. She wore a traditional Acholi fabric of yellow, red, and black stripes and stood in front of hundreds of her high school peers singing in Luo with a conviction that trumped the laughter of her classmates. I don't really know why they were laughing. Perhaps the song made them uncomfortable. Perhaps sadness about the war shows weakness. A guess is only a guess.

Those of us from the Jazz for Justice Project, in conjunction with Acholi musician Jeff Korondo, the Northern Uganda Girls Education Network, and local radio station Mega FM, hosted an event at Gulu High School called Rhythms of Reconciliation. All members of the Music, Dance, and Drama Club were invited to participate by creating or modifying a song, dance, skit, or poem that focused on peacebuilding and reconciliation.

The performances ranged from traditional Acholi dances to homemade rap songs to poems calling for peace.¹⁸ One particular skit stood out with its profound message: peace is precarious.

The skit opened with the rebel characters, dressed in camouflage and carrying cardboard guns, invading someone's house, abducting the husband, and raping the wife. The students in the audience laughed as the Joseph Kony, Walter Ochora,¹⁹ and Yoweri Museveni characters spoke to each other on walkie-talkies and cell phones about when to meet up to discuss the peace process.

¹⁸ See opening poem excerpt in chapter one.

¹⁹ Resident District Commissioner for Gulu District



Gulu High School students performing a skit on the peace talks
Photo by: Lindsay McClain

I was taken aback at first that these teenagers would put together such a vivid depiction of the war when many of them have experienced similar situations. It seemed that reliving such horrors could run the risk of retraumatizing people. The academic Westerner in me wants to say that perhaps the violence had become so normalized that there was no risk involved. It was a skit about an everyday aspect of these people's lives. Instead, perhaps publicizing the reality that goes unsaid in an attempt to forget is a way of healing in bringing together a community and uniting with a common fear.

I was further shocked that almost everyone in the audience laughed during the performance. How was this funny? They found humor, though, in the process at the governmental level to establish peace in northern Uganda and at their peers caricaturing the war's protagonists. The peace talks, as many Ugandans have told me, are a joke.

Changes in the Government

One of the most frustrating barriers to peace and healing in northern Uganda is the lack of responsibility at the governmental level. Much time and effort is spent on analyzing victims in various situations, and rightly so if efforts are genuine in their attempts to facilitate healing in the region. Very little attention, however, is paid to perpetrators, as Ortiz (33) and Jeffrey Sluka (11) both recognize in different settings. To understand the perpetrator is to understand the violation, which would in turn address the core of the problem, allowing for two things: preventative

measures for future violations and approaches to deeper healing by targeting the causes, not just the effects of social suffering.

Sister Ortiz agrees, recognizing the need for government accountability:

Torture, initiated at the level of government, is followed by government-imposed secrecy and impunity for those involved in it. Research into the issue of how to eliminate the practice of torture as well as how to improve the healing process thus requires research into how to reduce or end secrecy and impunity in government (33).

The International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for Joseph Kony, but due to the fact that the ICC was implemented after Museveni and the National Resistance Movement committed its known atrocities, the Government of Uganda is not held accountable for its actions, including the forced displacement of millions of people. Instead, Museveni is recognized by outsiders as somewhat of a hero for his revered education and economic policies.

Furthermore, Museveni has garnered support from the West, particularly the United States, because he has framed the fight against the LRA as a fight against terrorism. Uganda is recognized as a stable country with impressive economic development. What the West fails to see, however, is the immense state terror present in Uganda. Unless Museveni and the Government of Uganda are also held accountable by the international community and their own people, the root of the problem will continue to be ignored and change will never truly happen.

One can also hope that the Uganda presidential election in 2011 will bring change to the country and an end to Museveni's 22-year reign. Nicknamed the "Obama of Uganda," Gulu politician Norbert Mao is running as the Democratic Party candidate in opposition to President Museveni. An Acholi, his election as president could possibly allow for equal opportunity throughout the nation and more of an effort to address the psychosocial, economic, and developmental needs of the northern region. A 2008 article in Uganda's newspaper *The New Vision* mentions that Mao has the support of the northern districts. Reporter Moses Mulondo writes that Mao could also win the vote from the Buganda Kingdom, in which Kampala sits. He quotes Democratic Party leader Mukasa Mbidde as saying that the Baganda will not vote based on "tribe," and that Ugandans "are tired of bloodstained leaders. We want a peaceful leader" (as qtd. in Mulondo).

Mao would most certainly add a new face to Ugandan politics. An engaging orator and an educated and respected leader, Mao has brought optimism to people who see the change he could bring to northern Uganda. One must also be cautious, though. Mao is a politician who

may have a tendency to tell people what they want to hear in order to gain the popular vote. For example, the Invisible Children t-shirt controversy led Mao to contact Invisible Children's offices, express his anger with the shirts, and demand the shirts be redesigned.²⁰

Recently, however, Invisible Children released a photograph of Mao wearing the "I heart the LRA" shirt, with a caption that reads that he supports and is impressed by the message and wants it posterized all over northern Uganda (Poole and Russell). Failing to consult locals before releasing the shirts, Invisible Children met with Mao to reconcile the controversy and convince him of the idea. The politician appears to be speaking on behalf of all of northern Uganda in his endorsement of the message. Without local opinion, though, this could prove dangerous. In addition, to be convinced of an idea to win the support of a high-dollar NGO could delegitimize the sincerity in some of Mao's political stances and agendas. Granted, a t-shirt controversy is trivial compared to implementing programs for psychosocial needs, but favoring Western ideas over local realities for the sake of appeasing a powerful NGO is enough to be concerned.

Even if Mao is not elected president and Museveni wins yet another term, an Acholi still has a possibility for an influential leadership position. Rumors circulating in Uganda claim that Museveni is considering making former Uganda Representative to the UN Olara Otunnu his vice president, which, according to a 2009 op-ed column *The Daily Monitor*, "is sure to cause a major realignment of regional and national politics" and could do Museveni "a lot of regional and national good" (Obbo).

Interestingly, Charles Onyango Obbo writes mostly of the positive effects this move would have on Museveni's campaign. This is particularly the case for winning the support of the northern region, which is in Museveni's best interest if he were to economically invest in the area, seeing as northern Uganda has oil fields, untouched fertile farmland due to the war, and a connection to South Sudan, Uganda's leading trading partner, according to Obbo. Economic investment in the north could allow the region to rebuild physically and emotionally. With a northerner as vice president, one would hope that investment would do more for the region than exploit its resources. It is also difficult to predict whether this move would change Museveni's policies for northern Uganda, especially in strengthening the PRDP.

²⁰ Discussed in chapter three

Nongovernmental Organizations

Gaps and inadequacies in psychosocial support from NGOs arise due to the fact that many organizations address initial counseling, without considering long-term, in-depth support, according to a Ugandan friend. Another friend and coordinator of a Ugandan-based education organization continued:

We need to train people in trauma-counseling. And actually the people here in the field, they are not trained counselors. They are not. The majority, like 90%, are not trained counselors. They go in for HIV...they go in for a workshop of HIV/AIDS counseling, and that's it. (personal interview, 2007)

Schools in particular are recognized as safe places for addressing the psychosocial needs of children. Teachers are taught to be counselors, but only in the capacity of HIV/AIDS counseling, in many cases. In others, teachers are expected to serve as counselors of children, but they are only paid their teachers' salaries.

"They are overwhelmed!" a Ugandan friend exclaimed in 2007 in reference to NGOs and workers who experience burnout. The same can be said for teachers with this added responsibility of counseling their students. There are two problems with this approach to counseling. First, there is an impressive focus on the needs of children, but from my own experience, I found very few programs that address the trauma of teachers and other adults who interact with the children.

It appears that adults and the elderly are somewhat neglected by NGOs, which leads to the second problem concerning teachers as counselors in schools: how are teachers able to assist children in dealing with their trauma when very little, if anything, has been done to allow the teachers to heal from their own trauma? Those teachers who are actually trained counselors, like those at a special school for war-affected children in northern Uganda, are still paid no more than their regular teachers' salaries, causing them to leave their important posts at schools and seek work in higher-paying jobs with NGOs. To prevent this, the government must allot money for special counselors through governmental policies, as addressed in Museveni's Peace, Recovery, and Development Plan (PRDP) for northern Uganda, rather than relying on foreign NGOs to provide jobs.

Instead of training teachers to provide counseling or implementing programs around trained Western counselors, NGOs continuing psychosocial work in northern Uganda must provide counseling (if it is discovered that counseling works and is desired in northern Uganda)

for teachers, parents, and guardians of children based on knowledge and needs specific to northern Uganda. If children are learning how to cope with trauma from their teachers at school, what support system is available when they return home to parents and guardians who have perhaps not yet coped?

According to headteachers at various schools, there can be a disconnect between parents and teachers, based on multiple circumstances, some of which include the following situations: poor parents living in IDP camps resent government-paid teachers; many rural schools are located near IDP camps, so school grounds and facilities are used and abused by community members; some teachers with depression-induced alcohol problems come tardy and drunk to school, abusive in their drunken states (personal interview, 2008). To address these issues, counseling programs for children at schools should allow for children and their guardians to be counseled together to facilitate communication between parents and teachers and to provide a support system in healing.

To continue the discussion on NGOs, one question that must be addressed is: Is counseling useful without material provision? Annan et al identify that “the majority of the [local counselors’] clients are living in extreme poverty, so when counselors go to their homes, they face high expectations for material support rather than for counseling services” (243). This is a question of material needs versus emotional needs: must one be met before focusing on the other, or must they be addressed simultaneously? Northern Uganda has become the site of hundreds of NGOs, all vying for resources and distributing such material items as food aid, boreholes, and school materials, among others. The process of healing seems to be more possible without the looming burden of poverty, so one would assume that material needs must be met first before addressing the psychological damage. Northern Uganda must reach the economic standards of the rest of the country before deeper healing can take place.

Northern Uganda has received material aid for years, though, and has become accustomed to it, to the point that aid is almost expected. Unless trauma and the deep emotional wounds from the war are addressed, empowering communities and recovering both mentally and economically will be difficult. Thus, “while counseling does not bring an immediate end to the war,” Annan et al acknowledge, “it works at the roots of violence and aggression and, therefore, contributes to building peace in an area of conflict” (241). Fixing the problems of poverty, violence, and inequality at the *structural* level must be the top priority, rather than trying to

alleviate the side-effects of such, whether they are emotional or physical. In the meantime, an approach to healing that simultaneously addresses material and emotional needs must be in order. The structure to this approach is something to research further.

Aid Dependency and the Global Economic Crisis

Extending this discussion on international actors, one must also pay attention to foreign aid. President Barack Obama has not only inspired the U.S. with visions of hope, but he has also garnered support across the continent of Africa. Obama's family connection to the Luo—a family of ethnic groups that spans across northern Uganda, southern Sudan, western Kenya, eastern DRC, and northern Tanzania—has people in these regions optimistic about being recognized in the American government in a non-colonial sense (Hanson). The excitement is further heightened with Obama's nomination of Johnnie Carson—former U.S. ambassador to Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Uganda and Foreign Service Officer in various other African countries—as U.S. assistant secretary of state for African affairs (Dugger).

In a guest column featured on AllAfrica Global Media's website (allafrica.com), which covers news from all across the continent of Africa, Witney Schneidman, an adviser on Africa for Obama's election campaign, outlines Obama's three objectives for Africa. They include:

- Accelerat[ing] Africa's integration into the global economy
- Enhanc[ing] peace and security of African states
- Strengthen[ing] relationships with those governments, institutions, and civil society organizations committed to deepening democracy, accountability, and reducing poverty in Africa (Schneidman)

With many crises presently occurring in Africa—the most pressing occurring in Darfur, Somalia, and eastern DRC—special attention to northern Uganda is not particularly a top priority for the Obama administration. Investment and economic development are a priority for the continent, though, especially now since the Obama administration is recanting its goal of doubling foreign aid by the end of 2012 (LaFranchi).

Kenyan journalist Mukoma wa Ngugi writes: “What Africa needs are investments that benefit its citizenry, re-invest profits in local economies while promoting national industry.” Beldina Auma, World Bank Senior Communications Officer in advising the Vice Presidency for the Africa Region on Communications, agrees: “Aid should be considered a necessity, but only in a business manner. Not favors” (personal interview, 2009). Zambian-born economist

Dambisa Moyo continues this argument and identifies in her controversial book, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa*, the negative effects of foreign aid—government-to-government aid in particular—calling Africa aid-dependent and arguing for other methods of development. She highlights how “overreliance on aid has trapped developing nations in a vicious circle of aid dependency, corruption, market distortion, and further poverty, leaving them with nothing but the ‘need’ for more aid” (Moyo).

So what does this mean for northern Uganda, a seemingly aid-dependent region? Auma asserts that aid is equivalent to borrowing, recognizing that even the United States borrows (personal interview, 2009). Thus, aid is not especially bad, as Moyo claims. However, Auma also states that countries that pledged money to the International Development Association, the World Bank’s lending arm to the world’s poorest countries, can no longer follow through on these pledges. This in turn causes governments to spend money they do not have.

If aid to Uganda is decreasing amidst the economic crisis, will the government act more on its responsibility to the country? This is difficult to tell. Museveni and his government have contributed greatly to the economic development of Uganda, but the north has largely been neglected. Who holds the government responsible? Auma argues that the people need to question aid distribution to ensure it is better managed. The local community needs to be empowered to hold its own leaders accountable, but this is not realistic given the government’s tendency to quiet the voices of the population.

Furthermore, the combination of depression and dependency has actually led many people in northern Uganda to believe what Western media and actions imply: they are helpless. In a meeting with a small group of advanced English learners at the first IDP camp I visited in 2007, my northern Ugandan escort and friend recited a story after each of the people in the group had informed him of their dreams and educational goals, some revealing to him the sad reality that they had no hopes for their futures. They lived in the camp and were doomed to the life it entailed, they thought: no education, no career, no change. Below is a summarized version of the original I heard:

A pair of eagles abandoned their un-hatched egg in a nest full of other eggs, but this nest did not belong to another eagle. It was a chicken’s nest. The young eagle hatched with its chicken brothers and sisters and the hen adopted the majestic bird as her own. The eagle sounded like a chicken, ate like a chicken, and flew like a chicken. A majestic bird it seemed, but this eagle was nothing more than a lowly chicken raised in a lowly chicken family. During flying lessons one day, danger came to the coop, and the chicken family scurried to find safety. Though the eagle

had only been able to fly a few feet at a time, it scooped up its family, spread its long wings, and flew far from the danger. This “chicken” had finally become an eagle.

The story questions what these people were beginning to believe. Are they really doomed to a life of poverty and no success? Or is opportunity for change actually within their reach, the strings of responsibility and disappointment, though, tightening their grip and pulling these people back before they can grab hold of something better?

According to an Acholi education organization, parents come to the organization with complaints if their child has behavioral issues, transforming the organization into the parent and asking it to fix a particular situation. “They say, ‘*Your* child has done this, this, this, and this,’” one of the organization’s workers said (personal interview, 2008). Some parents, like the government, have become complacent with the heavy local and foreign aid presence. “What they [NGOs] are doing is what the government is supposed to do,” someone at the Ministry of Education told me about an American NGO and its education project (personal interview, 2008).

“The excuse of war is not going to be heard of anymore,” an Acholi friend of mine who leads a development consulting agency for northern Uganda said to a headteacher at a school we inspected together (2008). The headteacher, a shy man who was clearly embarrassed by the way he had been called out, had been responding to questions regarding teacher absenteeism, students’ low-achievement, and the dilapidated physical state of the school with answers similar to: “We are too poor,” “The government has neglected us,” “The war has set us back,” “We are lacking resources.”

Instead of giving excuses, my friend explained, people must start to demonstrate what they are actually doing and how they are making the most of their resources, despite poverty, neglect, and war. “How much does an excuse cost?” he asked. “The region must change” (2008). To start, he suggests, attitudes of the people must change. The previous chapter opens with a local folk story about the community pulling itself out of suffering. If the community dwells on the past and fails to recognize its own capabilities, foreign assistance will be the main source of sustenance.

“What is the future of the people who are left here after all of these programs?” my friend asked (2008). Indeed, what will happen? When food aid reaches its end in northern Uganda, will the people remember how to farm? Do they even have farms to which to return? When lunch is no longer provided for children at schools, will they stop coming to school? When

trauma-counseling programs end, will people be healed? When NGOs pull out of northern Uganda, they are off to another conflict or disaster zone to keep their workers on payroll, but people in northern Uganda will then have to fend for themselves. And that is okay. Giving control over people's everyday lives back to the people is great news for northern Uganda. But NGOs need to wean the region off of aid, and northern Uganda must be prepared for the shift.

Continuing the discussion on psychosocial issues in the region, aid dependency confirms people's ideas of inadequacy and inability about themselves. These ideas—they will never heal as a community; they will never rebuild without someone's help; they will never see peace—are destabilizing and degrading and keep the region's morale in a continually low state.

To prevent this, my Ugandan friend who challenged the headteacher explained that people need to start taking initiative, even with something as little as cleaning up the school compound. "Instead of relying on USAID and UNICEF to take care of it," he suggested, "you should have the children line up and pick up all the trash. It teaches them not to litter" (2008). Furthermore, he proposed an idea that has surfaced in many of my interviews with various people from each of my three trips to Uganda: Acholi mentors must be introduced for empowerment, not Americans or Europeans, and, Sister Ortiz agrees in writing about foreign counselors, "unless the therapeutic process is rooted in the empowerment of the survivor,..., it is doomed before it begins" (27). Thus, putting control back in the hands of the people means allowing them to recognize their own competence in rebuilding and surviving.

Conclusion: What Works?

What works when it comes to psychosocial healing in northern Uganda? To answer this question, one must first ask what it means for something to *work*, a difficult question to answer and one that comes with a number of other questions. Does it mean that the PRDP is adopted by northern Ugandan communities and is being implemented smoothly? Does it mean that President Museveni is held responsible for *his* crimes and the people have a voice? Does it mean that the region has overcome its trauma by engaging with the rest of the nation economically? Does it mean that Joseph Kony has been caught and brought to justice or reintegrated into society? Does an end to trauma mean that children are attending school, people are receiving healthcare, and cases of domestic abuse and alcoholism have decreased? Does it mean that the continual threat of violence no longer exists and life can resume without worry of terrifying

memories, outbursts of aggression among peers, or the ever watchful eye of a foreign aid worker?

All of these lead to an even deeper question: Who decides what works and what does not work? Is it the people? The government? NGOs and the international community? To me, a psychosocial program that works in northern Uganda is one that integrates local methods of healing—religious or cultural—into Western or governmental programs with which the vast majority of the population is comfortable and can adopt into their lives.

Anthropologist Sally Engle Merry writes on the anthropologist's role regarding human rights, specifically, but the point she makes can also be applied to this discussion. In localizing human rights, human rights translators emerge, becoming the “middle” between the local and global communities and beliefs. They serve two roles: to take human rights discourse and turn it into the vernacular, and to take local concerns and make them appeal to international actors. The translators in northern Uganda are local and foreign NGO workers. Their roles are carried out through two processes. Hybridization is the merging of Western ideas with local ones, growing human rights standards from the bottom-up. Replication, however, takes a more top-down approach, importing Western models, which remain more dominant than local ideas (Merry 44).

Too often NGOs and other actors identify what is “right” for various places under specific circumstances. Too often, then, are programs replicated, letting the transnational model set the organization and mission for psychosocial intervention, while the local setting provides only the content. In northern Uganda, this means that the post-conflict setting and need for rehabilitation personalizes the larger, more general model implemented from the top-down. Just as Merry argues would be the case with human rights regarding this system, northern Uganda would see less change because there are fewer implications for a radical shift in thought and practice and more of a pattern of aid dependency, discussed above.

Hybridization or “vernacularization” of psychosocial programs in northern Uganda, on the other hand, would facilitate the interaction of local and transnational actors, blending ideas to create a new form or program altogether—one that makes approaches to psychosocial healing culturally legitimate for northern Uganda. Again, Merry talks about this process in terms of human rights. Legal scholar Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im also discusses this in the context of human rights and would agree with Merry. The underlying reason why human rights violations occur, he argues, is due to a lack of internal cultural legitimacy of human rights. Unless the

people within a particular culture recognize how universal human rights make sense to them, human rights cannot be achieved (An-Na'im 69).

Furthermore, in her book *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice*, Merry recognizes that even the so-called insiders of a particular culture can be of different socio-economic status, and, thus, are not really insiders. She asks, "Who speaks for whom" (16)? Who speaks for culture? Most of the people from whom I have learned of Acholi culture or local thoughts pertaining to social suffering and healing are local politicians with the charisma to appeal to local communities, the national government, and international actors; leading religious figures famous in northern Uganda and advocating for peace and justice on behalf of others; and others with high-end careers and international education or experience. Local politicians are presently calling for military interventions in order to secure peace. Religious leaders are opposed to the International Criminal Court and advocating for traditional reconciliation. "Higher" class Acholi and other Ugandans are developing projects to reconstruct the region. But what the local people are calling for, advocating, and developing is a topic for further research.

In northern Uganda, programs implemented to address trauma and social suffering must be internalized first. Whether they based on Acholi customs or Western ideas, they must be adopted within the community, not imposed from the outside. During my first visit to northern Uganda in 2007, I was so disheartened by the overwhelming presence of NGOs and their seemingly ignorant understanding of local culture that I thought what was best for northern Uganda was a removal of all foreign assistance and a return to cultural practices stripped of Western influence.

My way of thinking has since matured. I recognize that culture is not absolute—that it is an ever-changing system of ideas and practices with no definitive authenticity. Acholi culture has had contact with Arab slave traders, British colonialists, Indian ex-patriots, Chinese investors, neighboring ethnic groups, and slews of Western aid workers and humanitarian tourists. It is not an untouched culture, so to return to that would be stepping backwards in time. It would be somewhat of an imperialist and romanticist move as well, seeing as I, the Westerner desired preserving culture over alternative options. Recognizing this allows for a different approach in advocating for culture over Western agendas. Instead, governmental, nongovernmental, international, and transnational actors must allow northern Ugandan

communities to highlight local social realities and communal understandings of healing, interpret the advice and efforts by outsiders to address suffering, and internalize these methods to make them work for them.

Ann-Belinda Preis, an anthropologist with human rights research experience in Botswana, cautions people to not dwell on culture and assume that culture dictates the customs and beliefs of all people defined by that culture. She advises others to understand that *culture* cannot prevail over *people* because otherwise, human rights violations will occur as they are seen just in the context of the culture and not as violence to human subjectivity (Preis 335-6). In northern Uganda, just as one cannot generalize people in the region simply as “poor Africans” or “suffering Ugandans,” one should also not get bogged down in culture to the extent that human rights abuses and social suffering in the region are ignored. The term “psychosocial” is, in fact, tied to cultural and local understandings. For the sake of making progress in northern Uganda, though, and moving forward from the never-ending debate about the positive and negative effects of the government and NGOs, one must advocate for the *merging* of culture, local norms, and generalized international concepts—one must advocate for the merging of internal and external ideas of healing.

In summary, local and foreign humanitarians, governmental actors, religious leaders, peacebuilders, and civilians must hybridize approaches to psychosocial healing in northern Uganda. It should be one that fuses both local customs and Western influence and is born out of the wants of those whom these programs affect. If it does not, the process of healing will be foreign, uncomfortable, and irrelevant to northern Ugandans. Healing must belong to those who need to heal.

*

The opening story to this chapter exemplifies the importance of hope in northern Uganda. “Hope” is a term frequently used in the region—by children, adults, elderly, child-mothers, former soldiers, politicians, religious leaders, peacebuilders, teachers, and civil servants. Whether meant in spiritual terms or not, “hope is embedded in the anguish,” according to Chairman Norbert Mao (personal interview, 2008). Perhaps it is what people cling to in order to cope with devastation and move on. A survival skill of sorts. It is the understanding that there is something beyond the war. There is something beyond the pain. That is not to say that all

northern Ugandans are optimistic; many do not realistically see peace or equality or reconstruction. But many do, in fact, recognize a life beyond the devastating reality.

In the Rhythms of Reconciliation contest at Gulu High School in July 2007, five boys performed a rap song they wrote describing how the war began as something surreal and now it is something written about or made into movies by outsiders. “It started like a dream and ended like a story,” they sang, in between lines calling for peace. But was the war ever something real? For northern Uganda, it was. For northern Uganda, it is. Whether there is a happy ending to this story is still to be determined. Over 20 years of war has harmed northern Uganda politically, economically, physically, and emotionally. Healing the deep wounds will take just as long, if not, longer.

While Yoweri Museveni and the West are advocating for justice via the trial and punishment of Joseph Kony, northern Uganda’s social justice is manifested in *social healing*. Restoring humanity in Acholiland—by erasing ethnic stereotypes, encouraging localized development, and creating change beginning at the structural level of government—is only the beginning of the healing process.



Girl playing at HEALS, a play therapy center in Gulu

Epilogue

Service-Learning and a Call to Action

My privilege in this world makes me hurt for those on the other end of the spectrum. I sincerely, hope, then, that this thesis is an opportunity for this suffering to be recognized—not for my sake, but for the sake of those who have tried time and time again to be heard. As an undergraduate student, it is overwhelming to comprehend all that must be fixed in order to secure peace, justice, and healing in conflict and post-conflict zones. It can be discouraging to know that I cannot personally bring Kony to justice. I cannot personally educate Museveni of his errors.

What I can do, however, is advocate for cross-cultural education to create more globally- and socially-aware students in the United States, which would in turn create more globally- and socially-aware policy-makers, doctors, human rights activists, etc. The University of Tennessee has somewhat adopted this innovative idea through the creation of the Center for Civic Engagement and initiatives taken by the Chancellor's Honors Program to advocate for a civically-engaged university. This type of university is one that recognizes the importance of interactive, real-life experiential learning whether at home or abroad.

Service-Learning

The University of Tennessee has a vision to establish itself as the flagship of “public research and teaching universities, linking the people of Tennessee to the nation and the world” (“Vision and Mission Statements”). Thus, its mission statement includes the following objectives (emphasis mine):

- Provide a *high quality educational experience* to undergraduate students in a *diverse learning environment*—promoting the values and institutions of democracy that prepare students to *lead lives of personal integrity and civic responsibility in a global society*
- Conduct research, teaching, and *outreach* to improve human and animal medicine and health
- *Partner with communities* to provide educational, technical and cultural support to increase the livability of those communities (“Vision and Mission Statements”)

UT Knoxville, then, claims to be committed to civic engagement—to enhance the educational experience of its students and faculty through hands-on learning, and to share its resources with local and global communities.

But how is UT fulfilling these missions? It is home of the Tennessee Volunteers, but where do we draw the line between volunteerism and engagement? Both service-learning and volunteerism involve unpaid outreach, but service-learning is *academically-based* community service that allows for a partnership between, in this case, the University of Tennessee and the community. Service-learning entails a long-term, solution-driven *partnership*—one that not only shares university resources, but, more importantly for the university, service-learning also gives students real-life research opportunities. Students learn the social, political, and economic issues from people of the community in which they work.

Unlike traditional teaching, where learning occurs from lectures and readings, service-learning involves the typical classroom experience and assigned readings, but it also allows for learning through interaction and dialogue with community members, hands-on experience, and structured reflection. The professor is certainly an expert in one sense of the word, but the community possesses an expertise of its own, which is vital to the student's academic experience.

With the implementation of UT's Center for Civic Engagement at the Howard H. Baker, Jr. Center for Public Policy, UT is a step closer to fulfilling the responsibility it has to its students to provide them with an engaged education. The university needs to facilitate the broadening of students' knowledge—to raise the academic bar for the 25,000 undergraduate and graduate students at this institution and make community engagement a standard of academic excellence.

The Center for Civic Engagement is important to the *community*. The University of Pennsylvania, a model for service-learning, prides itself on educating educators and young people of community issues from a *partnership* approach, rather than a "savior" approach. The purpose is to establish long-term relationships with various sectors of the university to create long-term solutions for the community.

This center is important to the *university*. It will provide students with opportunities for an innovative academic approach to understanding topics relevant to their respective majors, while bringing to their attention the underlying social justice issues that affect the communities in which they live, work, and study. By centralizing the various outreach efforts throughout the university in this one center, students and faculty can identify what is already being done and where they can fit in. It can allow for communication of members of the university and collaboration among these efforts.

This center is important to *me*. With my self-designed major, I seek a solution-driven career path—one that pays careful attention to the world’s shortcomings and focuses on long-term, sustainable relationships, rather than one-time technical support. UT needs to know there are students like me who care about the Knoxville and world communities and crave to learn from and experience these communities.

We, the students, are calling for the university to support the synergy of service and academics. We are calling for committed engagement by the university to local, national, and international communities. We are calling for real-life research opportunities. We are calling for civic responsibility.

Benjamin Franklin once said, “An inclination join'd with an Ability to serve mankind, one's Country, Friends and Family...should be the great Aim and End of all learning.” Committed service to the community and innovative academic excellence should be the aim and end of the University of Tennessee.

Rethinking Humanitarianism

Thanks to the flexibility of the College Scholars Program, the unmatched mentorship of Dr. Rosalind Hackett, and the generosity of the College Scholars and Chancellor’s Honors Programs, I was able to expand my classroom beyond the traditional notions of such and travel three times to northern Uganda: on a month-long Jazz for Justice Project site visit, a semester-long self-designed independent study, and a month-long international service-learning site visit.

The program I designed through College Scholars was originally called “Rethinking Humanitarianism.” What exactly does this mean? It means questioning established concepts of humanitarianism and recognizing the importance of the community in decision-making and program-planning. Advocating partnerships over imperialistic approaches. For a student, rethinking humanitarianism means realizing how much one can learn from the global community. It means seeking to understand how politics, economics, and culture merge. By doing this, one can more fully understand how various actors and factors interact with each other, allowing for a more genuine approach to humanitarianism.

My intention in joining College Scholars and traveling to Uganda was to study humanitarianism and find my place in it. Going to Uganda, however, allowed me to rethink that

idea. My time in Uganda has allowed me to recognize the need for more genuine, creative strategies to peacebuilding and healing.

I have learned to look more critically at humanitarianism and question the role of Westerners like me, given the feedback I received in northern Uganda and the backlash of people in various other parts of Africa, as seen recently with Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo.²¹ I understand that I cannot speak on behalf of a people I hardly know. I also realize that I have written a thesis on the suffering of others. I am aware of both of these considerations and am thus very careful in my assessment of social suffering and psychosocial healing in northern Uganda.

Implications for Further Research

Are locals being listened to? Sometimes. Given this understanding of what has been done to address psychosocial needs and what has seemingly worked or not worked, more of an effort to communicate with locals—more of a push for *localizing* the healing process—must be undertaken.

I embarked on this project expecting a precise answer as to what works best for healing in northern Uganda. Perhaps such an answer would have given me a clearer idea of how long exactly it will take for the region to recover. I expected some kind of outcome, but I have since realized the need for further exploration into the issues surrounding psychosocial healing in northern Uganda.

Areas for further research would include looking at existing programs that have successfully merged local and Western approaches to healing and comparing the effects to strictly local and strictly Western approaches. In addition, I would like to look deeper into accountability issues surrounding the government. The Western community wants rebel leader Joseph Kony to be prosecuted in a Western justice system. Northern Ugandan peacebuilders want Kony reintegrated into Acholi society through a reconciliation ceremony. Very little discussion, however, focuses on holding President Museveni and the Government of Uganda responsible for their war crimes.

According to Justice James Ogoola, the Principal Judge of the High Court of Uganda, government soldiers will most likely be tried in a military court (personal interview, 2008).

²¹ Discussed in chapter four

These courts can be criticized for their inherent subjectivity and the failure to include the input of those northern Ugandan civilians affected by the government's atrocities. A need is in order, then, for a synergy between victims, the desire for justice, and those bringing justice. A culture of terror instilled by the government, and a culture of terrorism instilled by the rebels, has dictated various human rights abuses, thus creating a culture of fear in northern Uganda: a culture where human rights abuses are not only the cause of social suffering, but where they also pose complications in allowing for psychosocial healing. A lack of justice at the governmental level seems to further impede the healing process in northern Uganda.

Also, further research into how to reintegrate abductees—child-soldiers and rape victims, in particular—into society must be considered. With an understanding of local ideas of evil spirits attached to those who have witnessed or taken part in someone's death attaches a stigma that leads to social isolation. A careful look at how to educate the community and establish support systems must be undertaken.

*

On April 23, 2009, during a ceremony in remembrance of the Holocaust, President Barack Obama articulated my own reasons for traveling to Uganda and understanding social suffering. I conclude with this quote to emphasize that this work is only the beginning.

Today, and every day, we have an opportunity, as well as an obligation, to confront these scourges—to fight the impulse to turn the channel when we see images that disturb us, or wrap ourselves in the false comfort that others' sufferings are not our own. Instead we have the opportunity to make a habit of empathy; to recognize ourselves in each other; to commit ourselves to resisting injustice and intolerance and indifference in whatever forms they may take—whether confronting those who tell lies about history, or doing everything we can to prevent and end atrocities...

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