

**What's Happening to Uganda's Girls?  
The Effects of War on Youth Culture in Northern Uganda**

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## **Introduction**

War, or violent conflict, has a negative effect on societies. Children are particularly vulnerable, as their development, childhood, and adolescence have been significantly shaped by the influences of war. These influences, including social, economic, and psychological factors, have significantly impacted the culture of young people. Avruch (1998) defines culture as “a derivative of individual experience, something learned or created by individuals themselves or passed on to them socially by contemporaries or ancestors.” Culture is not simply based on religion, ethnicity, language, and/or customs, as much dialogue supports. Instead, it is non-homogenous, dynamic psychological and social experiences that are shared throughout a population (Avruch, 1998). Consequently, youth culture is “socially constructed in relation to culture itself, is the creation of people, and is defined by who has power and who does not” (Goldstein, 2006). It is a subset of other cultures and experiences within a society, a product of internal and external forces that are particular to children in an environment (Steinberg, 2006). As with other cultures, youth culture is characterized by its ability to shape interactions among a portion of the population as well as be shaped by the popular culture at large. Therefore, youth culture in conflict zones is strongly shaped by war, or more specifically the culture of war that exists in areas of violence (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2005). Youth culture can be understood by observing the impacts that war and its subsequent culture have on children, their development, and their relationships within a community.

Children, defined as individuals ages 18 and below, account for more than 50% of the total population across the African continent (Machel, 2001). Thus, the effects of war on this group deserve particular attention. As a result of war, more than 2 million children died in the 1990s and over 20 million children have become displaced from their homes (Machel, 2001). Child soldiers, “any child—boy or girl—under the age of 18, who is compulsorily, forcibly or voluntarily recruited or used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defense units or other armed groups,” are a dramatic product of violent conflict. At any given point in time, 300,000 children are child soldiers worldwide,

violating policies such as the International Labor Organization Convention 182 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Machel, 2001). Northern Uganda, experiencing an ongoing conflict, strongly illustrates the devastating effects of war on children, as more than 50,000 child abductions have increased the number of child soldiers (Poole, Bailey, & Russell, 2006). Both male and female child soldiers incur the consequences of illegally acting as combatants, messengers, porters, and sexual servants (Gow, Vandergrift, & Wanduragala, 2000; Twum-Danso, 2003).

In discussing the effects of war on children and youth culture, however, we find that the effects of females are often not acknowledged. Ramsbotham and colleagues (2005) identify that examining conflict and conflict resolution “in its development, conceptualization and methods, [has] been gender-blind.” Additionally, understanding that “gender, which is taken to mean the historical and social construction of role differences between men and women, implies a relationship of power, which has a pervasive effect on all areas of behaviour and in all social institutions and practices” to properly acknowledge and explore the effects of conflict on this crucial and particularly affected population (Ramsbotham et al., 2005).

This paper examines the role that war plays in shaping youth culture, particularly that of young girls, in Northern Uganda. Because youth culture is the conglomeration and interaction of social, economic, psychological, and cultural experiences, this question can be explored through understanding how violent conflict influences safety, education, livelihood, health, and the psychosocial dynamics of children. While not the only determinant, war is the most important and

under-investigated influence shaping youth culture, especially for females, in Northern Uganda.

### **Background : Uganda, War, and the Northern Region**

Since independence from Britain in 1962, the Republic of Uganda has faced both turmoil and success. The first 20 years of independence were

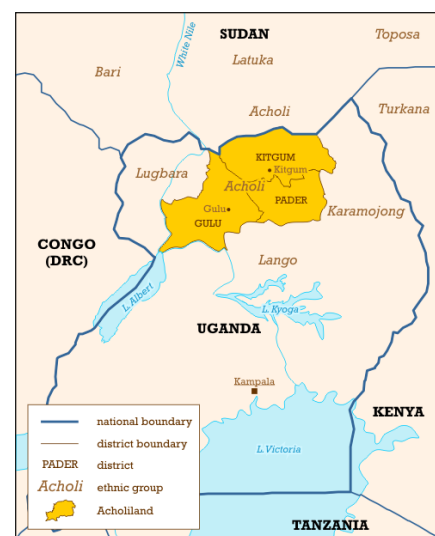


**Map 1**

characterized by the tyrant and militant regimes of General Idi Amin Dada and Former President Milton Obote, resulting in political repression, ethnic discrimination, human rights abuses, and more than 600,000 deaths (Mutibwa, 1992). Since 1986, current President Yoweri Museveni, whose right to power was through the support of a military coup, has reversed the general warfare that Uganda had experienced and has encouraged economic growth, significant health improvements (most notably through a drastic regression of HIV/AIDS rates in the 1990s), and—until recently—increased security and stability.

While the 1980s saw the improvement of the Republic of Uganda, it also saw the destruction of its Northern regions due to armed conflict. Scholars including Mutibwa (1992) find that origins of the war extend to the politics of corruption and ethnic and economic discrimination that have occurred in Uganda since independence in 1960. Others, such as Behrend (1999), focus on a Holy movement that emerged in 1986 and placed the civil war in the Northern districts of Gulu, Pader, and Kitgum, known as Acholiland due to the overwhelming concentration of Uganda’s 4% Acholi ethnic group (see Map 2) (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001).

**Map 2**



Despite the variations on how conflict in the Northern Uganda regions of Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader commenced, the devastations, deaths, and impacts of the war remain uncontested. The predominant fighting forces of the war include:

- the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel army in Northern Uganda, created and led by Joseph Kony since 1987 with a mission to oust Museveni’s government;
- the Ugandan People’s Defense Forces (UPDF), the government army, controlled by President Museveni;
- the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), the primary rebel group located in southern Sudan, supported by Uganda under Museveni;
- and the Sudanese government military, led by President Omar Al-Bashir of the National Islamic Front in Sudan and former supporter of the LRA (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001).

In 1986, Alice Auma, who was believed to be directed by the Holy Spirit Lakwena, led a popular rebellion against “Evil” in the UPDF, with much support coming from Northern ethnic groups, including the Acholi people (Behrend, 1999). As Auma’s Holy Spirit Movement began to fall apart, Joseph Kony emerged, calling himself “holy” as well in order to generate support for the LRA movement against Uganda’s national government. Since 1987, the LRA has not been the only rebellion army present throughout Uganda. It has, however, been known for destructive guerilla warfare, destroying communities and committing gross human rights abuses throughout Northern Uganda.

While the LRA declares its mission as one of political justice, seeking to oust Museveni’s existing government and thus bringing prosperity to the forgotten Northern region, their devastating attacks on the people of Acholiland have created unrest and insecurity for more than 20 years. The conflict has cost Northern Uganda over US\$1.33 billion, with more than a quarter of the cost reflected in loss of livelihood through agriculture and livestock and another 29% in military expenditures (Dorsey & Opeitum, 2002). In 2004, more than 90% of Northern Ugandans had fled their homes, resulting in the displacement of over 1.6 million as a consequence of the conflict, resulting in extreme poverty and dependency on Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps and foreign assistance programs (Jones, 2004). Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall (2005) would call this experience of war a “war culture,” where violence has become synonymous with power and all civilians—regardless of age, gender, or vulnerability—have become targets. The result of war culture in areas such as Northern Uganda has created “states of terror which penetrate the entire fabric of grassroots social relations...as a means of social control,” intentionally “destroy[ing] the normal meanings that define and guide daily life” (Ramsbotham et al., 2005). Women have been extremely vulnerable, as sexual violence has increased tremendously as a result of conflict (“UGANDA: Poverty driving child sex abuse in the north,” 2008). Children have been most severely affected by war, as an estimated 12,000 to 50,000 children have been abducted since the beginning of rebellion, destroying families and further disrupting everyday life (Poole et al., 2006). This environment has been devastating for girls.

## **Literature Review**

Until the 1990s, the effects of violent conflict on children were not acknowledged. Today, however, children and violent conflict are growing areas of literature. Graca Machel's (2001) *The Impact of War on Children* is one of the foundational literatures in the effects of conflict on children. Through a comprehensive analysis discussing child soldiers, health and HIV/AIDS, sexual violence against women, and the psychosocial consequences of war, Machel's report for the United Nations addresses the major areas that future studies have built on. Jo Boyden and Joanna de Berry (2004) also illustrate a general overview of the effects of war on children in conflict zones worldwide. The Women's Commission for Refugee Women & Children (2001) and the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) (2007) expound on such studies, focusing specifically on the experiences of adolescents and women, respectively, in the war-torn zones of Northern Uganda. These sources identify the effects of war on children in different categories, including economic, social, political, cultural, and psychological consequences. This same framework will be adopted in the following research.

Additional research has focused on specific subsets of child and youth populations that are affected by war. Afua Twum-Danso (2003) examines both male and female child soldiers throughout Africa, acknowledging that this portion of the population has much to overcome in order to contribute to a peaceful future. Jimmie Briggs (2005) and Robby Muhumuza (1994) provide personal accounts of child soldiers and their experiences to illustrate the effects that war has had on children in the military. Eunice Apio (2007) explores a lesser discussed area of children affected by war, focusing on children in Northern Uganda who are born from rape (particularly by teen mothers who were abducted into the Lords Resistance Army) and the challenges they must overcome. The importance of understanding gender-based experiences has more recently entered scholarship (Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) & Defense for Children International-Canada, 2007; Machel, 2001; McKay, 2005; Twum-Danso, 2003; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children,

2001). Sources such as McKay (2005), ACORD (2007), and Twum-Danso (2003) acknowledge that male and females, particularly child soldiers or those who face sexual violence, experience and respond to war differently. Drawing on such research, the subsequent paper will focus on child soldiers, acknowledging that the consequences and experiences of war may differ from one child to another based on gender as well as other factors.

Finally, this paper discusses youth culture, a relatively new concept that is underexplored, particularly in relation to war. Youth culture is a socially-constructed subset of popular culture, formed by the shared experiences of children and adolescents within a society (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2005; De Boeck & Honwana, 2005; Durham, 2005; Goldstein, 2006; Machel, 2001; Rabwoni, 2002). Steinberg, Parmar, and Richard (2007) compile a series of articles that explore the definition and realization of youth culture, focusing on North America, as much research does. The works of Amit-Talai and Wulff (1995), Pilkington (1994), Ross and Rose (1994), and Skelton and Valentine (1998) further contribute to identifying a politicized youth culture as rebellious and resistant (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005). Even fewer authors focus on youth culture in Africa and/or violence zones (Abdullah, 2005; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2005; De Boeck & Honwana, 2005; Durham, 2005). These authors acknowledge the complexity of appropriately examining youth culture throughout the African continent, draw inferences from Western-based examples, and attempt to draw unique conclusions within the context of different African countries. While particularly using the flexible definitions of youth culture provided by Steinberg (2007) and Goldstein (2007), this paper will illustrate how youth culture has been affected by war. This research will also, however, incorporate perspectives on Acholi culture prior to war, such as provided by Jalobo Jacan Ngomlokojo (1999), to more thoroughly identify the effects of war and war culture on Acholi youth culture.

### **Methodology**

This research asks: how has the Lord Resistance Army (LRA)-led war affected youth culture in Acholiland? To explore this question, the paper will first conceptualize Acholi youth culture as a

subset of Acholi culture prior to war, using Ngomlokojo's (1999) description of traditional Acholi culture as well as documented personal accounts. Then, using categories of the effects of war on children outlined by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2001), Machel (2001), and ACORD (2007), this paper will explore the economic, social, and cultural consequences of war on children. These indicators will include safety, education, livelihood, health, and psychosocial consequences, all of which were identified as important by both participants and outsiders analyzing the war. Finally, through understanding the effects of conflict on children, this paper will deduce the implications that the war in Northern Uganda has on youth culture. Both primary and secondary sources—including books, articles, documentaries, and testimonies—will be used in this research, particularly given that youth culture in Northern Uganda has yet to be thoroughly examined. Literature used is not exclusive to the case of Uganda, due to the limited availability of resources and the insight that can be drawn from similar cases.

### **Pre-War Acholi Culture**

With the war in Acholiland incurring since the late 1980s, and since much of Uganda's independence was characterized by war prior to that time, it is difficult to imagine Acholi youth culture prior to war. In fact, relatively few sources describe traditional, pre-war Acholi culture (Ngomlokojo, 1999). It is important, however, to understand that violence, instability, insecurity, illiteracy, and poverty were not characteristic of Acholi life until the war began in 1987. Prior to the ongoing war, Acholi culture was epitomized by a stable familial and communal lifestyle. Marriage was an honored tradition between a man and a woman after following a traditional process of courtship, and families remained together (Ngomlokojo, 1999). As Reverend Carlos Rodriguez, Catholic missionary in Northern Uganda, describes, "children were taught to respect their parents and the homestead was the place where you found security, affection and a healthy environment to lead a simple, happy life" (Rodríguez).

For youth, education was, and still remains today, an important achievement, through both informal and formal means (Larok, Akera, Akera, & Okullo, 2000). *Wang oo*, or informal education through storytelling around a fire, was central to creating community and passing down lessons on Acholi culture and tradition (Rodríguez). Music and dance were also important traditions through which messages were conveyed. Complimentarily, particularly in the post-colonial era, formal education has been recognized as the key to future success (Larok et al., 2000). Youth have thus pursued schooling in order to improve their lives and seek a non-subsistence future.

Before the war, Acholi culture was characterized by its independence. George Dider, a 72 year old Ugandan, reminisces about the economic independence and livelihood the Acholi used to have:

We used to be free to move and spend our time rearing our livestock. We never went without. Now, all these proud people can do is farm small vegetable crops on the edge of the camp. But it's not enough; and they're dependent on handouts from relief groups. Acholi men once held their wealth in land and animals. But they have been left with neither (Lock, 2008).

In addition to an agrarian lifestyle, Acholi culture was characterized by roles for every member of the society, based on age and gender (Ngomlokojo, 1999). Men were the breadwinners, socialized to be strong, hardworking, and the defenders of self, family, and community (Kavuma, 2006). Young boys were taught to follow such traditions, acting as leaders, providers, and protectors (Larok et al., 2000). The women “though strong, hardworking and courageous - were generally trained to be submissive, caring wives, making sure the family ate enough quality food” (Kavuma, 2006). Whether married or single, a woman or a girl, Acholi females took care of the household and harvested and cooked to ensure their families were fed (Ngomlokojo, 1999). Acholi elders, or *ladit kaka*, were well-respected personalities with significant power within their clans. They presided over rituals and Acholi traditions while ensuring strong links between chiefs and their respective communities (Ngomlokojo, 1999).

Finally, Acholi culture had rituals to respond to war. Women and children, for example, were always protected, never being targets during times of war (Kavuma, 2006). Death was a well-understood concept in Acholi society, and those who killed faced *culu kwar*, or the possibility of

“compensat[ion], reveng[e], or aveng[e]” (Ngomlokojo, 1999). Even more central to Acholi culture were the concepts of peace and reconciliation (Tom, 2006). The Acholi believe that bad behavior causes the “living dead” or “divine spirits” to send misfortune, and consequently believe that, through ritual, a restoration of social relationships can occur.

### **A New Youth Culture: Effects of War on Children**

The effects of war on Acholi youth culture, particularly on child soldiers and females during their service and throughout the remainder of their youth, are severe. These influences have more than just an impact on the child; they have a lasting impression on how youth in Northern Uganda will experience their childhood and adolescence. Youth in the Northern Ugandan regions have articulated that “a combination of war, massive displacement, HIV/AIDS, lack of development and poverty has created a world of unimaginable misery for young people” (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). These miseries are unimaginable because they were not characteristic of Acholi youth culture prior to war. The effects of violent conflict on youth include, but are not limited to, insecurity, a lack of education, diminished livelihood, poor health, and negative psychosocial consequences. Understanding these consequences and how they are interrelated reveals a reimagining of Acholi youth culture.

#### **Insecurity**

As a result of guerrilla warfare, security has become a serious concern for children in Northern Uganda. The Convention on the Rights of the Child indicates that children have the right to feel safe and secure in their own environments (Gow et al., 2000). The ensuing warfare, however, has created a threatening environment of constant terror that affects youth, causing physical as well as psychological consequences. While the LRA are often the largest perpetrators of behavior that encourage fear and the threat of safety, UPDF soldiers stationed to protect civilians in Northern Uganda have also exploited vulnerable children and contributed to security concerns. Additionally, the insecurity felt throughout

the Northern Ugandan regions has also resulted in violence perpetrated by other community members (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001).

### *Abduction*

In Northern Uganda, one of the most profound fears has been the forcible recruitment of child soldiers through abduction. Generally conducted by the LRA, abductions in Northern Uganda are estimated to include no less than 11,000 children and as many as 50,000 (Poole et al., 2006; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). Abduction, referring to the illegal capture of children, is often accompanied by brutality, forced combat, labor, and sexual violence (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). Boys and girls live in constant fear that they may be abducted or re-abducted and subjected to abuses and possibly death.

Thousands of Ugandan children sleep in guarded bus parks, “protected” locations including IDP camps, and even in the wilderness surrounding their homes in hopes of avoiding abduction. Girls, such as Briggs (2005) describes in the story of abduction at the Sacred Heart Girls Boarding School in 1987, 1988, and 1991 and the documentary *War Dance* (2007) reveal as well, are similarly kidnapped, brutalized and forced to both engage in and observe the atrocities committed. As the interviews illustrate, the consequences apart from acute and constant fear, include depression, anxiety, nightmares, and an ability to act strong and resilient, as appropriate in Acholi culture (Fine & Nix, 2007; Macksoud, 1993; Poole et al., 2006; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001).

### *Sexual Violence*

Sexual violence, defined as “any act, attempt or threat of a sexual nature that results, or is likely to result, in physical, psychological and emotional harm,” is also a serious safety concern in the conflict region of Northern Uganda (Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) & Defense for Children International-Canada, 2007). During conflict, sexual violence is often more pronounced because it becomes systematized and normalized. Whether through assault, rape,

exploitation, and even non-physical contact, sexual violence is used as a means of instilling fear in vulnerable populations, especially but not exclusively women and children, and serves to disenfranchise affected communities at even deeper levels (Machel, 2001). While both boys and girls acknowledge sexual violence as among the top 5 security concerns, girls identify “rape and defilement” as the most pressing issue (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001).

In Northern Uganda, rape and forced marriage are among the most commonly discussed forms of sexual violence. Former child soldiers express the normality of abducted girls becoming “wives” of LRA militants. Even those who did not become wives were forced to engage in sexual activity for fear of being killed if they refused (Briggs, 2005). Janet A., a 16-year-old former child soldier, was forced to be a rebel leader’s “wife.” “During the day he would treat me as a prisoner,” Janet describes, “but at night he would want to treat me as a wife and would force me to love [engage in sexual activity] him” (Muhumuza, 1994). Estella O., age 15, describes that “in the bush camp I was allocated to a man to become his second wife. All the girls were allocated to men to be their husbands by force. They didn’t care whether he was too big or old or sick; they just forced you to be his wife. If you refused to show respect to your husband you would be beaten thoroughly well until you were forced to accept him” (Muhumuza, 1994). Even when physical violence was not engaged in, girls are denigrated and exploited through other means. Molly A. watched the murders of several children because of the bright, easily visible colors of their shirt. Rather than being killed herself, Molly was asked to remove her shirt and “to walk bare chested in the tall grass and thorns the whole day” (Muhumuza, 1994).

Finally, Doreen, a victim who was kidnapped as a child, graphically describes her experience of rape and pregnancy. After the 40 female and male abductees were separated, the LRA soldiers identified non-married girls, raped them, and slept with them for the remainder of the night. Doreen describes that:

The next day some of the girls were not in a position to walk, but for fear of their lives we had to. We started the journey the next day, but we were too hungry, because we were not given food the previous day. They said we were captives and that is what is done to newly abducted people. We moved for some good miles that I cannot estimate but I guess it was over 40 miles. When night came it was even worse for the girls now.

We were divided into three different groups. So when you change position a different man rapes you. Different men raped all the girls. I must confess over five men raped me in a period of only one week. Some times [sic] you are raped by two men in one night. Just imagine such an inhuman situation. One month after all the raping my period was no more. I thought it was because of the bad feeding and the environment. But the second month came and the same thing. It was then that I realised I must be pregnant. I became so depressed because I could not tell who impregnated me because different men raped me. I felt like dying, killing myself, but there was no way, because we were heavily guarded (Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) & Defense for Children International-Canada, 2007).

The consequences of such sexual abuses include psychological, social, and physical threats.

Health-wise, children and youth face significant exposure to sexually-transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS, a number of other infections, and the possibility of teen pregnancy. Often, during abduction and as a result of poor infrastructure during times of conflict, children are unable to receive appropriate medical treatment. Some children are exposed to homemade contraceptives, such as *carabas*, or plastic bags found on the side of the road and used/reused as condoms, and self-abortion that significantly increase health risks (Poole et al., 2006). Additionally, sexual violence has profound psychological and social effects. Inability to discuss the effects of sexual exploitation, social ostracization a consequence of no longer being a virgin or bearing an illegitimate child, and depression severely affect the mentality and development of child and youth victims of sexual violence (Machel, 2001).

While Acholi youth culture does not accept fear from abduction and sexual violence, it certainly expects these abuses. A culture once known for its safety and security organized around strong family units is now characterized by broken homes and uprooted families. The government's attempt to provide increased safety, through mandated placement of families from their home communities into IDP camps, has unfortunately served to exacerbate insecurity and instability. Acholi youth culture, as a result of war, has become synonymous with terror.

## Lack of Education

Education is acknowledged as one of most effective tools for development (Plan Ltd., 2008). Kofi Anan specifies that “There is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls. It is “vital to the future prospects and development of children across the globe” and creates a foundation for which individuals and societies can economically and socially prosper (Plan Ltd., 2008). Additionally, education is described to provide health benefits. The Global Campaign for Education highlights that if all children completed primary school, “the economic impact of HIV/AIDS could be greatly reduced and around 700,000 cases of HIV in young adults could be prevented each year” (UNAIDS, UNFPA, & UNIFEM, 2007). More than 100 million children, 62 million of which are girls, are currently not in school, however, violating a fundamental right of children worldwide.

As a result of war, formal education has been negatively impacted. Schools have been destroyed, teachers and students have been abducted and killed, and the accessibility of education has become limited (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). Even when individuals are able to find a school, instability and a lack of resources results in overcrowded conditions and difficulty in attaining one’s education. The consequences include not only higher rates of illiteracy, ensuing poverty, and further economic despair; these effects extend to increased gender inequality and the loss of a safety zone, an environment that allows children to hope for an improved future and maintain a “normal” childhood (Machel, 2001).

While the limited number and distant locations of schools continue to threaten education, one of the most pronounced threats in Northern Uganda is insecurity (Larok et al., 2000). Schools in the rural environments of Northern Uganda are often far and few, particularly as a result of war. However, the constant threat of the LRA and other militant groups legitimizes the concern for abduction on the migration to and from school (Poole et al., 2006; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). Additionally, schools are often easy targets during times of conflict. The Sacred Heart Girls Boarding School was victim to at least three attacks, many killings, and the abduction of more

than 50 students (Briggs, 2005). St. Mary's College, another school in Northern Uganda, was attacked by the LRA resulting in 139 student abductions in one single night (Briggs, 2005). In addition to the threat of insecurity, the school buildings were destroyed, resources were damaged, and in some circumstances students, teachers, and administration members were killed. Larok and colleagues (2000) identify that there is an inverse relationship between warfare and education and development in Northern Uganda. They also acknowledge a decline in the success rates of students, particularly in primary and secondary schools, and lower levels of attaining higher education (Larok et al., 2000).

Education for children is further affected by a child's inability to focus in school or prioritize school over other aspects of daily life. Some cannot afford the costs associated with school, although Uganda's Universal Primary Education bill, in practice, was designed to alleviate the burden of up to four children in each household (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). Others, often females, are not permitted to attend school or feel they cannot attend due to the necessity to help their family raise income to survive. Those who even continue to attend face extreme fatigue, possibly a result of sleeping in hiding and commuting long distances; as many as 40,000 children in Northern Uganda are night commuters, sleeping in communal settings away from their families for safety and migrating to school each day (Latigo, 2008). Lack of focus from hunger, improperly treated illness, and constant fear continue to destroy a healthy and productive learning environment (Machel, 2001).

The rebel-led war in Northern Uganda has created additional psychological and social barriers for youth in their pursuit of education. Because their education is disrupted when abducted, returning to school after escape or release provides challenges that some children are unable to overcome. Often, these young people are the oldest in their respective classes, which results in low self-esteem, teasing, and lower success rates in school (Machel, 2001; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). At least 30% of women who return from abduction have become mothers as consequence of sexual violence, and without proper financial, physical, and emotional support for

themselves and their children, they are unable to return to school (Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) & Defense for Children International-Canada, 2007). Stigma and discrimination are particularly strong consequences of war that disrupt the education of youth. When paired with improper educational support—especially for IDPs or child soldiers who return disabled—a child’s education is compromised.

As a result of war, a culture that was once shaped by educational attainment is now shaped by a longing to pursue an education. Attending school is still extremely important to youth in Northern Uganda. However, because of the conflict, formal education often manifests itself as an inaccessible goal. Even when children are able to pursue their professed desire for education, the quality of instruction has declined as a consequence of war, as has children’s performances (Larok et al., 2000). From 1987, shortly after the start of the LRA-led war, to 1995, drop out rates and performance levels on the Primary Level Examination were lower in the North than throughout greater Uganda; “the total percentage drop and improvement in Gulu and Kitgum was 32.2% and 17.1% against the national drop and rise of 32.1% and 21.3% respectively” (Larok et al., 2000). Youth culture has thus become characterized by a yearning for a quality education that is often not possible to achieve.

### Diminished Livelihood

As a result of conflict, “adolescents bear the heaviest economic burdens” (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). These economic burdens precede the LRA-led rebellion and are actually among the driving forces of rebel attacks in Northern Uganda. The consequence of deprivation in Uganda since independence had significant effects, including high levels of poverty and illiteracy, throughout the country. Since Museveni’s regime in 1986, however, the Northern region of Uganda has remained the poorest region in Uganda (*Continuing Conflict In Acholiland: An Objective Civil Society Organisation Perspective*, 2002; Dorsey & Opeitum, 2002). Poor infrastructure and limited development engage in a vicious cycle with warfare, preventing the region from any sort of economic improvement. Consequently all inhabitants, particularly the most

vulnerable populations such as children, are affected.

As a result of war, many children are unable to attain the basic necessities of life: food, water, and shelter. This occurs because of destroyed land and decreasing number of livestock, making the Acholi agricultural way of life nearly impossible (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). Even in IDP camps whose intent is to provide security and normalcy in Acholiland, the agrarian lifestyle is difficult to maintain. Additionally, children are heavily relied upon to support their families as well as themselves, changing the traditional social roles for Acoli youth. Children have a lack of skills and training, however, a consequence of the inaccessibility of education, which results in desperate measures to attain income.

The effects of warfare on economic livelihood have been profound in “voluntarily” encouraging children to enter war (Rabwoni, 2002). Rebecca Symington, UNICEF protection officer in Gulu district, indicates that “The poverty and insecurity in Northern Uganda could make children vulnerable to recruitment into the armed forces. Many children see fighting as a form of employment and see the carrying of arms as the only way to protect themselves and others” (“UGANDA: Insecurity, poverty leaves northern children vulnerable to military recruitment - UNICEF,” 2004). “Voluntary” recruitment is thus the desperate response of children to the devastating pressures of war (Machel, 2001).

The necessity to attain livelihood further affects females. Marriage, a tradition once celebrated in the Acholi Culture of Northern Uganda, is now used as a means for families to make an income. “Early marriage [is seen] as a ‘solution’ to economic deprivation and insecurity, because ‘they need money’ one girl from Gulu district explained” (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). Girls may be married off between the ages of 15 and 18, but sometimes as young as 12 years old, in exchange for a financial package by the groom’s family. Unfortunately, girls are not always mentally or physically prepared to enter into such unions (“UGANDA: Poverty driving child sex abuse in the north,” 2008). Marriage as a means of livelihood is not always perpetrated by the

child's family. Janet A., a former child soldier, constantly feared for her life and well-being after entering back into every day life. "I thought of running away from home. I found a man who was willing to hide me in a village far from my home where the rebels would not catch me. Though I did not want to get married yet, and moreover to a man with another wife, I did not have an alternative" (Muhumuza, 1994). Unlike the sacred union in traditional Acholi culture, marriage has become a desperate means of attaining physical and economic security in the war-torn northern regions.

Additionally, young women face the threat of prostitution as a means of achieving economic livelihood. A 15-year-old girl in Gulu district describes how she solicits herself in bars, hoping to generate enough income to survive. "My parents are dead; they were killed by the rebels and this is the only way for my survival. I earn between 5,000 shillings [US\$3] and 8,000 shillings [\$5] a day from clients in night clubs and bars" ("UGANDA: Poverty driving child sex abuse in the north," 2008). In some cases, vulnerable women, particularly orphans and displaced girls, engage in sexual activity in exchange for food, clothing, and shelter (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). The consequence of such behavior has additional affects on the psychological and social well-being of children as well as potential health concerns and pregnancy.

Because of the effects of war on the livelihood of youth, their roles in society have significantly changed. While traditionally the job of the man of the house, providing for oneself and ones family has extended to all household members, including the children. Acholi youth culture prior to war understood fundamentals within Acholi culture, including the role of a girl and boy and traditional courtship processes. Presently, war continues to lead to a degradation of traditional values and social responsibilities, forcing children to resort to any means possible to attain basic needs of life. Marriage, traditionally characterized by slow and careful courtships and rituals, has been expedited and used as a means of income. Prostitution has become a viable form of employment, allowing young women to practice behaviors that were once taboo and unrespectable within Acholi culture. Furthermore, children have "voluntarily" enlisted in the armed forces to provide income and protect their communities.

Rabwoni (2002) reveals that prior to becoming a child soldier, violence and war was a romanticized concept. He reveals that many children, especially those who “voluntarily” enter into the military, believe the experience of war will resemble its depiction in films. The reality, however, “has a permanent impact on you, and affects how you relate to others,” developing a “harshness” that often remains characteristic of a former child soldiers (Rabwoni, 2002). War has lost its romance within Acholi youth culture and has created an atmosphere where desperate times warrant desperate actions.

### Poor Health

Poor health is a serious consequence of war, particularly the conflict in Northern Uganda. Complicated by low levels of education, brutal experiences when abducted, and risky behavior in hopes of attaining the basic necessities of life, health is severely affected. Additionally, with poor infrastructure, limited health care facilities, and difficulty accessing the few services that exist, the health of children—another fundamental right—is severely compromised.

Malnutrition, food shortages, and hunger are common health conditions that result from war. As a result of poor diet and a lack of nutrients, individuals face nutritional deficiencies which lead to additional health concerns (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). Lack of Vitamin A, for example, causes deficiencies that can result in blindness. Iodine deficiency can lead to mental retardation. Malnutrition is particularly a concern for children under five-years-old, causing increased illness and twice the likelihood of death (Machel, 2001). Young mothers also jeopardize the health of their baby when they are unable to supply their body with vital nutrients. This can lead to deficiencies in their newborn and the potential for neonatal death (Jacobsen, 2008).

Sanitation is another serious health concern in war-torn areas (FitzSimons & Whiteside, 1994). Overcrowding and limited resources often lead to dirty water, lack of bathroom facilities, and ultimately health hazards that can potentially be fatal. One child in Gulu acknowledged that “People are drinking dirty water from the rivers because there is no clean water, which makes them sick (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001).” Others agreed that “For us, war

means that there aren't enough places to go to the bathroom (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001).” The consequence of poor sanitation results in the quick spread of highly contagious diseases such as pneumonia, diarrhea, malaria, measles, tuberculosis, and cholera (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001; World Health Organization, 2005). These diseases further disrupt households and communities while potentially leading to death.

The concerns of communicable diseases are particularly profound when acknowledging the disruption of health services and the lack of access to health care. Health facilities, easily targeted during conflict, are far and few. Additionally, if an individual can find the means to travel, facilities are often ill-resourced and understaffed, preventing the ability to properly respond to a variety of illnesses. In Kitgum, a village in Northern Uganda, one doctor and two medical facilities serve as many as 36,000 refugees, IDPs, and residents in the area (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). Peter O. describes health concerns he witnessed during his time as a child soldier:

We walked long distances barefoot, became thirsty, and drunk dirty water. While in Sudan we were treat like slaves. We would wake up early morning to dig in the garden, then dig latrines, build offices' houses with no rest and not enough to eat. We would eat leaves, grass, anything that would not kill you, you would eat. Many people were suffering from diarrhoea and dysentery. There was no treatment. When you were almost dying is when you would be taken to Juba Hospital (Muhumuza, 1994).

Similar situations for child soldiers occur frequently in Northern Uganda during times of war. Receiving treatment is particularly challenging for children who are still under LRA control.

Finally, reproductive health and sexually-transmitted infections are serious consequences of war. These are often related to sexual violence and/or sexual activity that youth engage in. Both voluntary and involuntary risk behavior, such as prostitution, rape, and other forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, can led to the transmission of infections such as HIV/AIDS, which was once a serious concern in Uganda. Children and youth often do not understand how diseases such as HIV/AIDS are transmitted, the various modes of prevention, and the consequences of their actions. Even in some instances, as described with the use of *carabas*, individuals' attempts to prevent the

spread of infection using homemade contraceptives can actually lead to additional and far more complicated diseases (Poole et al., 2006). For women, reproductive health is important yet problematic. Lack of resources, inability to access health care, and not realizing the need to attain health care are among some of the greatest threats. Additionally, while girl soldiers are under captivity, the repeated sexual violence they face can lead to infection, disability, severe impairment, pregnancy, and in some cases even death (Twum-Danso, 2003). Even when pregnant, girls often do not receive the medical attention and treatment they need, and thus respond to potentially life-threatening health situations on their own. Teen mothers are faced with the additional challenges of providing for their newborn and ensuring their child's health as well (Apio, 2007). These consequences are significantly affected by low levels of education and high poverty.

Youth culture has been particularly affected by poor health as a consequence of the other effects of war. With child abductions and the atrocities that occur throughout service, the lack of both formal and informal education, and the risky behaviors youth engage in for economic and other reasons, the health of young Acholis is compromised. Additionally, as poor infrastructure and limited resources have retarded quality health care, youth have lived a reality dependent on Western aid. George Omona of Gulu district comments on the lack of independence stating that, "Even the children growing up today think that food is provided by [World Food Programme] WFP" (Kavuma, 2006). War has embedded poor health and dependency for recovery into Acholi youth culture.

### Psychosocial consequences

The result of the experiences child soldiers in Northern Uganda endure, as well as the realization of its vast consequences on their lives and futures, has strong psychosocial effects. Psychosocial, a combination of psychological and social concerns, refers to the interrelatedness of the feelings, perceptions, and beliefs of children (psychological factors) as well as the nature of communal and family relationships (social factors) (Machel, 2001). While much can be said about the psychosocial effects, since each child's experience differs from the next, a brief overview will attempt

to display the impact these consequences have had on youth culture.

Machel (2001) identifies that “war affects every aspect of a child’s development—physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual.” It is for this reason that the effects can be wide-spanning and deep, affecting a child soldier throughout adolescence and the rest of his or her life. Many children witness atrocities, such as the torturing and killing of innocent community members, family, and other children, and are forced to remain resilient for fear of their own lives. Meanwhile, these same children were often forced to commit heinous acts, killing innocent bystanders for no reason other than because they were ordered to do so. One child acknowledged that “to [him] killing had become normal, like shaking hands in greeting” (Muhumuza, 1994). This double-edged sword, between being the victim and the victimizer, severely affects a child’s psychological well-being as well as his or her post-abduction relationships with others.

Despite trying to repress memories of war, many children remain haunted by their experiences and memories during warfare. These visions may manifest themselves in nightmares and night terrors, anxiety, poor concentration, aggressiveness, depression, self-destructiveness, and withdrawal (Macksoud, 1993). Testimonies express low self-esteem, sensitivity to loud noises and/or sudden movements, hopelessness, anger, and extreme guilt and shame (Twum-Danso, 2003). Additionally, child soldiers continue to live in a sense of heightened fear, terrified of recapture knowing the inhumane conditions that would result (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). This fear continues to prevent the ability to return to a somewhat “normal” lifestyle, as large numbers of children continue to sleep in the bush or in large camps each night for safety.

While experiencing all of the above psychosocial effects, girls face additional burdens as a consequence of the conflict. As a result of the sexual violence many girls endure, Twum-Danso (2003) finds that girls tend to withdraw rather than act with aggression. Girls particularly face the challenges of reentering community and family life, as the roles they may have experienced during combat challenge the socially-accepted roles of women in Acholi life. They face possible ostracization because

they are perceived as aggressive and unclean killers (Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) & Defense for Children International-Canada, 2007). Young women who have experienced sexual abuse may think differently toward marriage, not desiring to marry or unable to find a husband do to the attached stigma of her experiences. Marie, a 17-year-old escaped child soldier, aspires to attain her education and work, having no desire to marry after her brutal experiences. Nighty, abducted at the age of 12, was impregnated by an LRA soldier and, after escaping, wishes only to run a small business to financially support herself and her child (McKay, 2005). Finally, females face the challenges of baring an illegitimate child, particularly as families and communities may reject both the young mother and her new child. Even when families do welcome them back, young women often face additional discrimination, such as additional housework or different treatment from other family members (Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) & Defense for Children International-Canada, 2007).

Regardless of gender, the psychosocial effects that each child experience vary depending on age, developmental stage, resiliency, and especially family and community support. These social networks, building upon tradition and cultures in Northern Uganda, are essential to assisting in the psychosocial recovery and smooth integration of former child soldiers. The Concerned Parents Association, a community-based project supporting awareness on the child soldier issue in Northern Uganda, has played a large role in welcoming escaped child soldiers back into the community and creating a network of support these children can rely on (Briggs, 2005). Another former child soldier, after safely being placed at a rehabilitation center, expresses “I am happy I am here with other children who understand how I feel because they have gone through the same suffering” (Muhumuza, 1994).

Many situations describe discrimination, stigma, and a lack of support stemming from family and community members who often do not understand how war has impacted their children. Stavrou and Stewart explain that:

The severing of the link between the child and the parent and family has ramifications that go beyond the immediate stress or trauma. The family is the primary arena through which the process of socialization occurs. This process is central to children's learning about the world and their role within that world. Through interaction with the family and greater social environment, the individual becomes aware of the self and learns what is considered acceptable behaviour and what is not (Twum-Danso, 2003).

Relationships, and the support that children and adolescents returning from war receive, are key in the possibility of rehabilitation of youth. Children who become displaced or orphaned face further barriers, as past social networks no longer exist (Twum-Danso, 2003).

The war in Northern Uganda has significantly reshaped youth culture. Psychologically, children continue to face the struggles of adolescence, however, these struggles now include the burdens of experiencing life as both a victim and a victimizer. Children must reconcile their behaviors during times of war, often facing guilt, anger, and shame. They must relearn how to socially interact with their respective families and Acholi communities. A major challenge in reintegrating into Acholi life is the shift in boundaries of societal roles for boys and girls in the Acholi community. Whereas prior to war, children accepted the positions of "provider" and "caretaker" for males and females respectively, experiences during war have forced both boys and girls to fulfill roles that were not traditionally part of their culture. Because of psychosocial shifts, youth culture is at greater dissonance with the traditional Acholi culture that older generations recall (Lock, 2008). Children have experienced a life of dependency and desperation, allowing the culture of youth to accept behaviors that were not previously tolerable. Alcoholism and drug use have increased, consequently supporting increased incidents of sexual abuse; violence in the communities has also become normalized. Dider, a 72-year-old living in Northern Uganda, suggests that "respecting your elders had no bearing on children nowadays. Instead they run around like packs of dogs, tormenting each other and ignoring the shouts of their mothers" (Lock, 2008). War has, most strikingly for youth culture, reevaluated the way children experience life and the "social web of interactions" in Acholi society (Lederach, 2005).

## **Conclusion and Implications**

War in Northern Uganda has severely impacted youth culture. Once characterized as safe, family-oriented, and independent, Acholi culture at large, and its subset of youth culture, have been altered socially, economically, and politically. War has re-imagined the boundaries of “right” and “wrong” and forced children to define and adapt new goals. War has changed the experience—the culture—of life for Acholi youth.

It is important to realize that youth culture is experienced by more than 50% of Uganda’s population, and thus affects a significant portion of Uganda (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2001). If peace, stability, and prosperity are ever to return to the Northern regions, children must be involved in the response. Children need to be rehabilitated in order to enter back into society as productive citizens, and understanding the deep impacts of war on not just the child and the youth culture he or she is a part of.

Additionally, while this discussion has focused on youth culture within the confines of Acholiland, Northern Uganda, the actual consequences of the redefinition of youth culture in the region are much more pronounced. Spillover effects, affecting the bordering nation of Sudan, are immediate consequences of a youth culture where violence, poverty, and fear have become characteristic and systematized. Other violent conflict zones, such as in Angola, Mozambique, and most recently the Democratic Republic of Congo, are experiencing the reformulation of youth culture in similar ways. As conflict zones continue to spread across the African continent, and as children become more intertwined in the hardships of war, youth cultures continue to accept and normalize events that were once unacceptable. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, “If we are to reach real peace in this world and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with children” (Christopher, 2008). Perhaps more indicatively, we must begin to re-imagine youth culture.

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