

## Wartime Captivity and Homecoming: Culture, Stigma and Coping Strategies of Formerly Abducted Women in Post-conflict Northern Uganda.

**Allen Kiconco** Department of African Studies and Anthropology, University of Birmingham and **Martin**

**Nthakomwa** Department of Geography, Environment and Disaster Management, Coventry University

### Abstract

One of the three durable solutions to mass displacement preferred by the UNHCR and leading humanitarian agencies is that victims return to their home communities, resulting into meaningful reintegration. It is believed that families and communities provide the best hope for recovery and reintegration post displacement due to familiarity, care and shared culture. Yet these 'places of hope and comfort', sometimes defined and shaped by ethnic culture and values, can also potentially provide a hostile environment in which stigma can flourish. The women formerly abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda find that achieving meaningful reintegration into their communities is a distant prospect despite being the home culture they once shared. The stigmatisation of formerly abducted persons by the home community members who have never been abducted renders them 'outsiders' upon return to their home communities. Meaningful relationships with fellow community members and access to cultural, social and economic systems are hampered by stigma about the women's traumatic past episode as abductees. This experience has significant implications for these women, negotiating their journey to recovery and reintegration into home communities.

**Keywords:** Acholi, Gender and conflict, girls and LRA, reintegration, recovery, stigma, Uganda

### Introduction

Reintegration constitutes one of the three durable solutions for displaced people (UNHCR, 2011). Post-disaster recovery, of which reintegration is a part, underlines the importance of reuniting families and communities. For formerly abducted persons, "the family and community provide the most effective protection" (Paris Principle, 2007, p. 23). However, homecoming into post-conflict northern Uganda communities has been characterised by social stigmatisation from 'never-abducted' populations.

Furthermore, through the prism of culture, traditions and beliefs, the never-abducted people struggle to engage constructively with the formerly abducted persons, which impacts their

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reintegration. Stigmatisation from the majority of never-abducted directed at formerly abducted persons has become one of the main obstacles to their meaningful recovery and reintegration. For this reason, the formerly abducted persons are compelled by their circumstances to seek new or even alternative strategies for coping with or negotiating the process of recovery and reintegration.

This paper focuses on formerly abducted women and their lived experiences in the Acholi sub-region of northern Uganda. Upon homecoming, they are confronted with the stigma associated with them having previously lived within masculine militaristic culture within the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

The violent history of recruitment into the LRA and their time in the bush challenge numerous social, cultural and spiritual norms within the Acholi region. Communities view formerly abducted women as having violated traditional norms, and therefore they are perceived as sexually impure, spiritually tainted, and a threat to the patriarchal order. Following the return to their home region in Acholi, they are regarded as having lower social status, suggesting that abduction, their experience of being part of the rebellion, stay in the bush, and the sexual violence have positioned them outside social harmony (Porter, 2017). The women experience stigma and exclusion from community life on the grounds that they are considered as lacking personal and feminine qualities of purity, innocence, peacefulness, and obedience.

This paper examines stigma as a significant mediator between formerly abducted women and their reintegration in communities of northern Uganda. It argues that the time spent with the LRA does not help with smooth reintegration due to problematic associations drawn between their history and the new identity as formerly abducted persons. Three related factors contribute to stigma and marginalisation against these women: being women, formerly abducted, and carriers of polluting spirits. Specifically, the paper links the stigma experienced by the formerly abducted women to local social, cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices, which should be overcome for any success in reintegration to occur. Thus, this paper also analyses the extent of stigma directed towards them and evaluates the strategies pursued to cope with stigma to aid their post-war lives, recovery and reintegration.

The paper is organised as follows. A brief contextual background to the LRA insurgency in northern Uganda is first presented, and this is followed by a discussion relating to the conceptualisation of reintegration. The paper then highlights the research methodology adopted. This leads to an exploration and discussion about Acholi traditional practices, spiritual and cultural beliefs, and the

impact on formerly abducted women's experiences. With a particular focus on stigma and perspectives in the Acholi society, the paper links stigma experienced by formerly abducted women to local spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices. The paper further demonstrates how stigmatisation hinders recovery and reintegration. It concludes with a discussion of strategies for coping with stigma and engaging in reintegration. To appreciate the context within which this discussion is situated, it is perhaps important at this point in the discussion to chart the events and the situation leading to the abduction of girls from their communities into the LRA militia.

### **The Lord's Resistance Army insurgency in northern Uganda**

Researchers have approached the issue of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) from a range of perspectives, with varying foci and emphasis. The narratives locate Joseph Kony, a soldier and self-proclaimed spiritual leader, from Odek community of the Acholi region on the one hand, and the Ugandan Government forces, on the other, as the main opposing entities (see, e.g. Dolan, 2009; Branch, 2011). Starting as a relatively unknown figure, from about 1987, Kony gained notoriety for his activities of kidnapping and forcibly recruiting child combatants into his army (see Pham et al., 2007; Annan et al., 2006, 2008; Blattman and Annan, 2010).

The conflict in northern Uganda can be traced back to the overthrow of Ugandan President Tito Okello (an Acholi) by Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA). During the early stages of the LRA group and its predecessor militia organisation (Holy Spirit Movement) led by the local prophetess Alice Auma 'Lakwena', the organisation commanded some considerable local support (see Behrend, 1999). This support was attributed firstly to traditions among the locals, secondly to the overthrow of their Acholi President Okello by the NRA, and thirdly to atrocities against Acholi people associated with the formerly guerilla NRA who had just assumed power (renamed Uganda People's Defence Force in 1995). During the early stages, significant numbers of the LRA members were Ugandan government soldiers ousted following President Okello's fall.

Although the LRA initially enjoyed significant local support, this waned over time as the conflict continued (Branch, 2011). However, with support from the Government of Sudan, who shared a common enemy in the new Ugandan Government under Yoweri Museveni, the LRA rapidly grew into a formidable guerilla force (see Prunier, 2004). Starting in the Acholi sub-region, the conflict had widespread adverse effects on almost all northern Uganda sub-regions. The group increasingly engaged in forced abductions and recruitment of young boys and girls (Pham et al., 2007).

Following a period of insurgency and counter-insurgency, the Government of Uganda attempted to engage with the LRA through the Bigombe peace talks (1994/5). Alongside these efforts, Sudan and Uganda's governments also engaged in peace efforts through the Nairobi Peace Agreement (1999). However, when these initiatives showed signs of stalling or failing, the Government of Uganda launched *Operation Iron Fist* in March 2002 to dislodge Kony from logistically enjoying relatively easy access to the support/supplies from Sudan by invading LRA military hideouts near the border with Sudan to cut off supplies (see Branch, 2011).

The Uganda People's Defense Forces (Ugandan Government) resolved to counteract the LRA of forcibly recruiting children to be combatants by forcibly moving people into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in northern Uganda. The Ugandan Government argued that the move would be a better solution for protecting the public from the LRA abductions and attacks. Subsequently, over half a million civilians were soon provided with shelter in IDP camps. By 2001 about 1.7 million civilians had been forced by the Government to relocate to these IDP camps (see Dolan, 2009). The displaced persons' camps thus catered for two groups of people; the majority who had been moved by Government forcibly from communities in northern Uganda and those who had either escaped, been rescued, or had been freed from the LRA captivity.

In July 2006, the then Vice President of South Sudan Riek Machar made further efforts to broker peace between the LRA and the Ugandan Government, but these efforts also failed. Subsequently, the LRA retreated and relocated itself to the vast bushy region stretching between Uganda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central Africa Republic. Thus, a period of relative peace followed, resulting in Internally Displaced Persons' movements from camps back to their communities in northern Uganda. The never-abducted populations - people who, as stated above, had been moved from communities into IDP camps by Government forces – were later joined by the children who had previously been abducted as combatants by the LRA. It is this second group – the formerly abducted children (now young adults) who had returned to join and reintegrate with the never-abducted population (home communities) that are critical to this research. The focus is on the formerly abducted girls, now women, and their lived experiences in the post-conflict Acholi region.

Early research suggested that by the end of the war in 2006, most formerly abducted persons had returned to their communities and had successfully been reintegrated (e.g. Annan et al., 2008). However, longer-term perspectives indicate that experiences were very different, underlined by significant problems around reintegration because of ostracism (e.g. Mukasa, 2017; Leeuwen et al.,

2018; Acan et al., 2019; Macdonald and Kerali, 2020). Abductees used compliance/obedience, stoicism and silence to survive life in the LRA (see Amony, 2015; Can, 2017; Baines, 2017). As this paper will show, the formerly abducted women again experience exclusion and rely on similar strategies to support their post-LRA day-to-day experiences.

We now move the discussion to analysing the extent of stigma *faced by and directed towards* formerly abducted women, and how this manifests within a home cultural setting in which the women have returned to live. In meeting these objectives, the paper identifies and evaluates the strategies that the formerly abducted women pursued in order to cope with stigma and the inner resolve they had to assist with their recovery and reintegration. Thus, the stigmatisation by home communities as they attempted to reintegrate, the drive to maintain social harmony within Acholi culture and the strategies that formerly abducted women invoked to engage in reintegration, are of particular interest in this research paper. First, we need to discuss the problem of reintegration in Uganda.

### **The problem of reintegration**

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes in northern Uganda were guided by the Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS) strategy, which defines reintegration as:

the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time-frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and national responsibility and often necessitates long-term external assistance (IDDRS, 2006, 1.10).

However, this approach to reintegration has been scrutinised for being paternalistic, viewing ex-combatants and formerly abducted persons as the 'problem in need of reintegration' (Metsola, 2006, p.119), rather than problems with the reintegration programmes themselves (e.g. Bowd and Özerdem, 2013). Experience shows that reintegration is broader and longer than the life span of project activities and in many cases, occurring independently after the project programmes finish (e.g. Nussio, 2012; Vastapuu, 2018; Anderson, 2018; Acan et al., 2019).

Experiences in northern Uganda and beyond show that reintegration takes several trajectories (e.g. see Kiconco, 2021). These include social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual processes of adjustment. Indeed, our findings discussed below support Torjesen (2013., p. 2) who asserts that

research efforts should concentrate on fostering an “understanding of reintegration where many causal factors are assessed, including how particular combinations of factors may account for why and how the process of reintegration has unfolded in the way that it has for different groups of combatants.” While we have found that relying on reintegration programmes as a departure in defining and analysing formerly abducted women's reintegration in northern Uganda may be helpful, the approach directs attention away from the larger and long-term social, economic, cultural and spiritual processes and moves towards a narrow and short-term programme of activities. The approach also fails to address many of the themes that surface when following their reintegration trajectories. Therefore, we have applied a 'bottom-up' analytical framework that focuses less on project activities and places women's experiences at the forefront of the reintegration analysis.

Therefore, reintegration in this paper will refer to the process formerly abducted women use in transitioning from combatant to civilian. The process is dynamic, transformative and aims to re-connect the individual to the community's structural and cognitive elements, facilitate the re-establishment of familial/kinship ties, and re-establish community networks. We analyse reintegration as a long-term and dynamic process, which involves complex negotiations and exchanges between hosting communities and formerly abducted women. Inclusion is the ultimate goal of reintegration. We apply this approach because it gives voice to the processes, experiences, and challenges formerly abducted women have encountered as they reintegrate into post-war northern Uganda communities.

### **Research Methodology**

In 2012-2013, the first author carried out six months of ethnographic research in northern Uganda, particularly the Acholi region.<sup>1</sup> Interviews and conversations were held with 170 participants in Gulu, Kitgum, Lamwo, and Pader districts of the Acholi region. From the number of participants above, in-depth interviews were conducted with 57 formerly abducted women. Some women were identified and recruited through rehabilitation centres, and others, through a snowball sampling technique via women interviewed previously.

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on research undertaken for doctoral studies at the University of Birmingham. The study focused on issues of the LRA abductions and captivity, rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction. It particularly examined the lived experiences of formerly abducted women in the Acholi region. Therefore, the arguments of this paper emerged from this research as a key insight. The research received ethical approval from the University of Birmingham and Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST).

Engaging the Acholi community was also critical for this research. Twelve focus group discussions were also organised with community members and women (formerly abducted and never-abducted). Numerous other key informants, including staff from rehabilitation centres, local government officers, and local women leaders, were also interviewed.

The opportunity to undertake focus group discussions and interviews with key informants helped us to develop a deeper appreciation of how people in the Acholi region made sense of and attributed meaning to war and its aftermath and how this is reflected in the attitudes towards formally abducted persons, and women in particular. This paper discusses some of the research findings that specifically explored experiences of stigmatisation and coping mechanisms. Most of the interviewees gave expressed permission to use their correct details in data dissemination. However, to protect their identities, we have anonymised all names and places.

#### **Acholi social and cultural problems viewed through the spiritual lens.**

To fully appreciate the paradox of stigma in the Acholi area of Uganda, one needs to understand the profound value and need attached to maintaining social harmony in the Acholi culture (see Porter, 2017) and the independent construct of 'self' (see p'Bitek, 1986; Oloya, 2013; Finnstrom, 2008).<sup>2</sup> A person in the Acholi culture is deeply rooted in their *kaka* (clan) and *caro* (village/community). A person's good health, happiness and spiritual welfare are based on the harmony between the individual and their *kaka* and *caro*, with ancestral *jogi* (spirits) guiding how to maintain this social harmony (see Porter, 2017). Liu Institute & Gulu NGO Forum (2005, p.11) found that "historically, the good health and happiness of the Acholi individual was always situated in the context of the harmony and wellbeing of the clan. The ancestral and spiritual worlds provided guidance to the Acholi people, maintaining the unity of the clan."

Therefore, according to Acholi society, "[social harmony] denotes a state of normal relations among the living and the dead, linked to an idea of cosmological equilibrium and a social balance of power and moral order" (Porter, 2013, p.15). This experience suggests "social harmony is the highest goal of the Acholi community" (Ofumbi, 2012, p.116).

Therefore, to uphold social harmony, people are discouraged from engaging in acts of *kiir*, 'taboo/abomination', that transgress societal moral order (see Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2007; Victor and Porter, 2017). The Justice and Reconciliation Project (2007) found that *kiir* includes

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed political history and origin of Acholi people and culture, see Atkinson (1994) and Girling (1960).

the burning and destruction of property, the breaking of vows, fighting at the well or other sources of water, fighting in the garden, having sex in the bush, rape, incest, murder, walking over corpses, mishandling corpses (or neglecting to give the deceased a proper burial), throwing food, money or faeces in anger, beating one's genitals, domestic quarrels between husbands and wives, defecating in food, and eating ash, [among other abominations] (p. 4).

It is a local belief that failing to observe these moral codes compromises and transgresses social harmony, which angers the ancestral *jagi* and leads them to visit retribution on the individual, their *kaka* and *caro*. Bernstein (2009, p.20) found that “social suffering is a result of the deliberate attempt to disrespect Acholi culture, values and spirituality.” Liu Institute & Gulu NGO Forum (2005, p.11) further found that

conflicts, misfortune and poor health could be 'sent' by angry spirits and extended not only to the violators of the moral codes but to his or her family or clan. Thus, one person's actions always had ramifications for his or her family and clan who in turn assumed collective responsibility for the offence.

In addition to failing to observe moral codes, which transgresses social harmony leading to misfortunes, a person's wellbeing can also be jeopardised indirectly through possession by foreign spirits. Retribution from spirit worlds, ancestral or foreign, manifests in the form of misfortune or illness. The most familiar form is caused by *cen*, 'vengeance ghost or angry spirit' (p'Bitek, 1986). We return to the phenomenon of *cen* later on.

From above, an individual's life in Acholi society should thus be lived through adherence to social harmony achievement. However, following the LRA insurgency and return of formerly abducted persons, social harmony became “difficult to achieve and even harder to maintain” (Porter, 2013, p.15). Through their operations, namely, killing, destroying villages, abductions and residing in the bush, communities viewed the LRA group as disrupting social harmony. In the same breath, it is considered by the community that because of their abduction and stay in the bush, formerly abducted persons have also transgressed social harmony. Thus, they are seen as 'wrongdoers', 'outsiders' and a 'threat' to never-abducted people and their wellbeing. Indeed, because their existence is believed to attract and cause serious misfortunes in society, there is a great need to restore and protect social harmony. Thus, to be free from retribution from the spirit world, many women who participated in our research

experienced cultural cleansing in their communities upon homecoming.<sup>3</sup> These experiences suggest that the principle of social harmony in Acholi has been compromised and distorted by the effects of war.

A formerly abducted woman who participated in our research reported that when she returned to her community, “people looked at me suspiciously and made remarks such as ‘You were part of the LRA that has been troubling people. You are not welcome into this same community that you people [rebels] have killed people and brought destruction.’” Another interviewee reported, “I have no problems with my immediate neighbours, but people outside our backyard are the ones who say bad things [stigmatisation] to me. They still call me a *dwog cen paco*.” Sigma and stigmatisation descriptions followed similar patterns in the interviews.

Several terms exist describing people who returned from the LRA in northern Uganda. The Amnesty Act of 2000 refers to amnesty beneficiaries in Uganda as ‘reporters’—as opposed to ex-soldiers— taking into consideration that many of those seeking amnesty could have joined armed groups involuntarily, as was the case with the LRA. Therefore, the Act sees them as reporting back home from involuntary military recruitment. Whereas ‘reporter’ was the official—state/DDR— narrative in northern Uganda, communities in the Acholi region coined *dwog cen paco*, a term that meant ‘a former rebel who returned home’ or simply ‘a returnee’. The term was coined from the phrase ‘come back home’, which was used to persuade LRA people to denounce the rebellion. Indeed, there was a radio programme in Gulu town, known as *Dwog Cen Paco* hosted by Radio Mega FM. However, several years after the end of the war, the description now carries stigma and negative connotations in communities rather than urging people to return home from the rebellion. During fieldwork, we sensed that a significant section of society continues to stigmatise formerly abducted persons. We observed that locals had readopted a *dwog cen paco* term to mean ‘a former rebel’. Interviews show that several years after the war ended, people still call and describe a formerly abducted person as *dwog cen paco*, demonstrating the continued potency of stigmatisation.

Stigmatisation and discrimination of formerly abducted persons show that the people of northern Uganda have not forgotten the wrongs the LRA combatants (and their abductees) did to them and their communities. Although claims of forgiveness are commonplace in the Acholi region, formerly

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<sup>3</sup> Cultural cleansing as a reintegration strategy in the Acholi region is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information on cleansing rituals, see Okumu (2005), Behrend (1999), Harlacher (2009), Liu Institute & Gulu NGO Forum (2005), among others.

abducted persons remain a constant reminder of those ‘wrongs’, and community members target them leading to feelings of guilt, frustration, and confusion. As formerly abducted persons are deemed ‘polluted’ and ‘no longer normal’, they are stigmatised and discriminated against within their home communities. Thus, in the research, we set to find out the extent of stigma *faced by and directed to* formerly abducted women, how this is manifested within a cultural setting, in which the women have returned to live and also to identify and evaluate the strategies they pursue to cope with stigma and help with their recovery and reintegration.

The Paris Principles (2007) observe that stigmatisation of formerly abducted girls “is one of greatest barriers to reintegration (p. 32) [...] stigma facing [them] is fundamentally different in kind—it lasts much longer, is critically more difficult to reduce and is more severe’ (p.36). Although stigmatisation has previously been highlighted as a major obstacle to long-term social reintegration in northern Uganda (see, e.g. Ndossi, 2010; Macdonald and Kerali, 2020), the root cause of its persistence has not been fully explored. Besides, the word ‘stigma’ is often used in reintegration literature without being precise about its meaning.

Our findings concur with the literature that formerly abducted women face persistent social stigma and discrimination in northern Uganda at many levels, from their own family and community members. However, using the Acholi case, we illustrate how stigma manifests in their daily lives. This paper shows how widespread stigmatisation hinders efforts and the capacity to reintegrate and participate proactively in community activities and ultimately contribute to these women’s complete post-captivity recovery and inclusion. We discuss how claims of forgiveness from communities and subsequent cleansing rituals in the immediate aftermath of their return have not resulted in any realistic hope for formerly abducted women as stigma prevails. Even in situations where their own families have fully accepted them, stigma within wider Acholi society persists.

### **Stigma and perspectives**

Interviews show that stigmatisation was one of the major problems encountered by our research participants when they first returned home. More than 80 per cent of formerly abducted women reported still facing stigmatisation from within their families and communities at the time of our interviews. The study subjects described stigmatisation in terms of ‘hate-filled talks, insults and treatment’ received from communities. According to Dijker & Koomen (2007, p.6), stigmatisation is:

the process by which an individual's or group's character or identity is negatively responded to on the basis of the individual's or group's association with a past, imagined, or currently present deviant condition, often with harmful physical or psychological consequences for the individual or group.

Therefore, when 'stigmatisation' is used in this paper, it means stigma promotion, including any off-putting thoughts, feelings, inappropriate language or actions intended to constitute defamation or slander of formerly abducted persons.

Stigmatisation in this sense targets formerly abducted women (and men) because they are perceived as coming from a contaminated background. Abduction history not only stands in the way of their complete reintegration into 'normal' Acholi persons, but this past has also become the basis for stigmatisation by the majority section of the Acholi society, not personally abducted by the LRA. Thus, the reference to formerly abducted persons takes inappropriate stigma-promoting language, including 'rebel', 'bush behaviour', 'bush mentality', 'vengeance spirit possessed'. This language is demeaning, discriminatory and shapes responses and attitudes to reintegration, sometimes subconsciously but adversely affecting an individual's life opportunities.

Although several formerly abducted persons have returned home to their families (parents) to seek protection, stigma from sections of the home community has made their lives unbearable. Abducted in 1990, at the age of fourteen, for fourteen years, Akello (not real name) encapsulated the experiences and how it feels to be a formerly abducted woman in these words: "I feel and live like a stranger in my community. Life at home has become an entirely new thing. [...] I regard all this treatment [stigmatisation] as a serious insult because I never joined the LRA willingly. All this bad treatment [stigmatisation] makes me wonder why I returned home."

The interviewees used two geographical spaces, home and bush, to contrast their past and present experiences. During fieldwork, we also observed a difference between the understanding of the bush and home/community spaces in the context of Acholi. *Lum* refers to grass that builds to a bush. Therefore, Acholi people use the concept of *Lum* to refer to the 'bush'— denoting an unsafe, fearful and mysterious place not to be visited without good reason. The bush is a place where wild animals, criminals and polluting spirits reside. On the other hand, home/community is a sanctioned space where people reside in harmony under the guidance of ancestral *jogi*.

Some studies utilise the idea from the perspective of moral geography to explore this bush vs the home binary in Acholi society (e.g. see Oloya, 2013; Dubal, 2018; Porter, 2019). Macdonald and Kerali (2020, p. 11-12) found:

On the one hand, it [bush] provides the firewood and game that sustain daily life in the village. But it is also a dangerous moral space. It is believed that journeys into the bush must be undertaken with care and vigilance because, in contraction to the home, in the village, the bush was not a place of human habitation and order, but a turbulent, ungovernable place where wild animals roamed free and formidable cosmological forces worked through and above nature.

At the beginning of the LRA rebellion, this tension between bush and home spaces became louder. The LRA rebellion did not take place in a social and spiritual vacuum. It was largely an Acholi rebellion led by a majority of Acholi fighters. The leadership was, therefore, no strangers to Acholi culture. However, Baines (2017) argues that in the late 1990s, Joseph Kony decided to create a 'new Acholi nation', which he considered morally superior to the old Acholi. According to her research participants, Kony termed the new state Acholi A and the old state Acholi B. Besides abductions of adolescents and teenagers, Kony relied on an institutionalised forced marriage to populate the new state (Apio, 2016; Baines, 2017). The new Acholi state project complemented the spiritual initiative project introduced at the formation of the group in the late 1980s (see Behrend, 1999; Van Acker, 2004; Titeca, 2010). The LRA/new Acholi practised their version of social harmony, just like home, upheld by a spiritual body via Kony (see Behrend, 1999; Van Acker, 2004). While their settlements in south Sudan and social life mirrored old Acholi, the rebellion developed their own moral codes that every member lived by (Titeca, 2010; Baines, 2017; Porter, 2019). Interviews show that upon arrival in the LRA settlements, newly abducted persons were subjected to rituals with a view to cleansing them of any potential polluting spirits and witchcraft from old and inferior Acholi state. Transgressors of LRA/new Acholi social harmony were punished, sometimes by death (Baines, 2017; Porter, 2019; Titeca, 2010).

Similarly, at home, people coined the term *olum olum*—derived from *Lum*—to refer to people who had entered the bush to wage a rebellion against the Government. Over the years, the *olum olum* came to mean 'people who live in the bush'—as in the case of the LRA rebels— suggesting they were polluted, mentally unsound, criminals, with a 'bush mentality.' Thus, returning from the rebellion and the bush, home communities perceived formerly abducted persons as now possessing a lower moral status in a society where people, nature and the spiritual world determine moral standing. The never-

abducted persons saw them as potential polluters of the social body. Therefore, we found the bush an essential concept linked together with the LRA and the polluting spirits.

Further to this, it is believed that formerly abducted persons are deemed not to be *fully* capable of complete cleansing, spiritually. Thus, the stigma arising from cultural and spiritual beliefs impinges on their life opportunities by being unable to establish reciprocal trust for effective social interactions, relationships and marriages (see Kiconco and Nthakomwa, 2018; Kiconco, 2021). As interviews demonstrate, formerly abducted persons in northern Uganda face blanket resistance in their attempts to gain trust and reintegrate into their home communities. Humanitarian workers, development workers and researchers have perceived formerly abducted persons in northern Uganda, particularly women, as innocent victims. However, a significant section of the home community does not fully take into consideration the circumstances of their abduction and therefore involvement with the LRA. The home community is thus unwilling to fully accept the formerly abducted persons and to forgive to smoothen their path to reintegration. Locals perceive them to be dangerous and therefore feared. They are *feared* because they are from an ‘unknown’, ‘suspicious’ and ‘stained’ background. Also, a significant number of people from their communities believe that formerly abducted persons are prone to repeating habits learned from their time with the militia.

From a related perspective, formerly abducted persons are not seen as *whole* individuals, but as persons whose *being* is ‘stained’, ‘confused’ and ‘mentally unsound’. Aciro was abducted in 1999 at the age of thirteen for six years. When she returned home, community members questioned her sanity. She recalled, “some people said because I had spent six long years in the bush, I could be mentally unstable. It did not go down so well with me because I knew I am mentally sound despite the bad things I had been forced to do while in the bush.”

Stigmatisation and discrimination are widespread, and as such, participation in community events and projects is inhibited. As our interviewees’ experiences show, formerly abducted persons are seen as unfit to participate in community projects and occupy significant community positions. Another woman reported that:

The never abducted people think and look at us who have returned from the bush as senseless. For example, when electing leaders in community meetings, they do not think we have credible opinions. Instead, they think that when we are angered, we can turn against the people. This is the reason why they do not elect us into local leadership positions. Even if you raise your hand

in such meetings, they will not point at you to be given the opportunity to speak and as such you put down your hand and return home.

Throughout our fieldwork, it was apparent that people distrust formerly abducted persons, believing the bush and the LRA left them 'contaminated'. Taken collectively, irrespective of the length of abduction and experience, they are seen to possess 'bush mentality,' i.e. dangerous, unintelligent, offensive, intolerant, terrible and uncivilised mindsets or behaviour. They are stigmatised because they are seen as having deviated from the home cultural norms of honesty, intelligence, purity, wholeness and attractiveness. This kind of attitude is not unique to communities of northern Uganda as it has happened in eastern Congo where formerly abducted persons are seen as possessing 'military mentality/spirit' and that they can easily get angry or possessed by a demon (Tonheim, 2012; see also Coulter 2009 in Sierra Leone).

The participants' stories suggest two parallel worlds of 'the bush' and 'normal people'. The women who participated in our research felt firmly confined to the 'bush' world by the community. Although they lived in close physical proximity to the 'normal'/never-abducted people, they were singled out as different and 'other'. Their experiences show that formerly abducted persons are deemed as of lower status when others know their history. As a consequence, many find themselves isolated from society and discredited by the un-accepting society. Examination of the issues within the Acholi region demonstrates that three assumptions shape the community's negative perception of formerly abducted women, including:

*Violation of traditional norms*

We found that there was a strong gendered element to stigmatisation in the Acholi region. While we got the impression that both formerly abducted women and men faced stigmatisation because of their past, the experience was particularly severe for women. Annan et al. (2011) found that formerly abducted women in northern Uganda were at least twice as likely to report persistent family and community problems, including stigma. We understood that some of this stigma is embedded in the tension between home and bush spaces highlighted earlier.

Further to the discussion above, women returning home with children fathered by the LRA fighters are viewed as having violated the traditional norms. An Acholi girl giving birth without being legally married runs contrary to Acholi traditional and cultural expectations as this is perceived as a threat to the institution of marriage. The local assumption is that the women were abducted as virgins

and that rebels raped and impregnated them in the bush, a contested space. Accordingly, communities view these women and their children (born out of wedlock) as having violated customary norms of gender, kinship, marriage and patriarchy. Their presence is consequentially interpreted as disrupting and threatening Acholi social order and harmony. Communities view these women through a lens of purity, innocence, moral intelligence and experience. They are judged to have deviated from key personal and feminine qualities and are instead regarded as damaged women with low social status. The women can still contribute to their families and communities, but they are no longer regarded as carriers of the cherished values that Acholi women depend upon and are defined by; peacefulness, purity and innocence. Formerly abducted women have transgressed into the realm of violence, which is an inherently masculine world. Their participation in this world is regarded as a betrayal of social norms that regard women as non-violent and peaceful (Meintjes, Pillay, and Turshen, 2001). As seen from the interviewees' experiences, this perception particularly affects formerly abducted women's attempts to relate with home communities, engage in livelihood recovery activities, or get married (see Kiconco and Nthakomwa, 2018).

#### *Raped and therefore unhealthy and impure*

Research shows that rape continues to be an everyday experience in Acholi society (see Porter, 2017). However, because formerly abducted women's rape happened in the 'the bush,' the experience further complicated their position upon return home. Communities fear formerly abducted women because they are perceived as possessing cosmological consequences for the home space; it becomes imperative that they are instantly cleansed (Kiconco, 2021). They are also seen as possibly infected with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. It is important to note that formerly abducted persons (both women and men) are both locally called *olum-olum*. However, of particular interest is that while formerly abducted men are commonly referred to as 'Kony soldiers', women are described as 'Kony wives', which suggests as victims of sexual violence, including rape and sexual slavery. This observation in the choice of terminology may seem to present negligible and subtle differences, but these gendered stereotypes have left formerly abducted women's identity severely compromised. Finnstrom (2008, p. 193) found that 'in a deeper sense, however, girls are also more often held to be impure sexually and thus morally more dubious, even more dangerous, than boys.'

#### *Potential carriers of Cen*

Violation of customary norms and sexual impurity influence formerly abducted women's lived experiences post-LRA. However, we understood that the tendency by the home community to link them to the LRA killings fuels and sustains community discrimination and stigmatisation. Acholi culture suggests that their forced participation in the killings during their captivity will have contaminated them with *cen*, vengeful spirit of the dead.<sup>4</sup> Liu Institute & Gulu NGO Forum (2005) found that *cen* is viewed as:

[T]he entrance of an angry spirit into the physical body of a person or persons that seeks appeasement, usually in the form of a sacrifice or, in the case of a "wrongful death", compensation and reconciliation between the clan of the offended and offender. The spirit manifests as *cen*, which will 'haunt' the wrongdoers by entering their mind or body in the form of visions and nightmares that may result in mental illness and sickness until the wrong is made right. *Cen* can also send nightmares and sickness to the rest of the family of the individual involved, so threatens not only the individual but the family and community (p. 12).

*Cen* is visible in an individual who participated in an unresolved murder or accidental death or has come across the body of someone killed violently. According to Acholi beliefs, the spirits of such dead people or huge wild animals will haunt the area to avenge their death, so *cen* may possess an individual who passes through such an area (see Liu Institute & Gulu NGO Forum, 2005; Harlacher, 2009). Based on this belief, forests, woodlands and the wilderness in war-affected northern Uganda and South Sudan are perceived to be places inhabited by wandering spirits of the dead. It is believed that roaming and residing in these areas transformed abductees into being potential vehicles of *cen*.

It is difficult to determine how the impact of *cen* varies, but it seems the more *cen* one experiences, the greater its consequence. The latter becomes manifest when the person deemed to have been exposed to *cen* starts behaving in what is considered a socially and morally disturbing way, before becoming violent and eventually lapsing into insanity (see Finnström, 2008, p.160). *Cen* is thought to be contagious and transferable to the second generation of the 'possessed'; for example, a baby can be born with *cen* if either parent was possessed; or, if not exorcised or cleansed, *cen* may be transmitted down the generations of the lineage of a carrier (Liu Institute & Gulu NGO Forum, 2005; Finnström, 2008). *Cen* not only targets someone's personality; but also affects his or her social and

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to human *cen*, often the Acholi concept of *cen* or polluting spirits also include spirits of large wild animals in the bushes and can afflict human beings the same way human *cen* does. Interviews indicated that appropriate spiritual cleansing has to be done to free the afflicted person.

economic wellbeing. We found some women in this study living close to their families, suggesting that family members did not see them as having contaminated them with *cen*. Although we did not document stories of banishment from communities, locals speculated fears of *cen* following formerly abducted persons.

Stigmatisation in this sense targets formerly abducted persons because they are perceived as having contracted the potentially deadly angry spirits and could unknowingly wreak havoc in their families and communities. Seen as potential carriers of 'vengeful spirit', this then translates into behaviours and the belief that they should be avoided so that *cen* does not attack, kill or transfer to the 'normal' individuals.

Responses suggest that culture is both a solution and a problem for formerly abducted persons in the Acholi region. It can be argued that formerly abducted women need their community and culture to achieve successful reintegration (inclusion). Paradoxically, people's resentment and 'inflexible' culture and traditions have been seen to hinder effective and meaningful reintegration into home community among the Acholi people. While there is a general acceptance that the women were recruited against their will, stigmatisation persists and are seen by others as substandard and unworthy.

In summary, returning home means returning to patriarchal communities in the Acholi region where men hold the greatest power, leadership roles, privilege, moral authority and access to resources, including in the family. The research participants were confronted with the culture and lifestyle that attach violence to masculinity. In their communities, they are viewed as having violated traditional gender norms, a threat to the patriarchal order. They are characterised as lacking personal and feminine qualities, stigmatised and classified as having low social status. Notably, because of their past, these women are seen as damaged goods, unfit for consideration into marriage and motherhood (see Apio, 2016; Kiconco, 2021). The stigma comes from bad perception about what will have happened to women in captivity. The unique feature here is that stigma against this population transcends beyond them being victims of the LRA rebellion to being linked to undesirable characteristics from their chapter in captivity.

#### **Stigmatisation as a hindrance to reintegration**

As can be seen from the interviewees' experience, formerly abducted persons feel a need to avoid engaging in community activities because of stigma and the resulting discrimination. Listening to negative responses repeatedly strains relationships with the never-abducted community, negatively

affecting their self-esteem and leading to perpetual unhappiness. Aware of the tendency by friends, families, and home communities to associate formerly abducted persons with the past, coupled with persistent slanders or demeaning reactions, the experiences reinforce their belief that despite attempts to integrate, there exist few prospects of achieving normal life and meaningful reintegration. Through personal and social experiences, formerly abducted persons are highly conscious about stigmatising labels like 'rebel', 'bush behaviour/mentality' or 'angry spirit possessed', among others, coupled with finger-pointing and accusations. Despite not being physically rejected and ejected for returning to their home communities, they know that their society has not fully accepted them. Thus, their participation in community life and activities geared to support reintegration are severely affected.

Interviews suggest that stigma promotion results in emotional distress by generating a sense of guilt that triggers helplessness, loneliness and depression. As formerly abducted persons cannot protect themselves from stigma, this situation creates further a sense of confusion. It was evident from the interviews that stigma is destructive to their psychological recovery and reintegration. Stigmatisation reminds them about life in captivity about which they desperately want to forget. Thus, these experiences from within their communities have become hindrances to building confidence for effective reintegration.

Political and social research literature considers acceptance at the family and community level as an important factor for successful reintegration (see Annan et al., 2008; Betancourt et al., 2008; Anderson, 2018; Boothby, 2006; McKay and Mazurana, 2004). The Acholi interviewees described complete acceptance as being free from stigmatisation, an indicator of successful reintegration (inclusion). One woman in our study remarked that at a point where an individual "no longer experiences any form of stigma, that person will confidently say, 'I have successfully reintegrated.' Don't circumstances and daily encounters, like rudeness, insulting and mocking her for no good reason, seem radically different from that which has the potential to facilitate her recovery and integration process?" A social environment that provides the necessary preconditions for starting to embark on recovery and inclusion seems to be one where stigmatising factors are non-existent. A common feature of the former abductee experiences is that stigma rekindles the traumatic memories of war and captivity.

Progressive reintegration was expected to ensure that the community of origin assisted with transitioning a formerly abducted person from military to civilian life, leading to community inclusion. Interestingly comments from the community would seem to suggest differently. According to the participants in our focus group discussions with the never-abducted community members, successful

reintegration would happen only when formerly abducted persons stop paying much attention to their stigmatisation. The locals implied that formerly abducted persons would always be stigmatised, and their reactions to stigma would determine the speed at which their social reintegration took place. One participant via focus group discussion concluded this argument with the following remark:

The way they [formerly abducted persons] react when they are stigmatised will show if they are fitting well in the community or not. If they take [stigmatising] comments lightly, it will show they are changing attitudes and moving on well. I remember the days when they had just returned from the bush; they reacted with extreme violence. Some used to move around with panga or knife [machete], and if you stigmatised them, they would physically attack you. This is changing, and it shows they are moving away from their bush mentality.

Surprisingly, locals cited that 'lack (end) of reaction by formerly abducted persons to daily abuse' from the wider community would be seen as a litmus test that they are finally ready to engage in meaningful reintegration. The statement suggests a one-way process whereby the formerly abducted must make efforts to reintegrate. Thus, it would seem understandable that one woman remarked, "it was not our choice to be abducted. People behave as if they do not know that. The Government should sensitise people in communities so that they stop stigmatising us." As can be seen, it would seem imperative that home communities avoid stigma-promotion against the formerly abducted persons. Currently, the interface and relationships with formerly abducted persons are characterised by caution and 'being on guard' as each side is unsure about reactions from the other party.

### **Strategies for coping with stigma and engaging in reintegration**

Against the cultural and stigmatising experiences discussed above, formerly abducted women develop a range of strategies to cope and engage in the reintegration process. These are further discussed below.

#### *Information control*

We observed that most formerly abducted persons live in rural communities where everyone knows their neighbours and backgrounds, and the stigma is perpetuated by the community's collective culture. In these settings, a person is not defined as an independent individual/self but in terms of social relations and the groups one functions within from family and clan, spreading out to relationships into the broader community (see p'Bitek, 1986; Finnstrom, 2008; Oloya, 2013). This culture among the Acholi people and lifestyle means that formerly abducted persons are easily identifiable by neighbours.

However, in these settings, some women in our study indicated that they cope with their predicament by controlling information to avoid stigmatisation. They strongly guard against sharing complete stories of their life in captivity with their acquaintances. A reflection on this suggests that we can attribute some of these behaviours to self-stigma, the worry of being heavily stigmatised or simply an inability to respond to stigma promotion. Perhaps one interviewee's remarks are useful in articulating this point: "based on my experiences within this community; I often bend my head down in shame when someone asks me about my bush experience, [...] or every time I hear people talking about us [formerly abducted persons]." This observation seems consistent with what Annan et al., (2009) found that "when [formerly abducted persons] experienced problems with neighbours or other community members, most of them described reacting passively—staying silent or walking away" (p.650).

#### *Urbanisation as a strategy for recovery and reintegration*

Further to the above, other unconventional strategies are also employed as coping strategies, including relocating to new environments and, in particular, urban centres, where formerly abducted persons are unlikely to be identified and stigmatised. Urban living was identified as providing opportunities to conceal true identities safely, thus minimising the possibility of being discredited. As residents in urban areas tend to come from all over Uganda, in contrast, to close-knit communities' characteristic of rural Acholi, this environment provides some hope for recovery. Thus, 'recovery by urbanising' becomes a reintegration strategy for formerly abducted women. Urban lives enable them to move around freely, just like the freedom exercised by the never-abducted community members. At the time of the interviews, it was disclosed that Lamunu and her husband Okello (both formerly abducted) had left their communities and relocated to the outskirts of Gulu town, where their past is unknown. Because people do not know their true identities and their backgrounds are unknown, they are in a position to embark on the process of recovery and personal healing successfully. Lamunu remarked, "I like sitting where people are gathered. I hear many bad comments about us [former abductees] [...] it tells me that we are still stigmatised and discriminated." It is clear from such examples that the collective life prevalent in the Acholi culture and traditions, though a key source of security and protection to some, is unable to provide the solace and environment for meaningful recovery and reintegration.

#### *Secrecy as a reintegration strategy*

Secrecy as a coping mechanism has been associated with women combatants who secretly find their way back to their communities, perhaps moving in with family members, friends, or sympathetic adults,

and continue to keep a low profile (see McKay and Mazurana, 2004). However, Acholi findings indicate that even women who are 'formally' returned to their communities of origin prefer to subsequently relocate to new places to practice this secrecy coping strategy. Secrecy was identified in the interviews as a common strategy for coping and dealing with stigma. Instead of actively and outwardly reacting to stigma experiences, formerly abducted women concentrate on managing the information about them that may be associated with stigmatic attributes that may lead to them being exposed and subsequently rejected. They must, however, live in secrecy and the paranoia of their true identity being revealed as one of the participants expressed, repeatedly at the end of our interview: "You [interview team] should not tell community members that we [interviewed women] were abducted because they will start ill talking about us. I have never told anybody in this area [marital home] that I am from the bush." This experience goes some way in indicating the level of dislike of formerly abducted women by a section of home communities and the negative impacts disclosure may entail.

#### *Reporting their stigmatisers to authorities*

Some women in our research reported that when stigmatisation gets worse, and they fear for their lives or being judged for exercising a 'bush mentality', they report their stigmatisers to local authorities rather than standing up to them. Twenty-eight-year-old Akumu was abducted at the age of nine for nine years. She explained this vulnerable position in which many of these women find themselves post-LRA. She said, "I am a peaceful person. Suppose someone tries to provoke me with insults, asking for a fight or quarrel. In that case, I keep quiet or will go to the local leader so that the community does not claim that I am aggressive and offensive because I was in the bush, and that I have a bush mentality." However, some other women who reported their stigmatisation to authorities expressed disappointment with the local justice system. They conveyed frustration, as one woman reported that, "the challenge remains to get someone who can help me get justice so that those behaving unkindly to me are punished. When we [formerly abducted persons] report our cases to sub-county authorities, we do not get justice."

#### *Silence as recovery and reintegration strategy*

Silence was another strategy utilised by the participants to respond to stigmatisation. Many said in most cases, they simply ignore their stigmatisers. It was reported that women often react meekly rather than aggressively and thus avoid confrontations. Yet, silence itself was subject to misconceptions within and by the wider 'normal' home community. Based on her experiences, Acen reported that adopting silence as a strategy ended up with neighbours wrongly concluding that "now *cen* has come upon her; she

might harm people.” Her experience illustrates that adopting silence has not sufficiently proved an effective strategy for protecting former abductee women and, let alone, contributing to the process of reintegration.

#### *Adopting solitary life as a strategy for recovery and reintegration*

In addition to silence, interviews suggest that some formerly abducted women find/ seek solace in self-isolation as a means to escape stigmatisation. Consider this experience:

All I am doing now is to concentrate on things I can do with minimal interaction with others. I isolate myself from those abusive people. I no longer attend some of the community gatherings. I prefer to spend my time alone in my home. To avoid being a bother to the sub-county leaders, I have also stopped visiting them to follow up on my complaints.

Confined to their families, the formerly abducted women stayed away from community gatherings or events that would normally provide the necessary environment to bring people closer together. The isolation experiences are perhaps best encapsulated through the twenty-year-old, Aneno, who was abducted at age eleven for ten years. She left the LRA with two children fathered by a rebel man. Back home, Aneno relies on isolation as a means of coping with stigma from her community. She only leaves her father’s compound on Sundays for worship and prayers at church. Even of more interest and worth noting is that in an attempt to avoid mixing with her community, she does not attend her local church but walks for almost two hours to the neighbouring town.

#### **Concluding remarks**

This paper concludes that stigmatisation is a persistent challenge facing formerly abducted women as they seek to engage in the process of recovery and reintegration into post-conflict northern Uganda. The research found that stigmatisation takes different forms and constitutes perhaps the single most challenging barrier to recovery and post-conflict social reintegration. Stigma hinders formerly abducted women from accessing opportunities available within their home communities. Notably, stigmatisation arising from culture and traditions adversely affect opportunities for developing and nurturing meaningful social relationships. Participation by formerly abducted women is severely compromised, reducing their hope and prospects significantly. Our findings indicate that factors leading to their stigmatisation are unique as they challenge common conventions that reintegration and repatriation are critical, necessary and a solution post-displacement.

If not adequately addressed, individual rights will continue to be violated in communities of northern Uganda. It would seem that societal culture can be a paradox; on the one hand providing an environment to protect sections of a community, and on the other, actively excluding some. Within their daily experiences, formerly abducted women have had to contend with negative stereotypes and prejudices that extends to their marriage prospects and their attempts to form important and influential networks that can benefit them as they seek to reintegrate into the post-conflict society. From this research, it would seem that completely meaningful and productive reintegration (inclusion) for formerly abducted persons is a challenging prospect in that the cultural environment is not always fully conducive to successful recovery and reintegration.

Stigmatisation based on some of the cultural values and traditions has steadily pushed formerly abducted women further away and into the margins of the Acholi society. Since stigmatisation was shown to be heavily rooted in the collective culture of the Acholi, meaningful and productive recovery and reintegration may need to focus on addressing the structural causes of stigmatisation, marginalisation, discrimination and vulnerability. Furthermore, a deeper appreciation of societal culture, effective legislation and advocacy can be an effective way of realising protection for formerly abducted women.

### Correspondence

**Allen Kiconco** Department of African Studies and Anthropology, the University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2TT, United Kingdom. Email: [kiconcoaa@gmail.com](mailto:kiconcoaa@gmail.com)

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