

# **Neglected Voices**

## **Untold Stories of Gender, Conflict and Transitional Justice in the Great Lakes Region**

**PhD dissertation  
Theo Hollander**

**Front page:**

During the war in northern Uganda, Odong Nakumia lost two sons. Phillip was arrested in 1986 by security forces of the Ugandan government under Yoweri Museveni. Charles was abducted ten years later by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. Nakumia never heard from them again. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of August 2013, the day this portrait was taken, he was still uncertain what fate had befallen his sons.

**Photograph by:**

Tadej Znidaric. August 2013

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Proefschrift

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## Samenvatting

Deze dissertatie bestaat uit één boekhoofdstuk en drie artikelen, gebaseerd op veldwerk in het oosten van de Democratische Republiek Congo en in het noorden van Oeganda. De drie overlappende thema's van deze dissertatie zijn gender, gewapend conflict en naoorlogse wederopbouw en verzoening. Wat de vier publicaties verbindt zijn de kritische reflecties op de dominante discoursen over de gewapende conflicten in de twee regio's. Ik doe dit door ofwel de onderliggende aannames te bekritisieren, of door een stem te geven aan groepen slachtoffers/overlevenden wier stemmen buiten de dominante verhalen vallen. De eerste twee publicaties gaan over gender dynamieken in het oosten van de Democratische Republiek Congo. De laatste twee artikelen gaan over twee vergeten groepen overlevenden van het conflict in Noord Oeganda. Deze artikelen leggen uit hoe deze groepen dagelijks worden geconfronteerd met de erfenis van het gewapende conflict en hoe hun verhalen relevant zijn voor naoorlogse debatten en praktijken aangaande de wederopbouw.

*Gender en politieke, economische en sociale crisis in het oosten van de Democratische Republiek Congo.*

Het boekhoofdstuk *“Oral histories of gender in flux: challenging popular perceptions about the state of gender in South Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo”* (Hollander, 2014), geaccepteerd als tweede hoofdstuk van het boek *“Gender and Conflict: Embodiments, Discourses and Symbolic Practices”* dat uitgegeven gaat worden door Ashgate, bediscussieert de impact van historische processen, tot aan de uitbraak van de eerste Congo-oorlog in 1996, op gender dynamieken. Gender is altijd aan verandering onderhevig. Echter, er zijn tijden van grote politieke, economische en sociale omwentelingen die verandering in gender normen, relaties, gedragscodes en uitvoeringen in een stroomversnelling brengen. In het Congo van voor 1996 waren deze historische verschuivingen kolonialisme, kerstening, gewapend conflict tijdens de Mulele rebellie en dertig jaar politieke dictatuur van Mobutu, die leidde tot hyperinflatie en het bankroet van de formele economie. De kolonisten schaften het traditionele patriarchaat af, belichaamd door traditionele instituten zoals de Lubunka, de centrale plekken in dorpen waar mannen politiek bedreven, en zij vervingen dit door een patriarchaat dat gebaseerd was op Christelijke normen en waarden en op de suprematie van de blanke overheerser. Ook introduceerden de koloniale overheersers een geldeconomie waaraan alleen mannen mochten deelnemen. De kerstening rekende tegelijkertijd af met de polygamie, en introduceerde de monogamie waarin mannen de leiders van de families waren. Dit leidde niet zozeer tot vermindering van het patriarchaat, maar het veranderde wel het karakter ervan. Na de onafhankelijkheid kwam het patriarchaat vaker onder druk te staan door bepaalde historische processen. De Mulele oorlog en het economische verval zorgden voor aardverschuivingen in gender dynamieken. Tijdens de Mulele oorlog namen vrouwen

belangrijke taken over van mannen en lieten zij zien dat zij net zo capabel waren als mannen om deze taken te vervullen. Verder leidde de oorlog ook tot economisch verval, wat betekende dat veel mannen niet langer een bruidsschat konden betalen. Zonder bruidsschat werd het gemakkelijker voor vrouwen om te scheiden van hun man als deze niet voldeed aan de eisen en verwachtingspatronen als man, en dit laatste werd steeds moeilijker toen de Congo in een diepe crisis kwam tijdens de heerschappij van Mobutu. Steeds meer mannen raakten hun baan in de formele economie kwijt en vrouwen speelden een steeds grotere rol in de broodwinning. Deze grotere economische rol voor de vrouwen vertaalde zich in grotere invloed, en dus meer emancipatie voor vrouwen.

Als ik de mondelinge tradities van het voor-koloniale en koloniale tijdperk vergelijk met de mondeling overgeleverde geschiedenissen uit het postkoloniale tijdperk, kan ik niet anders dan constateren dat in het historische bewustzijn van mijn respondenten, de grote gender ongelijkheid van het kolonialisme niet meer bestond aan de vooravond van de eerste Congo-oorlog in 1996. Vrouwen waren minder afhankelijk geworden van mannen, terwijl de mannen juist afhankelijker werden van vrouwen. De traditionele genderverhoudingen waren in een staat van verwarring. Alle aandacht die is uitgegaan naar seksueel geweld in de Congo heeft deze analyse verhuisd. Toen de oorlog uitbrak in 1996 waren er inderdaad problematische genderverhoudingen. Echter, in tegenstelling tot de dominante discoursen over de Congo, was het probleem niet zozeer de gender ongelijkheid, die nog steeds wel bestond, maar een gender crisis waarin de eerdere gender normen en verwachtingen niet langer realistisch waren gezien de veranderde situatie. Dit resulteerde in een diepe crisis van masculiniteiten. De twee continentale oorlogen en de oneindige rebellies van daarna verergerden deze situatie verder. Gedwongen migratie, militarisering, extreem geweld en de invloed van NGOs brachten verdere verwarring in een gender systeem dat al in een diepe staat van verwarring was.

Het artikel *“Men, Masculinities and the demise of a state: Examining masculinities in the context of economic, political and social crisis in a small town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo”*, geaccepteerd door het journal *Men and Masculinities*, gaat door waar het voorgaande boekhoofdstuk stopt. Gebaseerd op een studie in het kleine stadje Kiliba waar een suikerfabriek tot de het midden van de jaren negentig een bron van welvaart was, laat deze studie zien hoe het uiteindelijke bankroet van de fabriek leidde tot een crisis in masculiniteiten en de uiteindelijke emasculatie van een paar duizend mannen. Er waren grofweg twee manieren waarop mannen omgingen met de emasculatie. Sommige mannen namen een slachtofferidentiteit aan. Zij plaatsten de schuld van hun situatie buiten zichzelf, en zij werden lethargisch, aggressief en achterdochtig jegens anderen. Andere mannen heroverwogen hun eigen masculiniteit en zij accepteerden hun verlaagde positie, zij namen genoegen met werk dat zij traditioneel ver beneden hun niveau beschouwden en zij verlegden ook hun rol en status binnen het gezin. Het verschil in omgang met de emasculatie heeft belangrijke gevolgen. De laatste aanpassing was beter voor de gemoedstoestand van de mannen evenals het overleven van het gezin. Bovendien leidde het tot een vermindering van gendergeweld en droeg het bij aan gendergelijkheid. Deze analyse

stapt af van de gedachte dat gendergeweld een gevolg is van genderongelijkheid, maar laat juist zien hoe verschuivingen in samenlevingen masculiniteitscrises kunnen veroorzaken, die gendergeweld kunnen doen toenemen. Dit artikel laat zien dat gendergelijkheid en een afname van gendergeweld bevorderd worden door het stimuleren van herziene masculiniteiten ten opzichte van slachtoffer masculiniteiten.

*Vergeeten stemmen in Oeganda's naoorlogse wederopbouw.*

Het menselijk lichaam speelt een centrale rol in moderne oorlogsvoering en de oorlog in Noord Oeganda is hier een goed voorbeeld van. In het conflict in het noorden van Oeganda hebben zowel de rebellen als de Oegandese overheid lichamen verminkt en verwond als communicatie methode, om de vijand te beledigen en te intimideren en om zowel mensen als territorium te domineren. Het artikel *“Every Day the War Continues in My Body: Examining the Marked Body in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda”*, gepubliceerd in het *International Journal for Transitional Justice*, laat zien dat de verwondingen en invaliditeit die deze mensen opliepen tijdens de oorlog een diepe impact achterlaten, lang nadat het conflict ten einde is gekomen. Mensen wier lichamen ‘gemarkeerd’ raakten worden iedere dag met de oorlog geconfronteerd door hun pijn, hun handicaps en door hun immobiliteit. Hun lichamen zijn letterlijk canvassen waarop het gewapend conflict is afgebeeld. Dit zorgt ervoor dat mensen constant hun invaliditeit in de na-oorlogse context vergelijken met hun validiteit tijdens de oorlog, waarbij men eigenlijk terugverlangt naar de oorlog toen zij nog valide waren. Vanwege hun handicap en het agrarische karakter van de Oegandese economie kunnen de meeste mensen met gemarkeerde lichamen niet voldoen aan genderverwachtingen. Dit leidt tot een laag zelfbeeld en soms ook tot discriminatie. Daarnaast leidt hun verlaagde productiviteit en hun vermogen om gunsten met gelijke munt terug te betalen tot sociale isolatie en stigmatisering.

Voor mensen met gemarkeerde lichamen gaat de oorlog door in hun lichaam, ook nog acht jaar nadat het conflict in Noord Oeganda ten einde is gekomen. Terwijl het lichaam een centrale rol inneemt in oorlogstijd, krijgt het menselijke lichaam niet dezelfde aandacht in vreedstijd en bij naoorlogse processen. Om dit te veranderen, is het noodzakelijk om gewonde mensen te integreren in alle na-oorlogse praktijken en in ons denken over naoorlogse wederopbouw. Dit gaat verder dan medische zorg geven aan deze mensen. Wij moeten nadenken hoe mensen met gemarkeerde lichamen betrokken kunnen worden, hoe zij kunnen participeren en profiteren van alle naoorlogse processen. Om er voor te zorgen dat dit goed gebeurt, is het noodzakelijk om meer onderzoek te doen naar de dagelijkse overlevingsbekommeringen van de mensen met gemarkeerde lichamen, hun behoeftes, hun uitdagingen en hun aspiraties voor de toekomst.

Een andere groep slachtoffers die ook vergeten is in Oeganda's naoorlogse wederopbouw zijn de families van vermiste personen. Het artikel *“Parenting the Missing: Living with Ambiguous Loss in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda”*, ingeleverd bij het *Journal for Eastern African Studies*, beargumenteert dat vermissingen misschien wel het grootste

negatieve erfgoed zijn van jaren van geweld in het na-oorlogse noorden van Oeganda. Voor de families van vermiste personen is de chronische onzekerheid van het verlies, de vraag of vermiste kinderen nog wel of niet in leven zijn, het allermoeilijkst. Het niet weten betekent dat er geen einde is aan het verdriet en dat mensen niet kunnen afsluiten. Hoop, hetgeen normaliter als een positieve emotie wordt beschouwd, doet bij de ouders van vermiste personen juist pijn. Terwijl kennissen en anderen in de nabije omgeving in het begin vaak sympathiseren met de ouders van vermiste personen, wordt die sympathie na verloop van tijd minder. Van ouders wordt verwacht dat ze zich er overheen zetten en omdat ze dat niet kunnen, raken ze langzaam in een sociaal isolement. Wat het onbegrip nog verder vergroot is het gebrek aan rituelen die het verlies symboliseren of die betekenis kunnen geven aan het verlies. Hier komt nog eens een enorme economische stressfactor bovenop. In Oeganda, waar geen pensioenen zijn of andere formele ouderdagsvoorzieningen, zijn ouders afhankelijk van hun kinderen. Het verlies van een kind brengt terechte zorgen over de ouderdagsvoorziening.

Wat de situatie van de ouders van vermiste personen verder verergert in het na-oorlogse noord Oeganda is de stilte en de ontkenning van hun probleem. Om de stilte te doorbreken moet er een atmosfeer gecreëerd worden waarin ouders van vermiste personen over hun onderwerpen kunnen praten, zowel met mensen binnen als buiten hun directe samenleving. Ook zouden ouders in staat moeten worden gesteld om aangifte te doen van de vermissing van hun kind. Dit artikel laat zien dat psychosociale programma's een veel sterkere focus zouden moeten hebben in wederopbouwpraktijken. Ook moet er worden gekeken of culturele and religieuze praktijken veranderd kunnen worden zodat deze kunnen inspelen op de behoeftes van de families van vermiste personen.

## Conclusie

De vier publicaties van deze dissertatie leveren een belangrijke bijdrage aan de grote pluraliteit van individuele oorlogservaringen. Verschillende groepen mensen hebben verschillende ervaringen, uitdagingen, behoeftes en dromen. Deze kunnen niet allemaal gerealiseerd worden door algemene interventies, die oorlogsslachtoffers als algemene groep behandelen. Deze dissertatie laat zien dat oorlogen aanzienlijk meer complex zijn dan de narratieven die ons begrip over bepaalde conflicten domineren. Het is belangrijk om altijd kritisch te kijken naar de onderliggende aannames en om ervaringen in ogenschouw te nemen van mensen die buiten de dominante narratieven vallen. Interventies uit humanitair en ontwikkelingsperspectief moeten deze complexiteit omarmen, inplaats van ze uit de weg gaan.

## Summary

This dissertation consists out of one book chapter and four journal articles that are based on extensive field research in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Uganda. The three overarching themes of this dissertation are gender, armed conflict and transitional justice. What binds the four publications is that they all offer critical reflections on hegemonic discourses about the conflicts in these two regions, either by criticizing the underlying assumptions, or by amplifying the voices of victim/survivor groups whose voices are neglected in the dominant narratives. The first two publications are about gender dynamics in eastern DRC. The last two articles give voice to two neglected survivor groups in post-conflict northern Uganda. They examine how two groups of people are confronted with the legacies of armed violence on a daily basis and the relevance of these groups' experiences, challenges, needs and aspirations for transitional justice debates and practices in Uganda. Below I will shortly summarize the four publications.

*Gender and political, economic and social crisis in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.*

The book chapter "*Oral histories of gender in flux: challenging popular perceptions about the state of gender in South Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo*" (Hollander, 2014; the second chapter of the book *Gender and Conflict: Embodiments, Discourses and Symbolic Practices*, which will be published by Ashgate), discusses the impact of historical processes from before the outbreak of the First Congo War in 1996 on gender dynamics. While gender is always in flux, there are certain times of great political, social and economic upheaval that leave extraordinary imprints on gender norms, relations, practices and performances. In pre-1996 eastern DRC, these upheavals were colonialism, Christianization, independence, armed conflict (Mulele rebellion) and thirty years of Mobutu rule, hyperinflation and the bankruptcy of the formal economy. Colonialism replaced traditional patriarchal systems by a patriarchal system based on Christianity and colonial supremacy. The major shifts colonialism brought were the end of political supremacy of Congolese men, the disappearance of the Lubunka, the traditional stronghold of patriarchy, and the introduction of a monetized economy, in which only men were allowed to earn some money. At the same time, Christianization strongly diminished polygamy as an official practice, while it emphasized the male's authority in monogamous matrimonies. So while colonialism did not diminish patriarchy as a ruling principle, it did change the character of the patriarchal system.

After independence, the Mulele war and thirty years of Mobutu rule and economic decay caused another set of gendered earthquakes that led to a crisis in the patriarchal system. As many men joined the fighting during the Mulele rebellion, women took over roles that were traditionally regarded as the domain of men and they learned that they were just as capable. Furthermore, the war impoverished eastern Congo and after the war, many

families were unable to pay bride prices. Without a bride price, it became easier to divorce, especially when a man did not fulfill the breadwinner expectation. And in the impoverished economy, which experienced further decay during Mobutu's reign, it became increasingly difficult for a man to live-up to the expectations of their masculinities. While at the higher levels of society, men remained the principal powerbrokers, at the lower levels of the society women increasingly played an important role in the breadwinning. This gave them some economic leverage over their husbands.

Comparing the oral traditions of the pre- and early colonial time with the oral histories of gender realities at the end of the Mobutu era, I can only conclude that, at least in the historical consciousness of my informants, the extremely unequal gender reality that existed before colonialism did not exist anymore at the end of the Mobutu era. While women's dependency on men had lessened, men's dependency on women had grown. The traditional roles of men and women had become murky. The focus on sexual violence has clouded a historical analysis of shifts that took place over the decades preceding the Congo wars. By the time the first Congo war broke out, gender relations were indeed problematic. However, in contradiction to the dominant discourse about gender violence in eastern DRC, this was not so much caused by inequality, but rather because notions and norms of gender stopped reflecting daily lived experiences and performances of gender. A deep crisis of masculinities was the result. The two continental wars and the lingering conflicts in eastern DRC worsened this situation further. Forced migration, militarization, extreme (sexual) violence and the influx of NGO and UN activities brought further confusion to an already confused gender balance.

The article "*Men, masculinities and the demise of a state: Examining masculinities in the context of economic, political and social crisis in a small town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*", submitted to the journal *Men and Masculinities*, continues where the book chapter stops. Based on a study in the small town of Kiliba where a sugarcane factory was a source of prosperity until well into the mid-nineties, the eventual bankruptcy of the factory caused a deep crisis in masculinities and the emasculation of several thousand men. There were generally two distinct ways in which men renegotiated their masculinities after the closure of the factory. Some men adopted a victim identity; they placed the blame of their situation outside themselves and became idle, aggressive, suspicious towards others and non-self-reflective. Other men renegotiated their masculinities and accepted a lower status within the family and society. The latter renegotiation was more conducive for the survival of individuals and families; it decreased SGBV and increased gender equality and general levels of cooperative behavior. Examining men in terms of 'victimized' and 'renegotiated' masculinities increases our understanding of how men respond differently to emasculation and it can also inform humanitarian and developmental responses.

*Neglected voices within northern Uganda's transitional justice processes.*

Human bodies have assumed centre-stage in modern warfare and few armed conflicts epitomize this more than the conflict in northern Uganda, where both rebel groups and government violated bodily integrity and altered human tissue to communicate messages, humiliate and intimidate the enemy and their support base, and dominate both people and territory. The article “*Every Day the War Continues in My Body: Examining the ‘Marked’ Body in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda*”, published by the *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, shows that the injuries and disabilities inflicted during wartime continue to affect people long after armed violence has come to an end. People whose bodies were ‘marked’ continue to embody the war in everyday activities in terms of pain, disabilities and loss of mobility. Their bodies act quite literally as canvasses that depict the war. This also causes many people with marked bodies to constantly juxtapose the able-bodied past during wartime with the disable-bodied present in peacetime, whereby the wartime memory is preferred over the peacetime reality. Because of their disabilities and the nature of northern Uganda’s agricultural economy that drives on hard physical labour, most marked bodies struggle to conform gender performances to expectations. This leads to a low self-esteem, depression and at times discrimination. Furthermore, a decline in productivity of people with marked bodies and failure to reciprocate mutual beneficial interaction leads to ruptures within social capital networks, resulting in widespread stigmatization and social isolation. In other words, every day, the war continued in their bodies.

While the body has assumed centre-stage in warfare, focus on the body seems to be largely missing in peace processes and transitional justice. In the aftermath of armed conflict, where so many bodies have been marked, disability mainstreaming should become a quintessential element in transitional justice. This goes beyond medical interventions alone, but rather means that in all transitional justice thinking and practices, attention is paid to how marked bodies can participate and benefit. To ensure inclusion of marked bodies and other victim groups in transitional justice, more microanalysis is needed that distinguishes survivor groups in terms of their day-to-day survival concerns, challenges, experiences, needs and aspirations.

Another victim group that is equally ignored are the relatives of missing persons. The article “*Parenting the Missing: Living with Ambiguous Loss in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda*”, submitted to the *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, argues that the issue of the disappeared is arguably one of the largest unaddressed legacies of armed violence in post-conflict northern Uganda. Families of the missing are ambiguous about their loss, which prevents closure and freezes grief processes. Not knowing keeps the hope alive that their children might one day come back, and it is the hope that perpetuates the emotional suffering of the parents. While community members are initially sympathetic to the parents of the missing, sympathy wanes and social isolation increases as the grief. This is induced further by a lack of cultural rituals that symbolize their loss and provide meaning. Lastly, in a situation where one’s children are one’s pension, the ambiguous loss of a child causes concern over the parents’ survival in old age, which is another major factor of stress in the

parents' lives. What worsens the situation faced by relatives of the missing is the silence around their issue. Breaking this silence means creating an atmosphere where relatives of missing can openly engage with important stakeholders and community members, and where they can register their missing family members. This article also shows that transitional justice mechanisms needed for this survivor group should have a much stronger emphasis on psychosocial programs, include adaptation of cultural and religious mechanisms tailored to the needs of the families of the missing, and specific livelihood programs to address the emotional, social, cultural and economic distress of the relatives of the missing. The article warns that successful transitional justice needs to be based on the experiences and needs of the war-affected people, which can only be gathered through documentation and micro-analysis of various victim groups.

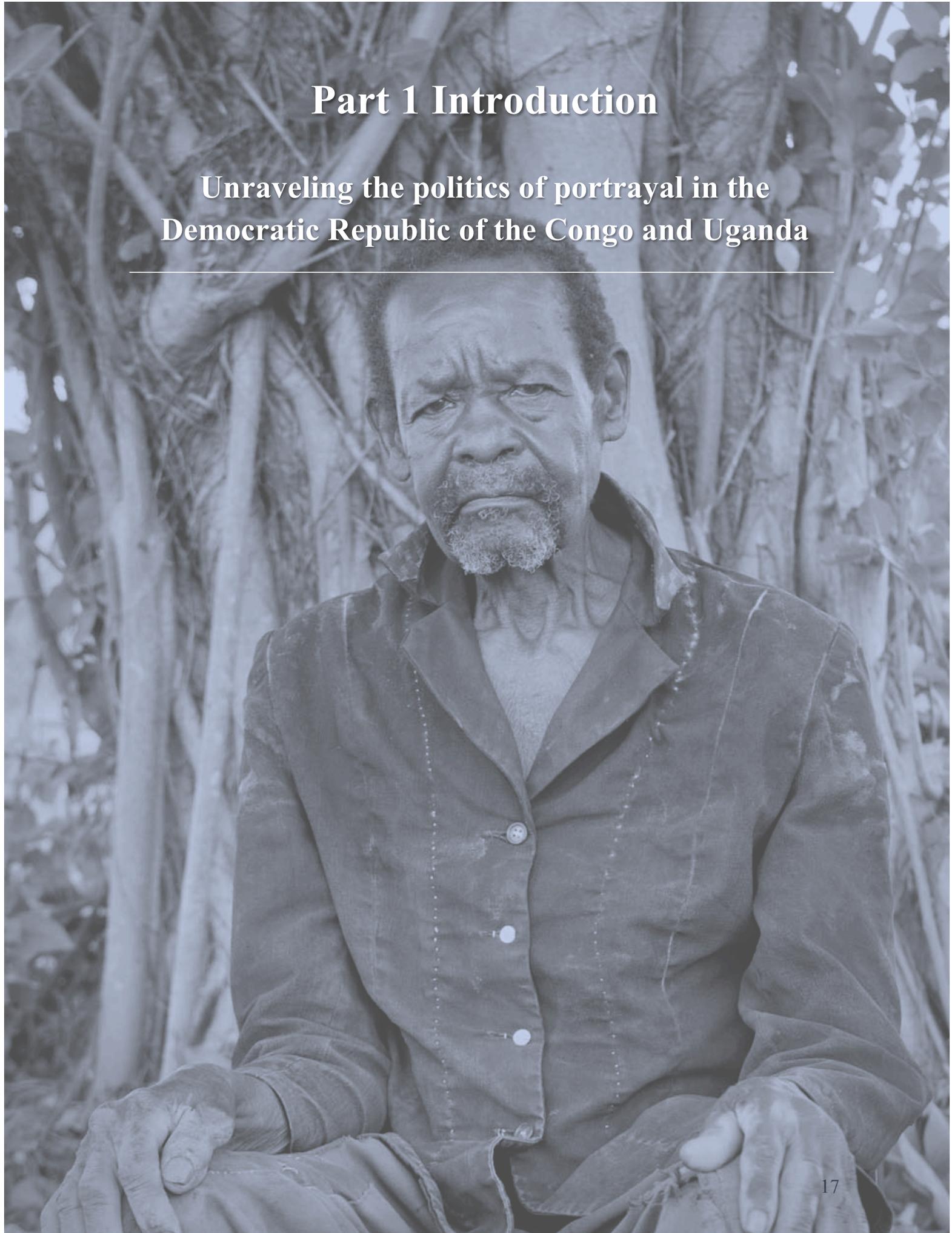
### *Conclusion*

The four publications of this dissertation make an important contribution to the pluralism of individual experiences before, during and after armed conflict. It shows that different survivor groups have different challenges, needs and aspirations. These cannot be encompassed by general interventions that treat victims or survivors as a homogeneous group. Both during and after armed conflict, individual experiences of people show wide variation. While it is partially possible to cluster experiences in groups, as was done in the last three articles, the boundaries of these groups will always be vague. This makes intervening also so extremely difficult. However, as was shown earlier, interventions that do not take these complexities into account are very likely to either fail or do more harm than good.

# Part 1 Introduction

Unraveling the politics of portrayal in the  
Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, the Great Lakes Region in Africa has been one of the most conflict-affected regions in the world. Comprising countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, this region has seen some of the deadliest and most infamous armed conflicts since the end of the Second World War. The genocide in Rwanda witnessed the worst killing spree of unarmed civilians since the Holocaust (Lemarchant, 2002:499). Estimated death rates in the ongoing conflict in Eastern DRC indicate it as the deadliest conflict since WWII, with the victim count still rising (Coghlan et al, 2006:44). Uganda, once labeled the '*Pearl of Africa*' by Winston Churchill, has become known for its erratic and savage leaders and the forced conscription and 'dehumanization' of children who are forced to kill their parents (Finnström, 2010). For the outside world, these conflicts have been given simplistic narratives that make something inherently incomprehensible intelligible.

This introduction will provide a critical reflection of the effects of these *master narratives* on interventions and the impact that these have on the ground. It will also clarify how the four publications that are part of this dissertation all engage with the master narratives, either by challenging the underlying assumptions, or by offering counter narratives that illuminate neglected challenges of victim/survivor groups whose voices fall outside of the master narratives. The introduction is divided into four parts. In the first section, I will provide a brief overview of some of the academic debates surrounding the framing of armed conflicts and the influence that post-Cold war frames have on the increased legitimization of interventionism at the cost of state sovereignty. In the second part I will zoom in on the specific master narratives that dominate international

understanding of the two armed conflicts under examination in this PhD dissertation, namely eastern DRC and northern Uganda, and I will explain how these narratives informed humanitarian and development interventions and which impact they have had on locations where they have been implemented. In the third part I will explain how my book chapter and the three journal articles engage with the dominant narratives by challenging their assumptions and offering counter narratives. In the fourth and last part of this introduction, I will elaborate on my own epistemological journey as a researcher. This biographical self-reflection will explain the choice of topics for the four articles that are quite different in historical, geographical and thematic scope. While the choice of topics might seem erratic and random to an outsider, they make complete sense to me as a researcher. Therefore, I hope that this section will put this dissertation in context of my own academic development.

## 2. The Politics of Portrayal and ‘New’ Humanism.

In the academic field of conflict studies there is an increased recognition that conflicts are immensely complex social processes that involve millions of people who are all interconnected in various ways. Academics such as Kalyvas, Duffield and Jabri argue that simplistic dichotomies between structure and agency and greed and grievance are no longer sufficient. Instead, they look at the extreme complexities of violence; complex and dialectical connections between government bureaucracies, non-state actors, communities and individuals stretch the globe far beyond the historic and geographical boundaries of the armed conflicts in question. Jabri and Duffield argue that discourses about conflicts are increasingly consummated and recreated globally, which means that the conflicts are no longer isolated events. Jabri (2007:163) writes:

*“Conflicts in late modern times are no longer distant isolated events, contained within their own spatiality and temporality, but are immediately present in the global arena, suggesting this arena at one and the same time as a wide and dispersed space for the mobilisation of material and human resources for ongoing antagonisms.”*

Kalyvas (2003:475) writes:

*“Rather than posit a dichotomy between greed and grievance, I point to the interaction between political and private identities and actions. Civil wars are not binary conflicts, but complex and ambiguous processes that foster the “joint” action of local and supralocal actors, civilians, and armies, whose alliance results in violence that aggregates yet still reflects their diverse goals. It is the convergence of local motives and supra-local*

*imperatives that endows civil wars with their particular and often puzzling character, straddling the divide between the political and the private, the collective and the individual.”*

However, while the interconnectedness, fluctuating alliances and complexity of conflict is increasingly recognized in academia, this complexity is not reflected in popular portrayals of violent conflicts. While we live in an information age where news from around the world is available at the click of a button, the content of the news that is consumed by many becomes increasingly shallow. As Michael Bhatia (2008:12) argued:

*“the advent of round-the-clock news has only reduced the depth of news coverage on external conflicts, producing not an informative exposition of conflict dynamics but a constant stream of flash images and simplifications.”*

The narratives that have come to dominate our understanding about various civil wars rarely reflect complexities. Instead, simplistic narratives that apply good versus evil imaginaries are disseminated by a wide variety of agents, including international media, governments, multilateral agencies, advocacy and aid agencies, opinion leaders, bloggers and individuals via various social media networks.

The simplification of complex processes and the representation of certain narratives above others is called framing. Entman identifies this as follows:

*“To frame means ‘to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”* (Entman,

1993:52).

So framing is an act of advocating one particular collective of stories or experiences and promoting a particular set of causations and solutions. Vivienne Jabri (2007:19) argues that discourses are created by emphasizing some subjective realities while downplaying others:

*“The historical trajectory of any conflict, any war, is but a collection of memories held and shared in the context of collectivities, in the public sphere. Memories are, however, but traces and fragments, holding some in the grip of history while totally evading others. It is then all too simple to extract from history the war and violence associated with particular instances of conflict, render these in terms of legality or even justice, forcing their dynamics into some formulaic discourse on the rational or even the moral.”*

The frames that give rise to master narratives are thus based on certain events and certain memories and experiences of certain individuals. They are not fabrications, but rather interpretations by those with the powers to frame of what is important and what is not, and, based on that, which experiences and memories to portray, and which to leave out.

The dominance of one narrative over another is a process that is subject to both pragmatism and politics. As Autesserre (2012:207) explains, the pragmatism stems from the need to simplify because of time pressures in news coverage, limited word counts in written media, and the need to capture readership and audiences that have limited or no knowledge and who have a limited ability to absorb complex stories. Within the policy world of governments and multilateral organizations, lobbyists, think tanks and country/thematic specialists are often given limited time and space to brief the decision-

makers who in turn make decisions over a wide variety of issues and thus often have very limited knowledge about the contexts on which they make crucial decisions. This means that very complex issues need to be reduced to short elevator pitches, PowerPoint presentations and policy briefs that are concise and offer clear recommendations, preferably in bullet-points. Also international organizations need clear stories that captivate people or that draw support in fundraising and advocacy campaigns. The most effective way to gain support and raise funds is by telling simple stories with a clear problem and attainable solutions.

On top of these pragmatic needs to simplify, the knowledge that journalists, civil servants and practitioners have about particular conflicts is often also limited. Journalists often cover large geographic areas and a wide array of topics, or they fly in from afar to cover large events or investigate pre-determined stories. Time to gather information is often short and editors, who are far away, are often as interested in the commercial potential of stories than in their portrayal of the on-the-ground realities. Country specialists and embassy personnel often work from the capital cities, either in their own country or in the country in question, they live behind large fences, shop in luxurious malls and rarely engage in prolonged field work in conflict affected areas. With regards to practitioners, Autesserre (2012:208) argues that on average, they stay in a country anywhere between a few months and three years and are usually hired for their technical expertise, not for their knowledge of the country. Also, the practitioners who are most closely embedded in the field are also often the furthest removed from strategic decision-making power. Furthermore, their work is mostly focused on the perceived humanitarian needs in the country and allows little time to do in-depth research on conflict issues in the country. Also, the dominant narratives often influence academics and most research that is produced is

often about topics that relate to these dominant narratives. This is also because there is often more funding available and more academic exposure on conferences for topics that fall within the dominant narratives.

This explains the pragmatic needs to simplify. However, beyond this pragmatism, narratives and frames are often also politically/strategically motivated and very carefully crafted. The domination of one narrative above another is part of a power play, in which some players have more power to forward a narrative than others. While some engage with existing narratives uncritically, others produce and reproduce certain narratives in order to legitimize or advocate for certain interventions. Jolle Demmers (2014) coined this the politics of portrayal. Actors involved in politics of portrayal are governments and their bureaucracies, media, multilateral organizations, advocacy agencies, aid agencies, bloggers and at times celebrities or other opinion makers who have a wide appeal. They produce narratives that are consumed and then reproduced by millions. Some of these narratives have more appeal than others and they become dominant, which ultimately leads to a hegemonic discourse about a conflict. This discourse is of course not stagnant. Discourses tend to shift over time under the pressure of counter narratives or due to new events and developments. However, these changes are usually slow and gradual.

Governments and multilateral organizations often have a particular interest to forward simplistic narratives to legitimize or delegitimize military interventions. The post-Cold war era has seen a discursive shift from ideological wars, communism versus capitalism, to ‘good wars’ versus ‘bad wars’. Bad wars are wars that are fought by the “*barbaric others*” who suppress, kill, rape and maim innocent civilians. Good wars are wars fought by disciplined armies that respect human rights and use precision bombings to stop the barbaric other from killing innocent victims. In these wars, the death of innocent civilians is

labeled ‘collateral damage’ instead of massacres, executions or killings. Instead of using the phrase bad and good wars, Mark Duffield refers to them as ‘their wars’ versus ‘our wars’, indicating the western bias in the naming of the *other*.

*“Their wars, for example, are internal, illegitimate, identity-based, characterized by unrestrained destruction, abuse civilians, lead to social regression, rely on privatized violence, and so on. By implication, our wars are between states, are legitimate and politically motivated, show restraint, respect civilians, lead to social advancement and are based upon accountable force. In describing their wars, by implication, such statements suggest a good deal about how we like to understand our own violence. They establish, for want of better terms, a formative contrast between borderland traits of barbarity, excess and irrationality, and metropolitan characteristics of civility, restraint and rationality”* (Duffield: 2002:1052).

Mary Kaldor (2001) identified the military interventions in some of the civil wars in what Duffield calls ‘*the borderlands*’ as a new form of warfare, which she called humanitarian war (Jabri, 2007:45). This label has received much criticism, as many of the new wars were not so different from many of the post-colonial military interventions that had reigned during the cold war. However, what many agree with Kaldor is that the one thing new about the new wars is the use of framing of the barbaric and inhumane other, the emphasis on the global responsibility to *protect*, and the increased legitimization of military interventions on humanitarian rather than ideological grounds. In the words of Helen Dexter (2008:57):

*“The international community’s response to the humanitarian catastrophes of the new wars has been a military-led one, giving birth to what Chomsky has referred to as the ‘new military humanism’. Today the UN is criticized more often for not intervening on behalf of the international community where there are humanitarian concerns, rather than being accused of interfering with the domestic prerogative of states. The notion of state sovereignty has begun to transform from one of unalienable right to one of obligation. Within a new normative context that has seen the stronger defence of human rights and a significant development of humanitarian law, as well as the graphic television coverage of human suffering, the legitimacy of intervention for humanitarian purposes began to gain support from both the public and the international community.”*

This has become all too clear in various conflicts where the UN has had peacekeeping forces, e.g., in Bosnia, Cyprus, Sudan, Burundi and many more. While the efficiency of the UN peacekeeping forces have been questioned time and again, their legitimacy and justification have been questioned less often. Once the Security Council sanctions a military intervention, the mobilization and deployment of military might is rarely criticized on moral grounds.

Intervening states have copied the language of new military humanism to support unilateral or coalition warfare. These are called the good wars, exemplified by the wars in Kosovo between NATO and Serbia, the British intervention in Sierra Leone against the RUF, and more recently the military interventions in the Arabic world and Afghanistan. One of the clearest examples where the ‘good war’ narratives were politically crafted to legitimate intervention war was “*Operation Iraqi Freedom*”, a name that already emphasize the USA government’s attempt to portray itself as the civilian population’s

liberator from Saddam Hussein's oppression. Moorcroft and Taylor argued that both the governments of the US and the UK tried to diminish public dissent by engaging mainstream media.

*“With mass public dissent in evidence at large demonstrations against the war, the US–UK coalition sought to engage mainstream media in the battle for moral and political legitimacy. During the early stages of major military interventions, as extensive media operations are launched alongside military planning, shared media–military interests in a ‘good’ war narrative for ‘our troops’ can lead to the press becoming ‘part of the PR strategy’ (Moorcroft and Taylor, 2008: 230, cited in Katy Parry, 2011:1186).*

Eight years later, the same governments again used similar strategies to invade Libya. Jolle Demmers for example demonstrates how simplistic depictions of the suffering of the people of Libya at the hands of a “*monstrous*” Colonel Gaddafi legitimized a military intervention that served entirely different goals than the protection needs forwarded in the narrative.

*“Gaddafi makes a fine case-study of the power of portrayal characterizing executive power in the age of globalized and corporate media, and the productive relation between the security work of the state and the social imaginary. [...] Gaddafi’s regime had been one of repression, human rights abuses, and nepotism since he came to power in 1969, it was only when he became a serious obstacle for western access to African resources as Chairman of the African Union in 2009 [...] that state violence in Libya became a ‘responsibility of humanity’. The smoothness by which the military intervention in Libya was sold to western*

*audiences as an act of humanity, and how, only 8 years after Iraq, it was unquestionably consumed, shows us many things: how war-making is a drawn-out and repetitive process which involves a diverse group of actors in acts of naming, picturing, scripting, legislating, consuming, bombing and killing, and above all: how much of all this depends on the power to politicize certain forms of violence and depoliticize others” (Demmers, forthcoming).*

What both Moorcroft and Taylor, Parry and Demmers all demonstrate, is that western military interventionists increasingly stress their obligation to protect the civilians of ‘barbaric’ regimes, putting themselves up as liberators, in order to hide their true intentions.

Since the end of the cold war the ‘new war’ paradigm has also taken hold of development and humanitarian thinking. Duffield argues that, increasingly, development is not just aimed at mere poverty reduction, but rather at governing the minds of people. In his words:

*“Regarding a reforming urge, descriptions of borderland conflict destroying a nation's social fabric, entrenching generations of hatred, targeting civilians, and so on, provide a powerful justification. At the same time, the veiling and separating of ‘their’ irrational violence from the restraint of ‘ours’ provides a legitimation. Together, such forms of justification and legitimation combine to establish a will to govern the borderlands. [...] A will to govern animates the public-private networks of aid practice. [...] ...the types of economic and social policies being pursued, levels of poverty, the degree of popular participation, the extent of corruption and criminal activity, respect for human rights, the role of women, the status of the media, psychological well-being, the quality of political institutions, and so on, have all become areas in which the borderlands as a social body*

*have been opened up to levels of metropolitan monitoring, intervention and regulation unprecedented since the colonial period” (Duffield, 2002:1065).*

As Duffield demonstrates, western governments and humanitarian and development actors increasingly implement interventions that reflect our own norms and values and that indeed aim to govern minds: e.g., women’s empowerment, stopping female circumcision, respect for human rights, free markets, etc. In commercials and advocacy videos, humanitarian agencies increasingly highlight how the average Joe can help to save the African child, the Indian crippled or the poor Haitian woman. Development agencies emphasize their own enlightened duty to save the innocent victims, and they often do this by depicting the problems that they tackle in terms of barbarisms or affronts to human dignity. Particularly since 9/11, humanitarian and development interventions are also legitimized by narratives that emphasize our own (western) security (Duffield, 2002:1066, Chandler:2007). Big international power players like the UN, the OECD, DFID, the European Council and the United States have argued that development and security are intrinsically linked. (United Nations, 2004; OECD 2007; DFID 2005; European Council 2003, 2008; UNDP, 2005, see Stern and Öjendal, 2010 for more information). The underlying assumption is that fragile states are breeding grounds for international criminal and terrorist networks and that unemployment can be a large factor in driving young men into extremism. Take for example the US national strategy for counterterrorism of 2011. It says:

*“[...] we must retain a focus on addressing the near-term challenge of preventing those individuals already on the brink from embracing al-Qa’ida ideology and resorting to violence. [...] .We will put forward a positive vision of engagement with foreign publics*

*and support for universal rights that demonstrates that the United States aims to build while al-Qa'ida would only destroy. We will apply focused foreign and development assistance abroad. [...] These efforts strengthen bulwarks against radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization to violence in the name of al-Qa'ida and will focus in particular on those drivers that we know al-Qa'ida exploits.” (White House, 2011)*

This quote offers an example of how development assistance is forwarded as a tool to advance western security. The bureaucracies of foreign affairs and development ministries, multilateral organizations such as the UN and the World Bank, and NGO often use very similar frames that emphasize our own moral superiority, and which simplify the realities in the borderlands, to borrow a term from Duffield, so that they fit our own norms and values and legitimize interventions that fit our own moral preferences, rather than necessarily reflect the myriad of experiences and aspirations of the people on whose behalf is intervened.

The politics of portrayal can be seen as a modern day battle for moral superiority. Those with the power to frame also have the power to legitimize and execute interventions, even those that violate the principles of state sovereignty. While the discourses that are used to legitimize interventions are often very compelling, basing these interventions on very simplistic good and evil narratives can have many adverse effects. They can also impact negatively on the efficiency of the interventions. Moreover, interventions based on simplistic narratives can also perpetuate and aggravate the problem that the intervention seeks to address. This has happened in the case studies of this dissertation. In the next section I will discuss how a range of actors created discourses that did not resonate with the

plurality of experiences of the war-affected people in the DRC and Uganda and that eventually had negative impacts on the people at the receiving end of the interventions.

### **3. Barbarians, Madmen and Helpless Victims: Portrayals of the Wars in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and Northern Uganda.**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In the book *Between the Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, Finnström (2010:74) argues that “*wars are partially what the media make of them*”. While the conflicts in eastern DRC and northern Uganda are both immensely complex and beyond the understanding of any one individual, the narratives that have come to dominate mainstream understanding of these two conflicts are simplistic and one-sided. The narratives are based on real stories and coverage of real events, rape and minerals exploitation in the Congo and abduction of minors and their savage unleashing upon civilians in northern Uganda. However, the interpretation of these events and the selectivity of which stories to cover and which not produced simplistic and one-sided portrayals of the conflicts. In the most basic deductions, the conflicts in eastern Congo are described as a resource conflict, in which barbaric men rape helpless women. This was aptly captured in a headline of the Guardian of August 14<sup>th</sup> 2010 entitled: ‘*Conflict minerals finance gang rape in Africa*’. The conflicts in northern Uganda are deduced to a war run by a schizophrenic madman, Joseph Kony, who claims to be a prophet and who abducts and brutalizes young children and forces them to kill their parents. In this paragraph I will look at the genesis of the dominant narratives that have come to inform mainstream understanding of the wars in eastern DRC and northern Uganda. I will explain how these simplistic narratives have informed and legitimized interventions, and I will highlight some of the consequences that these interventions have had on the war-affected populations of eastern DRC and northern Uganda.

### **3.2 Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo: Minerals and Barbaric Men Against Women.**

This section draws heavily from the excellent article “Dangerous Tales: Dominant Narratives on the Congo and their Unintended Consequences” of Séverine Autesserre. Her article captures exactly what I intend to do in this paragraph, and as I felt no need to reinvent the wheel I shall present a few of her extensive quotes to explain the detrimental consequences of simplistic narratives. Autesserre’s study examines the dialectic relation between framing and interventions in eastern DRC and the negative consequences of this dialectic relation on local realities. Autesserre (2012:202) argues that there are three dominant narratives that explain causation, consequence and solution of the ongoing conflicts in eastern DRC. These narratives hold that the cause of the conflicts are the illegal exploitation of the Congo’s vast mineral wealth, the consequence is rape of girls and women, and the solution is to reconstruct state authority. Autesserre explains that the three frames that now dominate our understanding of the wars in the DRC were not the dominant frames from the immediate onset of the First Congo War. Instead, they were consciously produced, and, over time, they gained a readership and an audience, who then reproduced the same narratives, shared it with others, who in turn, reproduced it again. In a way, the master narrative starts with one or with several unconnected ink stains that grow bigger and bigger, overshadowing other narratives or sometimes incorporating these. With regard to the mineral narrative, Autesserre places the genesis with campaigns of European advocacy NGOs.

*“European advocacy NGOs such as Global Witness were the first to put forth this narrative in the late 1990s. Their campaigns led to the creation of a UN Panel of Inquiry that investigated the illegal exploitation of natural resources and other forms of wealth in*

*the Congo. Along with the efforts of the European NGOs, the three reports that the Panel of Inquiry published between 2001 and 2003 put the topic of mineral resources firmly on the policy agenda. From then on, media reports multiplied, along with research on the link between mineral resources and violence in the Congo. Newly created US advocacy NGOs like Enough adopted the narrative and helped reinforce nascent interest on the subject in North America. By 2011, conflict minerals had become a requisite topic of conferences and writings on the Congo.” (Autesserre, 2012:210)*

Also the advancement of the master narrative that rape was the main consequence gained popularity in the same way. Again, in the words of Autesserre (2012:214-215):

*“The 2002 report by Human Rights Watch on ‘the war within the war’ was the first to draw attention to this specific form of brutality. Journalists and news editors started favouring the sexual violence angle when talking about the Congolese conflict. The attention to this issue prompted NGOs to initiate projects on sexual abuse and to launch fundraising campaigns that reinforced interest in the topic. By all accounts, the visit of Hillary Clinton to the eastern Congo in 2009, which focused on victims of sexual violence and resulted in an offer of millions of dollars in aid, and which was followed shortly after by a trip by Margot Wallström, entrenched sexual violence as the frame to use when thinking about the Congo. From then on, eastern Congo and rape became inextricably linked for most foreign audiences.”*

Lastly, the domination of the third narrative, to rebuild Congo’s state structures, has two sources. Again, in the words of Autesserre (2012:218-219):

*“The focus on state building as the central solution to the complex problems of the Congo comes from two sources. First, diplomats and the leadership of international organizations are most comfortable with a state-to-state approach. They are trained to deal with state officials, and they see such interactions as the best way to respect the global norms of sovereignty and non-interference. It is therefore of utmost importance for these high-ranking interveners to ensure that they have counterparts with whom to interact. Second, from 2009 onward, international interveners believed that they had successfully implemented all the standard post-war solutions, notably general elections as well as national and regional reconciliation. From their point of view, the remaining problems were thus due to criminality and other ‘law and order’ issues, which the Congo would be able to tackle if it were not a ‘failed state’. Reconstructing state authority was a way to give the Congolese government the capacity necessary to address these domestic matters. At the same time, many international NGOs and church structures saw themselves as providing services that should be the responsibility of the state, such as health care and education. They therefore considered state building to be a sustainable exit strategy.”*

Autesserre makes it clear that while these three narratives have come to dominate our understanding of the Congo; they are also contested by Congolese civil society organizations (CSOs), Congolese intellectuals and international academics, think tanks and on the ground interveners. Advocacy and research institutes such as the Ugandan Refugee Law Project, the Congolese Pole Institute, International Alert, and International Crisis Group, alongside critical academics, including Séverine Autesserre, Gerard Prunier, Thomas Turner, Kevin C. Dunn, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, Jeroen Adam, Koen

Vlassenroot, Judith Verweijen, Chris Dolan, Maria Stern and Maria Erikson Baaz, and David van Reybrouck are just amongst a small selection of critical voices who reflect on the dominant narratives and offer counter narratives. They highlight other causations, including the economic downfall of the DRC and subsequent conflict over other financial sources than minerals, e.g., cattle, farmland, political offices, timber, and so forth. They have researched the presence of foreign militaries and armed groups, most notably from Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, and the connection to the Rwandan genocide. They point to the long history of state predation and the deep mistrust between the civilian population and the state, derived from a long history of corruption, power abuse, illegal taxation, state-oppression and disappearances, mismanagement and impunity of security forces, and so on. Various reports and articles also show continuous shifting alliances between the various armed groups, and their support basis, which include local elites, local communities and sometimes transnational networks. They also reflect on different consequences, for example other types of violence than sexual violence, the upsetting effects to the gender order, forced conscription of child soldiers, the continued economic decline, the increase in group antagonism, and so on. Furthermore, there are also many counter narratives regarding what types of solutions would work best. These include local peace-building initiatives instead of centralized ones, local and cultural reconciliation and the promotion of traditional justice over formal justice, promotion of hybrid governance, instead of centralized governance, and so on.

When all these narratives are combined, a more holistic picture of causation, consequences and solutions emerges. This picture is complex, messy and often contradictory. It shows that there are no blueprint explanations for the dozens of armed conflicts that each have their own unique genesis and dynamics. It shows that solutions that

might work to solve one problem, could potentially aggravate other problems. They also show that, while certain interventions do reach their targeted objectives, they sometimes have unintended consequences that might in the long or short run do more harm than good. Such complexity is difficult to grasp, it is difficult to sell, and it is demoralizing for those who want to intervene. This is also why simple narratives hold so much power. The complex picture doesn't provide easy entry for interventions, it doesn't provide blueprints, and it necessitates a very high degree of self-criticism and effective M&E programming. Simple narratives on the other hand do provide entry points for interventions while giving clear strategic direction. However, as many analysts have pointed out, interventions based on simplistic narratives rarely solve the problems that they target and at times they even aggravate a situation. This has also been the case in eastern DRC.

In direct response to the illegal exploitation of conflict minerals, Germany, the European Union, the OECD, the UN, the US and the World Bank passed legislation or set up projects that prohibited the trade of conflict minerals which were meant to reduce conflict in eastern DRC (Autesserre, 2012:211). Eventually, advocacy campaigns from the DRC and other conflict regions in Africa brought about the Kimberly Process, a joint government, industry and civil society initiative to stem the flow of conflict diamonds. While the Kimberly Process and the shifts in mining legislation complicates the trafficking of conflict minerals, estimates are that in the DRC, only eight percent of all conflicts are over natural resources, which effectively means that major international efforts to curtail the trade of 'blood diamonds' only have marginal effect on the curtailing of armed conflict in eastern DRC (Autesserre, 2012:211). The conflict over natural resources has completely eclipsed other causes of conflict in eastern DRC, such as conflicts over land, antagonisms between groups, poverty, the porous borders and regional rebel groups, strong

militarization, absence of rule of law and so on. This also means that only few and most often marginally funded interventions have targeted these alternative causes, bearing little to no fruit.

Furthermore, while the Kimberly process and other changes in legislation to prevent the trade of blood diamonds were meant to protect vulnerable populations from rebel movements that used blood diamonds to finance their wars, the interventions in the DRC mostly had negative consequences for the populations that they were meant to protect. Laura E. Seay (2012:1) has produced a convincing study of the enormous detrimental consequences of an American initiative to curtail the trade of blood diamonds:

*“Although its provisions have yet to be implemented, section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act is already having a profound effect on the Congolese mining sector. Nicknamed “Obama’s Law” by the Congolese, section 1502 has created a de facto ban on Congolese mineral exports, put anywhere from tens of thousands up to 2 million Congolese miners out of work in the eastern Congo, and, despite ending most of the trade in Congolese conflict minerals, done little to improve the security situation or the daily lives of most Congolese.”*

Congo experts such as Autesserre (2012), Stearns (2010), Vlassenroot (2010) and Cuvelier (2010) support the finding that Western attempts to curtail the trade of blood diamonds had negative consequences on the miners and traders. Civilian miners and traders depend on the income of the minerals, and they support large informal and formal economies with the money they earn, which is spent in small shops and bars, and on prostitutes, churches, transport, school fees and so on. While it is indeed the case that many

armed groups partially finance their activities through various taxation schemes, a simple ban on diamonds from conflict had more negative than positive consequences for the millions of civilians who either directly or indirectly depended on the mining income. Furthermore, while armed groups can find alternative sources of income when the prices or demand chains of the natural resources change, for civilians, this is more difficult.

Also the interventions that target the DRC's most dominant narrative have many negative consequences. Ever since Hillary Clinton visited the eastern DRC and Margot Wallström labeled as the DRC as '*the rape capital of the world*' or '*the most dangerous place on earth to be a women*', rape has become a standard element in all media coverage and the focus point of many interventions. According to Autesserre (2012:214), the rape narrative has become so dominant that many donors only talk about the DRC in the context of rape:

*“According to an insider, since 2009, there has been no interest in the Congo at the UN Security Council except when it discussed incidents of mass rapes and potential responses to them. Similarly, US State Department top officials reportedly pay no attention to the Congo except when sexual violence grabs the headlines.”*

The large international attention to rape has helped raise enormous funds for interventions that have had both positive and negative consequences. The positive consequence is that many women who have been raped can now find help. In most major towns in eastern DRC, treatment centers can be found where raped women can access medical services, Anti Retroviral Drugs (ARV), counseling and relative safe havens where they can recover. While this is a significant achievement and a great success, the simplistic

focus on rape as the main consequence of armed violence also has had many negative consequences. One of the problems is that there is so much focus on medical help, that other needs of the raped women are forgotten about. For example, data gathered by PhD candidate Charlotte Mertens indicates that women's need to return to their community and provide education, food and security for their children outweigh their needs for recognition and long recovery.<sup>1</sup> Also, the focus on rape of women and girls has come at the expense of other victim groups, such as men and boys who have been raped, torture victims, relatives of deceased or missing persons, victims of financial and economic extortion and so on. Research by Chris Dolan and the Refugee Law Project documentary 'Gender Against Men' highlight that many of the men who have been raped are not taken serious by medical centers that have been constructed with the sole purpose to provide medical attention to women. Authors such as Maria Eriksson-Baaz and Maria Stern show how the provision of health services are actually shaped around rape, and not around other medical needs (Eriksson-Baaz and Stern: 2010)

Directly linked to this problem is that the vast majority of interventions focus on treating the symptoms of sexualized violence rather than investigating or targeting its source. Autesserre (2012:218) shows that 72 percent of all the funds for sexual violence are used to treat victims, whereas only 27 percent is used to prevent sexual abuse. Autesserre (2012:218) argues that while it is admirable and important to provide medical assistance for women who have been raped, these women would have undoubtedly preferred an approach that had prevented the rape from happening in the first place. Autesserre is right that 27 percent is not a significant amount for the prevention. However, what is worse is that also prevention interventions are based on simple cause-effect narratives that not only

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<sup>1</sup> <http://christophvogel.net/2013/12/01/amani-itakuya-23-colonial-remembering-injured-bodies-and-current->

undermine their effectiveness, but which can also perpetuate the problem, while simultaneously creating a whole new set of problems. There are several generally held assumptions about the causes of rape: it is a weapon of war, a consequence of impunity, and a consequence of gender inequality and gender norms. Singular focus on any of these issues have produced more problems than they have solved. Let me give the example of interventions that focused on ending impunity.

Donors and multilateral organizations envisioned that, if they could address impunity, they would also diminish the number of rape cases. Under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) the judicial system has been reconstructed to enable Congolese officials to respond better to sexual abuses, which has largely come at the expense of other crimes (Autesserre 2012:217, Eriksson-Baaz & Stern, 2010:51-55). This became very clear from my own field research. In September 2010, I did nine interviews in a prison in Uvira, South Kivu. According to the prison warden, 95 percent of all the inmates were there for rape, which is already a telltale sign of the disproportionate effect that the SGBV intervention had on the judicial system. Donors have reported the incarceration of ‘rapists’ as a success of their intervention (Smits and Cruz, 2011). However, examination of the narratives of the convicts shed a different light on this success story. While the judicial system has been reformed to have a stronger focus on sexual violence and on ending impunity, the capacity of the judicial system has not been improved significantly. Like other government institutes, the judicial system is also rife with corruption, and fair trials are the exception rather than the rule (Human Right Watch, 2005:32-35). All the narratives of the nine prisoners I interviewed that day were full of detailed examples of how these men had been framed by state officials, community members and often also by parents-in-law, for their failure to pay the bride price. Also

outside of the prison, I talked with civilian men who expressed that they had become very uncomfortable in their relations because they feared that they had to always please their girlfriends/wives and family-in-law to avoid prosecution. Thus, while the reform of the judiciary system has not curtailed the prevalence of rape, it does contribute to upsetting gender relations and it is perceived by many of the men I interviewed as yet another tool of male suppression. Thus, rather than having a deterrent effect on rapists, rape is instrumentalized and even commercialized to settle disputes or to extort or pressurize people. Others have also recognized this. For example, Eriksson-Baaz and Stern (2010:13) write:

*“In the context of a corrupt judiciary and rampant poverty, the focus on sexual violence as a particularly serious crime enables people from various groups—from justice personnel to poor civilians—to view and use allegations of rape as an income-earning strategy. While it is politically difficult to do so, it is important to recognize that not just military justice staff, but also civilians are already sometimes implicated in such “commercialization” and may become more so. Given the focus of interventions in combination with rampant poverty in the DRC, this is not surprising.”*

Reforming the judiciary to respond to the impunity of rape has not led to a decrease in impunity, but rather to a whole new range of human rights abuses in which rape accusations and prosecution have become an industry. This means that the projects that do target the causes of rape only perpetuate more violence and feelings of insecurity.

Moreover, in some cases, the ‘rape as a weapon of war’ narrative has also become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Again, this is highlighted by Autesserre (2012:217):

*“The singular focus on sexual violence signals that this form of abuse is particularly forbidden and punishable, and thus creates incentives for various groups to exploit it. While this mostly takes the form of threats of rapes in order to push for negotiations or end military operations, there are also examples of such threats being enacted, such as during the August 2010 mass rapes in Luvungi. A local militia called Mai Mai Sheka, which allied with the foreign rebel group the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, gang raped 387 civilians over the course of three days in a remote part of Walikale territory. According to several sources, Sheka ordered his soldiers to systematically rape women, instead of just looting and beating people as they usually do, because he wanted to draw attention to his armed group and to be invited to the negotiating table. He knew that using sexual violence was the best way to reach this goal, because it would draw the attention of the international community, and various states and advocacy groups would put pressure on the Congolese government to negotiate with him – which is exactly what happened.”*

Thus, while the dominant focus on sexual violence had led to better medical care for many rape victims, this success has come at a high cost.

Lastly, the general solution for the DRC’s problems is usually sought in the advancement of state-authority. The discourses about the DRC are framed in global fragile state discourses. The term ‘fragile states’ is a relatively new policy term used by most of the major donors and development agencies to refer to those countries which are the least developed, poorest and most conflictive, with the weakest and often most repressive governments. Although the term represents a relatively new discourse about how to engage

in the most difficult countries, the term itself does not have a universally accepted meaning. There is no international consensus about how to define and measure the phenomenon, nor is there an agreed upon list of countries that fit the label. Nonetheless, fragile statehood is seen as the main problem in many conflict prone countries and the solution is state building. In the DRC, extending state-control has often had more negative than positive consequences. Again in the words of Autesserre (2012:220):

*“The main problem with this strategy is that the Congolese state remains a predatory structure, as it has been during most of the Congo’s history. Governmental officials are often preoccupied with using public offices as a means to accumulate personal wealth, even when it conflicts with the pursuit of the public good. State officials, including members of the army, the police, and the administration, continue to be responsible for the largest part of all human rights violations. Consequently, throughout the eastern Congo, people often experience the state as an oppressive, exploitative, and threatening machine, instead of seeing it as a structure set up for their benefit. Overall, large parts of the population survive in spite of the state rather than with its help.”*

Autesserre makes clear that in a de-facto predatory state, extending state control does not contribute to human security and only aggravates the problem. Nonetheless, other solutions have rarely been given any thought.

All in all, while some notable successes have been booked by humanitarian organizations in offering medical aid to female rape victims, the humanitarian interventions in eastern DRC have not brought about the positive change that they aimed to bring. The evidence that interventions based on simplistic narratives do not work is mounting. These

interventions fail to address the real causes of the problems, and at times interventions even aggravate the general situation that the interventions try to address.

### 3.3 Northern Uganda: The Story of Madmen Versus Children.

Also regarding the conflicts in northern Uganda, the narratives that dominate mainstream understanding are one-sided, overly simplistic and fail to do justice to the myriad of experiences, challenges, needs and aspirations of the war-affected communities. While the conflicts in the central-north of Uganda involved at least ten different armed groups,<sup>2</sup> the Lord's Resistance Army has become the singular focal point of international attention. While you can hardly speak of one war, in most media portrayals, the cause of *the war* is equaled to the reason why the LRA fights, which in turn is '*shrouded in mystery*'. Academics such as Finnström (2010) and Branch (2007, 2011) argue that the dominant narratives that explain the Lord's Resistance Army have focused on the bizarre, the mysterious and the religious/(oc)cultist character of the LRA and the erratic character of its mad leader, Joseph Kony. Branch (2007:182) writes:

*“This ‘official discourse’ limits its focus to the LRA’s brutality, in particular its violence against children. In most accounts the rebel group is, in a word, ‘bizarre,’ and LRA violence simply defies understanding.”*

One of the clearest examples of this framing in recent years was the Kony 2012 campaign of Invisible Children. The short advocacy film, which reached more than 180

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<sup>2</sup> 1) Uganda People's Democratic Army, 2) the Holy Spirit Movement under Alice Lakwena and 3) the Holy Spirit Movement under her father, Severino Lukiyo, 4) the Lord's Resistance Army, who was also initially called differently, 5) the National Resistance Army, later renamed the Uganda People's Defense Forces, 6) Arrow Boys in Teso, 7) Arrow Boys in Acholi, 8) Amuka Boys in Lira, 9) Boo Kec groups, also referred to as armed thugs, 10) Karamojong Cattle Warriors.

million people,<sup>3</sup> offers a clear example of the powerful impact of simplistic narratives and frames that use good and evil dichotomies, as well as the western savior complex to solve African problems. In the words of Joanne Diane Caytas (2012:2):

*'Kony 2012' reduces a regional humanitarian crisis of several decades to an easily digestible dichotomy between "the good guys" (the Ugandan government) and "the bad guy" (Joseph Kony), and proposes to its young viewers a deceptively easy way to cause important humanitarian change on a global scale. Earlier news reports about Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) tended to emphasize the bizarre and the gruesome: his obsession with religion, possession by spirits, brutal killings, horrific mutilations, and his practice of forcing abductees to kill their relatives. Media estimates of the number of children kidnapped by the LRA to serve as fighters or sex slaves range from 20,000 to 40,000 to over 50,000. For the last 26 years, the LRA is said to have terrorized civilians in a dense jungle area of some 100,000 square kilometers extension. Joseph Kony even made it onto Forbes Magazine's 2011 "World's Most Wanted Fugitives" list. His LRA is portrayed to have no agenda or purpose besides preserving Kony as a regional, border-crossing power player and to maintain his ability to torture the local population.'*

The advocacy campaign of the American advocacy NGO Invisible Children perfectly summed up the hegemonic discourse of the conflict that they reinforced. In this discourse, the cause of the conflict is mystified and reduced to religious notions such as liberating Uganda with the Ten Commandments. The main consequences are the forceful abduction of minors who were either used as sex slaves or as brutal killing machines who

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/apr/20/kony-2012-facts-numbers>

are forced to unleash unprecedented violence upon civilian populations. The solution is a) to *stop* Kony by assisting the Ugandan government to fight the LRA, b) to give aid to victims of the LRA, in particular the former child soldiers. It is this narrative that has informed and legitimated most interventions in northern Uganda.

The genesis of this master narrative on cause, effect and solution, and the singling out of the LRA as the only perpetrator has several sources, starting with the LRA itself. As Finnström (2010:78) has put it, “*the LRA, because of their gross violence, has become a co-author in the process.*” The LRA is indeed one of Africa’s most brutal rebel groups and portrayals of LRA brutality are certainly not fabrications. Some of the events that made headlines worldwide were the Atiak massacre in 1995, in which Vincent Otti, at that time the number two man of the LRA, ordered the execution of over 300 people from his home village. A year later, in October 1996, the LRA abducted 139 girls from an Italian-run girls’ school in Aboke. In an attempt to free the girls, the Italian nun that ran the school involved dignitaries from across the globe, including the pope, Nelson Mandela and Hillary Clinton who all condemned the LRA actions and called upon them to release the girls. Other events that made international headlines were the massacres in Barlonyo in 2003 and what has been dubbed the Christmas massacres in the DRC in 2008. Besides reporting these events, there were also numerous background stories, magazine articles, books and documentaries that covered the brutal abduction of children who were subsequently used as sex slaves or child soldiers. Other media coverage, which enforced the picture of a war of barbaric adults against helpless children, focused on the thousands of night commuters, children who fled the countryside every night to sleep on the open verandas in towns, where there was more military protection. Lastly, there was much media coverage on the squalid conditions in the IDP camps that were often described as protected camps where people lived out of fear for

the LRA. Events and stories such as these made the LRA the perfect villain in a story revolving around clear good and evil dichotomies.

However, while the LRA brutality is horrific in both its nature and scale, they were certainly not the only perpetrator of horrific violence in the conflict. Other perpetrators included the Karamojong Cattle Raiders, who were responsible for much of the looting and cattle theft but who are rarely mentioned as perpetrators, and the government army, who was the second largest perpetrator of grave human rights violations after the Lord's Resistance Army.<sup>4</sup> Research by the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre, the Kitgum office of the Refugee Law Project, clearly highlights that the government army was by far the largest perpetrator of armed violence at the start of the conflict, which certainly helped to give rise to a movement such as the Lord's Resistance Army. The event documentation database uncovers that government forces were responsible for many war crimes, including dozens of large-scale massacres, hundreds of extra-judicial executions and thousands of arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances. Research by both the Justice and Reconciliation Project and Refugee Law Project also uncovered that government forces have tortured people, that they were responsible for hundreds if not thousands of rape cases, of both men and women, and that they were responsible for large scale plundering (for a clear example of government violence, see Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2013).

That these realities are not part of the hegemonic discourse is due to a good international public relations strategy of the Ugandan government, which was built on masquerading its own atrocities and portraying itself as a partner that the west can rely on. The government has always downplayed its own violence by suppressing those who

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<sup>4</sup> This becomes clear from the event documentation database of the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre, the Kitgum office of the Refugee Law Project.

wanted to bring it out and by simply denying it and/or blaming it on the LRA. This is a trick that the LRA has also tried with much less success. When the evidence was too clear to deny the massacres, as has become the case with the massacres in Namakora in 1986 and Burcoro in 1991, the government argued that these massacres were perpetrated by *‘rotten elements within their armed forces who have been dealt with.’*<sup>5</sup> Moreover, some of the worst crimes were actually committed out in the open and covered up by humanitarian and protection language. The forced displacement of almost two million people was justified as a strategy to protect the civilians from the LRA. As a strategic ally and donor darling of the west, its American and European allies have adopted the hegemonic discourse of the Ugandan government. Branch (2011:6) rightly noticed:

*“Uganda came to be seen as a partner in protecting the human rights of its citizens and not as a possible violator of those rights, and human rights interventions have proceeded on that basis. Consequently, Uganda used international support to intensify the war, increase its militarization, and repress democratic domestic politics.”*

A clear example of how other governments have adopted the Ugandan government narrative is the US government’s *“Lord’s Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009.”* Upon signing the act, Barack Obama said the following:

*“The Lord’s Resistance Army preys on civilians - killing, raping, and mutilating the people of central Africa; stealing and brutalizing their children; and displacing hundreds of thousands of people. Its leadership, indicted by the International Criminal Court for*

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<sup>5</sup> This is the information I gathered in several interviews with high military commanders on 2012, including the commanders of the fourth and fifth army division and the commander of the reserve auxiliary forces.

*crimes against humanity, has no agenda and no purpose other than its own survival. It fills its ranks of fighters with the young boys and girls it abducts. By any measure, its actions are an affront to human dignity.”*

Nowhere in Obama’s speech was the same said about the actions of the Ugandan government. Instead, the act legitimizes military and logistical support to the Ugandan government in an effort to capture Kony, thereby aiding the further militarization of Uganda. In the words of Branch (2012:4-6):

*“Uganda’s positive international reputation and its strategic alliances with the United States, the international financial institutions, and European states have given rise to a reductive moralized understanding of the conflict in which the benevolent but shorthanded Ugandan government needs assistance to protect its population from the evil LRA.”*

The Ugandan government’s moral victory over the LRA has also been made possible by the uncritical stance of humanitarian and multilateral agencies such as the UN, the World Bank and a whole range of INGOs. The Ugandan office of the prime minister worked closely together with the steering committee that consisted out of all the larger NGOs and UN agencies that oversaw the humanitarian coordination. This partnership between the UN and the government of Uganda is also reflected in the UN discourse of the war. One of the most influential advocates of the UN discourse regarding humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda was Jan Egeland, the UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs. During his visit in November 2003, he labeled the conflict in northern

Uganda as “*the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world today.*”

To emphasize his point, he directed most of his focus on the issue of child soldiers:

*"This is not a war where the civilian population is affected through collateral damage," Egeland said, "it is a war targeting the civilian population, and especially children. [...] How can we as an international community accept that a war is continuing that is directed and targeted against children... who are abducted, brainwashed and made into child soldiers or sex slaves and forced to attack and kill their own families in their own villages?"*<sup>6</sup>

In an interview with ERIN in 2006, Egeland said: *"Northern Uganda is, in many ways, the world's terrorism epicentre. Nowhere in the world do we have large areas where between 80 and 90 percent of the population are terrorised into camps by violence."*<sup>7</sup>

While Egeland is correct that 80 to 90 percent of the population were terrorized into the camps by violence, what he doesn't mention and what he must have known, is that it was the Ugandan government that forced the people in the camps. Starting from 1996 onwards in Gulu district, the government gave the civilian population a 24-hour ultimatum to leave their villages and report to designated camps. They were threatening to kill anybody who would not report to the camps within the given time period, a threat that was executed both by the shelling of surrounding villages after the ultimatum ended, or by some exemplary extra-judicial execution of civilians who were found outside the camp

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.frouganda.org/PDF/war%20in%20northern%20uganda.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.irinnews.org/printreport.aspx?reportid=58646>

boundaries after the deadline had past.<sup>8</sup> What Egeland also did not mention was that the government did not provide basic survival necessities for the population, such as food, shelter or drinking water. The Ugandan government left that to the humanitarian agencies, which jumped in with great enthusiasm. Estimates by the World Health Organization are that at the height of the conflict, one thousand people died every week because of the squalid conditions in the camp, accounting for far more casualties than LRA violence. This makes the internment of an estimated 1,7 million people arguably the largest war crime that was committed in northern Uganda. However, Egeland, who represented the official UN line, took the Ugandan government discourse at face value and blamed the violence on the LRA, while engaging the Ugandan government as a cooperative partner in the fight against the humanitarian crisis.

The negative consequences of basing a large-scale humanitarian intervention on such a one-sided narrative should not be underestimated. In the aftermath of the forced internment of the people of northern Uganda into camps, humanitarian agencies, instead of condemning the Ugandan government for creating a humanitarian crisis, legitimized the government's policy by handing out food, drilling boreholes, digging latrines, handing out non-food items, such as blankets and baskets, and building facilities such as schools and medical centers. Regardless of all these humanitarian interventions, the death rates in the camps were extremely high because the humanitarian aid wasn't adequate to supply all that was needed. Chris Dolan (2009) calls this "Social Torture". He describes the IDP situation as a deliberate attempt of the government to humiliate and subordinate the people of northern Uganda, in which donors, multinational organizations, INGOs and others have become complicit. *"Like doctors in a torture situation,"* Dolan says, *"they appear to be*

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with the camp leader of Awach camp, 2007

*there to ease the suffering of the victims, but in reality they enable the process to be prolonged by keeping the victim alive for further abuse.”* While the humanitarian intervention might have had saved lives in the short run, by giving people an incentive to stay in the camps because of the aid given to them and by taking an uncritical stance to the actor that was primarily responsible for the humanitarian crisis, the Ugandan government, and blaming it on the Lord’s Resistance Army instead, the humanitarian intervention might have cost far more lives than it has saved. Had the earlier atrocities of the government against civilians in northern Uganda been included in the hegemonic narrative of the conflict, humanitarian actors and donor countries might have looked differently at the intentions of the government, and they might have pressured the Ugandan government to disband the IDP camps, instead of legitimizing the ‘social torture’ of over 1,7 million people. Adam Branch (2011:4) argued that the humanitarian interventions actually worsened the humanitarian situation:

*“International intervention, I believe, not only failed to bring about positive change, but also prevented such change from occurring, and, at times, it directly and destructively enflamed, enabled, and prolonged the war, displacement and civilian suffering. [...] Moreover, I found that this complicity emerged according to a similar logic in all the different interventions, a similarity I traced to the interventionist human rights discourse that informed and motivated the various interventions, a human rights discourse tied to a specific image of the conflict in Uganda.”*

While I largely agree with Dolan and Branch that the humanitarian agencies became complicit in perpetuating the humanitarian crisis through their uncritical stance towards the

government, I also believe that there were interventions that had positive effects. For example, offering shelter to thousands of night commuters significantly improved their nightly living conditions in the short-run. While provision of shelter doesn't address the root causes of why the children flee the countryside in the evening for the safety of town, it did help to ease the symptoms of endemic violence. Also the creation of rehabilitation centers, vocational skills facilities and specialized schools for child soldiers did play a positive role in the reintegration process of those child soldiers who managed to escape the LRA (Hollander, 2010). However, the inherent dilemma with the way that funding streams work, is that they are based on a distant donor's assessment of what is important to fund and what is not. These assessments are often based on the dominant narratives of the conflict and thus lead to discrimination in the provision of aid. This was clear with regard to humanitarian attention to sexual violence in the DRC, and in Uganda humanitarian attention focused a lot of its resources to the issues of child soldiers and child mothers. Hundreds of small and large projects offered a wide range of vocational skill trainings, education, rehabilitation, agricultural projects for former child soldiers, drama and arts projects, and so on. The 'generous' reinsertion packages that were given to former child soldiers were looked at with much envy by some of their worst victims. Children who have not been subjected to LRA abduction but who suffered all the other adverse effects of armed conflicts had problems accessing schools and vocational skill trainings that were open for former child soldiers. I have done several interviews in 2007 with young people who portrayed themselves as child soldiers while they weren't, just to increase the chance to get aid. Another effect was that, while these projects increased opportunities for former child soldiers, they also contributed to the stigmatization of former child soldiers. So in short, victim groups that fell outside the dominant narratives, for example adults abducted

by the LRA, adults whose children were abducted, relatives of people who were killed or victims of sexual violence could not make claims to aid interventions. They fell outside of the mandate of the humanitarian agencies' projects, which were funded according to perceived needs established by far away decision makers.

Anno 2014, the IDP camps have disappeared and the majority of the inhabitants of northern Uganda have returned to their ancestral lands. The humanitarian crisis is history and for the majority of people, life has improved significantly. Ronald Atkinson has shown that these positive changes were a consequence of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended the war between the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement and the Government of Sudan in Khartoum. Cut from their safe havens in current day South Sudan, the LRA was forced to relocate to Garamba national park in the northeastern DRC. The end of the war has brought many positive changes, and I largely agree with Branch (2011:10) that these changes were achieved through the people's own resilience, rather than because of humanitarian interventions: *"it is most accurate to see these positive changes as having occurred, not because of, but despite Western intervention - despite the International Criminal Court's arrest warrants, despite the unrelenting support Western donors have provided to the Ugandan government's militarization and authoritarianism, despite the LRA's placement on the U.S. State Department Terrorist list, despite the aid agencies' reluctance to help people leave the camps, despite the expired seeds and useless machetes that Acholi were given in their so-called return packages."*

However, while the guns have fallen silent, many of the legacies of the conflict are still unaddressed and many people continue to embody the conflict on a daily basis. Transitional justice and post-conflict recovery are the new buzzwords in northern Uganda. Unfortunately, the transitional justice regime operates with the same discourse that

legitimized the humanitarian intervention. Western donors and multilateral institutes continue to fund the Ugandan government as the principle architect of Uganda's transitional justice and post-conflict recovery processes, engaging it as a partner and largely ignoring its complicity in the war. The transitional justice debates in Uganda are largely debates by elites who talk about what is needed on the ground. There is only minimum consultation with the war-affected communities who have very limited power to influence transitional justice processes. Discussions are focused on reparation schemes, truth-telling commissions and amnesty versus criminal justice, with the latter only referring to LRA combatants. Bringing government soldiers to trial is not discussed. The dominant discourse still sees the LRA as the only culprit, the real underlying issues that caused the war, e.g., the real or perceived marginalization of the north, is still not addressed. Many survivor groups who continue to embody the conflict feel excluded and neglected in the transitional justice processes. Thus similarly to the humanitarian interventions in eastern DRC, the post-conflict interventions in northern Uganda fail to take the complexity and multitude of experiences, challenges, needs and aspirations of the war-affected people into account.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

While the dominant narratives of the conflicts in eastern DRC and northern Uganda are different, the commonality is that they both revolve around savagery and brutal realities that defy human understanding. They revolve around the '*otherness*' and '*barbarism*' of the armed groups that are held most responsible for the violence, the creation of clear victim groups who have little agency but with whom we can sympathize and the good guys in the form of western saviors who work with the national governments to stop the violence.

While the humanitarian crises in the DRC and in northern Uganda are very real, the narratives that have come to dominate our understanding of these conflicts only reflect a limited set of experiences from particular groups. Those with the power to frame have both pragmatic and political reasons to forward simplistic discourses, which partially intentionally and partially unintentionally inform humanitarian and developmental interventions. Here lies the crux of the problem: interventions that are based on extremely simplified perceptions of reality address only a limited number of issues at the expense of others, they address symptoms rather than causes, and when they do address causes, they often do so on the basis of wrong assumptions. Not only does this undermine the effectiveness of interventions, it can also perpetuate and aggravate the humanitarian crises. What is worse, the workings of funding streams makes humanitarian actors and even governments of developing countries accountable upwards rather than downwards, which means that the people on whose behalf is intervened have no power or mechanisms to hold the interveners to account or influence the interventions. Most war-affected people never have a chance to speak out and have their voices heard by those that intervene, as there are no democratic processes that they can utilize to influence interventions. Talking with outsiders such as me is often the only way that some of the war-affected people can share their experiences and criticize intervention practices or a lack thereof. It is for this reason that I find it important to give voice to people with different narratives of the conflicts based on their own experiences and to offer counter narratives to the dominant narratives. In the next section I will explain how this dissertation contributes to this.

## 4. Engaging Hegemonic Discourses.

### 4.1 Introduction

The previous section highlighted the dominant narratives of the conflicts in eastern DRC and northern Uganda. I explained how politically motivated narratives informed multimillion dollar interventions that did not bring the change they envisioned. This was largely because these interventions failed to engage with the complexities and the myriad of experiences, needs and aspirations of the people on whose behalf was intervened. To justify interventions, the voices of a few were amplified while the voices of the many were muted. As a result, interventions followed one-sided narratives and targeted only a small selection of causes, effects and solutions. Furthermore, interventions more often target the symptoms of a problem, sometimes with important results, rather than engaging in a critical analysis of underlying causes and addressing these. The communities targeted or neglected by interventions found that they have very limited power to influence intervention programs and even less power to hold interveners to account when interventions aggravate their problems.

One of the many tasks of academia is to address these wrongs, to critically engage with assumptions, to illuminate complexity and ‘invisible’ problems and give voice to people whose voices have been silenced. For many of the people I interviewed, talking to my research assistants and me provided them a rare chance to share their experiences with an outsider and maybe have their voices heard beyond their own community. Based on hundreds of in-depth interviews, dozens of focus group discussions (FGDs) and long-term engagement in the field, this dissertation questions commonly held assumptions and it gives voice to people whose experiences generally fall outside of the dominant narratives.

In the next section I will explain how this dissertation adds to the exposure of the plurality of experiences and perceptions of war-affected people and the costs of ignoring these.

#### **4.2 Oral Histories of Gender in Flux: Challenging Popular Perceptions about the State of Gender in South Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.**

As was explained in previous section, rape and sexual violence are central in the hegemonic discourse of the conflicts in eastern DRC. The Congo is systematically described as the world's rape capital and as one of the worst places to be a woman on earth. In the previous section I already explained what some of the negative consequences are of this type of framing. One of the underlying assumptions that are often articulated is that the sexual violence is a consequence or sign of extreme gender inequality. "*Even before the war in Congo,*" says Human Rights Watch (2002:18), "*women and girls were second class citizens*", which is then seen as a reason for the prolific and virulent sexual violence in the DRC. The reality behind this assumption is of course far more complex if not completely the opposite, and this is explained in my book chapter "*Oral histories of gender in flux: challenging popular perceptions about the state of gender in South Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo*" (accepted as the second chapter of the book *Gender and Conflict: Embodiments, Discourses and Symbolic Practices*).

While gender dynamics are always in flux, there are certain political, social and economic events that cause dramatic shifts in a relatively short period of time. My book chapter discusses several of these '*gendered earthquakes*'. The chapter shows how colonialism, christianization, independence, armed conflict, thirty years of Mobutu rule and economic decline caused significant shifts in gender norms, relations, practices and performances. Colonialism replaced traditional patriarchal systems to a patriarchal system based on Christianity and colonial supremacy. After independence, these gendered

earthquakes led to a crises in the patriarchal system, at least at the domestic level. In a situation of political, social and economic crisis, it became increasingly difficult for men to live-up to societal expectations of what a man is supposed to do and who he is supposed to be. To fill the economic void left by men, women increasingly contributed to the family's breadwinning, which also gave them some economic leverage over their husbands. While culturally the men remained the head of the household, reality shifted significantly. Though the political at the higher levels of society remained mostly in the hands of male elites, at grassroots level, shifts in production and certain government policies of Mobutu contributed significantly to the emancipation of women. While you can not speak of a gender equality society in the Congo on the eve of the First Congo War, certainly not in the realm of ideas, beliefs and discourses, in the daily-lived realities of my respondents many men felt a profound crises of their masculinities while many women felt emancipated enough to challenge the unquestionable rule of men.

The implications of these shifts in gender dynamics were very large. My chapter illuminates the impact that war, economic collapse and state fragility have had on gender dynamics. It shows that war - instead of being a hampering factor in women's strive for equality - can actually be a factor that advances gender equality, albeit in a perverted way and in a situation where the quality of life goes down for all. It shows that the bankruptcy of economic patterns that exclude women can have a liberating effect on women and a suffocating effect on men. Most importantly, it shows that claims that women and children suffer more during armed conflicts and crisis situations are simplifications that do not reflect the daily-lived experiences of both women and men. Situations of conflict and crisis affects men and women differently, they alter the performances of both masculinities and femininities, which cause shifts in gender dynamics and create friction in gender relations.

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) should also be seen in this light. Rather than a consequence of gender inequality, SGBV, certainly at the domestic level, can be partially explained as a consequence of shifts in gender dynamics, emasculation and gender power struggles that are considered to be zero-sum games in the eyes of men. Therefore, any program that aims to fight SGBV through women's empowerment, without also focusing on emasculation and taking gender dynamics into consideration, is likely to increase the problem rather than reducing it. It is therefore vital that SGBV and gender inequality stops being seen as a women's issue, and interventions that address these issues should take the wider gender scope into consideration.

#### **4.3 Men, Masculinities and the Demise of a State: Examining Masculinities in the Context of Economic, Political and Social Crisis in a Small Town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.**

The article "*Men, masculinities and the demise of a state: Examining masculinities in the context of economic, political and social crisis in a small town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*", submitted to the journal *Men and Masculinities*, also shows that gender problems do not only affect women. This article looks at the effects of emasculation and coping strategies that men apply in emasculating circumstances. This article challenges the singular focus on rape as a weapon of war as the only gender problem in eastern DRC. Theoretically, the article provides a critical reflection on Connell's classification of masculinities. The data that I gathered in eastern DRC clearly suggests that a classification of men into hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, marginalized and protest masculinities is not sufficiently adequate to describe how men react to sudden changes in their environment and prolonged periods of deep economical, social and political crises.

Based on a study in the small town of Kiliba in South Kivu, this article highlights

the enormous stress that men undergo when the conditions that enable them to perform their masculinities according to societal expectations suddenly cease to exist. Already in the previous article, it was explained that the expectations of men are high. They are expected to provide, to protect, to advise and to provide leadership. In return, they reap what Connell describes as the patriarchal dividend: more power. However, in Congo after thirty years of Mobutism, the conditions that enabled men to provide slowly vaporized with the collapse of the economy, which had a huge emasculating effect on most men. The existence of a large sugarcane factory in Kiliba that operated with US dollars and had its markets in Rwandan and Burundi postponed the economic decay that affected large parts of the rest of the DRC. However, after the Genocide in Rwanda and the outbreak of the First Congo War, the factory had to close.

The study highlights two distinct ways in which men renegotiated their masculinities after the war broke out and closure of a sugarcane factory caused 3,000 people to lose their jobs. Some men adopted a victim identity. They placed the blame of their situation outside themselves and scolded others for putting them in this situation, while they also placed the solution in the hands of others. Their reaction to emasculation can be largely described as defeatism, embitterment and at times aggression. What I was told is that these men do not leave their beds early in the morning, instead of constructive behavior, they sleep a lot and they are largely idle. The nickname of some men has become 'wake-up and eat', as that is the only thing that they are considered to be good for. My data also suggest that victimized masculinity often show destructive behavior, such as alcoholism, domestic violence and fights with other men. Their families and surrounding community members criticized their idleness and they responded to critique with the one masculine feature that they hadn't lost, their physical strength. Especially in families where

women became less obedient and submissive, violence was often used to restore order, which in turn increased the number of divorces and increased the isolation of the men. In gender literature, these men are sometimes also referred to as violent masculinities. I prefer victimized masculinities, as the men often expressed themselves in victimizing language.

The other form of renegotiation that I encountered were men who effaced themselves. They lowered their self-expectations. Inability to live up to societal expectations and the shame derived from it caused them to move into the background and become inconspicuous. While these men might also place the blame of their situation outside of themselves, they saw that no one but themselves would get them out of this situation. The data I gathered clearly indicates that while some men were mostly idle and adopted the 'wake up and eat' victimized masculinities, others went out to do petty jobs that they traditionally considered to be far below their status. They accepted that they no longer held the hegemonic position in the family. Realizing that what they earned was not enough for the sustenance of their family, they encouraged their wives to also earn an income. The lowering of their own standards also meant that they increasingly shared the virtues of the patriarchal dividend with their wives. Decisions on how to spend the money were made together and women got a say in household spending. In short, the renegotiated or effaced masculinities accepted a new gender order in which the men could still lead, but based on performance and more democratic decision-making.

Instead of looking at men purely as victims of war or perpetrators of domestic violence, this article examines how the men in Kiliba town coped with a deeply emasculating situation. It shows how a microanalysis of gender dynamics in one small town can shed light on the various coping mechanisms that emasculated men deploy. This analysis shows the enormous stress that men are faced with in crisis situations, but also that

the two different coping mechanisms described result in very different outcomes in terms of livelihood provision and gender dynamics. While one is conducive for both women's empowerment and decreasing SGBV, the other one induces it. If these distinctions form the basis of interventions, the success rate of interventions is likely to increase. While far more research is needed on this topic, interventions that would take the various coping mechanisms of emasculated men into account could do justice to both the experiences of men, while also addressing SGBV and gender inequality.

#### **4.4 Every Day the War Continues in My Body: Examining the 'marked' body in post-conflict northern Uganda.**

We all know the expression "*a picture is worth a thousand words*". Photography is a very important tool in news coverage and the creation of discourses. Pictures can captivate and move people. Good pictures instantly grasp the attention and draw it's viewers to the story. However, pictures can equally hide the truth, they can be intrusive and voyeuristic. In light of the debate in the previous two sections, pictures can also be used to enforce dominant narratives while blocking other narratives. What often happens is that the object of the picture becomes unimportant, while the story, the interpretation of a particular image becomes important. This is what has often happened in northern Uganda. Newspapers such as the Guardian, the New York Times and many others have used the pictures of mutilated people to depict the savagery of the LRA, rather than to tell the stories of these people. Examples of this abound: the article "Atrocity Victims in Uganda Choose to Forgive",<sup>9</sup> by Marc Lacey, published in the New York Times on 18 April, 2005 and the photo reportage "Tragedy in Uganda: Joseph Kony massacre survivors - pictures"<sup>10</sup> by Will Storr are just two examples out of a few hundred. While these pictures have contributed to

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/18/international/africa/18uganda.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2014/jan/12/joseph-kony-uganda-massacres-survivors-in-pictures?picture=426761135>

awareness that there are many people in northern Uganda who are severely wounded as a result of mutilations, the pictures have been used to depict LRA savagery while failing to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of war-affected people.

The article “*Every Day the War Continues in My Body: Examining the ‘marked’ body in post-conflict northern Uganda*”, accepted by the International Journal of Transitional Justice, is about people whose bodies were marked in various ways. Their portraits have been voyeuristically used to forward the dominant narrative of primordial violence in northern Uganda, but their experiences, challenges, needs and aspirations have been largely neglected in post-conflict processes. The fact that this is only the second academic publication about people with war-related injuries in northern Uganda offers some evidence of this. Together with co-author Bani Gill, I argue that human bodies have assumed center-stage in modern warfare. Few armed conflicts epitomize this more than the conflict in northern Uganda, where both rebel groups and government forces violated bodily integrity and altered human tissue to communicate messages, humiliate and intimidate the enemy and their support base, and dominate both people and territory. The injuries and disabilities inflicted during wartime continue to affect people long after armed violence has come to an end. Using the theoretical lenses of embodiment, gender and social capital theory, we analyze the impact the injuries/disabilities have on people’s everyday lives. People whose bodies were ‘marked’ continue to embody the war in everyday activities in terms of pain, disabilities and loss of mobility. Most marked bodies struggle to conform gender performances to expectations, which is often connected to depression and loss of self-esteem. Furthermore, a decline in productivity of people with marked bodies and the failure to reciprocate mutual beneficial interaction leads to ruptures within social capital networks, resulting in widespread stigmatization and discrimination.

While the body has assumed centre-stage in warfare, focus on the body seems to be largely missing in peace and transitional justice processes. While the images of these people have been used many times to enforce dominant narratives about LRA brutality, the voices of people with marked bodies fall outside of the dominant narratives. Assumptions are made that all these people need is medical treatment, but otherwise their experiences are largely ignored. Indeed, the few projects that do target people with marked bodies exclusively focus on the medical needs of these people. However, what this study highlights is that the needs and aspirations of these people often go beyond what medical interventions can deliver. In the aftermath of armed conflict, where so many bodies have been marked, disability mainstreaming should become a quintessential element in transitional justice. Going beyond medical interventions, this means that in all transitional justice thinking and practices, attention should be paid to how marked bodies can be included, participate and benefit.

Apart from focusing on the experiences, challenges, needs and aspirations of people with marked bodies, we also highlight that victims/survivors are far from a homogeneous group. Different victims have different issues and also completely different needs. In the previous section I already explained that dominant narratives often point to a selection of victim groups at the expense of others. In northern Uganda, most attention has gone to children; mostly former child soldiers and interventions have focused on their rehabilitation and reintegration. While the images of wounded people have been used time and again to reinforce the hegemonic discourse of the conflict in northern Uganda, this has hardly contributed to a specific focus on people with marked bodies in transitional justice processes. Also in this area, we show the importance of microanalyses that go beyond dominant narratives and take the voices of excluded groups into account.

#### **4.5 Parenting the Missing: Living with Ambiguous Loss in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda.**

The fourth and final article of my PhD dissertation reinforces the last point. “*Parenting the Missing: Living with Ambiguous Loss in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda*”, submitted to the Journal for Eastern African Studies, engages with again another group of survivors whose experiences have largely been neglected, if not actively silenced throughout the war and its aftermath. While the abduction of young children and their experiences in LRA captivity have been central in the hegemonic discourse of northern Uganda, no attention has gone to the parents of these children, who arguably suffer the worst fate that any parent can undergo. They know that something bad has happened to their child, but do not know exactly what has happened to him/her and whether he/she is still alive or not. The issue of the disappeared is arguably one of the largest unaddressed legacies of armed violence in post-conflict northern Uganda, affecting thousands of families. So far, only a handful of interventions have focused on this issue. In terms of research, this issue has received inadequate attention, which is already epitomized by a complete lack of statistics of number of disappeared. Also the experiences of relatives of missing people have been neglected. While there are dozens of publications about child soldiers in northern Uganda, as far as I can establish, this is the first academic publication that gives voice to the parents of these child soldiers. This also shows that academics are often guided by hegemonic discourses and that they are blind to issues that fall outside of this discourse.

Applying ambiguous loss theory, created by Pauline Boss, this article shows that the ambiguity of the parent’s loss of their children prevents closure and freezes grief processes. While community members are initially sympathetic to the parents of the missing, sympathy wanes and social isolation increases as the grief intensifies. This is induced

further by a lack of cultural rituals that symbolize their loss and provide meaning. Lastly, in a situation where one's children are one's pension, the ambiguous loss of a child also affects the over parent's survival in old age. Similarly to the people with marked bodies whose experiences were highlighted in the third article of this dissertation, the parents of the missing continue to embody the armed conflict in their daily lives. While the general discourse in northern Uganda today is one of peace and post-conflict reconstruction, for both these victim groups, the war endures, but for very different reasons and with very different consequences. While in most cases both these groups will have to live with the consequences of the war for the rest of their lives, well-targeted interventions as well as mainstreaming their experiences in general transitional justice practices can have positive effects on their lives in post-conflict northern Uganda, which is for example demonstrated by a small pilot project of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

One of the things that worsen the situation faced by relatives of the missing is the silence around their issue. Breaking this silence means creating an atmosphere where relatives of missing can openly engage with important stakeholders and community members, and where they can register their missing family members. This article also shows is that transitional justice mechanisms needed for this survivor group should have a much stronger emphasis on psychosocial programs, adaptation of cultural and religious mechanisms to tailor the needs of the families of the missing, and livelihood programs tailored to the needs of families of missing to address the emotional, social, cultural and economic distress of the relatives of the missing. This defies the elitist debates around transitional justice in Uganda that emphasize the need of truth-telling and the establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions (TRC), that heed the need of reparation payments, or that engages with the dichotomy between formal and informal justice. While these

discussions are certainly important, they do not reflect the experiences, challenges, needs and aspirations of the parents of the missing. While they of course want to know the truth about what happened to their children, a TRC is unlikely to provide them with this information, and it might only serve to increase hope, which is a very difficult emotion for people living with ambiguous loss. The article warns that successful transitional justice needs to be based on the experiences and needs of the war-affected people, which can only be gathered through documentation and micro-analysis of various victim groups.

This article makes another important contribution to the pluralism of post-war experiences. It shows that different survivor groups have different challenges, needs and aspirations. These cannot be encompassed by general interventions that treat victims or survivors as a homogeneous group. Both during and after armed conflict, individual experiences of people show wide variation. While it is partially possible to cluster experiences in groups, as was done in the last three articles, the boundaries of these groups will always be vague. This makes intervening also so extremely difficult. However, as was shown earlier, interventions that do not take these complexities into account are very likely to either fail or do more harm than good.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

The book chapter and the three journal articles that form the core of this dissertation each engage differently with the dominant narratives of the conflicts in eastern DRC and northern Uganda. The book chapter offers a critical reflection on the assumption that gender inequality is at an all time high in the DRC and that this is somehow connected to the sexual violence. The articles give voice to victim/survivor groups whose plights have been neglected. While the experiences of emasculated men, people with marked bodies and parents of missing persons fall outside the hegemonic discourses of the situations in

northern Uganda and eastern DRC, the realities that were described are the daily-lived experiences of thousands of people. By highlighting their voices, I aim to contribute to our understanding the plurality of experiences, challenges, needs and aspirations of groups that fall outside the gaze of interveners.



## 5. An Epistemological Journey in the Great Lakes Region

### 4.1 Introduction

The four articles of this dissertation are quite diverse, both in terms of themes, historic timespan and geographical focus. The three overarching and intersecting theoretical fields are armed conflict, gender and transitional justice. Within these fields I focused on the four issues that I elaborated on in the previous section: 1) shifts in gender dynamics in Congo's pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history; 2) effects of social, political and economic crisis on masculinities; 3) the impact of the conflict related injuries/wounds/disabilities on people's daily lives and the relevance of this for transitional justice and; 4) the impact of people having a missing child on people's daily lives and the relevance of this for transitional justice. While these topics are quite different, they were not randomly selected. While we are always influenced by the dominant narratives, especially in the initial stages of a research when familiarity with the case study is in its developing stages, I have always tried to keep an open-mind when I entered the field. My questions were open-ended and they covered a wide range of topics. I allowed a fair amount of academic wandering in my search for what is important and what is worthwhile analyzing and writing about. Listening to the stories of war-affected people in the Congo and Uganda, I became attuned to stories and voices that were either neglected or that challenged underlying assumptions. While there were many narratives about social injustices that I came across and I could have written about, I feel that the four that I selected all capture important issues. Their commonality is that they all challenge dominant discourses, and I think this is largely because of my epistemological and ontological preferences. In this section I will elaborate on my epistemological and ontological journey as a social scientist. Rather than being

considered an act in vanity, I hope that this part of the introduction will put this PhD in context and will help to explain the choice of topics, theories and methods that I used to bring this PhD dissertation to conclusion.

## **5.2 My Epistemological and Ontological Journey.**

### *5.2a Life-History Interviews in northern Uganda.*

From an early age onwards, I have been captivated by armed conflicts. As a child I read books about the first and second world war and I watched T.V. series such as ‘*Tour of Duty*’ and movies such as ‘*D-Day*’. In line with dominant narratives, I was captivated by the heroics of warfare. Much later, I learned the darker side of armed conflict and the immense human suffering it leaves in its aftermath. I learned that many of the complexities of armed conflicts and their aftermath are beyond human understanding. However, I also learned that aspects of it can be illuminated and rendered intelligible, which has since then become my personal career goal. My personal journey as a social scientist has seen a disciplinary shift in my outlook of armed conflicts.

My initial interest was in historical political processes of global importance and military strategies in some of the world’s largest military campaigns. Several papers I produced during my years as a history undergraduate epitomized this. The papers I wrote in the first years of my academic forming were about military doctrines, military strategies and geopolitical power politics. I was interested in grand history, in the larger picture of politics, diplomacy and warfare. This interest in the larger picture sparked an interest to look at the personal motivations of the architects of it all. I read the biographies/memoirs of people such as Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela, Che Guevara and many other historical figures. I liked the individual angles in these books and

the different ways they illuminated certain historical episodes. What I enjoyed about (auto) biographies was that they captured the ‘zeitgeist’, which gave rise to these political leaders. While these elite stories captivated me, I increasingly became interested in the stories of ordinary people. Perhaps the most influential book that changed my gaze from the high politics of the elites to the every day lives of common people was the book ‘*Ordinary men*’ from Christopher Browning (1992). Based on archival research of post-war testimonies of the reserve police battalion 101, this book excellently explains the dynamics behind the mass extermination of six million Jews. It shows convincingly how the most ordinary men, people like you and me, became entangled in arguably the largest crime in human history. Ever since I read this book in 2003 during a course in Holocaust and Genocide studies at the University of Amsterdam, my gaze started to shift from the world of large politics towards understanding the dynamics of violence on grassroots level.

In June 2006 I entered a war-zone for the first time in my life. I was seated in a shabby overcrowded bus that also catered room for a few dozen chickens and goats. The bus drove too fast to my liking over very bad roads and I often had the feeling that we might tip over. What eased my mind was the chatter of the people around me who were generally in good spirits. This changed when we crossed the river Nile that separates southern and northern Uganda. The man sitting next to me told me that we had entered Kony’s territory and people talked in lower voices, while staring intently outside. The reason why I came to Uganda in 2006 had much to do with the shift in my academic gaze from macro-politics to micro-experiences of violence. Two years before, not long after I attended a presentation of Christopher Browning in Amsterdam, I had been at a presentation from a former child soldier from Sierra Leone. He told a story of enormous social and political injustice, cruelty, endurance and resilience. The story had a large impact

on me. In the years that followed I read many biographies of former child soldiers as well as literature about the issue. One of the case studies that I read about was the war in Uganda, ‘the world’s most forgotten and neglected humanitarian crisis where the LRA abducted thousands of children and used them in the most brutal ways to fight a war without clear purpose or intent’, as the dominant narrative goes. Inspired by this narrative, I travelled to northern Uganda in June 2006, from Kenya, where I lived at that time. The main purpose of this journey was to find out how I could engage with this conflict and the issue of child soldiers in a meaningful way. This was the basis for many trips that followed to northern Uganda, southern Sudan (at that time still part of Sudan) and eastern DRC.

I travelled past Gulu, the largest town in northern Uganda, and I went straight to Kitgum. Here I visited several NGOs that were active at the time. War Child Holland showed me several of the recreational centers they had built for former child soldiers. Food for the Hungry International showed me a rehabilitation center that they had built to help female ex-combatants to reintegrate into society. I visited KICWA, Kitgum’s largest rehabilitation center for ‘escapees’. I was allowed to travel with a World Food Programme food-convoy to a remote IDP camp, where I spent almost the entire day, as the large trucks were unloaded. At various places, I was ‘allowed’ to interview war-victims, mostly IDPs and local leaders, and local NGO staff and volunteers. While I was initially very nervous and unprepared, I quickly learned that people were very responsive to my questions and that they were willing to share. I also learned that the NGO world tended to divide former child soldiers in two rough groups, the child mothers, those women who have returned from LRA captivity after having given birth, and other child soldiers. The child mothers had become the new buzz word by the time I visited northern Uganda, based on successful advocacy campaigns that pointed to the neglect of women and girls in Disarmament,

Demobilization and Reintegration programs. I also became convinced of the specific vulnerability of this group of war-victims and I decided that my master thesis would focus on the reintegration challenges of these women.

Little less than a year later, in March 2007, I came back to northern Uganda to conduct research for my master thesis *'The Blessing of survival'* for the master program Conflict Studies and Human Rights, at Utrecht University.<sup>11</sup> This time my base was Gulu where I had found an Ugandan organization that was willing to play a gatekeeper role in my research. This organization was called the War Affected Children Association (WACA), founded by former child soldiers, for former child soldiers. My first real interview with a former child soldier was with one of the founders of WACA, named Norman Okello. My personal notes after this interview said: *"Shocked, flabbergasted, inspired, and yearning for a cigarette, a beer and some time to organize my thoughts."* At that time I didn't yet know that Norman's story would play an enormous role in my academic forming and my career choice later on. Norman and Victor Oloya, another formerly abducted person, became my translators. Together with them I selected a group of seven former girl soldiers who had returned from LRA captivity with a child. These women are often referred to as 'child mothers', which is a very confusing term since first, many of them weren't children anymore, and second, because many juvenile girls got pregnant outside of the LRA, for example because of the common war-related transactional sex.

With the two translators (Norman for my interviews in Gulu town, Victor for my interviews in rural areas) I interviewed all the seven women multiple times. The stories that the women told were mind blowing. They had all been brutally abducted by the LRA.

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<sup>11</sup> Hollander, T. 2010 *The Blessing of Survival: Challenges and opportunities in the reintegration and rehabilitation processes of former female child soldiers, abused and impregnated during the civil conflict in Northern Uganda*. Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010

Some had indeed witnessed the killing of their parents. In the LRA they were married-out and forced to have sex with their elderly commanders at very young ages. When they came back from LRA captivity, in most cases because they escaped, they were traumatized and they had a lot of difficulty adapting to civilian life. While my first interviews had the enormous shock-factor that makes the dominant narrative of LRA brutality so appealing, I also uncovered the enormous complexity in these women's stories and their ambiguous perspectives towards the LRA, towards their former husbands, and towards the civilian communities in which they had to reintegrate. While the stories of the seven women were full of horror, what also emerged was the agency of these young women and the interplay between this agency and societal structures that presented both opportunities and obstacles towards their reintegration. Theoretically, the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens became an important founding principle in my academic thinking. While I do not mention this in any of the articles of this dissertation, I do believe that the interplay between structures and agency and the dualism of structure is quintessential in understanding the dynamics of violent conflict. This became clear to me from the stories of the girls. When the girls returned from LRA captivity, they returned to cultural structures and gender codes that didn't condone their status as child mothers, they returned to a society that was partially sympathetic partially hostile. The women were subject to these structures, but they also changed them through their own agency and behavior. They learned that violent behavior reinforced hostile structures while moderate behavior reduced hostility. Through their behavior, they changed community perspectives of the child mothers, thereby changing the structures of societal expectations. From my study it became very clear that it is hard to understand the reintegration of these girls, without accepting the duality of structure as a founding societal principle.

From a methodological perspective, I learned the power of the Life-History-Interview. As I said, I interviewed all the women multiple times, and each time I interviewed them, new layers of complexity emerged. Instead of feeling that I was running out of questions, I felt that every topic that I started led to more questions and the deeper I dug, the more curious I became in unraveling the next layer in their stories. Stemming from the notion that every individual history is far too complicated to be captured in one interview, the technique with Life-History Interviews (LHI) is to interview individuals multiple times and allowing enough time to explore topics in-depth. Rather than operating with a pre-determined set of questions, you only formulate a few loose themes and the types of questions that are asked are mostly open-ended. This allows the interviewee to narrate stories in their own words and highlight what they find important and unimportant, while minimizing the steering and guidance of the interviewer. The beauty of a LHI is that you never know where the interview will end and what angles will be chosen. Each answer potentially opens a realm of new questions and the flow of topics and timespan in a person's history occurs very naturally. I learned that during the first interviews, interviewees are often slightly uncomfortable, and they stick to the facts that they want to share. However, in subsequent interviews, as the bond of trust between interviewer and interviewee slowly grows, it is increasingly possible to explore the subjectivity of human experience, feelings, perspectives, ideas, regrets, aspirations, the type of content that provide stories with a human face.

Apart from the strengths of LHI, I also learned some of its pitfalls. One of these pitfalls is the fine line between probing and prying. I learned that while technically, in an interview you are allowed to ask any question, questions can also be very intrusive and very painful when they are asked in a wrong way at the wrong time. The women I

interviewed were all highly traumatized. This presents an ethical dilemma, as it is difficult to abide the 'do no harm' principle. I learned that once you agree with a person to do an interview about a painful subject, there is no guarantee that no harm will be done. Sometimes certain questions open a Pandora's box of bad memories and social scientists are poorly equipped to deal with this. There are several ways to diminish this harm, which I always did in every interview. First of all, I always take a lot of time before the start of an interview. I explain the reason of the interview, why I want to interview the interviewee, I brief the person on what types of topics we might be talking about, and I make it very clear that it is their voluntary choice to participate, that they will receive no benefits other than giving voice to their issues, and I make it clear that they can stop the interview at any time or ask to change the question or change the topic. Second, during the interview I always pay attention to body language and whether body language suggests something different from the verbal language. Whenever I sense in the body language that a certain topic is particularly painful, I ask the interviewee whether they want to continue. Lastly, I communicate with my translators and research assistants who speak the language and know local customs and behavioral trades much better than I do, I involve them in the decision of what questions to ask, how to ask them, and when to stop an interview.

At the end of my field research with the child mothers, I did one last interview with Norman Okello, mostly to explore some of the patterns that I had seen with the child mothers, and to see whether Norman, as a boy, had different or similar experiences. While I had done a few dozen interviews at that time, the second interview with Norman inspired me even more than the first and together, we decided that his story merited a full biography. To this end, I returned to northern Uganda in February 2008. I stayed in Uganda for more than four months and every week I did several interviews with Norman. Every interview

focuses on a certain episode in his story and we explored it in full depth. At the time, Norman was still highly traumatized and he suffered bad nightmares almost every night, which had caused him to develop insomnia. Since he couldn't sleep at night, I gave him my voice recorder and he started narrating his story in a very soft voice in the middle of the night, when everyone around him was asleep. I would analyze and transcribe these stories during the day, and then twice a week we would have an interview about his monologues. After a few months of doing this, we decided that it was time to visit the various locations in his story. This resulted in a grand tour throughout northern Uganda and southern Sudan. At each location, if circumstances allowed, Norman would walk me through the landscape, following the same paths he had used almost ten years earlier, we would stop at places where things had happened in his story and he would describe to me what he witnessed. Location interviews became a major source of knowledge. Being at the same places where things happened in his story, helped Norman to recollect very detailed memories that he had almost forgotten, and it gave me a sense of the scenery and geography. By the end of the four months, I had over forty hours of interviews and even more hours of monologues. Two years later, in May 2010, I finished the first draft of what is probably one of the most detailed biographies of a former child soldier ever written. The manuscript is now in its final editing stages and will hopefully be published either at the end of 2014 or in the first half of 2015.<sup>12</sup>

While I have never repeated such a detailed research about one individual since, the research I did with Norman, in addition to the research with the child mothers, has become the basis of both my epistemological and ontological positioning. If we can deduce

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<sup>12</sup> Hollander, Theo: *Boy Soldier: memoirs of a former child soldier from northern Uganda*. Now in final editing stages with the Bell, Lomax and Moreton literary agency in London. (Currently available under the title "In the service of the Lord's Army" on the following website [www.refugeelawproject.org/nmpdc](http://www.refugeelawproject.org/nmpdc))

ontology to the question; What is worth knowing, and epistemology to the question; How do we get to know it, these researches had a huge impact on my academic forming. From Norman's story I learned that there is almost no limit to the vastness and complexity of individual experience and subjective interpretation of these. While I felt that after more than forty hours of interviews and even more monologues I had enough information to write the book, I also knew that I could do another forty hours of interviews and that I would still encounter many experiences that he hadn't shared before. Second, I learned that you can learn as much or more from interviewing one individual a few dozen times than you learn from interviewing a few dozen people once. Third, I learned that Norman's individual experience of his time in the LRA was far more complex than the dominant narratives held. I learned that armed conflict is so extremely multi-layered that it will never be possible to understand it in all the pluralism of experiences. Fourth, I learned that microanalysis could illuminate complexities that will always stay hidden in macro-analysis, but which can have an enormous influence on macro-analysis if they are taken into account. What I learned from the research I did with the child mothers was that, while each story and individual set of experiences of armed conflict is unique, it is possible to cluster people with relatively similar experiences together and to see patterns emerging. While the study of patterns is often considered the domain of quantitative research methods, these methods, e.g., questionnaires, diminish flexibility in a research and it also diminishes respondent's ability to tell their own story. Microanalysis of small groups of respondents who are interviewed multiple times does not have this limitation. The inherent weakness is of course the generalizing power of microanalysis, depth at the cost of width, but such weaknesses could be countered by seeing microanalysis as a pre-requisite for broader quantitative studies or vice-versa. What I mean with this is that I do not know whether the

experiences of Norman Okello are representative for the experiences of other child soldiers. However, his story can significantly improve quantitative analysis because it illuminates experiences that prompt certain questions, which might have never been considered without such a story. So to the epistemological question; what is worth knowing; I would say the plurality of individual experiences and the clustering of these into patterns. How do we go about knowing these: Through microanalysis of individual narratives, based on multiple interviews that allow the interviewer and interviewee to explore complex topics without having to rush to the next question and the next topic.

### *5.2b The Dutch Knowledge Network for Peace, Security and Development*

So back to this dissertation, how did this epistemological and ontological formation influence the choice of topics and the approach that was chosen? When I started my PhD I was far less narrow minded than I was when I first entered northern Uganda. I was more of a critical thinker who didn't take dominant narratives at face value. Furthermore, I knew that there is a vast depth and knowledge in every individual concerning their own life-experiences. These could be unveiled by asking open-ended questions, by listening very intently, both to verbal and non-verbal language and by taking your time and not rushing through interviews with a pre-determined set of questions. Ultimately, the open-minded focus on individual narratives, in combination with organizational circumstances and work environments, led me to the various topics of my dissertation.

In March 2009, I was hired as a junior researcher at the Centre for Conflict Studies (CCS) of Utrecht University. At the time, the CCS took part in a large research network called the Dutch Knowledge Network on Peace, Security and Development (KNPSD), which encompassed various knowledge institutes, government institutes, multi-national

corporations and NGOs. The CCS participated in three of the five working groups of the KNPSD and I was assigned to the Gender and Conflict working group with the aim to research the dialectical relation between gender and fragile states. At the time I only had limited experience with gender studies as an academic field through the study on the child mothers and I was also relatively new to the fragile state discourse and the world of policy analysis. My experiences with the KNPSD provided a quick lesson in all these areas. Within a timespan of less than a year, I had produced three working papers, one literature review and one positioning paper on fragile state discourses, gender concerns within these fragile state discourses and the difficult relation between gender equality and the hybrid forms of governance in fragile states.<sup>13</sup> All these papers were based on a review of feminist literature and gender studies, most notably the work of R.W. Connell, academic literature about fragile states, and alternatives to this, e.g., the mediated state, twilight institutions and hybrid political orders and policy briefs, policy documents and reports by governments, multilateral organizations, think tanks, NGOs and advocacy agencies.

Especially Connell's (1995; 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) classification of masculinities would come to play a big role in my future research. Connell's theory highlighted that the concept of masculinities is relational and it evolves around the historical constructed hierarchies of social interaction and social distinction. Connell distinguishes several types of masculinities. On top of the hierarchy is what he called hegemonic masculinity. This refers to an ideal type of manhood that very few can achieve.

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<sup>13</sup> Hollander, T. (2009). *Situating gender in the international discourse and policy development on Fragile States*. Utrecht: Knowledge Network of Peace Security and Development; Hollander, T. 2010. 'Gender Equality and the Hybrid Reality in Fragile States.' Utrecht, Knowledge Network of Peace Security and Development; Hollander, T. 2010. 'Literature review on the linkage between masculinities and violent conflict in the DRC.' Utrecht: Knowledge Network of Peace Security and Development; Hollander, T. 2009. 'The international Fragile States Agenda; Dilemmas, debates and definitions.' Utrecht: Knowledge Network of Peace Security and Development; Overbeek, F. van, Hollander, T., Molen, I. van der, Willems, R.C., Frerks, G.E. & Anten, L. (2009). *Fragile State Discourse Unveiled*. Utrecht: Knowledge Network of Peace Security and Development

Below the hegemonic ideal are complicit masculinities; these are the masculinities of men who live-up to the hegemonic ideal, without achieving it. Other types of masculinities described by Connell are protest masculinities, which refers to a type of hyper masculinity of men who are often at the bottom of society, marginalized masculinities, which refers to the masculinities of marginalized groups of men, and subordinate masculinities, which refers to the type of masculinities that are subordinate to the ideal, e.g. masculinities of gay men. Especially the article “*Men, masculinities and the demise of a state*” will discuss Connell’s theory further. What I want to emphasize here is that Connell’s theory has become the dominant lens I used when looking at gender issues. In the interviews I did in Congo and Uganda, I started to look at the hegemonic ideal and how the hegemonic ideal had shifted over time. Then I looked into the complicit masculinities and the dynamics of complying with the hegemonic ideal and I looked at the forces that challenge the hegemonic ideal, which is something that for example human rights and women’s empowerment agencies sometimes contribute to. So in short, even though I found that Connell’s classification of masculinities was insufficiently adequate to analyze masculinities in the context of deep economic, social and political crisis, my work seeks to build on his theory rather than criticize its founding principles. As such, Connell’s gender classification, together with Giddens structuration theory, became a cornerstone of my academic thinking.

The first time I applied Connell’s gender classification in field research was when I got involved as a junior researcher in a consultancy for the World Food Programme in northern Uganda, in September and October 2009. I was assigned to study the impact of humanitarian aid on livelihoods and Acholi and Langi (two Ugandan tribes) culture and I

was involved in the production of two reports.<sup>14</sup> Based on my increased knowledge in gender theory, this research also focused on the impact of humanitarian aid on gender dynamics. This research formed my first critical encounter with the dynamics of humanitarian aid and the discourses that legitimize certain forms of aid at the cost of others. It was also my first research in which I started to focus on the negative consequences of armed violence on men. While the field masculinities studies was growing at the time, consensus was, and largely still is, that women bear the brunt of armed violence. What I found was that armed conflict and especially displacement led to the general emasculation of Acholi men, who were caught between societal expectations of their manhood at the one side, and a reality at the other that prevented them from achieving this expected manhood. I uncovered very similar patterns in the Congo, which I will explain below. Furthermore, I also noticed that the humanitarian crisis affected men and women very differently and while the effects were adverse for all, armed conflict did contribute to creating a more gender equal society which brought a lot of friction without people's households.

The WFP consultancy also added to my methodological forming. It was my first time that I used focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews rather than life-history interviews, as the short research time did not allow for such an approach. I learned that both focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were good tools to understand trends and to get general perspectives of processes and events that affect people. I generally had two approaches when conducting focus group discussions. In one I asked

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<sup>14</sup> Douma, P. Hollander, T. and Frerks G. 2009. 'The impact of humanitarian assistance on livelihoods affected by humanitarian crises in Uganda: An Analysis of Communities' and Humanitarian Actors' Perspectives on Socio-Cultural Dynamics in the Acholi and Lango Entry Points' Utrecht University & Hollander, T.B.M., Ochen, Eric Awich & Frerks, G.E. (2009). 'The Impact of Humanitarian Assistance on Livelihoods Affected by Humanitarian Crises in Awach Sub-county: An Analysis of Communities' and Humanitarian Actors' Perspectives on Socio-Cultural Impact of Humanitarian Aid in Awach.' (pp. 1-42). Utrecht: Centre for Conflict Studies, in collaboration with Makerere University, Kampala and Gulu University.

questions and group members who wanted to answer would raise their hands and answer the question. I often collected several answers; sometimes I asked probing questions that I would also allow others to answer. The other approach was that I would pose a proposition and I would ask people in the focus group discussions to discuss it, while my translator translated what people said. The first type was perfect to get collective ideas about the history or people's perspectives of the general situation, the second type was good to uncover differences of opinion and variations in people's narratives. The limitation of focus group discussions is that it is less personal and people will not talk about things that they do not want to share with their community members, but which they could be willing to share with a largely anonymous outsider. Semi-structured interviews do allow to capture these 'secret' opinions. Based on a semi-structured topic/question list, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to probe and to ask for personal experiences. However, rather than being about one's life-story, I used them to get people's perspectives on selected processes that affected them. In the research for this dissertation, I have used both these tools in addition to life-history interviews.

The work of the Conflict and Gender working group of the KNPSD was concluded with a study in eastern DRC in which all partners participated. The Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations focused on donor policies regarding SGBV, Oxfam Novib did a research on women's empowerment/female leadership, the Global Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights did a research on reproductive health, and, on behalf of the CCS, I did a research on the impact of armed conflict on masculinities. While all the partner organizations stayed in the DRC less than a month to do their research, I had over three months to finish my research. While I am the first to admit that three months is a very short time frame for ethnographic types of studies, it offered enough time

to explore a wide range of topics and interview hundreds of people.

One of the first things that I learned is that the people I interviewed understood the extremes of Congo's current gender dynamics, including rape, emasculation and domestic violence, in a historical context. It was hard to talk about sexual violence without people mentioning things that had happened during Mobutu's reign or the Mulele rebellion or shifts that had occurred during the Colonial time. Questions about the here and now were very often answered with: "*To understand this, you must look at the history of the Congo.*" In the experience of my informants, the current-day reality of the DRC had to be understood from its historical context, which was also certainly the case with issues regarding gender. Many interviews with men that would hint on the suppression of women led to resentment and a need of the interviewees to take me back into history. The deeper I delved and the further I went back in history, the more a picture emerged that was very different from the one that we are spoon-fed by western media and advocacy agencies. I will not go into the details of this now, as this is covered in my book chapter about historical gender dynamics in the eastern DRC. However, what I want to explain is that the choice of my first topic was influenced by the experiences of my interviewees. They understood current manifestations of gender in terms of historical shifts in gender dynamics, so for me it made sense to start my own exploration of gender issues from the same angle. Rather than having a pre-determined idea of what I would write, I conformed my choice of topic to what respondents considered important.

After I had been in the South Kivu for little over three months, I had done approximately 100 interviews and about two dozen focus group discussions. With this large wealth of information, I wrote a report with a word count of over 70,000 words that covered a history of shifts in gender dynamics, a history of shifts in masculinities, the

impact of economic bankruptcy on gender & masculinities, the impact of armed violence on gender & masculinities and the impact of humanitarian aid on masculinities and the instrumentalization and commercialization of rape.<sup>15</sup> In all this wealth of information, one of the research locations that I found most remarkable was the small town of Kiliba. As I will explain below, Kiliba had a sugarcane factory that supported a large formal economy. This economy continued to thrive when the rest of the Congo was entering a state of decay. When also the sugar cane factory had to close down after the outbreak of the first Congo war, Kiliba was brought back to the level of the rest of the Congo within a very short timespan. While I know that this is an oversimplification, but when I looked at Kiliba, and I compared my data of Kiliba with the data that I had collected elsewhere in South Kivu, Kiliba almost seemed to epitomize a micro-version of processes that had taken place on the national level, several years delayed and a lot less drastic, but similar in many other ways. This made Kiliba a very interesting case study and the source of my second article. I could have also elaborated on some of the other topics of the report. One of the things that particularly captured my interest was the commercialization of rape, the connection between this and the humanitarian interventions and the negative consequences that this had for men and society at large. While I mention it in my report, the information I had was a bit too shallow to base a PhD article on. I was initially planning to go back to the DRC and explore this topic in full detail and make it the primary point of investigation for the remainder of my PhD. However, life took a different turn and so did the focus of this dissertation.

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<sup>15</sup> Hollander, T. 2011. 'Thwarted masculinities and shifting gender relations in the context of colonialism, state fragility and violent conflict in South Kivu'. Utrecht, Knowledge Network of Peace, Security and Development.

### *5.2c The National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre*

While my interest in the Congo was firmly established after my first three months field trip, my interest in the armed conflict in northern Uganda had never disappeared. While I did the research for Norman's biography I developed the idea to start a war documentation centre together with WACA. When I got a job with Utrecht University I saw an opportunity to develop this idea further with the institutional support of the university. In the meantime, another organization, the Ugandan based Refugee Law Project (RLP) was developing a similar idea. When I came back from the Congo in 2010 I visited Uganda and I started the first conversations with RLP to explore the possibility of setting up a war documentation centre in cooperation with Utrecht University and Refugee Law Project. These conversations continued throughout 2011. While the Refugee Law Project set-up a War Documentation Centre in Kitgum, northern Uganda, called the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC), we agreed that Utrecht University would provide technical expertise and assistance. We were to train the researchers in event documentation and life-history documentation and to set-up databases that would allow us to organize, store and preserve all the documentation. With generous funding from Utrecht University's Focus & Massa program, I was able to get a grant with my colleague Lauren Gould. This grant enabled me to stay in northern Uganda and extend my PhD with one year. While I started at the NMPDC as a technical advisor, I soon became the voluntary research coordinator of this centre.

One of my most important contributions to the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre was the development of our event documentation research. When I started my work for the NMPDC one of my colleagues was working on a research activity that we named massacre scoping. While a very limited number of massacres in northern

Uganda have reached global news and a slightly larger number of massacres reached Uganda's national news, this research activity revealed that there were very many massacres that had gone completely undocumented. The purpose of the massacre scoping was to document the memories of witnesses and survivors of these massacres. Based on whatever knowledge we could find from newspapers and reports and armed with a voice recorder and a GPS system, one of my colleagues went into the communities and asked witnesses and survivors about their memories of the massacres. What we found were far more massacres than we ever anticipated. Also, while massacres are arguably the gravest crimes that were committed during the war, in our search for massacres we also increasingly encountered other stories of mass violence which did not necessarily bear the label massacres, but which the community members experienced as grave social injustice and an affront to their human dignity. While the massacre scoping was a very worthy exercise, I felt that this activity consumed too much time and resources while it only partially filled our knowledge gap of undocumented war-related events. I set out to devise a research strategy that would capture a more holistic picture of what had happened in northern Uganda during two decades of civil war as well as the preceding times of state-terror. I developed a questionnaire that allowed us to document more than just massacres. Instead of having one of our colleagues administer the questionnaire, I devised a cost-efficient strategy that would both increase the local ownership over the data-collection and add to our human resources. Instead of us collecting the information, we started to train village representatives of the entire Kitgum district, one sub-county as a time. We gave them a few dozen questionnaires and we trained them that each questionnaire had to cover only one event. The village representatives and the local government responded very positive to this initiative and instead of having one data-collector, we suddenly had over

four hundred who all set out to document events that had happened in their respective villages which they and their village members considered important enough to document. While this research strategy had many limitations on which I will not elaborate here, the wealth of data that it gave us was overwhelming, quite literally actually, as we are still struggling to process all of it. Our database has now over 7,000 events and it continues to grow every day. Events that have been documented include massacres, extra-judicial executions, cattle raids, looting, abductions, armed combat, forced displacement, natural disasters and many more. While certain issues are unrepresented in the database due to the methodological limitations, e.g., sexual violence, the event documentation database has also become one of our main sources of information about the memory landscape of the war in northern Uganda. It helped us to identify some of the major ongoing legacies of the armed conflict. Two of these legacies have been incorporated in our conflict legacies research program, and they have also become the focus of my last two articles that are part of this dissertation: the issue of the untreated wounds and the issue of the disappeared.

While I already developed an interest in the academic field of Transitional Justice prior to my work for the NMPDC, I suddenly found myself deeply emerged into the ongoing transitional justice processes, mechanisms and debates in northern Uganda. Many of the mechanisms in northern Uganda are still based on the old LRA insurgency discourse. There is an internationally funded 'International Crimes Division' in Uganda's judiciary that has so far only targeted a few LRA commanders while silencing government atrocities. Furthermore, a lot of the discussions are on the need of truth commissions, compensation schemes, punitive versus restorative justice and connected to this, formal versus informal justice. What is again largely excluded from this debate is the plurality of experiences, challenges, needs and aspirations of war-affected people themselves. While both the issue

of the untreated wounds and the parents/relatives of the missing stood out as some of the major post-conflict challenges in post-conflict northern Uganda (in addition to many other issues, such as land conflict, male survivors of sexual violence, unemployment, corruption, etc.), these issues are marginal issues at best in Uganda's transitional justice processes and debates. This is again because the power brokers in Uganda's transitional justice landscape, which include the government, donors and multilateral organizations, are too pre-occupied with their own concerns and their own areas of interest, which still stem from the same old discourse described above. Once I identified the two issues of the untreated wounds and families of the missing and we started to talk with the people who constitute these groups, it became clear that these voices are unrepresented, ignored, purposefully silenced and misinterpreted or misunderstood. I won't go into the content of both articles, as they are presented below. What I want to highlight instead is that the choice of topics was again inspired by voices and stories that I came across in the event database that have been largely ignored but that at the same time highlight issues that are of huge importance in Uganda's transitional justice landscape. Recognizing the complexities in individual stories, I resorted to my old methodological strategy of limiting the number of respondents but ensuring that I interviewed the respondents multiple times to unravel the multiple layers of their complex experiences.

The theoretical approach I took for the two articles about post-conflict northern Uganda was different from my study in eastern DRC. In the DRC, I had done a very thorough literature review before I went into the field. All the data I gathered were guided by and interpreted with the lens of Connell's classification of masculinities, alongside other, mostly feminist literature on gender. In Uganda, I started with the data collection before I engaged with the literature. The various theoretical fields that I used, embodiment theory,

social capital theory and ambiguous loss theory, were theories that I found after I had collected a substantial part of the data. The reason why I choose the various theoretical fields is because I found that they presented the best frames to interpret the data.

Embodiment (Csordas, 1990; Young, 1992) suggests that it is through our bodies that we interpret the world around us; the body is both a social vessel through which the world is experienced and made meaningful, as well as an object that shapes the world, which is again in line with Giddens' structuration theory. While everybody embodies that world that we inhabit we are not always aware of our own embodiment. This is very different for the people with marked bodies who we interviewed, who experienced the limitations of their bodies on a daily basis. Their bodies have quite literally become a canvas on which the legacies of armed violence are portrayed, and embodiment theory helped us to interpret the stories of our informants.

Again with regard to the marked bodies, one of the things that puzzled me was the extreme stigma that these people faced everyday, and I knew that there had to be an explanation for this stigma. By looking at the networks of the individuals with a marked body, we noticed that there were many socio-economic features that explained the stigmatization. We found that social capital theory (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993; and Uphoff, 2000) provided a very useful lens to interpret these features. Social capital theory explains how individuals relate to one another in complex network structures. In essence, social capital theory looks at the reciprocity of mutual beneficial interaction that over time strengthens networks which in turn increase an individual's productive potential. We found that the incapacity of the marked bodies to reciprocate beneficial action led to the isolation, which combined with the inability to comply with hegemonic gender norms led to stigmatization and discrimination. So we found that social capital theory gave us the

theoretical framework to understand the extreme stigma faced by people with marked bodies.

Lastly, with regard to the parents of the missing, I looked into various theoretical fields, e.g., theories about complicated grief and theories about post-traumatic stress disorder, and none of these theoretical fields provided a satisfactory framework to interpret the experiences of the parents of the missing. While the parents of the missing showed many of the symptoms of complicated grief, their grief was not so much a result of a mental disorder but rather a problem that existed outside themselves. And while many of the parents of the missing are traumatized, PTSD is a condition that affects many people in post-conflict northern Uganda and it doesn't distinguish the parents of the missing from other survivor groups. Ambiguous loss theory, developed by Pauline Boss (1999, 2004, 2007, 2010), on the other hand did provide a good tool to interpret the data. This theory recognizes that the reactions to ambiguous loss are not a psychological disorder, but rather a relational disorder, which was also what I found in the stories of the parents. Ambiguous loss theory gave me the analytical tool to interpret the experiences of the parents of the missing better than trauma and grief theory.

So while in my in eastern DRC studies I took a partial deductive approach, where my theoretical knowledge was the lens that I used to collect and interpret the data, which then led to a revision of the theoretical lens. In northern Uganda I took a more inductive approach, where the observations from the field led me to a search of theoretical fields that could be most helpful to interpret the data.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

The contribution of this dissertation to the field of social science is mostly an empirical one,

which is directly linked to my epistemological and ontological preferences. Through my epistemological and ontological journey I discovered the power of narratives, both as a way to legitimize interventions and armed violence, but also as a tool to uncover the multi-layered dynamics of this violence on community level. My work is inspired by the memories and experiences of ordinary people who live in extraordinary times. By taking people's narratives as a central basis of knowledge and by embracing complexity rather than ignoring it, I have uncovered issues that fall outside the dominant narratives that are forwarded by media, organizations, corporations and governments. While I have used academic theories to interpret my data, the data has always been central. While my work environments influenced the case studies and the broad academic fields of the topics, my epistemological and ontological journey influenced the exact topics of this dissertation and the strong focus on narratives in my methodology. While the stories that I put forward cover only a fraction of the plurality of conflict-related experiences and memories, they all offer counter narratives to dominant discourses. As such, I hope that they contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of armed conflict and the dialectic relation between conflict, gender and transitional justice.

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## Part 2 - Publications

### Neglected Voices: Untold Stories of Gender, Conflict and Transitional Justice in the Great Lakes Region

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# Challenging Popular Perceptions about Gender in South Kivu, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

## Introduction

Gender performances, norms, identities and relations are fluid and always changing. These changes are usually slow and hardly noticeable, but there are also times when gender balances are shaken significantly in a relative short time span. The inhabitants of South Kivu in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), have witnessed a number of what I would like to call ‘gender earthquakes’ in the last 150 years, when gender experiences and perceptions have undergone severe changes. To understand the contemporary manifestations of masculinities and femininities and resulting gender dynamics in South Kivu, it is vital to study how gender relations have been shaped by this one and a half century of significant social, economic and political change.

Much of the literature on gender in the DRC reiterates notions of problematic gender relations, whereby men are generally portrayed as oppressors and perpetrators of sexual violence and women as their victims or submissive servants (Jérôme Gouzou et al. 2009: 9, Smits and Cruz, 2011: 3). According to Mechanic (2004: 13), MONUC published a report that states that: (...) *‘the role of women in Congolese society has gone from full participation before colonization, to marginalization during the Colonial period, to full exclusion in the post-Colonial area’*. Mechanic leaves this statement unchallenged. He (2004:13) asserts that gender inequality is worse now than it has been before, mainly because of the conflicts of the 1990s and 2000s. After listing a whole range of gender inequalities between men and women, the SIDA’s country gender profile asserts that ‘ (...) *the causes for such inequalities may be found in widespread poverty, largely due to the*

*total collapse of the state since the Mobutu era'* (Jérôme Gouzou et al. 2009: 9). In light of my own research, these are highly doubtful assertions. My research unveiled that the equality gap between men and women in South Kivu has shrunk significantly during the last one and a half century. Changes in marriage and livelihood provision caused by colonialism, war and economic decline have decreased women's dependency on men, while men's dependency on women has grown. These shifts have especially manifested itself after independence, which is in direct contradiction with the claims made by Mechanic and Gouzou.

The persistence of very high levels of rape and sexual and gender-based violence in the DRC has clouded a historical analysis of gender dynamics. In a country where levels of rape are as high as in the DRC it seems perhaps logical to assert that gender inequality is at its peak. The many excesses of wartime rape, exacerbated by the for western standards problematic gender norms deeply embedded in Congolese culture, are presented as evidence to prove that gender inequality is at its height, rather than problematizing it. However, as Baaz Erikson and Stern (year?) show, rape is embedded in the masculinities of the rapists, who in many ways experience a crisis of masculinity. Yet, changes in gender equality of the past decades and also the vulnerability of men have been overlooked, resulting in a discourse that contains considerable empirical inadequacies. In an interview with the Guardian, Chris Dolan, director of the Refugee Law Project and one of the world's leading experts on masculinities and violent conflict in Uganda and eastern DRC, states the following: *"when gender was talked about, it was always in terms of women. We talked about engaging men in reducing violence against women, rather than engaging them with their own issues. The underlying assumption is that men are still in positions of power and therefore they can't ever be vulnerable. A lot of men have experienced vulnerability and*

*they don't relate to these discussions.*” My research findings echo this statement. This chapter serves to broaden the gender scope to include the vulnerabilities of men and to provide an analysis of how gender is perceived to have changed in South Kivu over the last 150 years.

Before embarking on this, it is important to emphasize that the history of gender relations in South Kivu is not uniform and there are many tribal and geographical specificities. This makes it difficult to talk about gender shifts as a homogeneous process in South Kivu. The more recent the past, the more contestation there seems to be.

## **Methodology**

The content of this chapter is based on oral histories, oral traditions and the narratives of respondents from South Kivu. I conducted around 60 individual interviews, 20 group interviews and 20 focus group discussions (FDGs). In total I reached out to approximately 500 respondents. These interviews and FDGs lasted from between 45 minutes and three hours and covered various topics; ranging from tribal narratives and stories of origin, to religion and gender and from emancipatory policies under former president Mobutu to the effects of armed conflict on masculinities. 71 percent of the interviews and focus group discussions were done with men, 24 percent with women and in 5 percent, group interviews and focus group discussions were done with mixed groups. More interviews were done in Fizi Territoire (71 percent) than in Uvira Territoire (29 percent), and slightly more interviews were done in the urban and semi urban areas of Uvira and Baraka (58 percent) than in the rural areas (42 percent). Within my sample I included people from every age group, with the youngest respondents being around 12 and the oldest over 100. However,

the majority of my respondents were between 40 and 70 years old. Furthermore, my respondents were quite diverse in terms of livelihood, including farmers, herdsman, fishermen, businessmen/traders, (former) factory employees and managers, motorbike drivers, ex-combatants, prostitutes, gold miners, prisoners, NGO staff, teachers, and many more. Nine individual interviews were conducted with people convicted or awaiting trial for sexual assault charges.

The information presented in this article is based on collective and individual memory and current day discourses and representations of the past, stretching from a past beyond living memory to a past well remembered by the respondents themselves. All but the youngest of my informants had clear memories of the Mobutu era (1965-1997) and practically every informant agreed that there had been very significant shifts in gender relations during his rule. However, what caused these shifts was a matter of much disagreement. Some said it was because government policies of Mobutu, while others attributed it to economic decline. Both gave examples and anecdotes supporting their statements. In the theoretical field of oral histories, it is widely accepted that memories are subject to change over time and that memories can be informed by one's world view. Neuenchwander (1978), quoting Salzman, holds that "*recollection changes with the change in one's view of oneself and the world.*" Alistair Thomson (1999:188) argues that '*Oral history allows us to explore the relationships between past and present, between experience and meaning, and between individual and collective memory*'. And, Barbara Allen (1984:6) argues: "*when researchers ask for the reconstruction of historical events in oral history interviews, what narrators actually provide is the verbal re-creation of the past...*". The further an event is removed from the current day, the more room there is for selective memory, reinterpretation and at times even fabrication, whether conscious or not.

Neuenschwander examined the link between reminiscence and fabrication and found that small and sometimes unintentional fabrications and reinterpretations turn into memories and as a result the narrative of the event changes from what really happened. Furthermore, over time, individual memories can also get mixed up with collective memories. Ricoeur (in Lavenne et al, 2005:2) argues that in the process of memory sharing individuals can appropriate memories that are not one's own as one's own memory. This happens in an intermediate zone between individual memory and collective memory

Oral histories are thus based on memories that are subject to change, influenced by selectivity, reinterpretation, collective memories and, sometimes, conscious, semi-conscious or unconscious fabrication. The further the memory is removed from the current day, the more it enters the realm of collective memory. creating agreement amongst the participants, as they have partially collectivized their memories through years of sharing. Therefore, agreement cannot necessarily be taken as evidence of accuracy and it is problematic to claim historic truth based on memories of a long time ago. Hence, it is more correct to talk about the historic consciousness of people living in the present.

The claims I make about gender dynamics in the pre-colonial and early colonial times are largely based on oral traditions, transmitted from parent to child to grandchild. Also for oral tradition counts that the further removed they are from the current day, the more uniform representations of the past become. Vansina (1985), an expert on oral traditions in the former Zaire, explains that details of individual stories slowly vaporize while the myriads of stories tend to melt together, leaving a core story that has common characteristics, even when told by different people. The story gradually becomes based on a selection of clichés, eventually turning historical memory into legend. This is why, according to Vansina, almost all tribal traditions concerning the great African migration in

the Upper Nile region are about two brothers who quarreled about an item of little importance and went their own way, something which I also came across in my research. The oral tradition '(...) *should be seen as a series of successive historical documents all lost except for the last one and usually interpreted by every link in the chain of transmission*' (Vansina, 1985:29). Although recognizing the limitations of using oral tradition, Vansina is strongly against discarding oral tradition as a source of historical information, especially in societies where few written records exist. People do not invent a past from scratch and believe it to be their own. Information regarding gender relations before respondents were born is often a fusion of different messages and stories that my informants heard from many different sources in and outside their communities. Vansina holds that information transmitted by many people to many people retains more accuracy. *'It is [...] evidence at second, third, or fourth remove, but it is still evidence.'* (Vansina, 1985:29) While it is difficult to access what historical accounts are selected for memory and which are not, the selected stories within the oral traditions are based on a past that existed.

*'Selectivity implies discarding certain information one has about the past and from that pool of information keeping only what is still significant in the present. Interpretation means to alter information from the past to give it new meaning and as interpretation is more creative than selection it is also more dangerous, but not to the point that all is to be rejected'* (Vansina, 1985:191).

In this article I will describe four periods that stand out in the oral tradition, collective memories and individual memories as times in which gender performances,

relations and norms underwent significant change. My baseline is the pre-colonial period, which is completely based on the oral tradition, anywhere from one to four generations away from my informants. My eldest informant, a woman of over 100 years old, recounted stories about this time that she had heard directly from her parents and others in her community when she was young. However, for the majority of my informants, this time was at least two or three generations away. Gender norms and performances of the pre-colonial period were transmitted from many to many. The majority of my informants had a clear historical consciousness of what it meant to be a man and a woman in the days before the Belgians colonized the Congo. I received stories about rites de passage in those days, specific gender roles and even the occasional anecdote. What I represent about this time is the current day interpretation of gender performances and relations in that time. I for example do not know what features of gender in those years did not survive the selection process. Across the various tribes, the picture is quite uniform, which again does not necessarily represent a picture that is completely accurate.

The second section of this paragraph is about gender shifts which happened during the colonial time. My eldest informants still had clear memories of this time, while the majority of my other informants knew about it through the stories from their parents and other community members. Similar to the previous section the majority of my informants agreed on the shifts in gender caused by colonialism and Christianization. In this section, I was also able to back up some of the information provided by my informants with literature about the Belgian colonization of the Congo.

The third section that I will discuss is the Mulele rebellion (1964-1967) and its direct aftermath.<sup>16</sup> This was well remembered by my elderly informants, some of whom

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<sup>16</sup> *The Mulele rebellion is sometimes also referred to as the Simba rebellion.*

had fought in it, while others lived through it in other capacities. Especially for those who fought in it, the anecdotal recollections of what happened have been repeated many times over the years and hence have become entwined with collective memory, even affecting the memories of those who didn't fight in the rebellion. Though there was some variation, generally there was a lot of agreement on how the rebellion impacted gender relations. While all information I was given was based on memories of lived experiences, I can again not fully assess what details were omitted, were reinterpreted or were given extra emphasis. Although the Mulele rebellion covers the shortest timeframe discussed in this article, my informants hold that it was one of the most significant triggers for the changes in gender relations. The last period witnessed the nearly complete devastation of the Congo and also constituted a time of significant political and social shifts. Except for the youngest of my informants, this era was well within the living memory of my informants, and as such, the stories and anecdotes from this time have much more nuance and details when compared to earlier times. It was generally accepted by my informants that the changes started during the Mulele rebellion were exacerbated by Mobutu's rule. There is also general agreement that the shifts in gender dynamics were very significant during the Mobutu era and by the time that his rule came to an end the gender balance was in a confused state.

The content of this article should be regarded neither as historical proof nor as historical fiction. Rather, it highlights the current day consciousness of the history of gender in the DRC and this history is quite different from some of the mainstream reports on the subject.

### **Oral histories about gender in South Kivu**

### *Pre-colonial and early colonial time (approximately 1850 – 1910)*

I conducted interviews with 45 representatives from seven different tribes<sup>17</sup>, specifically targeting their tribal histories and the history of gender relations within their tribes, starting from the earliest myths of origin up to the current day. The oral tradition showed that these tribes had a highly patriarchal form of society. Patriarchy refers to the role of men in the family and in society, where they take responsibility over the welfare and the security of the community and have primary authority over women. In patriarchal societies, men dominate social, economic, legislative and political processes and procedures, and for the Babembe, Bafulero, Banyindu, Banyamulenge, Barega, Bavira and the Masanze, this was also the case in the pre-Christianized and pre-colonial period in South Kivu.<sup>18</sup>

The majority of my interviews concerning oral traditions were with members of the Babembe tribe. A central feature within their oral tradition is focused on the institute of the 'Lubunka'. Within the oral tradition, the Lubunka was a meeting area in the form of a large hut standing in the center of the village. This was the place where men ate together, where young boys were initiated into manhood, where conflicts were settled, where men were being advised, where visitors were being received, where decisions were taken with regard to agriculture, where politics were conducted and where leaders were chosen. The oral traditions of the other abovementioned tribes entailed similar institutes with different names. Women played a minimal role in Lubunkas or their cultural equivalents. In most cases it was strictly forbidden for women to enter these male arenas and if they were allowed to enter them, it was only to serve food for the men. Women were not allowed to speak in

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<sup>17</sup>*Babembe, Bafulero, Banyindu, Banyamulenge, Barega, Bavira and the Masanze*

<sup>18</sup>*It needs to be emphasized here that, although this is pretty much the standard in South Kivu, there are exceptions. My translator in Uvira insisted that we would go to his village near Bukavu to interview a tribal queen who was still ruling as a tribal chief over many of the subjects of her tribe. This meant that it was not unthinkable that women could be rulers. Unfortunately security conditions prevented us from reaching her village.*

these public meeting spaces, nor in any other public spaces for that matter. If a woman wanted to convey a message, she had to do so through her husband, which severely limited women's capacity to influence collective decision-making or to voice their concerns, ideas and grievances.

Patriarchy was also evident within the family setting. The oral traditions of all the seven tribes held that in the pre-colonial time, the man's role in the family was omnipotent and unchallenged. The husband/father was the natural leader and head of the house. He made decisions for all his family members and he demanded and received respect at all times. Women could advise their husbands, but the men were responsible for taking the decisions. The fathers were also responsible for the selection of their sons' brides, and for conducting the negotiation of their daughter's bride price. The sons themselves, their future brides and the mothers of both parties had nothing to say about this.<sup>19</sup> Except for choosing the bride, the father was also fully responsible for paying the bride price of the first bride. The son himself often paid the bride price for the subsequent brides, but brides were still selected with the help of the father, so the number of women a father's son married, also reflected the wealth and pride of the father.

Polygamy was a widely practiced tradition in the time before Christianity. In all seven tribes, men were allowed and expected to marry more than one woman, while it was strictly forbidden for women to do the same. While at first sight, polygamy appears to be a system which only serves male purposes and which is highly repressive towards women, polygamy has served a very clear societal/demographic purpose in Africa.

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<sup>19</sup> See also Depelchin, 1974:134

“ (...) *the culture of polygamy also helps maintain a very high fertility level. By exposing nearly all women to early and prolonged risks of pregnancy, the polygamy system has helped maintain very high total fertility rates of between six and eight children in most of these countries. [...] Due to the high mortality caused by unfavorable climate, deadly diseases, and wars, population density remained very low for many centuries, and the decimation of whole tribes has been of serious concern. Therefore, at the core of this culture are the values and customs that promote reproduction. Sterility is not only undesirable but also evil. In contrast, moral judgments on sexual conduct tend to be relatively mild or largely absent.*” (Hayase and Liaw, 1997:293-295).

However, besides demographic functions, polygamy also enforced the patriarchal nature of Congolese society. Having multiple wives was a way to ‘show off’ a man’s wealth, having paid multiple dowries. Polygamy also served a clear economic purpose. Women were the ones who took care of the lion’s share of agricultural work and the more wives a man had, the higher the agricultural output would be. This higher output was subsequently used to accumulate a new bride price. This was also noted by Depelchin (1974:136). *“If a surplus is produced by the woman, it is the man who will decide how the surplus will be disposed. Very often it is this surplus that will finance the acquisition of subsequent wives.”* However, the most important function of polygamy was that it enhanced reproduction and diminished the chance of remaining childless. The number of children a man had was a status symbol, but they also were a ‘retirement’ provision as the children were expected to look after their parents in old age. Furthermore, children were also important to enter the after life. In many Bantu cultures, a man (or woman) who is without children cannot join the ranks of the revered ancestors after dead, but instead the

ghost will linger where the body has fallen. So the polygamous system even served purposes beyond this life.

While patriarchy has been a central feature of Congolese society since time immemorial and it still is, many things have changed. Men are no longer the omnipotent leaders that the oral tradition holds they once were. The equality gap between men and women, while still present, has shrunk significantly through several episodes of revolutionary change. In South Kivu, I assume that periods of dramatic shifts started with the arrival of Arab/Swahili traders, most notably Tippu Tip, who proclaimed himself supreme ruler over Eastern Congo from 1884 till 1887 (Reybrouck, 2010:41-45).<sup>20</sup> The coming of Tippu Tip heralded a time in which the way of life would gradually and sometimes fundamentally shift every couple of decades. It was the first acquaintance with firearms and Islam for the inhabitants of Eastern Congo. The life the Arab/Swahili traders introduced was undoubtedly different from the way their ancestors had been living. It is difficult to establish the impact that the coming of Tippu Tip had on the lives of ordinary people or on gender relations and identities, mostly because there are not many sources to draw from. What is clear is that some tribes, for example the Masanze, did convert to Islam during these years. According to representatives of the Mazanze whom I interviewed, the resulting changes were insignificant because many of their cultural attributes were similar to the rules of Islam, but these claims are difficult to substantiate. Also, Tippu Tip's absolute reign did not last very long and eventually Belgian settlers and missionaries overtook his position of dominance. The memory of Tipu Tipp is not very strong in the oral tradition. The majority of my respondents knew the name and could tell one or two tales

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<sup>20</sup>*Most histories of the Congo start their timeline with the first arrival of the explorers. One of the greatest unexplored and relatively recent historical phenomenon is the great tribal migration in Africa which happened in modern times, yet very little is known about this time and it is also out of living memory. But generally we can assume that the time of rapid changes in the last centuries started with the arrival of the first explorers, (slave) traders, missionaries and settlers.*

about him or events that happened in the time he ruled supreme. However, I got little information on how his arrival changed gender relations. This can either mean that gender concerns did not survive the selectivity of historical transmission, or that it simply wasn't all that significant. According to the oral traditions of all the tribes, with the exception of the Masanze who continued to adhere to Islam, the first significant changes in gender occurred in the colonial time due to Christianity.

### *Mid- to late colonial period (1910 – 1960)*

Generally, the majority of my elderly respondents mentioned colonialism and conversion to Christianity as the catalyst of major changes in South Kivu. In the late nineteenth century missionaries and subjects of the Belgian king Leopold II started to spread Christianity and incorporate the Congolese tribes into the colonial system. While in most parts of the country people were severely exploited because of western demands for rubber, in the oral traditions of the northwestern coastline of Lake Tanganyika rubber production does not feature. However, that doesn't mean that the people were not affected by the early colonial period. In South Kivu, many of the tribes were forced to live on the shores of Lake Tanganyika where they had to produce cotton and where they were subjected to 40 hours labor tax a month (Macgaffey, 1987:33).<sup>21</sup> It was during this time that most Congolese got a glimpse of a life completely alien to them, but from which they could not escape. Many Congolese were recruited by the churches where they were 're-educated',

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<sup>21</sup> *The time of King Leopold II is generally known for its savagery against the local population for economic gain. It started with the trade in ivory, and later with the malignant pursuit of rubber, which caused suffering on an unprecedented scale.. Although a few of my elderly respondents remember (or heard it from their fathers) the white' s eagerness for ivory, there were no recollections of anything slightly to do with rubber. What I conclude from this is that rubber did not play a role in the history of South Kivu, at least not in the vicinity of Lake Tanganyika. However, what did leave a mark on people's memories is the forced production of cotton, which was still vividly remembered by many of my elderly respondents.*

both in the word of the Lord, as well as into the workings of the capitalist economy and respecting Belgian authority (Macgaffey 1987:34, Schatzberg 1988:86). The introduction of a monetary economy and the spread of Christianity and European values had a contentious impact on gender relations. In one way it re-emphasized the patriarchal nature of society, which is also deeply embedded in the Catholic religion and the partial capitalist monetary economy that was introduced. Biblical references about the genesis of the world taught men that women were created out of the rib of men. Men dominated the institute of the church, as it was their sole privilege to be the preachers. The introduction of the monetary economy re-emphasized the important position of the father of the family, who was solely responsible for earning cash. In Uvira, I met a very old and now retired trader who had experienced the mid to late colonial period. This Mzee Gustav gained much wealth over the years through his trading activities and he counted as one of the business elites.. I met him five times over the course of several weeks. Although he was well in his eighties, the Mzee displayed a remarkably sharp memory and good narration skills. He related the following story regarding the shift towards a monetary economic system.

*“It must have been around 1935 that the Belgians started to collect the cotton. They sent a Belgian, I can’t remember his name, but he did it through the customary kings and he told the customary kings how much cotton had to be produced. Around that time we were starting to earn money because of the cotton. With the money we could buy some things. So the change from palm oil production to cotton production was good. At that time, it was not easy, it was dangerous for a native to be found with a 1000 franc. If you had that amount, you needed to have a paper which would state the reason why you had this amount of money, just to be sure that the money wasn’t stolen. So the natives could earn a lot of*

*money, even more than 1000 francs, but with this amount of money, you had to be careful. This was the start of a monetary economy. Before, the economy was based on trading goods for goods or services for services. The economy really changed in this time. With the money, you could buy cows, crops, etc. I bought some things at this time, and this really felt good. When I started to earn money, life improved. It changed positively. Personally, I can remember that people were now able to buy things deep in the villages, where things were cheap, and sell them in the town. And this would yield a high profit. The commerce kept growing increasingly, it was not an abrupt explosion, but it grew steadily.”<sup>22</sup>*

When I asked Mzee Gustav whether the advantages of the monetary economy he remembered reaping benefit of were also open to women, he answered that women benefitted from the new system through their husbands. The Belgians had very strict monetary rules for the Congolese. Money earning became an almost exclusively male domain, as women were restricted to participate in the formal economy (Macgaffey 1987:165-168). While there was a maximum amount of money that Congolese men could possess, that maximum was 100 percent more than women were allowed to have. This gave men legal prudence to be the sole money earner for the family. The economic privilege, mixed with the Christian values of the man as the head of the household gave a new character to an age-old patriarchal system in which men had dominion over women. However, at the same time, there were also aspects of colonialism that diminished the stronghold of Congolese men within the patriarchal system.

First of all, Belgian rule diminished the power of Congolese elites. Within the colonial system, Congolese men could only take lower positions of power. For the elites

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<sup>22</sup>Interview with an elderly trader in Uvira. July 2010

amongst the Congolese, these lower positions continued to give them prestige and power, but the most important political decisions were made by the Belgians. The Belgians used the chiefs and traditional rulers to implement their policies and to yield the profits from the land, as the quote of Mzee Gustav also makes clear. Furthermore, the Belgian colonial rulers centralized power through the destruction of traditional political systems. The Belgians abolished the Lubunka and its cultural equivalents. According to several of my elderly informants, the main reason why the Lubunkas were abolished was because the colonial rulers and the missionaries regarded the Lubunka's as native breeding grounds for political dissent as well as shrines for their pagan religions. The destruction of the Lubunka huts did not immediately abolish all its functions. Many of the functions continued in other designated places, for example under large trees and women did not gain any more power in these new structures than they had before. So while women did not gain any power, Congolese men did lose control over political decision-making, which increasingly became dominated by white males. The system of political patriarchy shifted from Congolese elites to Belgian elites

Another feature that altered the patriarchic nature of South Kivu was the shift in polygamy. While polygamy was widely practiced and accepted, Christian missionaries tried to put an end to this practice, but it was not an easy task to convince people of the benefits. Some of my elderly informants had clear memories of a time when the Christian zeal had not yet reached the majority of the population. Although attempts at conversion had started in the late 19th century, in the 1940s and 1950s people in South Kivu still adhered to their pagan religions, especially in the rural areas, which were difficult to reach. According to several of my informants, the single largest obstacle to the spread of Christianity was the pastors' relentless efforts to stop the polygamy. In Kazimia, a small

remote fishing village on the shore of Lake Tanganyika I met another old Mzee with whom I had long conversations about polygamy and monogamy and he remembered when Christianity had not yet conquered the country.

*“By the time I was born, the pagans were still the majority over the Christians. Christians had only one wife, which was an obligation from the bible. But this was different for the pagans, who had many wives, up to five or six. It was this that withheld many people from becoming Christians.”<sup>23</sup>*

Initially, according to this Mzee and a number of other informants, the monogamous nature of Christianity deterred men from converting. However, it soon became clear that there were large political and economic benefits to be gained when you did convert. Furthermore, many newly converted Christians married before the church, but maintained their mistresses. Generally, the first to convert to Christianity were the elites who reaped political benefits from their conversion. Once the elites were baptized many ‘commoners’ followed their example, although at times reluctantly. The condition to convert was that you divorced from all the ‘excess’ wives. When a man converted to Christianity, the wife he remained with also automatically converted to the new religion. Again, the domain on deciding which religion to adhere to was strictly male dominated. Thus the spread of Christianity went hand in hand with a massive wave of divorces. These divorces did not mean that the men changed their culture over night. Traditional weddings still continued, albeit in secrecy from the Church, and men did not stop to engage in sexual relations outside of the marriage, which is still a prominent feature of Congo nowadays. However,

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with an elderly man in Kazimia, September 2010

the abolition of the polygamous marriage system did have some positive ramifications for the female Christian spouses. While men still kept mistresses, these mistresses were not formally bound to the men because they hadn't paid a bride price. This could bring both shame and uncertainty for these women. So abolishing the polygamous marriage system wasn't positive for all women, especially in the beginning. However, for the one woman who the man did marry, it had clear advantages, because she became more privileged. The Mzee from Kazimia had a clear opinion about this:

*“With both the Christians and the pagans, the man was superior to the woman, but it was that the pagans often had more wives. But comparative to the pagans, it was better for a woman to be with a Christian, because they were paying much more things for their wives, more than the pagans, because having only one wife, meant that you could spend more time and money on her. But even in Christianity, women were under the strict order of men.”<sup>24</sup>*

Being the only wife did give women some kind of leverage over men that they did not have in the polygamous system. In the Christian system, the wives were the only morally accepted child bearers and they were the only women that could be on the man's side during public events. Furthermore, what I could derive from some of my interviews was that men also started to appreciate their wife more because he could only marry one. This appreciation was for example measured in the amount of things that a husband would get for the wife, like new clothes and other things.

Many of my informants also argued that some of the traditions which emphasized

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<sup>24</sup>Interview with an elderly man in Kazimia, September 2010

obedience and submissiveness of women, such as bowing down or kneeling while talking to a man or not being allowed to walk in front of a group of men, became less strict during this time. According to the oral tradition and the early memories of my elderly informants, Christian values emphasized the leadership role of the men, but it did not degenerate women in the way that traditional religions and customs did. The Church promoted the harmonious core-family, consisting out of one husband, one wife and several children. Men were obligated to be the leader of the family. They had the power to discipline the family when necessary, but it was also their task to keep the harmony within the family. So, according to the oral tradition and the early memories of several of my informants, Christian men were expected to be the leader over wife and children, but he had the obligation to treat them with respect. While neither confirming nor denying the truth in this, it is important to realize that these assertions are the current day discourse of how Christianity liberated women from unfair traditions. These recollections and oral traditions need to be placed under some scrutiny. Practically all my informants who told me about the positive ramifications that the spread of Christianity had for more gender justice came from Christians, and the most fervent advocates were often priests, pastors or other people who played an active role in the church. So there is a clear interest of the informants to portray a positive image of the church and their religious views are also likely to have shaped their memories of a time long ago. Furthermore, the Church is in itself of course a highly patriarchal institute. Although not necessarily part of the central doctrine (see Kesselaar, 2010:25-26) the majority of my informants insisted that the church promotes the idea that men are the sacred heads of households and that a woman should be submissive and obedient, often citing the phrase that the man was created first and the woman was made from the ribs of men, therefore making the man superior. Furthermore, also all the

important functions within the church, especially the Catholic Church, are male dominated. Nonetheless, the spread of Christianity features strong in the oral traditions and memories of my elderly informants as one of the key instigators of significant gender change, which had positive ramifications for more gender equality and thus for women in general.

In summary, colonialism caused many significant changes. In the years preceding independence, the majority of my elderly informants had converted to Christianity, they were formally and officially monogamous<sup>25</sup>, they were used to a monetary and formal economy which privileged men, and Congolese elites lost political power to the colonial rulers, industrialists and missionaries. All these changes caused shifts in the nature of patriarchy and it changed gender dynamics and relations. However, according to practically all my informants, further and more dramatic upsets of the gender balance were still to come.

### *The Mulele rebellion and its direct aftermath (1964 – 1970)*

The Mulele rebellion<sup>26</sup> takes a very significant place in people's memories regarding changes in gender, as well as other societal shifts. The Mulele rebellion was the first large-scale war in post-independence Congo and at its height it encompassed almost the entire eastern Congo, causing revolutionary shifts in many facets of life. According to all my elderly informants who experienced this war first hand, the Mulele rebellion had deep social, political and economic consequences. It militarized the society, it politicized

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<sup>25</sup> This is different from claiming that they were monogamous in practice. This is something I can't verify.

<sup>26</sup> Particularly popular in the east, the murder of Patrick Lumumba led to public outcries throughout the Kivus and in 'province Orientale'. Pierre Mulele, the former minister of education and art in the government of Lumumba led the efforts to revenge the murder of Lumumba which started in Kwilu (van Reybrouck, 2010:338). Having been trained in China in guerilla tactics, he led a farmers' revolt, which was supposed to overthrow Kasavubu and Mobutu from their thrones of power. In South Kivu the rebellion was led by Gaston Soumialot who demanded the control over hundreds of Simbas, young men often armed with not more than spears and arrows, who used grigris, magical amulets, to protect themselves from enemy bullets. Considering the poor armament, the war which was unfolding was massive and in the end Mulele could only be defeated by mercenaries who were flown in from abroad. In May 1964, under the leadership of Gaston Soumialot, the Simbas took Uvira and in the same months they marched all the way up to Stanleyville, current day Kalemie, which they also managed to capture (van Reybrouck, 2010:340).

people; divided them into different camps, united tribes that before this time had little interaction, and alienated other tribes who had formerly cohabitated quite well.<sup>27</sup> The war ravished the limited resources that people had in South Kivu. Upon the rape of a Belgian woman and murder of several Belgians in Kisangani, a large number of expatriates left, leaving much of the industrialized cash economy shattered, even though it picked up again after the Mulele rebellion was over. What had an even greater effect was that the people had to add to the war effort by supporting the warring factions with goats, cattle, fish and harvests. This had a significant impoverishing effect in South Kivu, and this is also one of the core reasons for the change in gender dynamics. Impoverishment meant that young men could no longer afford the bride price, which changed the character of marriage. In Baraka I interviewed two elderly men, one who had now a small bicycle repair shop. Both men had fought in the Mulele rebellion on the side of Mulele. According to them, the Mulele rebellion caused deep shifts in the institute of marriage, amongst other things.

*“It was during the war that a lot of cattle and other forms of wealth were lost. [...] Because there was no sufficient cattle, people were now marrying by force. They may go, they get engaged and after loving each other, the boys goes and he takes the wife without the permission of the family, without paying bride price. Once they are together, they cannot take them apart anymore. So there were a lot of secret marriages. The problem came when the girl got pregnant. So when the girl was pregnant, she needed a man, so sometimes the family would allow them to marry without bride price. It changed the culture*

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<sup>27</sup> Some of my respondents ascribe the present day tension between the Banyamulenge and the Babembe to this period, when the Banyamulenge supposedly sided with the government when they realized that the Mulele rebellion was on the losing side, thus betraying the Babembe.

*because before people always paid bride price. One consequence was that men lost their respect, as they couldn't pay for the bride price.*"<sup>28</sup>

Because many families could no longer afford bride price, young people started to engage in sexual relationships without the consent of their parents and the relationships often resulted in pregnancies and forbidden marriages. This was also noted by Depelchin (1974:133-134), who repeatedly reported that in the early 70s, people romanticized an earlier time when bride prices were not so difficult to raise. But later, according to Depelchin, young people became increasingly responsible for accumulating their own bride price. This undermined the respect for elders and it changed the role that fathers played in the selection of the bride. Without any goods to pay for the bride price, fathers could no longer go in search of potential brides, which led to a situation in which young men chose their own brides and married secretly. According to the memory of my older respondents, the secret marriages were different in character. As no bride price was paid, it was much easier for girls to get divorced and to maintain custody over their children, which significantly strengthened their position within the family. At the same time, it decreased the respect that the family-in-law had for the men who slept with their daughter, which led them to favor their daughter in any dispute, which was much more uncommon before the Mulele war. Inability to pay the bride price compromised a man's sense of himself and it went against societal expectations. Therefore, paying the bride price remained the ideal and the norm. In the unofficial marriages, women and men did live together, mostly within the traditional gender settings, in which women worked the land and cared for the household, while men tended to the cash crops and other income generating activities. The surplus that

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<sup>28</sup>*Interview with representatives of the Bafulero tribe, in Baraka. August, 2010*

women cultivated belonged traditionally to the men. Mostly, surplus was used to acquire cattle or other livestock, which belonged to men, and livestock was used to pay the bride price. So in a way, women helped to accumulate wealth that was used to pay their own bride price. (Depelchin: 1974:140). Once the bride price was paid, women's liberties such as easy divorce or being favored in disputes diminished. So while the Mulele war diminished gender inequality, gender inequality in the late 60s and early 70s was still very significant, which is at the core of Depelchin's analysis.

However, where some of my oral histories differ with the Marxist analysis of Depelchin, is that the Mulele war also led to a significant shift in gender roles in terms of livelihood provision. The Mulele rebellion forcefully politicized the majority of the inhabitants of South Kivu and even in remote rural areas people were forced to take sides. According to several of my informants, able bodied men of good fighting age either had to join the warring factions or had to flee. Being able bodied, but refusing to fight was seen as an act of treason by both sides, and therefore extremely dangerous. I haven't been able to verify this, but according to my informants, the vast majority of men joined the fighting during the Mulele war. With the men gone to fight, women became vital for the war effort because of their role in the food production. While the men were fighting the war, the women were feeding it. The fighting introduced these men to a new way of life and according to some informants, a significant number of men who fought changed. They were often mentally and/or physically wounded, at times more aggressive and often unwilling or incapable to pick up their old work, above all, they were highly traumatized, something which was also noted by Depelchin in the early seventies, (1974:54). The following quote is of an informant, named Eric, the director of a small NGO.

*“With the rebellion, the behavior of the people changed negatively. Here in the Congo, when you enter the armed service, there is no any service to recover from traumas. In the recent war we understood about DDR, but before it didn’t exist. So after the Mulele war, the ex-combatants came back to their families completely traumatized, absent minded and with the behavior of not wanting to work. So this meant that in most families, it were the women who started to do all the work. And the women couldn’t do the same amount of work with their natural power as the men could, as they are naturally weaker. So they could only produce enough to sustain the family. But in the towns, people were dependent on the food of the rural areas, and when men stopped producing food after the war, the food stocks really dwindled. [...] So this brought a lot of problems. It was after the Mulele rebellion, that agriculture became more of a women’s domain.”<sup>29</sup>*

While Eric hadn’t experienced the war himself, there was agreement that during the war, when the men went to fight, women took over the positions of men on the farm and in the household, and when the men came back, women continued to be involved in activities traditionally considered male because they had proven that they could and their work increased family income. In addition, some men were unwilling or incapable to resume their old work while others had not survived the war and their widows assumed the role of household head. So in at least two ways, the Mulele war decreased the gender equality gap. First of all the impoverishment meant that many young men, or rather their families, could not afford the bride prices, which led to secret marriages without payment of bride price and the male’s degradation within the family and family-in-law. Secondly, in some tribes, most notably the Babembe, men lost their dominance in the domain of agriculture, with the

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Eric Mwenge, July 2010

result that women's role in food production increased significantly and that in some families, women became the primary breadwinners. Both aspects are still clearly visible in current day South Kivu. The shifts that happened as a result of the Mulele war, would continue during the 31 year rule of Mobutu and during the wars of the mid 1990s and 2000s.

### *Second half of Mobutu's reign (1975 – 1996)*

In the oral histories I collected, the Mobutu era stands as the most significant period of gender change in the historical consciousness of my Congolese informants. During the early years of the Mobutu regime, Depelchin (1974:133) quotes interviews of men from Uvira and surrounding areas that said that men should not listen to women and they can even lose their lives if they heed the advice of women. At the end of the Mobutu era, women had become much more vocal, both within the private and the public domain. Women could speak in public, whereas before a woman could only speak in the privacy of her home, and it was upon the man to decide what he did with these consultations. After Mobutu's rule it was no longer inconceivable that women were the primary breadwinners of a family, which had in fact become a common feature in many families. In families where the man was still the primary breadwinner, the extra money a woman could earn was deemed a welcome contribution and it offered women a form of leverage over men, which translated into a larger influence on the how money would be spent in the household. There were many women who had started to trade. As a consequence, there were times when the female traders would leave the house for weeks, which meant that the husband had to take care of the children. During Mobutu's rule, women could even rise to leadership positions

and lead over men, which was pretty much unthinkable during the colonial period.<sup>30</sup> According to my respondents, in some cases, women could hold sermons in protestant churches and address large crowds on moral and religious issues. In other cases they occupied high government positions or they headed grassroots networks which included men, but which were presided over by women. Across the board, the gender equality gap had drastically shrunk by the time Mobutu fled the Congo as a sick old man.

As was mentioned, many of these shifts were a continuation of what had started during the Mulele rebellion. Other shifts were unique to this period. There is much contention in the oral histories about ‘what caused what’ in terms of gender shifts during this period. Generally, explanations point mainly towards two major causes. The first is the economic degradation, largely caused by massive mismanagement and corrupt systems of patronage on the highest level. The primary examples of this were the Zaïrianisation of the economy and the proclamation of *Débrouillez-vous*, popularly referred to as Article 15, which had devastating consequences for the economic and social stability of the Congo. The economic bankruptcy hit every aspect of social life and had devastating consequences for income generation and food security. The second cause mentioned by my informants was government policies promoting gender equality. When asked about gender shifts during the Mobutu period, respondents often mentioned the phrase: ‘*Otomboli Bamama, Otomboli Mobutu, Otomboli Mobutu, Otomboli Bamama*’. This sentence was translated quite uniformly as: ‘If you provoke women, you provoke Mobutu, and if you provoke Mobutu, you provoke the women’. What was less uniform was the importance attached to this Mobutu doctrine. Some argued that it had dramatic consequences on gender relations and especially promoted the liberation of women from the cultural norms that bound them

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<sup>30</sup> There are some notable exceptions to this, as in certain tribes, it was not uncommon to have female chiefs and queens, but for most tribes, this would not have been possible.

into being mere servants. Others argued that it was just one of Mobutu's many empty phrases, which did not bring about any significant change and only served his personal glorification. There was also mention of other causes, including the expansion of the educational system, higher enrollment of girls, globalization, modernization, the Zaïrianisation and the increased mobility of both men and women. However, in the context of this chapter, I will focus on the two causes most mentioned by my informants.

What became clear from the interviews was that most changes started to occur in the second half of Mobutu's rule, from 1974/1975 onwards, which correlates with Congo's economic downfall. Before this time, roughly during the first ten years of his rule, the majority of my respondents praised Mobutu for bringing back calm and stability to the Congo. Although the Mulele war shattered some industries, others survived and even started to flourish again some years after the rebellion. According to Turner (2007:35), from 1968 till 1974, the economic conditions in the Congo were reasonably good, as a result of increased stability and high copper prices. Wrong (2009:98) asserts that until the Zaïrianisation in 1974, the economic growth was around 7 percent annually. However, from 1974 onwards, the Congolese economy suffered a significant backdrop due to a range of ludicrous government measures and declining copper prices. On the 30th of November 1973, Mobutu took the drastic decision to appropriate thousands of small and middle-sized enterprises from their foreign owners, mostly Portuguese, Greek, Italian and Pakistani, and to hand these out to his clientele (van Reybrouck 2010:377, Wrong 2009:96). Furthermore, this was also the time in which Mobutu started *'a rash of poorly conceived industrial development projects that were launched without sensible and comprehensive economic planning and institutional support'* (Turner, 2007:35). These projects included the hydroelectric plant at Inga, the Voice of Zaire radio and television centre, and the World

Trade Center in Kinshasa (Turner, 2007:35). The consequences for the Congolese economy and society were dramatic. According to van Reybrouck (2010:378-379) “*The fiasco of the Zaïrianisation increased unemployment. Those who still had a job, for example public workers or teachers, couldn’t make ends meet. Everybody tried to earn a little extra, by becoming a bricklayer, driver or beer vendor. Their wives tried to make a little extra in the micro-trade. They sat in the market the whole day long with a small pile of charcoal and a few onions. They bought bread at the factory and walked with it around town until it was sold.*”<sup>31</sup> According to Turner (2007:51): ‘*The main winners were the president himself and his close associates; the losers were everybody else.*’ Furthermore, ‘*débrouillez-vous*’ proclaimed that citizens had to fend for themselves and that it was condoned to steal a little, if that would mean the survival of your family. Both policies brought about blatant forms of corruption and the slow disintegration of Congolese society. At all levels, it caused government officials and ordinary citizens to steal from the state and one another. Soldiers and police officers were given guns and bullets, and were told that in absence of a salary, these could be used to secure their own salaries. What followed was the complete collapse of the economy, including the industries Congo had, which was up to then the second most industrialized country of sub-Sahara Africa (Macgaffey 1987:31, van Reybrouck 2010:134-155, 208-209). This led to high unemployment and periods of hyperinflation in which Congolese money lost its value. Beside economic consequences, ‘*débrouillez-vous*’ also led to the complete collapse of the rule of law, in which anyone working for the government was viewed with suspicion and in which the supposed protectors of a society, the soldiers and police officers, became the symbols of blatant corruption and economic

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<sup>31</sup> This is a translation from Dutch by the author.

predation. Just as any other province in the DRC, South Kivu was hit hard by the economic degradation after 1974. A quote from Mzee Gustav in Uvira makes clear what happened.

*“One of the things about Mobutu, when he took over the power, things were well. Stability returned and we could start to rebuild our lives. This was until it entered the 70s. This is when he started to make blunders. The Zairianisation. He gave all the production means, the factories, the mines, everything, to his people; the so-called parliamentarians and others. That is when all the things started being spoiled and looted. This led to the economic decline, lack of jobs and unemployment. Congolese were unemployed in a country full of resources. That period affected my personal life as well as that of many others. In my own sub-location there were minerals, but we were not allowed to deal with them, as it was given to one of Mobutu’s protégés. We were dying of hunger and poverty, while, in a valley not far from here, we had all the resources. And then there was the process of demonetization, whereby the local money had no value. The local currency lost all of its value. So if you made a big deal, if you sold a house for example, the money had no value the next day. So you could make a big business deal that was utterly useless. So we used to feel powerless, with the hunger and poverty revealing and our children dying, while the country is full of wealth. So we felt repressed. Like we didn’t have freedom to operate in our own country and exploit the resources. So at that time, we were feeling weak and not comfortable, there was a lot of unease from men.”<sup>32</sup>*

During the Mobutu era, many men in South Kivu lost their jobs and their ability to provide for the household. Amongst other things, the region suffered from the closure of

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<sup>32</sup>Interview with a Mulele Simba, in Uvira. In July 2010

small businesses and several large factories as well, and from the limited access to the mineral mines caused by the Zaïrianisation. It was in this context that changes in the gender balance started to occur. I conducted a long interview with two elderly women from Uvira who talked about how the position of women had improved over time and they clearly traced this to the economic degradation during the Mobutu period. The women were aunt and niece. The younger of the two, Eveline, was born in 1945 and the eldest, Ngendi, did not know her age. Both women witnessed the episodes mentioned above. Ngendi could still recall changes in gender during the colonial time, and both women had clear memories of the Mulele rebellions and could recite what the rebellion did with respect to male-female relations, behavior and norms. They both agreed that gender dynamics had already changed significantly before Mobutu came into power, however, it was during Mobutu's reign that the traditional gender balance had completely changed. According to Ngendi:

*“During the Mobutu regime, the status of women went up as we got more involved in economic activities like trading. Here in Uvira, many women would trade in Bujumbura. In my view, during that period there was a lot of emancipation of women. This was during the seventies and eighties of the Mobutu reign. Women were getting more income and more responsibility in Congolese society. In the colonial times, women were not allowed to trade. We weren't earning any income; this was purely the domain of the men. So we used to be there at home or in the farm, and the man went to work and provided for the family. After colonial times, women started to undertake many different tasks in society. This increased the status of women, because we were not completely dependent on men anymore. We could buy our own things, and take care of ourselves. In some cases this brought a lot of friction in the family, but the friction depended on the person. Sometimes*

*there was friction when the women regarded the household as less important. This especially happened with people that traded over long distances. But it depended on somebody's own choice. Many women traded, without this leading to friction in the society.*"<sup>33</sup>

The bankruptcy of the formal economy had an enormous impact on gender relations, gender performances and eventually gender norms as well. The basic content of the previous quote emerged in practically every research location that I visited. During colonial times, women were practically legally banned from participating in the formal economy. While the end of colonialism also ended women's legal restrictions to earn money, gender norms continued to dictate that women tended the farm and the household, while the men earned money which paid for school fees, medical bills, luxury items, etc. So when the formal economy went bankrupt, changes in gender were unavoidable. Macgaffey noted the same in Kisangani (Macgaffey 1987, chapter 7). During the economic bankruptcy of the Congo, the male dominated formal economy started to give way for an informal black market economy in which women played an important role. This was simply out of necessity. If the man could not bring enough food on the table to feed the family, women had to chip in. According to my respondents, many men became completely idle after they lost their jobs, mainly because they were too proud to accept jobs that they considered below their status. So in these cases, women completely overtook the role of breadwinners. In other families, men did accept lower paid jobs, but they found that the payment was not enough to make ends meet, so they needed the financial support of their wives to top up. This changed structures of dependency. This became very clear from interviews with

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<sup>33</sup>*Interview with two elderly women in Uvira. August, 2010*

women who were now the main breadwinners in the house, and I encountered these women in the majority of my research locations. Also Ngendi and Eveline had a clear opinion on this. In the words of Eveline:

*“When the man is humble in the house it is still good for the woman to bring the income so that they make the plans together. But when the man still has a big ego, when he is not stable, there is no need to show him what you earned or to make him an associate in your plans. But usually, when the man treats you right, you share the money and make the decisions together.”<sup>34</sup>*

In many cases women gained the power to challenge their men when they did not agree with his behavior or with the decisions he made. The financial leverage women gained, caused them to emancipate. Women became more vocal towards their husband. Their income became important to their families' well-being, so their voice also carried more weight. However, quite opposite from feminist revolutions in the western world, it was desperation and the necessity to survive that changed gender relations and performances, rather than ideology. Moreover, gender norms didn't shift at the same rate as gender performances, which caused a lot of friction in the society. According to many of the oral histories I collected, this friction was further ignited by the emancipation policies of Mobutu.

Mobutu talked openly about the need for women's empowerment, he promoted many women to high positions, and he created hundreds of dancing groups which exclusively consisted out of women who would sing in Mobutu's honor and who earned a

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<sup>34</sup>Interview with two elderly ladies in Uvira. August, 2010

salary while doing so. The significance of these policies for changing gender relations was highlighted in many oral histories I collected. Let me give one example of an old man from Uvira who fought in the Mulele rebellion.

*“[During Mobutu] it was like they took the power from men and that they abruptly gave it to women. While men were literally empty pocketed and to some extent they ended up feeling powerless, he [Mobutu] was giving all this money to things that were in favor of women. Women were favored a lot under Mobutu. It was clear that Mobutu helped women. Mobutu proclaimed Otomboli Bamama, Otomboli Mobutu. During the Mobutu era, women were the ones trading, crossing the border to Burundi and Rwanda, and whenever the men complained, the women told them that when you provoke women, you would provoke Mobutu. Men were completely marginalized. This led to a lot of households being scattered. There were many divorces. Many families broke up. During the Mobutu era, the women’s ego went too high. They lost their respect for their husbands and fathers. There was a case of a man whose wife went to court, who paid back the bride price and who divorced him. She just was able to pay back the bride price.”<sup>35</sup>*

According to my respondents, the *Otomboli, Bamama, Otomboli Mobutu* doctrine and its associated policies made women very vocal within both private and public settings. It gave women a means to publicly disrespect their husbands and bring shame upon them, and get away with it. Formerly, any attempt by a woman to shame a man in public would lead to serious ‘disciplinary’ measures. According to six of my respondents, the *Otomboli Bamama, Otomboli Mobutu* doctrine was enforced through an elaborate system of secret

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<sup>35</sup>Interview with a Mulele Simba, in Uvira. August, 2010

police and secret detention areas. Women could threaten to report their husbands if they felt provoked and the fear this instilled was real. What I derived from my interviews was that this was one of the ways in which Mobutu gained leverage over men, even within domestic settings. According to the history teacher in Uvira:

*“The rise of women vis-à-vis men, allowed him [Mobutu] to have control over men in their houses. It prevented men to criticize and attack his system. In the sense that whenever a man had criticism towards the system, women could report their men. So for Mobutu, empowering women became a means of getting power over men, even within the domestic setting.”<sup>36</sup>*

Mobutu’s emancipatory policies were rarely seen in the oral tradition as ‘Mobutu the champion of the feminist cause’, but rather ‘Mobutu, the cunning fox who knew how to best suppress his subordinates’. Other informants told me something along the same lines, emphasizing that this policy of Mobutu was not a genuine attempt to improve the position of women, but more a tool to consolidate his own position. Except for one elderly woman who used to be in one of Mobutu’s dancing groups, none of my respondents actually thought that Mobutu genuinely cared about the position of women, but that it was rather meant to improve his own position. Nonetheless, as the quotes above make clear, many noted that the gender shifts that it created were real and that they could be felt throughout South Kivu, also in the rural areas. So, within the historical consciousness of my respondents, the combination of economic bankruptcy and political emancipation policies created a system in which women could speak in public places, challenge their husbands

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<sup>36</sup>Interview with a history teacher in Uvira. August, 2010

within the household, rise to positions of political and economic power and gain the breadwinner's role within the family. This was a complete upset of the earlier gender balance. So, upon the eve of the First Congo war in 1996, gender balances had been drastically transformed by the political, social and economic processes mentioned above. The DRC was still a patriarchal society in which men controlled most of the positions of power. However, these positions of power only belonged to a small minority. In the family unit, men had either lost their leading role altogether or their leadership was changed from a completely authoritarian system to shared decision making. The Mulele war and 31 years of Mobutu had an enormous impact on the gender balance, which led to a relative empowerment of women and disempowerment of men. While men were still expected to be the natural leaders of the household and women were expected to be obedient and submissive, reality had caught up with norms. Many women had become the primary breadwinners of the family, which over time diminished their expected obedience and submissiveness. At the same time there was a large gap between masculine ideals and the day-to-day experiences of the vast majority of men.

These changes in gender performances and relations did not necessarily reflect changes in gender norms. Practically all of my interviewees emphasized that since 'times immemorial', it was expected of men to be the leaders, providers, protectors, and advisors of the family, while women were expected to be the supporters/helpers of their husband. The characteristics of an ideal man included wisdom, wealth, strength, bravery, fearlessness, generosity, decisiveness and determination, the characteristics of an ideal women included discipline, cleanliness, obedience and submissiveness. (Dolan ...)

On the eve of the first Congo war, the ideal of the hegemonic man who possessed wealth, wisdom and power was a far cry from the lived experiences of many men. The

majority of men could no longer live up to expected models of manhood. The most basic attributes of being a man, for example the ability to provide for the family and to protect them from harm, had crumbled because of the economic downfall and a system of severe state suppression. Many men felt increasingly disenfranchised and emasculated, which deeply affected their self-esteem, their sense of manhood and their pride. By the end of the Mobutu era, men had become prisoners of societal expectations that reality prevented them from achieving. This was very similar in other African contexts of great social and economic upheaval. Besides eastern DRC, Chris Dolan also studied masculinities in northern Uganda, in which comparable gender shifts took place. *‘It is necessary to distinguish between men’s lived experiences of their own masculinities, which are necessarily multiple, and their lived expectations of masculinity, which are contained in a hegemonic normative model or set of ideas concerning what defines a man’*. Although Dolan’s article refers to a time and region of protracted conflict which was different from the Zaire of 1995 and early 1996, the friction between expectations and men’s inability to live up to these were similar. What Dolan (2002:77) wrote about northern Uganda also reflected reality in South Kivu. *“Paradoxically, the increasing heterogeneity of experience goes hand in hand with a further homogenizing of expectations; while marriage and fatherhood, provision and protection become harder to achieve, they do not become less desirable as a result, in fact they become more desirable as they appear to provide anchors and points of leverage in the midst of the economic, social and political uncertainty created by war.”* My research findings are very much in line with Dolan’s analysis. During the economic crisis, when living standards went down for everyone, expectations that society held of men, especially the expectation of provision and protection, did not adapt to circumstances. The next quote provides an illustration of this:

*“At the household level, my children still expected me to find an opportunity to recapture my lost identity and to understand my position and place as a household provider. Let me illustrate this with an example. One of my sons came with his bicycle of which the tire had burst and he asked me to come to have the wheel repaired. When I asked where I should find the money to have the bike repaired, my son didn’t answer because he assumed that it is the role of the father to help him with this. In the family, they don’t want to hear about excuses.”<sup>37</sup>*

This man used to be a high-ranking manager of a large sugarcane factory in Kiliba who could send his children to good schools and who had little difficulty to buy bicycles for his children and even a good car for himself. Yet, by the time the factory went bankrupt, he couldn’t even afford to fix a tire. Instead of receiving sympathy for his plight, the expectations of his position as a father hardened. *“They don’t want to hear about excuses”*. The mismatch between the expectations of family members and the reality of his lived experiences, led to a deep sense of powerlessness.

The relative empowerment of women was for a large part the result of the relative disempowerment of men. Reactions of women regarding their empowerment were very mixed. First of all, some of my female informants denied their empowerment altogether, and upon listening to their stories it became clear that empowerment did not happen to every women equally. While the majority of my female respondents reaped benefits in terms of enhanced freedom, others lacked any notion of empowerment and could not identify themselves with being empowered. Those who did see that they had a bigger say in the household and more voice in the society, also complained about double burdens,

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with a group of former employees of the sugarcane factory in Kiliba. August, 2010

because besides the status of breadwinner, they still had to attend to their traditional roles. Especially for elderly women, the feminine rise in society led to a clear conflict with their notions of femininity. In at least three interviews that I had with elderly women, the women wanted men's roles to be restored and women to return to their traditional gender roles. This shows that shifts in gender were not perceived as a 'man vs. woman thing'. Gender relations changed because the political, social and economic environment shifted, not because of ideological strive. While the shifts brought more gender equality, living standards went down for the vast majority of inhabitants and the associated gender shifts were not always welcomed, surely not by most men, but also not by all women. So while reality had shifted, notions and discourses about ideal gender norms had shifted to a much lesser extent. This caused a lot of friction between societal expectations and lived experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Much of the current day discourse on gender in the DRC is concerned with sexual violence against women. The DRC is labeled as 'the worst place on earth to be a woman' and especially the media plays a significant role in portraying the DRC in terms of barbarism. While authors such as Gouzou and Mechanic, media stations such as CNN and BBC, and political activists claim that the situation for women in the DRC is at an all time low, the stories of my informants depict a different reality. Comparing the oral traditions of the pre- and early colonial time with the oral histories of gender realities at the end of the Mobutu era, I can only conclude that, at least in the historical consciousness of my informants, the extremely unequal gender reality that existed before colonialism did not exist anymore at the end of the Mobutu era. While women's dependency on men had lessened, men's

dependency on women had grown. The traditional roles of men and women had become murky. Women engaged in trade and other income generating activities, while men sometimes engaged in subsistence farming, which used to be a women's domain. The focus on sexual violence has clouded a more precise historical analysis of shifts that took place over the years. By the time the first Congo war broke out, gender relations were indeed problematic, as Gouzou and Mechanic noted. However, according to the majority of my respondents and in contradiction to what Gouzou and Mechanic state, this was not so much caused by inequality, but rather because notions and norms of gender stopped reflecting daily lived experiences and performances of gender. A deep crisis of masculinities was the result. The two continental wars and the lingering conflicts in eastern DRC worsened this situation further. Forced migration, militarization, extreme (sexual) violence and the influx of NGO and UN activity brought further confusion to an already confused gender balance. To understand what impact the conflict had on gender, it is vital to realize that gender dynamics had a very turbulent history even before the conflicts broke out.

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# **Men, Masculinities and the Demise of a State; Examining Masculinities in the Context of Economic, Political and Social Crisis in a Small Town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.**

## **Introduction**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a classic example of a “collapsed state”. The government is weak, unable and/or unwilling to provide security and deliver vital public services.<sup>38</sup> The government has no monopoly on violence and is lacking territorial control. Where the government does have control, state officials are largely corrupt and predation prevails. This article provides an analysis of the effects of economic, social and political crisis on men and masculinities. It does so through case study of a small town of Kiliba, located in South Kivu, close to the borders of both Rwanda and Burundi. Until the mid-nineties, Kiliba was seen as a relative paradise amid widespread decay, due in part to an existing sugar cane factory, which, besides providing employment, also provided public services, such as healthcare, education and agricultural support schemes. Kiliba’s prosperity did not last. Instability in the region and the outbreak of war led to the closure of the sugar cane factory, which caused large-scale unemployment.

When I first came into Kiliba and I did interviews with the former workforce, the feeling engulfed me that I was looking at a micro-example of the gradual state collapse that had happened on a national level, several decades delayed and a lot less gradual, but similar in almost every other account. Over the course of several weeks in between July and August 2010, I visited Kiliba seven times. I conducted around ten key informant interviews with people that had worked and lived in Kiliba for a long time. I also did three focus group discussions (FGDs), with approximately twenty people in every focus group. The FGDs

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<sup>38</sup> For a more critical reflection on the state of the DRC’s fragility, please read Trefon, 2009. The government does deliver some forms of security and services, but in selective and erratic ways.

were with former male workers, a mixed group of male and females who had worked for the factory, and a group of widowed and divorced women who were now the sole caretaker of their families. The large size of the FGD offers an interesting reflection of the unequal position between researcher-researched. While I prefer smaller groups, my arrival always triggered expectations and interest and attracted more attention than was needed or preferred. FDGs were always held in open spaces and while the discussion was going on, new people arrived who were often immediately included in the discussion by other participants. So every start of the FGD started with expectation management and explanations of the exact research goals. In order not to induce suspicion or rivalry, I did not send people off. Only with the FDG with widowed and divorced women did I request new arrivals to leave, because of the sensitive nature of the discussion and the status of the women. Individual interviews were always strictly confidential, and only included the interviewee, the interviewer and the interpreter. My research in Kiliba was part of a much larger research that took me deep into both Uvira and Fizi Territoire. While I will focus mostly on the case study of Kiliba, the argument put forward in this article is also relevant for the other research locations.

This article will explain why traditional notions of masculinities in terms of hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, protest and marginalized as theorized by R.W. Connell, loses some of its analytical value in situations of extreme distress. While it does not denote or refute Connell's classification, it does argue that Connell's theory inadequately captures the complexities of situations of enduring crisis and that it therefore needs to be expanded, by adding new sub-categories. I argue that a new conceptualization is needed for situations such as the one in Kiliba, which this article attempts to do.

### **Kiliba: the demise of a paradise amid widespread decay.**

The sugar cane factory was built in 1951 by a group of Belgian entrepreneurs from Antwerp.<sup>39</sup> As a major industrial complex employing thousands of people, the sugarcane factory provided services that the government failed to provide in order to ensure a healthy, well-educated and harmonious work force. The owners constructed a hospital that offered better medical services than governmental hospitals, providing free healthcare to all their employees and their families. Several primary and secondary schools were built in the vicinity of factory and the best teachers from the region were recruited. The owners also took care of housing for their staff. In order to increase the production of the farmers who sold their produce to the factory, the factory management provided all kinds of agricultural training for the farmers and they provided them with high quality seeds and fertilizers. According to the former workers, the factory even had its own banking and loan system for the employees. In the late eighties and early nineties, the factory employed over 3000 people whose salaries supported an elaborate economy of shop keepers, traders, farmers, butchers, cattle herders, bakers, sex-workers, taxi-drivers, mechanics and so on.

The factory survived a series of events that brought the rest of the country to its knees. These included the Mulele rebellion in the sixties and the Zaïrianisation and thirty years of economic and political mismanagement under Mobutu, during which the country's formal economy went largely bankrupt. In the late-eighties and mid-nineties, the Democratic Republic of the Congo was one of poorest and most corrupt and instable countries in the world (van Reybrouck 2010, Wrong 2009, Macgaffey 1987). However, the sugar cane factory in Kiliba has circumvented crisis through smart politics, (e.g., having key people installed in the committee that oversaw the expropriation), exclusive use of US

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with the human resource manager, and with a former employee. July, 2010

Dollars to avoid the hyperinflation, and through diversifying their market to Burundi and Rwanda. In the year 1991, when the rest of the country was faced with hyperinflation, economic decline and the near collapse of the formal economy, the Kiliba sugarcane factory recorded its highest rate of production.<sup>40</sup>

The factory suffered its first serious blow with the genocide in Rwanda, which was up till then its main export market. The genocide in Rwanda caused a plunge in the demand for sugar and it created large streams of refugees in the border area. The factory production records showed that in 1994, the drop in export demands reduced production by half, which also meant that a large number of people lost their jobs and that farmers in the region were able to only sell part of their produce. The factory never recovered. Throughout 1995 production plummeted. On the eve of the first Congo war in 1996, the factory stopped production altogether, maintaining only a very small unpaid workforce who were primarily responsible for protecting the expensive machinery from petty theft. It is alleged that the factory owners again bought off the various armies and rebel movements to prevent large scale plunder by armed forces.

According to the nostalgic memories of the majority of people I interviewed, up till 1993, Kiliba was a sanctuary, an utopia if you like, shining brightly within a country that was in an advanced state of decay. From 1994 onwards, the population of Kiliba joined the ranks of their fellow countrymen; poor, desperate and waiting for a better future that was nowhere on the horizon. The impact the closure of the factory had on the local community was all encompassing: it impacted on practically every single daily-lived experience of Kiliba's inhabitants. In terms of gender, the closure of the factory turned everything upside down. Overnight, families that used to earn salaries high above the national level were

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<sup>40</sup> Factory production records shown to me in July, 2010.

earning nothing anymore. Husbands could no longer provide for their families, which meant that their wives had to contribute to the family's survival. In many households women became the primary breadwinners and children started to look to their mothers for support, rather than their fathers. Echoing the work of Chris Dolan (2010) and Desiree Lwambo (2011) the "men became women and the women became men".

### **Gendered consequences of the factory's bankruptcy.**

In the late eighties and early nineties of the twentieth century, Kiliba was potentially the single most enabling environment in South Kivu for men to comply with societal gender expectations. Expectations held that 'real' men provided non-violent, visionary and authoritative leadership. Men were expected to display wisdom and provide valuable advice to others. The most basic expectation of men was that they provided for and protected their family and that they had a high virility and sexual potency, resulting in many children (Hollander, 2014, Dolan, 2010:34, Lwambo, 2011:4, Schatzberg, 1988:82, Mechanic 2004, Erikson & Baaz, 2010:47).

There were of course significant differences between different men. Connell's (2005) distinction and classification between hegemonic, complicit and subordinate masculinities also existed in Kiliba. In the social hierarchy, hegemonic masculinity stands above complicit masculinity and subordinate masculinity (Connell 2005, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005)<sup>41</sup>. Hegemonic masculinity refers to a type of manhood that only a few men can actually achieve, while others position themselves in relation to it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:832). Although hegemonic masculinity can be seen as the top of the chain, it does not necessarily imply domination; it implies hegemony. This is not achieved through violence, but rather by cultural complicity and social acceptance. According to

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<sup>41</sup> Connell also describes protest masculinities and marginalized masculinities, which will be discussed later.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:832), hegemony means “*ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions and persuasion*”. Below hegemonic masculinity, there are complicit masculinities. These comply with aspects of the hegemonic ideal. Complicit masculinities live up to the basic expectations of manhood, but they are not top of the bill. Further down the hierarchy are the subordinate masculinities. These are the masculinities of men who are not really considered men, men who do not live up to societal expectations of what it means to be a man. They can be the masculinities of homosexual or transgender men, mentally disturbed people, the homeless, unemployed drunkards and junkies, etc. While I think Connell’s model is adequate to explain differences in masculinities in pre-crisis Kiliba, I do agree with critique forwarded by Miescher (2005:199) who refutes the “*global gender order*” and the “*prospect of all indigenous gender regimes foundering under this institutional and cultural pressure.*” While Belgian colonialism and the spread of Christianity indeed influenced the gender order, it did not lead to a collapse of the indigenous gender order, but rather induced a hybridity between traditional and modern notions of hegemonic masculinity (Hollander, 2014). As many Africanist gender scholars have noted, hegemonic masculinity maintained distinct African features, often captured in the term ‘Big Man’ (e.g., Miescher, 2005, Holland, 2005, Dover 2005). While the image of the Big Man has changed over the centuries, they are no longer muscular hunters of fierce warriors, but rather hold prestigious offices, drive large cars and live in large houses, Hollander (2014) argues that the central features of the Hegemonic Male are still intact. Interestingly, many of these features appear to be continental. Dover for example, characterized the hegemonic male in Zambia as follows: “*To give a thumbnail sketch: the man of power is self-reliant, hardworking, and successful. He provides all his family’s needs and helps his kin. He does not show fear; he is always calm and decisive, slow to*

*anger but will defend his own and his family's honor. He does not complain in hard times or show pain. He is generous and people come to him for advice.*" These characteristics show remarkable resemblance to what I found in South Kivu, eastern DRC.

When transferring Connell's and Messerschmidt's model of masculinities to the realities of Kiliba before the closure of the factory, the Big Men were the factory managers, the directors of the hospitals and the schools, the local administrators, the head of police and the religious leaders. These men had a level of power within Kiliba society, and they acted and were viewed as trusted father figures within the community. Schatzberg's study on the dialectics of oppression also uncovered a similar pattern regarding power and the image of fatherhood. He argues that people in positions of power across the DRC, and most notably Mobutu himself, used the image of the father figure to portray themselves (Schatzberg 1988:72-98). The father figure also implies hegemony through ascendancy rather than violence. He held authority over others, was expected to be just but strict, wise but willing to share his wisdom through provision of advice and education, generous but fair in the distribution of his generosity, self-assured and confident, but not arrogant. Kiliba's leaders had wealth. They drove large SUVs and they lived in the largest villas. They bestowed their wealth upon their family and elaborate patronage networks. They were expected to be jovial, kicking a stray football back into the pitch and laughing with the workers who were footballing, but not joining, as they needed to stand above them.

Below the most hegemonic males were the 'complicit masculinities', which constituted a very large group. The men belonging to this category were the teachers of the prestigious schools, the doctors in the hospital and the technical staff of the factory who run some of the precious and complicated machinery. Below this group were the factory workers, the tractor drivers, the mechanics, the farmers and entrepreneurs who derived their

status from providing services to the work force, such as bar owners, shop keepers, owners of small hotels, taxi drivers, etc. Further below this group were the waiters, the seasonal workers at the farms, gardeners, security guards, cleaning personal and others who earned small salaries. The status of these men varied and so did their level of complicity with the hegemonic ideal. However, what these men had in common is that they all earned salaries that enabled them to provide for the family and enjoy the virtues of the patriarchal dividend. While they couldn't claim hegemony, they lived up to societal expectations of what it meant to be a man and in return they were given respect and obedience. Their salaries allowed them to provide dowry, either for themselves or for their sons, which allowed them to marry and sustain families. While the hegemonic men such as the managers and the directors were father figures within the society, the complicit men were the father figures within the family. They were perceived to be just but strict towards their children and wife, they acted as advisors and they were accepted as the head of the household (see also Dolan, 2010, Lwambo, 2011). In return, their wives and children were obedient, submissive and they made the life of the provider as comfortable as possible.

Interestingly, most of my informants had suppressed the memory of subordinate masculinities in their nostalgic notions of the time when Kiliba was thriving. However, two of my key-informants in Kiliba, a former schoolteacher and a NGO worker, had clear memories of the existence of subordinate masculinities in the form of idlers, beggars and alcoholics. Here again, the continental overlap is clear: in the words of Dover (2005:177): *“The opposites of the man of power are the lazy man, the one who fears, fails and falls, and the drunkard.”* According to the schoolteacher, the economic downfall of the rest of the country caused an influx of job-hunters who often failed to find work in a job market that was saturated, which led to an increase in alcoholism, drug abuse and heightened crime

rates. Secondly, both the teacher and the NGO worker commented that the increase in alcoholism and drug abuse led to increases in domestic violence, which in turn led to an increase in divorces. So according to two of my informants, there were insubordinate masculinities before the closure, in the form of unemployed men, drunkards, beggars and criminals, but this group did not appear in the memories of the other inhabitants of Kiliba that I interviewed.

While Connell has been widely acclaimed for his critique on (gender) role theory and transcendence of it through his classification of masculinities and conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity, which looks at power and resistance to power and incorporates change, his gender classification have also received some critique as being too simplistic. Demetriou for example questioned Connell's conception of the relationship between hegemonic masculinities and other forms of masculinities, arguing that Connell does not recognized the way that marginalized and sub-ordinate masculinities can influence and change hegemonic masculinities. Michael Moller joins Demetriou in his critique that Connell's theoretical model is too simplistic. In his words: "*while much of Connell's work articulates a need for tools which will generate critical analyses of the ways in which masculinity is practiced, it also tends to overlook the complexity of the phenomena it investigates: that is, masculinity per se*" (Moller, 2007:265). Moller argues that the conceptualization of hegemonic masculinities leads researchers to look for "*particularly nefarious instances of masculinist abuses of power*" (Moller: 2007:265), while neglecting the everyday experiences and thoughts of most men.

Scholars such as Moller and Demetriou acclaim Connell's important contribution to the field of critical men's studies, but criticize it for its simplicity and inadequacy to understand masculinities in all its complexity. Also Africanist gender theorists have pointed

to inadequacy of Connell's theory to capture the emergence and transformation of masculinities in situations of poverty and deprivation. Groes-Green, for example, looks at how new masculinities based on sexual prowess and violence emerge and transform and both substitute and challenge masculine ideals that are centered on wealth and status. In a study about urban masculinities in impoverished and economic unequal Maputo, Mozambique, Groes-Green distinguishes the masculinities of middle class youngsters, who he refers to as 'showoffistas', and the young men whose masculine ideal of wealth and provision are unachievable because of their situation of poverty and unemployment. Groes-Green (2000:288-289) argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinities fail to capture the social inequalities and complexity of male powers. Connell's concept of protest masculinities, generally referred to as a hyper-heterosexual masculinity of young men who miss out on the patriarchal dividend, is meant to capture the masculinities of the working class youth who are poor, often unemployed and unable to live up to the bread-winners ideal. However, it fails to differentiate between the various masculinities that emerge amongst these groups of marginalized men. For the working class young men in Maputo, Groes-Green identified two distinct expressions of masculine prowess; one was through violence, the other through sexual performance. In the words of Groes-Green (2009:290):

*“Juxtaposing some young men's increasing preoccupation with sexual satisfaction of female partners with other young men's use of violence against their partners, it seemed that sexuality and violence emerge as bifurcated reactions to the problem of an unstable male authority brought about by unemployment and poverty.”*

The work of Katrien Pype offers another illustrates of the diversity of masculinities in situations of deprivation. Pype did an ethnographic study on masculinities, violence and youth cultures in the three communities of Lemba, Matete and Ngaba in Kinshasa. Pype

focuses on particular groups within these three communities, notably the *'sportifs'*, the *'sapeurs'* and *'staffeurs'*. The *'sportifs'* are characterized by a fighting culture and they portray their masculinity through scars, muscular appearances, handmade weapons and looks of fierceness and ruthlessness. The *'sapeurs'* and *'staffeurs'* on the other hand, show their masculinity off by designer cloths, cars, the most modern mobile phones and other flashy appearances. The observation that there are three distinct models of 'strongmen' in the urban context of Kinshasa and thus different interpretations of what masculinity means, leads Pype (2007:266) to the conclusion that *"one can no longer hold an essentialized and ahistorical approach towards gender. Embodying a certain type of masculinity is the result of the interplay of societal imperatives and personal concerns that leads to taking up a particular lifestyle; both are strategies of survival under compulsory systems"*. The work of Pype and Groes-Green illustrates that there are many different forms of masculinities that emerge and transform in situations of deprivation and crisis. The findings of current study on masculinities in Kiliba are in line with the critique of Groes-Green.

Like in Kinshasa and Maputo, the men in Kiliba were faced with deprivation of the ability to perform the breadwinners role, which necessitated a renegotiation of the masculine ideal and the emergence and transformation of new masculinities. However, there were also some major differences. First of all Kiliba is a small town, not a major capital, second, in Kiliba, the deprivation of the 'breadwinner' ideal was very abrupt and third, the subjects were not youths, but adult males who all had experienced prosperity. As a result, the renegotiation of masculinities took different forms. The impact of the closure of the factory is aptly captured with a quote from a former employee:

*"The population is creeping in misery. The big problem we are encountering is that we were not prepared for the closure of the factory, and the closure was very sudden and*

*abrupt. This meant that none of us were prepared to start another way of life or to venture into new areas. We had no income. We can't even afford our medical care anymore. This brings a lot of problems in the household, for example in terms of child mortality. Many children die because of our plight. When my children fall sick and I bring them to the hospital, even if the child gets his medicine and is cured, I cannot pay the bill and if this happens, my child is maintained in the hospital as a prisoner, until I can cover the costs. So this makes me and other people not to bring our children to the hospital with the effect that many die in their houses. This situation destroyed the community in terms of integrity. Most people don't even do any farming activities, but during the night they become poachers and they steal the crops of other people. They also do this with goats and cows. So there is a lot of envious behavior amongst people, which is also portrayed within inter-household relationships. When I see a case of unfaithfulness in the neighbor's family, I become suspicious of my own wife. And this creates some kind of mistrust. So there isn't any trust anymore in our society. This brings provocations, leading to robbery, and other forms of criminal behavior. The general situation brings an environment of disdain, where people become disdainful, arrogant, provocative and very suspicious of one another.*"<sup>42</sup>

The closure of the factory had a deep impact on society. From one day to the next, thousands of people lost their jobs. As a result, Kiliba's economy, which depended for a large part on the worker's salaries, went bankrupt. Many people stayed in Kiliba after the closure of the factory, because they had nowhere else to go. They were forced to cope with life in another way. It was in this coping process that the gender balance completely turned upside down. Let me illustrate this with two quotes that highlight a male and female perspective:

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<sup>42</sup> Focus Group Discussion with former employees of the sugarcane factory in Kiliba. August, 2010

*“In the family, the fact that the company closed down had a large impact on gender relations and gender roles, because it affects the loss of authority from the man. Looking at the time I was the breadwinner, I was the head, covering the needs of my family, in terms of financing. Traditionally, the role of the African woman was to maintain the social structure inside of the household. But the fact that I lost employment changed the role of my wife and made it that our children started lacking care. The role of the man became more of a theoretical thing than a realistic situation. This could be noticed in the sense that some of our children don’t recognize the father as the head of the house, and they turn to their mother instead. The whole situation brought up a mocking situation in which men are referred to as; ‘Wake up and eat’. The men mainly stay at home while it is the wife who goes out to get the food. So when she comes she can only tell the husband to wake up and eat, because he is idle. That basically makes us feel low, neglected. At times we may reach home and ask for water, and the wife says, ‘can’t you just do it yourself’. While in the past, you asked for these things and they will be brought. We used to be respected. But now, whenever I want to enforce order in the house, the wife says; ‘Can’t you just keep a low profile, unless you want me to expose you to shame’. This brings a distortion of the fabric of the household, which you could see through teenage pregnancies, prostitution, criminal behavior, including theft and even armed robberies. All this weakened the social fabric inside the society.”<sup>43</sup>*

This was the shift as seen from a male perspective. The following quote is from a woman, who also noticed a shift whereby women took over the position and roles of men.

*“The closure of the factory brought up a lot of hardships in the household and it caused major shifts in gender, whereby women had to take over the role traditionally meant*

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with the human resource manager of the sugarcane factory. July 2010

*for men, and we had to work harder, involving ourselves more in the agricultural activities. So when the factory closed down and my husband lost his job, I didn't have much need for my husband. So after the closure of the factory, life became much harder as I had to fend for myself.*"<sup>44</sup>

When comparing the picture of the hegemonic male or even the complicit male with the reality after the factory's closure, one can observe a large gap between the masculine ideal and the day-to-day experiences of the vast majority of men. After the closure, living up to the model of hegemonic masculinity could be no more than an unrealistic dream. As even the most basic attributes of being a man became unattainable, for example the ability to provide for the family, complicit masculinities became difficult to achieve. The men interviewed felt disenfranchised and emasculated, which deeply affected their self-esteem, their sense of manhood and their pride.

*"I was an educator for almost 33 years, which was a prestigious job. But now there is no more money to be made in education, and I am reduced to a situation whereby I don't feel manly anymore. I feel like a junk and I don't have any pride."*<sup>45</sup>

Increasingly, men were unable to live up to the expectations that they themselves, their families and the society had of them. The men interviewed said that this incapacity to live up to basic male expectations led to a significant increase in disrespect towards men in the society and especially the family, which undermined men's most fundamental privilege; receiving respect and having full authority.

*"This situation impacts negatively on the men, in the sense that as soon as we loose our roles as breadwinners and household pillars, we loose our authority and this feels like being completely useless. Let me give an example that happened less than 24 hours ago.*

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<sup>44</sup> Focus Group Discussion with a group of widows and divorcees from Kiliba. August, 2010

<sup>45</sup> Focus Group Discussion with former employees of the sugarcane factory in Kiliba. August, 2010

*[...] When I was mobilizing some of the people for this interview, I addressed some of the women who were building a fence. I asked the lady if the father would be willing to come for an interview. [...] So one of the children of the man that I wanted to invite said the following; ‘why do you ask for my father to be interviewed, they should interview mammy, since daddy is useless and there is nothing he can do.’ So this brought out a clash between me and the young boy. I said; “how can you be so disrespectful to your own father”? And the boy pointed to the fact that there is nothing that the father is useful for. He cannot provide and he cannot do anything, so what is the use of having him as the representative of the family. This shows to what extent the household fabric has been affected by the financial and economic situation around.”<sup>46</sup>*

In a situation whereby even wives and children publicly ceased to show respect towards their fathers and husbands, the ideal of the hegemonic man who possessed wealth, wisdom and power was far removed from the lived experiences of many men. Moreover, while most men experienced a significant drop in their capacity to perform their masculinities as they used to, the expectations did not change significantly. A former machine operator who is now in minimal service explained this:

*“At the household level, my children are still expecting me to find an opportunity to recapture my lost identity and to understand my position and place as a household provider. Let me illustrate this with an example. Recently, one of my sons came with his bicycle of which the tire had burst. He asked me to get the wheel repaired. When I asked where I should find the money to have the bike repaired, my son didn’t answer because he*

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with a former employee of Kiliba and someone who is now in minimal service. August, 2010

*assumed that it is the role of the father to help him with this. They don't want to hear about excuses.*”<sup>47</sup>

This man used to be one of the higher-ranking personnel of the Kiliba factory who could send his children to good schools and who could easily afford bicycles for his children. Yet, nowadays he can't even afford to fix a tire, which will probably not exceed the price of one dollar. Yet, instead of receiving sympathy for his plight, the expectations of his position as a father hardened. *“They don't want to hear about excuses”*. The mismatch between the expectations of family members and the reality of his lived experiences, led to a deep sense of powerlessness.

### **Renegotiating masculinities in the aftermath of the closure**

In a situation whereby scaling up to the ideal of hegemonic or even complicit masculinity became a privilege that none could attain, it was unavoidable that masculinities needed to be renegotiated. This happened in different ways. In many cases, as has been previously highlighted by Mechanic, Eriksson Baaz and Stern, Lwambo and Dolan, men became increasingly aggressive and tried to enforce their masculinity by the use of physical force. According to Dolan (2010), this can be explained because gender power is considered a zero-sum game. *“For different reasons, gender identities, which both demand and are created by a combination of very specific behaviors, roles and powers, are equally problematic. In a context of severe poverty, impunity and endemic violence, male gender identity is particularly troubled, and some communities have specific terms to describe men who fail to live up to gender expectations. Whether or not one approves of changes in roles*

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<sup>47</sup> Focus Group Discussion with former employees of the sugarcane factory in Kiliba. August, 2010

*and the power of women and men relative to one another, where they are understood as having been totally inverted, as in the claim that ‘the men have become the women’, it is apparent that gender power is still perceived as a bi-polar and zero-sum game, rather than something which could be redistributed more equitably to the profit of both women and men. With such perceptions, the changes are a significant source of tension and conflict within households and communities, for they mean that the “enemies” are no longer seen as just coming from outside, they are also believed to have found agents from within the home community.”*

Dolan’s observation was echoed in many of the narratives I recorded. The clearest narration was from the human resource manager of the factory:

*“[The economic plight] results in men who are more aggressive, they adopt a more aggressive behavior, they lose hope and they stop trusting almost everybody else. They view the people around them as their enemies, which causes a lack of tolerance. They rebel against the social structure and social authority, including the state, which can be understood as a situation of lawlessness. The other human beings around him are no longer respected. When a man lives in such a state of mind, he becomes a mere male animal. No more human. He becomes animalistic.”<sup>48</sup>*

This quote conforms with the findings of scholars from around the globe who study men in environments of grave distress, (e.g. Bannon & Coreia 2006, Clarke 2008, Silberschmidt, 2001; Theidon, 2009; Myrntinen, 2003; Hutchings, 2007; Cleaver, 2002; Barker and Ricardo, 2005 & 2008; Jones, 2009; Groes-Green, 2008; Jewkes, 2005) as well as from scholars who specifically focus on the DRC (e.g. Eriksson Baaz and Stern,

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with the human resource manager of the sugarcane factory in Kiliba. July 2010

2009:499; Mechanic, 2004:4-5; Lwambo, 2011:19-20; Dolan, 2002:72; Oser, 2007). In a situation where men were deprived of their masculine roles, they generally had one masculine attribute that was not affected by their social deprivation; their physical strength. Mechanic (2004:22) argued that men who lose their masculinities conclude that they can regain it by engaging in violence, which in turn leads to *‘a new generation of “emasculated men”*. Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2009a:505), whose studies focus on perpetrators of rape in Congo’s national army, observe that soldiers connect noncommissioned (sexual) violence due to the friction between embodied masculinity and societal expectations: *“when trying to explain rape, the soldiers located the impetus to rape in the mismatch of the “embodied performances” of their masculinities with their expectations of their masculinity – within the constraints of the generalized climate of violence and poverty in the DRC as well as the particular institutional framework of the armed forces.”* Lwambo argues along the same line: to understand violence against women it is important to understand violence among men, which includes power balances and emasculation: *“Experiences of male disempowerment do indeed exacerbate SGBV, but are not its nexus”* (Lwambo, 2011:20). The connection between disempowerment and violence has also been observed in other sub-Saharan countries and beyond. Groes-Green (2009:286) for example, establishes that *“poor young men react to a situation of unemployment and poverty by enacting masculinities that are subordinate vis-à-vis middle class peers, but which find expression through violence or sexual performance vis-à-vis female partners.”* Jewkes, studying masculinities and the prevalence of sexual violence in South Africa, concludes that extreme unemployment and social inequality created young men who are *“denied access to a prescribed and uncontested source of power”* and some may seek to resolve this through *“extreme acts of performed masculinity”* such as sexual violence (Jewkes 2005, quoted

from Ricardo and Barker, 2008:29). Scholars from across the globe have proven that there is a relation between disempowered men, thwarted masculinities and violent and destructive behavior. The violent and destructive behavior is a strategy applied to assert control and reaffirm one's superiority. Also in Kiliba, similar patterns could be uncovered. A number of informants complained that their wives had started to disrespect them after they lost their job, which was shown through many different signs of rebellion against their authority, such as refusing to get water and emphasizing their uselessness by calling them degrading names, such as 'wake up and eat'. In some cases, men reacted to this in acts of aggression, in order to restore their authority.

*"It was several years after we were married, that my husband lost his job. Before he was buying me cloths and other things, but afterwards he didn't buy anything for me anymore. So it was during this time that we often got into fights and that he started to become abusive towards me."*<sup>49</sup>

This violent 'hyper' masculinity could be seen as a form of protest masculinity rather than compliance with hegemonic masculinity. However, in the specific case of Kiliba, the concept of protest masculinity does not adequately describe the renegotiations that took place.

Protest masculinities are connected to men who do not have real power, and who make claims to power via violence. Broude (1990:103) describes protest masculinity in connection with '*destructiveness, low tolerance for delay of gratification, crime and drinking*' amongst other types of destructive behaviors. Connell (1995: 95-118) and Broude (1990:120) place the roots of men who subscribe to protest masculinities in their childhood

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with a woman in Katanga village. September 2010

and youth. The men described by Connell dropped out of school at an early age, and with little skills or qualification, they ended up either at the bottom of the labor market, unemployed, or engaged in criminal activity. They rebelled against the masculine power order through a general demeanor of toughness, hyper masculinity and violence, rather than through wealth and intellectual prowess. It is here that the concept of protest masculinities fails to conceptualize what happened in Kiliba. After the bankruptcy, the established gender order existed in the form of memories, values and norms, not in terms of daily-lived experiences, so the men were in protest against the memory of their former selves, rather than the masculine gender order. The workers in Kiliba weren't at the bottom because they were unskilled school dropouts. Rather, the roots of significant changes in their masculinities lie in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment in adulthood that they could not control.

Informants highlighted that some men coped with the mismatch of expectations and lived experiences by placing the blame of their situation of discomfort completely outside of themselves. Besides resorting to violence, victimization was a common strategy to renegotiate one's masculinity. I use the term '*victimized masculinity*' to describe this type of renegotiated masculinity. I prefer the use of this term instead of the term violent or protest masculinities, because victimization became a central aspect of their masculinities. Men who expressed themselves in victimizing language could still continue to live with themselves and have a sense of self-esteem, as they themselves held no responsibility for their misfortune. Instead, they were victims of the government, of globalization, of the armed conflict, of NGOs and UN agencies that promoted women's empowerment, of the factory owners who refused to re-open the factory, of president Kabila who had promised to re-open the factory but who didn't, of their wives and children who disrespected them

while they couldn't do anything to change their situation and so on. The victimized masculinities generally felt powerless to change their situation in a constructive way. This was clearly emphasized by some of my informants who talked of themselves as junks, as useless, and who articulated their inability to do anything to improve their situation and that of their family. Instead, they either turned idle, or they started to engage in criminal or other destructive behavior, like stealing, which was justified because they stated that the cause of their misery should be blamed on others.

*“This situation destroyed the community in terms of integrity. For instance, many men stopped farming, but during the night they go and start stealing people’s crops on the land and the same happens with animals. Many goats have for example been stolen, so nowadays, people are trying to hide the goats.”*<sup>50</sup>

For men who placed the blame of their situation of discomfort outside themselves, stealing, marital rapes<sup>51</sup>, fistfights and wife beating became legitimate ways to redeem their discomfort. This led to a large distrust in society and within families. There was a general breakdown in social capital, as people were no longer able to trust one another, which made it even more difficult to cope with the changed circumstances. As was explained before, some people continued to be connected to the factory in what they called the minimal service. Those who were in minimal service were mandated to protect the factory from theft and plundering. Even though they didn’t receive any salary, they executed the job because of the feeble hope that the factory would reopen one day and that they would be

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with the head of security of the Kiliba factory, one of the last remaining positions within the minimum service. July, 2010

<sup>51</sup> Marital rape is a very contested notion in South Kivu. Many of the male informants said that marriage gives them the right to have sex whenever they want. In the opinion of some of the respondents, if it is the husband’s privilege, how can it be rape?

the first to get their old jobs back. However, those who were not accepted for minimal service appeared to be embittered because they felt left out, placing the blame of their forced resignation on those who were still in minimal service.

*“I am still doing minimal service for the factory, and although I received my last salary many years ago, my neighbor is looking at me like I still have a regular income and that I am responsible for his situation of misery. [...] So this type of envious behavior brings provocations. It can lead to robbery, as people still assume that I have something in the house.”<sup>52</sup>*

This victimizing type of renegotiation of one’s masculinity had many negative consequences. As described, it led to embitterment, a breakdown of social capital and an increase in violence and insecurity. The net result was that the productivity amongst Kiliba’s inhabitants declined even further. The victimized masculinities tended to obstructed reflection and self-analysis. The men who saw themselves as victims told me that their misfortune was caused by others, so it were the others that had to set it straight. This often blocked innovative and pro-active behavior, which meant that the situation of misery persevered.

Victimizing oneself was a common, and widely documented strategy that men applied to deal with the disconnect between the lived experiences of one’s masculinity and the expectations that they, their dependents and the community had of them. However, I also came across an almost opposite reaction that was as common, but which has not received any scholarly attention. The opposite reaction was that men humbled themselves

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<sup>52</sup> Focus Group Discussion with former employees of the sugarcane factory in Kiliba. August, 2010

and that they made themselves inconspicuous in both their family and community. I labeled this type ‘renegotiated’ masculinities. Renegotiated masculinities referred to men who made themselves inconspicuous or humble through modesty or obsequiousness and to keep a low or discreet profile. Throughout my research, both in Kiliba and in other places in South Kivu, it was very often articulated that situations of deprivation did not automatically mean that every man expressed himself in terms of victimhood or turned violent as a means to restore their masculine dignity. This quote from an elderly woman in Uvira was common:

*“I don’t think that there is a clear connection between men who lose their jobs and violence within the household. In most cases, it is not a one-way thing. Most men do not turn violent when they lose their jobs. Most men who lose their jobs keep cool and keep respectful.”*<sup>53</sup>

According to most informants, both male and female and including those who talked about the victimizing type of masculinities described above, there were many men who adjusted their own expectations of themselves, accepting that they were no longer in charge and sharing the responsibilities that had traditionally been theirs amongst all the members of the family. This was often explained in terms of men that became more humble or men who kept a low profile, staying more in the background. The quote from an elderly man from Uvira underscores this:

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with an elderly women from Uvira. July 2010

*“So the woman is getting in charge because she is the one providing. But in terms of customs, the man had the power in the house, taking the leadership, and being the pride of the house. But this is not the case anymore since the woman is the one feeding the house. As a result, women express themselves more. Men have to keep a low profile. I don’t have the breadwinners’ power anymore. My wife has the breadwinners’ power now, so she is also the one making the decisions, while I remain quiet.”*<sup>54</sup>

During a focus group discussion with several widows and divorcees in Kiliba, one of the widows<sup>55</sup> explained that men became more humble and helpful towards the family, after the closure of the factory.

*“I noticed that the men became humble, somehow it also increased the level of faithfulness and men became more down to earth, they started helping out with farming activities and accompanying ladies with many of their tasks. [...] Also my husband became more humble. I could notice this in many things. For example, when he is offered some money on the road by friends, whether 100 francs or something, he would bring it home immediately because he was worried what would happen to the children and with house resources, while in the past, when he got his salary he would go to the bar and drink it. So the men became more preoccupied with the wellbeing of the family.”*<sup>56</sup>

Within the norms and customs of Congolese society, men and women didn’t know any better than a situation where the man was in charge and where he was the one that the

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with an elderly man from Uvira. July, 2010

<sup>55</sup> Her husband died during the conflict. The cause of his death is unknown to me.

<sup>56</sup> Focus Group Discussion with several widows and divorcees in Kiliba. August, 2010

family looked up to for provision, protection and guidance. However, protracted periods of deprivation significantly changed the reality. Men could no longer be the sole provider of their families and women's importance as (co)breadwinners increased. Economic, political and social shifts made some traditional norms and customs irrelevant and sometimes even harmful to the wellbeing of the family. In this situation, many men put their pride aside in order to help the family mitigate the detrimental consequences of poverty. This led to a situation of increased cooperation within the family. Both mothers and fathers struggled together to secure an income. Husbands took jobs that they earlier regarded to be below their status or that were traditionally regarded as feminine.

*“Let me give the example of the man sitting just there. He should be among the elites, because he used to be the secretary of one of the secondary schools. I have been looking for him since morning to get him to this interview, but I couldn't trace him because he was making fishing nets. This is how he has to survive now. So this is deeply humiliating for a man of his status.”<sup>57</sup>*

This man, the former secretary of a secondary school, accepted humiliation, performing a job that is clearly below his status as a teacher and secretary, to help the family. While men lowered themselves, it didn't mean that the situation of misery had brought sudden equity. In many families, wives and children continued to accept the leadership position of the man, but not unconditionally as it was in the past. Men were allowed to lead, but on the condition that things like family spending would be discussed between the husband and wife and that the man would be reasonable towards the family,

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<sup>57</sup> Focus Group Discussion with former employees of the sugarcane factory in Kiliba. August, 2010

thus not spending the extra income on extra-marital adventures or other useless things. Throughout Uvira and Fizi Territoire, I came across women who would put conditions to a man's leadership. Here is an example of a focus group discussion that I conducted with a group of approximately twenty women in Baraka, who all agreed to certain conditions that men needed to fulfill in order to be considered head of the household. The key condition was that the man would discuss and agree with the wife how the household money was spent.

*“So when he is a good man and they can have one opinion on how to share the money, the woman can be respectful. But if the husband spends it outside of the marriage, it is very difficult for the women to be respectful and she has to hide from the husband the amount of money which has been earned.”<sup>58</sup>*

So while the man could remain the leader of the family, his leadership was no longer hegemonic and natural. It was based on performance. My informants who fitted the label ‘renegotiated’ masculinities accepted the new reality. The men whom I interviewed who renegotiated their masculinities in an effaced way had a strong sense of self-reflection. They accepted their loss of power and they saw that they had to reconfigure themselves in a new social, political and economic environment. Different from the men whose narratives evolved around victimhood, the renegotiated masculine man did not resign to a situation of misery.

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<sup>58</sup> *Focus Group Discussion with women in Baraka. September, 2010*

*“The impact on the loss of jobs on masculinity cannot be avoided. When you used to have a job and when you loose it you feel it. Then you keep a low profile. But some [men] changed jobs; changed professions and they became successful. [...] Not all of them could succeed. Some people could not catch up and they had to keep a low profile. At a point they had to accept lower jobs from friends. Of course this was frustrating for them, but they didn’t have another choice.”*<sup>59</sup>

What this quote also highlights is that the renegotiation is a process that doesn’t happen from one day to the next. Sofia Aboim argues that: *“any masculinity is always internally hybrid and is always formed by tension and conflict. Any masculinity, as any man, any individual, is plural both in relation to the material positions that locate him in the social world and the cultural references that constitute his universe of meaning and significance.”* This was also the case with the men in Kiliba. In many occasions, victimization of oneself was a first reaction towards sudden deprivation. However, as the situation of misery became chronic and the hope that it would change back to normal was eradicated by a lack of positive progress, eventually, many men came to the realization *‘that they had no other choice’*. So while effaced and victimized masculinities appear to be completely contradictory and opposite and therefore in need of separate classification, I found that they can coexist in one male simultaneously. It depended on mood swings and on social settings, e.g. men could portray a renegotiated masculinity towards members of his family, but a victimized masculinity towards community members. Also, it likely depended on the interview settings and the relation between the interviewer and interviewees. While the renegotiated masculinity was often captured in stories of men who

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with an elderly man from Uvira who used to do a lot of business in Kiliba. July, 2010

talked about themselves, victimized masculinities came more often to the foreground when interviewees talked about the general situation or when they referred to others. So while my data suggest that the two typologies represented psychosocial phases, it is important to take note of the internal hybridity within the men who were interviewed.

Victimized masculinity was often the first reaction to extreme economic deprivation. And many of the men whose masculinities I would describe as renegotiated, had initially reacted to the deprivation through victimization. This was not something bipolar, but should rather be seen as a slow reconfiguration, in which people could either lean more to a victimized masculinity, or more to a renegotiated masculinity. My data suggest that over the years, as the situation of deprivation became chronic, men tended to lean less towards the victimized masculinity and turned instead towards renegotiated masculinity, in which men became increasingly less violent and envious and instead effaced themselves. Eventually, many men that I interviewed, especially elderly men, accepted that their own role within the family wasn't as significant as it used to be, thereby accepting that they had to lower their standards and expectations of themselves and give up their omnipotent position in the house, which in reality they had already lost.

## **Conclusion**

In a situation like the one in Kiliba after the closure of the factory, the traditional classification of masculinities into subordinate, protest, complicit and hegemonic (Connell, 1995, Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) is inadequate. When the comfortable and harmonious world came to end with the closure of the factory, the men in Kiliba were faced with a very serious crisis of their masculinities. In this situation, complicity with hegemonic masculinity became unattainable. While the general lifestyle of men after the closure of the

factory would have made them subordinate as compared to earlier standards, the fact that every man was emasculated makes the concept subordinate masculinity a misnomer. Marginalized masculinities could be a more adequate description, although the term, as explained by Connell, refers more to certain groups (racial/religious) within society whose masculinities are collectively marginalized vis-à-vis that of others. However, the closure of the factories marginalized all men more or less equally. After the closure, men renegotiated their masculinities into something that did not adhere to expectations of hegemonic masculinity, but which also cannot be described as protest masculinity.

Performances of masculinities that comply with the idea of hegemonic masculinity need an enabling environment. Kiliba of the late 1980s and early 1990s represented enabling environments where men could perform their masculinities. The closure of the sugarcane factory changed all of this. In less than one-year, living up to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity became a dream and even complicit masculinity became unachievable. While the ideal of the hegemonic male remained intact, men were collectively unable to live up to this ideal. This was already the case elsewhere in the DRC, and Kiliba stopped to be the exception. The changes in their social, economic and political landscape disabled men from achieving desired manhood, causing a friction in societal expectations and masculine performance, which resulted in a general crisis of masculinities.

Hence, these changes necessitated a renegotiation of masculinities. I identified two distinct ways in which men dealt with the sudden loss of their masculinity. I labeled the distinct renegotiations victimized masculinity and renegotiated masculinity. The victimized masculinity was centered on the idea of victimhood. The men placed the blame for their emasculation completely outside themselves. They were bitter, angry and confused. The men with victimized masculinities were unable or unwilling to accept that they needed to

reconfigure themselves in their changed environment. As a result, they were mostly idle and often overcome with understandable self-pity. Furthermore, victimized men often engaged in destructive behavior, such as alcoholism, if they could get money to afford it, domestic violence and fights with other men. This type of masculinity often blocked self-reflection, innovativeness and pro-active behavior, which were much-needed traits in those difficult times. The men who renegotiated their masculinities in victimized narratives were also more prone to use violence or engage in criminal activity. Their families and surrounding community members criticized their idleness and they responded to critique with the one masculine feature that they hadn't lost, their physical strength. Especially in families where women became less obedient and submissive, violence was used to restore order, which also led to an increase of divorces.

The other form of renegotiation that I encountered was what I called 'effaced' masculinity. The type of renegotiation involved men who effectively effaced themselves, both within the community and within the family. They lowered their self-expectations. They accepted income-generating activities that they traditionally considered to be below their standard. Furthermore, they recognized the newly found roles of their wives and they allowed them a position of more authority. Inability to live up to societal expectations and the shame derived from it caused them to move into the background and become inconspicuous. So while both types of masculinities exist on the basis of emasculation, the emasculation was acted out differently. Victimized masculinity was mostly centered on the past and inability to accept the present; renegotiated masculinity was more oriented on the direct needs of the present and the near future and on the acceptance of changed circumstances. Both represented a clear crisis of masculinities, but the way the crisis was managed was different.

While victimized and effaced masculinities seemed to be completely contradictory, they could co-exist in one individual simultaneously, depending on their mood, or they could be phases within the long-term process of coping with emasculation. The victimized masculinity was a first reaction to extreme situation of distress. It depended on the character of the individual; the people around him and other external factors regarding how long this phase took.

While it is difficult to codify or with certainty explain the lasting impact, the enduring situation of crisis seemed to result in a slow shift in gender norms. During the period of field research conducted in 2010, the ideal man was still described as someone who commanded respect, who provided for the family and protected them from harm. However, I also heard both men and women arguing that the perfect man respects women, he allows his wife to take decisions and he will provide completely equal treatment to daughters and sons. Notions about the importance for gender equality could be seen mostly from men with renegotiated masculinities, whereas victimized masculinities advocated more traditional notions about gender. What was clear is that the renegotiated masculinity was conducive for lowering levels of gender-based violence and increasing cooperative behaviors in families, while victimized masculinities had an almost opposite effect. As the perpetuated situation of deprivation and hardship continues, so do the shifts in gender performances. Arguably, the enduring crisis situation can slowly lead to a shift in gender norms. This could be of note to the various humanitarian and developmental organizations that are engaged in activities that seek to reduce sexual and gender-based violence and promote gender equality.

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# Every Day the War Continues in my Body: Examining the Marked Body in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda.

Theo Hollander<sup>1</sup> and Bani Gill<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

Years after an armed conflict comes to an end, the scars of the excessive violence remain engraved on bodies, depicted in people's psyche and entrenched within the social fabric of society. In northern Uganda, the two decades of violent conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda has been endured largely by the civilians living in the region. Nearly 90% of the population lived in internal displacement camps at the height of war in 2004-05.<sup>60</sup> Both the government as well as the rebel forces made use of inordinate force and violence, including the abduction and forced recruitment of over 60,000 children and youth into the rebel army, large scale massacres, rape, forced labour.<sup>61</sup> Countless others lost the use of limbs due to landmines or gunshot wounds, were subjected to torture and mutilation, sustained injuries in fires and bombings, became blind or permanently deaf through the use of rocket propelled grenades and gunshots and were subject to grave sexual and physical abuse by the various armed actors within the conflict. Such acts of violence on people's bodies represents an attack on the smallest unit of political space; the very act of violence forming an integral attack on the corporeality of the body and the social fabric of the community.<sup>62</sup>

In northern Uganda all the parties to the conflict injured bodies either through

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<sup>60</sup> World Health Organization: Health and mortality survey among internally displaced persons in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts, northern Uganda. July 2005 (<http://www.who.int/hac/crises/uga/sitreps/Ugandamortsurvey.pdf>)

<sup>61</sup> Alcala, Pilar Rian & Erin Baines: "The Archive in the Witness: Documentation in Settings of Chronic Insecurity." *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol. 5, 2011, 412–433, doi:10.1093/ijtj/ijr025

<sup>62</sup> Berghs, M. *War and Embodied Memory: Becoming Disabled in Sierra Leone*, Ashgate, 2012

combat or through grave acts against human dignity, which included rape of women and men, mutilations, torture, severe beatings, etc. The worst two violators of bodily integrity, as documented by the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC), the Kitgum office of the Refugee Law Project (RLP), were the government forces in the early years of the conflict, and the Lord's Resistance Army in the remainder of the war.<sup>63</sup> The Justice and Reconciliation Project's publication 'The Beasts of Burcoro' analyzes how government forces used rape and torture as a mode of humiliation and submission.<sup>64</sup> The NMPDC database clearly shows that the largest perpetrator of extreme violence was the Lord's Resistance Army.<sup>65</sup> Anthony Vinci focuses on the LRA's strategic use of mutilation, abduction, surprise, unpredictable attacks and general fear as a force multiplier. He argues that, "The LRA's brutality allows it to use mutilation as a method of communication and control over the population. Ears and lips are cut off as a signal to beware of informing on the LRA. Bicycle riders have their legs cut off because bicycles, a major mode of transportation, are also to bring communication."<sup>66</sup> The history of violence in northern Uganda implicates a number of actors -- such as the NRA/Uganda People Defense Forces (UPDF), the LRA, and several other rebel groups and criminal gangs, including the Karamojong Cattle Warriors (KCW), the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) I and II, the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA), Gilil rebels, and Boo Kec criminal groups -

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<sup>63</sup> The NMPDC has documented over 5,000 conflict related events in seven sub-counties of Kitgum district. While the database has notable methodological considerations, it does provide a good overview of what war-affected communities remember and what they are willing to share. The database can be accessed on request at the NMPDC, in Kitgum Town Council.

<sup>64</sup> Justice and Reconciliation Project: *The Beast of Burchoro: Recounting Atrocities by the NRA's 22nd Battalion in Burcoro Village in April 1991*. JRP Field Note XVII, Gulu, July 2013

<sup>65</sup> The NMPDC event documentation analysis reports for Kitgum Matidi sub-county shows that the LRA was responsible for "72 percent of all the killings (368 people), 81 percent of all the disappearances (1080 people), and 65 percent of all the cases of aggravated assault (202 people)" in Hollander, Theo: *More than Massacres*, analysis of the event documentation in Kitgum Matidi. Refugee Law Project, Kitgum, 2013 (publication is forth coming)

<sup>66</sup> Vinci, A. 'The Strategic Use of Fear by the Lord's Resistance Army', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 16, No. 3, December 2005, pp. 360- 381. See also Hollander. *In the service of the Lord's army*. Kampala, 2012. In a biography about a former child soldier, Hollander also documents how the LRA made use of violence to communicate and enforce their unique sets of 'laws' to civilian populations, which included a ban on cycling, owning dogs and pigs and working on Friday and Sunday. Whenever LRA combatants witnessed someone breaking the law, the punishment was extremely brutal and highly symbolic for the law that was broken.

for whom violence worked as a strategy of control. As research from other contexts such as Sierra Leone also show, in armed conflicts characterized by guerilla warfare, counter-insurgency and hit and run actions, the human body becomes the new frontline: the battleground for domination and control.<sup>67</sup> In northern Uganda, while the armed conflict came to an end in 2006, the ‘marking’ of the body by conflict has left an indelible legacy upon the everyday living of Acholi society.

Based on qualitative research conducted with fourteen survivor case studies over a period of eight months in northern Uganda, this paper seeks to explore the embodied, gendered and socio-economic features of the ‘marked’ body and link this to theoretical and practical discussions on transitional justice in post conflict northern Uganda. By using the term the ‘marked body’, the authors recognize that ‘disability’ or ‘impairment’ per se is as much culturally constructed as is medically validated.<sup>68</sup> For instance, in northern Uganda the Acholi term *lungulo* is used specifically to describe people with impairments, while the term *lugoro* is also used to describe someone who has a weakness of some kind.<sup>69</sup> Through the course of our field work, we came across a number of people who complained of bullet and bomb shrapnel lodged in their bodies, or who complained of excessive weakness due to the beatings or torture sustained. Many of these people claimed that they were unable to perform agricultural tasks with the same efficacy as before, and thus identified themselves as ‘disabled’- even if they did not fit the conventional criterion of persons with disabilities. On the other hand, there were also respondents who had suffered severe mutilations and

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<sup>67</sup> Berghs, *Supra* N. 61

<sup>68</sup> Barnes, C., Oliver, M and Barton, L. *Disability Studies Today*, Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002

<sup>69</sup> Muyinda, H, ‘Limbs and Lives: Disability, Violent Conflict, and Embodied Sociality in Northern Uganda’ (2008) University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology.

who - despite their physical impairments - did not identify as *lungulo* (disabled), preferring to use the term *lugoro* (weak) to describe themselves instead. Keeping in mind these diverse narratives, the authors thus chose to define the present respondent group under the broad prism of ‘marked’<sup>70</sup> or ‘deviant’<sup>71</sup> bodies, thereby enabling an articulation of their identity on their own terms.

Queer, feminist and disability studies have in recent years focused attention on the marked body by critiquing and deconstructing the normative framework of compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>72</sup> Yet, this trend has not been replicated in conflict related literature. This scarcity of literature is puzzling in light of the fact that armed conflict and political violence are the leading causes of injury, impairment and disability, responsible for the condition of over four million people who currently live with disability.<sup>73</sup> Images of brutalized, maimed, and injured bodies frequently make their way into the media. This gaze is often invasive, even voyeuristic, giving us little insight into the lived reality of this survivor population particularly in a post conflict context. Rarely have the experiences of these survivors been studied, which involve a ‘reintegration’ into erstwhile familiar spaces devastated by war. On the other hand, peace and transitional justice processes often refer to a homogenized victimhood, that doesn’t necessarily respond to the needs of bodies deviating from normative physiology, such as children, the elderly, the disabled, or those severely injured as a result of the conflict. Gendering of such peace

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<sup>70</sup> Butler, J. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York: Routledge, 1993

<sup>71</sup> Terry, J. and Urla, J. (Eds.), *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture*, Indiana University Press, 1995

<sup>72</sup> McRuer, R. ‘Compulsory Able- Bodiedness and Queer/ Disabled Existence’, in Davis, L. (Eds), *The Disability Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2006 pp 301 -308

<sup>73</sup> World Health Organization. “World Report on Violence and Health.” Geneva, 2002

processes facilitates deconstruction of this homogenized victimhood, but the reference point still remains the able bodied person. When references to those rendered severely injured/disabled occur, it is mostly in the form of lip service, which ends up pathologizing the very bodies they attempt to represent. In Sierra Leone, for example, Berghs elucidates how post conflict interventions created new identities and spaces in society for ‘disabled’ survivors either as ‘amputees’/ ‘war wounded’ located in separately designated medical camps, or as ‘victims’ in the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.<sup>74</sup> In the context of northern Uganda, this paper attempts to focus on the post-conflict experiences of this survivor group, whose livelihoods, mobility, family, and social capital networks have been altered in irrevocably different ways than other war survivors, thereby necessitating substantively different engagement with conflict and post conflict processes. This paper is thus not about physical disability or impairment per se, but rather about the specific vulnerabilities of a survivor population that need to be made more visible in TJ discourses.

After a brief explanation of the research methodology, this article will analyze the different ways in which the physical wound, disability, injury or disfigurement represent the embodiment of a violent past and its ongoing legacies inscribed into flesh. The first section ‘Embodying the war’ discusses how the marked body threatens to become a defining feature in the way one perceives the self and the world. This embodiment is reflected in survivor narratives through the constant negotiation with the memories of the able-bodied self during time of war and the disabled-bodied self currently situated in a period of peace. The second section discusses the social construction of the marked body that is posited in

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<sup>74</sup> Berghs, M. ‘Embodiment and Emotion in Sierra Leone’, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 8, September 2011, pp. 1399-1417

friction with dominant discourses on masculinities and femininities. The alleged deviation from a hetero-normative and able-bodied sense of gendered ‘normality’, was often expressed by respondents in phrases such as *‘failure to be a man’*<sup>75</sup>, or *‘unable to fulfill (my) role as a woman’*<sup>76</sup>. The third section then makes use of social capital theory to understand the myriad ways in which the marked body necessitates a renegotiation of both social and human capital and (re)production, often resulting in the experience of stigma and discrimination. The last section will then examine the relevance that the marked body has for transitional justice theory and TJ practices in Uganda. Our central argument is that, while bodies have become a new frontier in warfare leaving visible and physical legacies years after conflicts come to an end, bodies have not taken center-stage in peace processes, thereby ignoring the needs of some of the worst-affected survivors. Transitional Justice theory and practices need to incorporate the marked body into its thinking.

## **Methodology**

Research for this thesis was conducted with the support of the Refugee Law Project (RLP) and its National Memorial and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC) in Kitgum, Uganda, between August 2012- March 2013. The respondent sample was drawn from Kitgum District representing individuals from both rural and urban settings. Research was conducted primarily in Luo with the help of two research assistants, both of whom are from Kitgum. Their knowledge of local communities, systems and institutions considerably enriched the research process. But, and it must also be acknowledged, their location in the field, particularly as translators relaying our questions in Luo to the local population and translating their responses in English for our benefit, formed a crucial part of the process of

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Charles on 13-02-2013, Kitgum Matidi Sub-County

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Lucy on 21.02.2013 in Omiya Anyima Sub County

knowledge production which, consequently, drew heavily upon their own interpretation of the spoken word as well.

As mentioned before, 14 case studies involving multiple in-depth interviews with each of the survivors identified were undertaken, as well as interviews with their extended family, neighbours and support networks. This selection was based on a multiplicity of factors - on the willingness of these respondents to engage with us, on considerations of time and distance, and on the nature of injuries sustained. It must also be acknowledged that for us, the researchers, the uncomfortable decision of 'choosing' whose stories were 'worthy' of documentation proved to be a grave dilemma. On the one hand, it made logical sense to document the stories of the 'worst' affected, to highlight the experiences of those most marginalized. On the other, making this decision solely on the basis of whose physical injuries appeared the most severe ran the risk of further pathologizing the very narratives we were attempting to represent. Much to our discomfort, our initial surveys were often infused with a perverse bio-medical voyeurism- those affected sought to make themselves visible by putting their bodies up on display, exhibiting wounds, scars and other physical deviances. The logic of this biomedical gaze implies that only by representing themselves as abject, agency-less 'victims' with extreme medical needs, would they be 'entitled' to any kind of assistance- whether by the state or by the researchers who is referred to as '*munu*' which can be translated as white, or outsider. We thus made an active decision of 'choosing' participants not only on the basis of their 'suffering' or 'bodily integrity', but also on their specific social, political, cultural and economic contexts and histories. The narratives presented in this paper represent a smaller subsection of the respondent group, whose

narratives provide insight into how the needs and experiences of this survivor population necessitate a rethinking of transitional justice discourse and practice.

### **The embodiment of war**

Embodiment suggests that it is through our bodies that we interpret the world around us; the body is both a social vessel through which the world is experienced and made meaningful, as well as an object that shapes the world. As Csordas remarks; “If we begin with the lived world of perceptual phenomena, our bodies are not objects to us... they are an integral part of the perceiving subject.”<sup>77</sup> Bury uses the term ‘biographical disruption’ to understand the condition of chronic illness as a disruptive experience that threatens to dislocate the structures of everyday life.<sup>78</sup> This concept also resonates with the experience of people situated in an armed conflict situation where mere attempts at survival necessitates frequent negotiation with biographical disruptions or, at the very least, the *threat* of biographical disruptions, as even mundane activities like finding/preparing food means risking violence, abduction or death. For the marked body, however, the state of biographical disruption threatens to become a permanent state of being both in the context of conflict as well as post conflict requiring innovative negotiations with the erstwhile familiar space of home and everyday livelihood practices. While the Government of Uganda has ostensibly highlighted peace, recovery and development as the cornerstone of their policy in the north, exemplified by the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan,<sup>79</sup> our respondents’ narratives highlighted that they neither experienced nor enjoyed the peace that the government seemed to be talking about. The narratives of survivors such as Jalon reveal

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<sup>77</sup> Csordas, T. ‘Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology’, *Ethos*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1990, pp. 5-47

<sup>78</sup> Bury, M. ‘Illness narratives: fact or fiction?’ *Sociology of Health & Illness*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2001, pp. 263-285

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.prdp.org.ug>

the permanence of the ‘warscape’<sup>80</sup>, where everyday life is dictated by the memory of the war, the changed state of the physical body and the accompanying complex negotiations of the post conflict.

In August 1986, Jalon’s homestead in Kitgum district was overrun by soldiers of the National Resistance Army (NRA); a fighting force that had just gained the status of government army after Museveni’s predecessor Tito Okello was ousted from power.<sup>81</sup> All the men present were rounded up and severely beaten- Jalon’s left eye was gouged out in the assault, deep incisions were cut across his chest, and he was stabbed repeatedly in his stomach. When the torture stopped, Jalon and his brother were put on a truck and driven to Namakora from where he managed to escape.<sup>82</sup> In August 1986, the 35<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the National Resistance Army (NRA), the armed wing of NRM killed 40 civilians in Namakora, Kitgum district.<sup>83</sup> Namakora was the birthplace of Tito Okello, the president who was ousted by Yoweri Museveni. While the NRA massacred people in all corners of northern Uganda, the massacre at Namakora was particularly vicious because of the symbolic significance of the place. As one of the few survivors of the infamous Namakora massacre, Jalon directly blames president Museveni for his current state. The physical injuries he received as a result of the beatings have not healed to this day, severely impacting upon his ability to practice agriculture and other subsistence activities. In practically everything that Jalon does in his daily life - whether it is going to the toilet, having sexual intercourse,

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<sup>80</sup> Nordstrom, C. *A Different Kind of War Story*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Nordstrom proposes the concept of warscape to describe the space of everyday negotiations characterized by violence and instability- of people located in the landscape of conflict zones. For further references please see Lubkemann 2005, Richards 2005, Korf, Engeler and Hagmann 2010

<sup>81</sup> The Museveni led political party in power currently in Uganda is called the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Its armed wing was earlier called the NRA, and renamed to the Uganda People’s Defense Forces (UPDF) in 1996

<sup>82</sup> Please see Human Rights Watch, *Uprooted and Forgotten: Impunity and Human Rights Abuses in Northern Uganda*, September 2005, Vol. 17, No. 12 (A) for further details.

<sup>83</sup> Butime, H. *Examining the relevance of the theories of guerilla warfare in explaining the Lord’s Resistance Army insurgency in Northern Uganda*, DPhil thesis, Faculty of Law, University of Wollongong, 2012.

moving small distances or in his interactions with community members - the pains of the past are present. The recurrent question he would pose each time we met him was; *'how can there be peace when the present government is still in power?'*<sup>84</sup>

This embodiment is visible in the narratives of his wife Doreen as well. On the same day as Jalon's assault, Doreen and her sisters-in-law were sexually assaulted by the NRA soldiers. For Doreen, the memory of the assault, in addition to Jalon's weakness, prevents any notion of peace. In her words; *"There is no peace for me because I still recall what happened to me...Each time I see the UPDF I remember what I went through, and how weak Jalon has become. For me, it is the wound that has never healed."*<sup>85</sup> The memory of the violence sustained serves as a continual reminder of the 'denial of an ordinary life'<sup>86</sup> where the mere sight of a uniformed soldier threatens to transport Doreen back to the war.

While every human being embodies the world they live in, we are not always aware of our embodiment, and neither is embodiment always experienced in the same way. As Young explains; "For most people under most circumstances, the experience of personal identity entails two separate conditions: "I am embodied" and "I am not embodied." That is, some of the events which go on inside my body are experienced by me as essentially physical, part and parcel of having a body and being embodied while other internal events, such as thinking, imagining, remembering, dreaming, etc., although physiological processes, are experienced by me as essentially nonphysical, somehow independent of my body and my sense of being embodied."<sup>87</sup> While able-bodied individuals might not always perceive the wide array of our daily experiences as embodied, for the present respondent group, their

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with Jalon on 12.03.2013, Omiya Anyima sub county

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Doreen on 15.03.2013, Omiya Anyima sub county

<sup>86</sup> Tabar, L. "Memory, Agency, Counter- Narrative: Testimonies From Jenin Refugee Camp", *Critical Arts: A Journal of South- North Media and Cultural Studies*, Routledge, July 2007

<sup>87</sup> Young, L. 'Sexual Abuse and the Problem of Embodiment', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1992, pp. 89-100

very disabilities or disfigurements are a constant reminder of the legacy of their own past from which they cannot escape. While internal events, such as thinking, imagining, remembering and dreaming might be experienced as not embodied by the able-bodied person, for the marked body, these cognitive processes constantly reflect the body as an object of dreams, imaginations and memories.

Charles, who lives in Kitgum Matidi, was one amongst the millions forced to move to the government ‘protection’ camps for IDPs in 2003.<sup>88</sup> While packing up his former home for the sake of shelter in the newly formed IDP camps, a landmine exploded, killing Charles’ father instantly. Charles survived, but the blast severed his lower left arm and severely injured his abdominal muscle where shrapnel penetrated his stomach. Charles spent the next year recovering in a hospital in Tororo, eastern Uganda. Upon his return to the IDP camp, he learnt that his wife had been killed by the LRA, leaving him the sole caretaker of five children. Charles today depends entirely on his ageing mother and children. The memory and experience of the war reverberates in everything he does as he is unable to farm or earn a livelihood. In his daily musings, he constantly reflects upon his body. In his own words; *“Most days when I sit alone and look at my hand, I have flashbacks and then I feel so bad. During these moments I am also overcome by the smell of the fresh blood... blood which I lost during the occurrence.”*<sup>89</sup>

In some of the testimonies we recorded, respondents reflected a curious juxtaposition between a war-ravaged, but able-bodied past and an apparently peaceful but disabled-bodied present, with the former situation being identified as ‘better’. Current day northern

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<sup>88</sup> In the whole of Acholi and parts of Lango and Teso region, people either chose ‘voluntarily’, or were forced to move into IDP camps. The displacement started from Gulu district from 1996 onwards, and by the early 2000s people from the districts of Kitgum, Lamwo, Pader and Agago were also being moved. However, in the years preceding the official displacement, many people had moved to ‘protected villages’, where civilians often ended up surrounding army barracks. In this way, civilians paradoxically protected soldiers rather than the other way around.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Charles on 13-02-2013, Kitgum Matidi Sub-County

Uganda is generally described as either peaceful, in transition or as a society that is healing or recovering. Within the collective memory of the Acholi, the IDP camps feature as spaces of intense deprivation, humiliation and cultural degeneration.<sup>90</sup> However, for the marked bodies who continue to suffer the consequences of the war, the memory of the IDP camp stands in contrast to that of most able-bodied persons.

Simon, who lived in an IDP camp close to Kitgum Town Council, was a well-educated English teacher at a secondary school. In 2007, while driving his motorbike home, Simon heard gunfire and convinced that it was a LRA ambush, he sped off.<sup>91</sup> In fleeing the ‘ambush’, Simon suffered a horrific accident that left him paralyzed from the waist down. For Simon, his able bodied self at the height of the war stands in stark contrast to his ‘post’ conflict self of today in which he is completely dependent on his wife Sarah, his sole caretaker. Simon’s narrative was constructed around binaries; in the past he was regarded as a strong, virile man, a responsible member of his community. But now, his present condition was defined in terms of him being a ‘cripple’, where he is dependent on his wife for even the simplest of activities. The marked body thus negotiates an ambiguous, strained relation with the present, embodied also by caretakers and dependents. As Sarah states; *“Life was hard when there was war, but at least Simon was working. I think it was better in the past because even in case of a rebel ambush we could run together...right now, the situation is hopeless”*.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Douma, Hollander and Frerks: The impact of humanitarian assistance on livelihoods affected by humanitarian crises in Uganda: An Analysis of Communities’ and Humanitarian Actors’ Perspectives on Socio-Cultural Dynamics in the Acholi and Lango Entry Points: Utrecht University (2009); The newspaper archive of the NMPDC offers another good example of the discourse surrounding IDP camps as places of extreme deprivation, captured in article titles such as ‘Death camps’, and articles that articulate the hunger, the suffering and the deprivation of human dignity in the camps.

<sup>91</sup> While a cease-fire agreement in 2006 ended the armed conflict in northern Uganda, the fear of violence and hostilities remained, specially amongst local civilian populations.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Sarah on 30.08.2012 in Kitgum Town Council

The present situation is identified as ‘hopeless’ due to the continuing structural violence represented through socioeconomic pressures and conditions of abject poverty, which is compounded by the experience and memories of the marked body. In such cases, the past- even though identified with fear, danger and constant threat- occupies a strange place within the vicissitudes of memory, such that even the abstract space of the camp represents a condition of ‘abnormal normality’.<sup>93</sup> Lucy, who was partially blinded by an LRA attack in 2003 shortly before she moved to a camp with her husband Celestino, recognizes that the times of the insurgency were not easy. But their memories of the IDP camps are generally positive. In the word of Celestino; *“Life in the IDP camp was not very bad. We started getting problems when we returned back home from the IDP camp. At least in the IDP camp there was food and since everyone depended on aid, there was not so much discrimination.”*<sup>94</sup> Contrary to the more common memories of IDP camps as spaces of humiliation and misery, the narratives of Lucy and Celestino depict the camp as a place where there was enough to eat, where there was little discrimination, and where people helped each other.

In the IDP camp, the entire population was in essence disabled by its environment, which created a perverted sense of equality amongst the war-victims. However, in the present day post conflict phase, the freedom of others to enjoy their safe and secure environment stands in contrast to the experiences of those whose bodies were marked and disfigured during the conflict. The experience of returning ‘home’, is marred by the difficult task of everyday subsistence.

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<sup>93</sup> Quesada, J. ‘Suffering Child: An Embodiment of War and Its Aftermath in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua’, *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1998, pp. 51-73

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Celestino on 07-02-2013, Omiya Anyima sub-county

The survivors we interviewed for this paper thus interpreted and experienced the past, present and future through the prism of their injured body. However, the embodiment of war was also felt beyond the individual concerned. In an article on Nicaragua, James Quesada argued that “wars produce a continuum of duress”<sup>95</sup> meaning that the generation that follow those who participated in or were victims of war embody the war through their mothers and fathers. This notion was also clearly articulated in our research in northern Uganda, for example by Jalon’s son, Richard; *“There is no peace. If there was peace I would be like my friends who are not worried all the time. When I see my friends going to school, it makes me feel very bad. I always tell myself that if my father was healthy, I would also be going to school like others. If I had gone to school, I could be doing something that would help me and my parents.”*<sup>96</sup>

Richard embodies the war in northern Uganda through the scars and injuries of his father. His inability to go to school because of the structural poverty, made worse by his father’s inability to perform agricultural activities, make his future a source of ambiguity. In a sense, all our respondents saw their daily lived reality as a continuation of war because the war continues in their own bodies or the bodies of their loved ones.

### **Gendering the marked body**

“Bodies”, as Gerschick writes, “are central to achieving recognition as appropriately gendered beings. Bodies operate socially as canvases on which gender is displayed and kinesthetically as the mechanisms by which it is physically enacted.”<sup>97</sup> For the present

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<sup>95</sup> Quesada. *Supra*. N. 92

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Richard on 18-03-2013 in Omiya Anyima sub-county

<sup>97</sup> Gerschick, T.J. ‘Toward a Theory of Disability and Gender’, *Signs*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2000 pp. 1263-1268

survivor group, the embodiment of the conflict was expressed by the marked body in terms of friction between gender norms and expectations on the one hand, and daily-lived gendered performances on the other. Concerns about the inability to live up to gender expectations were voiced repeatedly during interviews in expressions such as *'I cannot do the tasks that a woman is supposed to do'*<sup>98</sup> or *'I was a man before, but now I am disabled'*<sup>99</sup>.

The situation of war, militarization and internal displacement has changed the gender context in northern Uganda considerably. For men, the situation of displacement and insecurity has made it very difficult to fulfill traditional normative gender roles of 'protectors' and 'providers'.<sup>100</sup> The growing disjuncture between normative expectation of masculinity and the lived experience of it has led to an experience of loss of domestic and political power, fueling feelings of humiliation, resentment, oppression and frustration, as well as fueling the use of violence.<sup>101</sup> At the same time the context of war and displacement also created (albeit limited) conditions of economic empowerment for women, where they were allowed the space to venture out and engage in livelihood practices that in turn strengthened their decision-making roles within the household.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Charles on 13-02-2013, Kitgum Matidi Sub-County

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Lucy on 21.02.2013 in Omiya Anyima Sub County

<sup>100</sup> A full gender analysis goes beyond the scope of this paper, but is certainly relevant for a deep understanding of post conflict processes and experiences, including those of people with marked bodies. For more in-depth information, we suggest the following articles and books: 1) Dolan, C. 'Collapsing Masculinities and Weak States – a Case Study of Northern Uganda,' in Cleaver, F. (Eds.), *Masculinities Matter! Men, Gender and Development*, London: Zed Books, pp. 57-83, 2002 2) Dolan, C. *Social Torture; the Case of Northern Uganda*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009 3) El-Bushra, J. & Sahl, I.M.G. *Cycles of Violence. Gender Relations and Armed Conflict*. ACORD. Nairobi, Kenya, 2005 4) Gilbert, J. 'Boys Becoming Men. Hegemonic Masculinity in Traditional Acholi culture,' in Jones, A. *Men of the Global South: A Reader*, London, Zed Books, 2006 5) Harris, C. *Gender- age systems and social change: A Haugaardin power analysis based on research from Northern Uganda*, MICROCON Research Working Paper 65, Brighton, 2012

<sup>101</sup> Dolan, C. *Social Torture; the Case of Northern Uganda*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009

<sup>102</sup> El-Bushra, J. & Sahl, I.M.G. *Cycles of Violence. Gender Relations and Armed Conflict*. ACORD. Nairobi, Kenya, 2005

Respondent narratives highlighted time and again that the situation of displacement and the collective handicap created by conflict and displacement overlapped with their personal handicaps. While the site of the IDP camp has been documented as a space of humiliation, hardship and vulnerability,<sup>103</sup> for some of our present respondents the IDP camp is also remembered as a space where there was a greater equality of suffering. With the cessation of direct hostilities and the decommissioning of the IDP camps, however, the assistance provided by humanitarian actors decreased significantly. For Charles, who lost his left arm in a landmine explosion, the event of his injury and the process of return ‘home’ represent a significant rupture from normative masculinity. Charles finds it exceedingly difficult to practice agriculture due to his handicap, and he is unable to ‘protect’ and ‘provide’ for his family in ways that are acceptable to an Acholi sense of masculinity. In order to make ends meet, he has taken to helping his mother and daughter brew alcohol – an activity considered typically ‘feminine’. The marked body necessitates a renegotiation of gender identities and norms, particularly when faced with the challenge of managing the ‘everyday structural violence of poverty.’<sup>104</sup> In the past, when Charles was able bodied, he states that he embodied the masculine traits of virility and physical ability. However, in the present, he depends on his mother and daughter for even everyday activities like bathing. In a context where men are traditionally held to hold power over women and children, the act of dependence upon his mother and oldest daughter signifies an undesirable deviance. Charles is often subjected to verbal abuse by community members, who call him ‘useless’ and a ‘burden’. Charles himself echoes this when talking about himself as ‘dependent’ and

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<sup>103</sup> Dolan. *Supra* N. 100

<sup>104</sup> Berghs, M. ‘Embodiment and Emotion in Sierra Leone’, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 8, September 2011, pp. 1399-1417

‘useless’. Thus, as one’s “physical wholeness and strength” are drawn into question, so is one’s ability to live up to expectations of masculinities.<sup>105</sup>

Reports such as “As if We Weren’t Human: Discrimination and Violence against Women with Disabilities in Northern Uganda” have documented the kind of issues that women with disabilities (war related or otherwise) faced in camps, and in the return process home in northern Uganda.<sup>106</sup> This includes the experience of stigma and discrimination, lack of access to health facilities and government programs and services, challenges to economic self sufficiency and property rights, and physical and sexual violence. These remain pertinent issues in the context of post conflict northern Uganda as well, and particularly so for women who have been rendered severely injured/ disabled during the conflict and whose families and husbands often show little sympathy for their disability. Aketo Eldaar is an energetic woman of about 35 who lost her right leg and three fingers off her left hand when she stepped on a landmine in 1996. She was married at the time, and had 3 children. However, soon after she was discharged from the hospital, her husband left her;

*“After I came back from the hospital, people in the community started telling him that your woman has become disabled and useless. You should find another wife. That’s when he started mistreating me...He told me that he can’t take care of me because of my disability so it will be better if we get a divorce, and I go back home. He stopped taking care of me and I had no option but to leave.”<sup>107</sup>*

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<sup>105</sup> Gerschick, T.J, and Miller, A.S. ‘Coming To Terms. Masculinity and Physical Disability’, in Ore, T.E. (Eds.) *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality. Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality*, Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000 2) Murphy, R.F. *The Body Silent*, W W Norton and Company Incorporated, 2001

<sup>106</sup> Human Right Watch. ‘As if We Weren’t Human: Discrimination and Violence against Women with Disabilities in Northern Uganda’ New York, 2010

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Aketo Eldaar on 05.09.2012, Amida sub county

Connell's conception of the gender order- comprising of labor (the manual expectations of men and women), power (reflected in the authority to make decisions in both the public and private space) and cathexis ('dynamics within personal relationships, including marriage, sexuality and childbearing')- may be useful here for understanding such narratives for whom the experience of the marked body spells a considerable loss in status.<sup>60</sup> Women in Acholi society are not treated at par with men<sup>108</sup> yet the private or domestic sphere represents a space where they are allowed freedom and mobility.<sup>109</sup> The event of the injury results in a physical debilitation which affects the performance of domestic activities- producing children, looking after children, cooking, keeping the homestead clean, cultivating and weeding the fields- and thus threatens the foundational bedrock of a woman's source of respect.

### **Dwindling Social Capital**

A majority of the people that participated in this study experienced a significant loss in social capital because of their increased inability to reciprocate beneficial actions to community members. Participation in various networks through family and friends, neighborhoods and work is crucial to the generation of social capital.<sup>110</sup> However, for those with injuries such as Simon's, their physical condition threatens to inhibit their previous participation in social networks at the same efficiency and level as before. Before his accident, Simon was a well respected school teacher who was also known to assist people in and around his compound with digging and other tasks. But ever since he lost his job, his social standing in the community has been threatened. He is now under constant pressure to

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<sup>108</sup> El-Bushra and Sahl, *Supra* n. 101. Dolan, *Supra* n. 100

<sup>109</sup> Muyinda, *Supra* n. 68

<sup>110</sup> Chenoweth, L., Stehlik, D. 'Implications of social capital for the inclusion of people with disabilities and families in community life', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, Vol. 8, No.1, pp. 59-72

raise the resources to pay his rent, and feels that he no longer has a say in community affairs:

*“If I look at the situation in which I am now, I feel so sad given how I was in the past before the accident. It’s very hard for me now because I have lost all my property and all my friends are now gone...after the accident all my neighbours have started to neglect me, and all they ask is when I will be leaving the block...”<sup>111</sup>*

Simon’s current state has also spelt a disruption in Sarah’s social capital networks. As she spends most of her time looking after him, her own participation in community affairs has decreased because she is unable to live up to her other social obligations. After Simon’s injury, the local church gave Sarah a startup capital to initiate her own business. But the pressure of running a small goods shop which required her constant supervision conflicted with her duties to Simon and eventually the business became bankrupt. She claims her neighbors have become increasingly hostile, ‘advising’ her to leave Simon as he is now only a ‘burden’. According to her, she has now lost all her friends in the community and it is only her family that supports her from time to time. Referring to her neighbours, Sarah states that;

*“...before Simon’s accident I used to take care of their children and they would look after mine. But after his accident this good relationship is no longer there. When Simon lost his job there was no one to care for me and my children... During the time I spent in the*

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<sup>111</sup> Interview with Simon on 30.08.2012, Kitgum Town Council

*hospital with Simon no one gave me any help. I was the only one struggling with the help of my family.*”<sup>112</sup>

The theme of reciprocity of favors and relationships runs through this narrative. Whereas earlier Sarah was a vital part of community networks amongst the women in her locality - looking after each other's children should one be called away for work - Sarah now is unable to contribute much time to these informal associations. This has had repercussions in that Sarah no longer feels as welcome in her existing networks.

In the largely rural and agrarian context of northern Uganda, production is often a communal effort accomplished through joint physical labor and the pooling of resources. In the absence of tractors, community members often organize themselves into communal farming groups. These groups cultivate the land of individual members on a rotating basis. Often, after the time of harvest, the groups sell the leftover produce together so as to can yield a higher profit. For people who have been severely injured or disabled this poses a predicament, as they are unable to perform agricultural labor with the same efficiency as before, yet they remain dependent on the productive outcome. This inability to contribute on the same or equal footing threatens to disturb existing social capital networks, and further contributes to a situation of stigma and discrimination, as is reflected in Lucy's narrative;

*“Before I got injured, we would all dig our field together. But afterwards people started withdrawing from us [Lucy and her husband] because we couldn't dig as much as they*

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<sup>112</sup> Interview with Sarah on 06.09.2012 in Kitgum Town Council

*could. The rate at which I would till the land reduced a lot...people then started forming their own separate groups doing farming and excluding us”<sup>113</sup>*

Social capital is based on bonds of trust, coherence and cooperation, and inculcated by networks and associations. A rupture in these networks has consequences upon cooperation and trust levels between community members, and sometimes even family. Jalon describes a situation where his alleged vulnerability has led to the breakdown of relations between him and his brother, who is currently a political leader of the village. According to Jalon, his brother takes advantage of his position to drive Jalon out of their ancestral land, as he feels Jalon is no longer in a position to dig and cultivate the field:

*“If I ever need anything from him, or ask him for something he refuses...he is my real brother but he gives me no respect now... he says I am not productive anymore due to my lack of strength now. He says this plot belongs to his father, but we belong to the same father. He tells me that he does not want to see me here anymore, and tells me to go away or he will beat me. What can I do in my condition?”<sup>114</sup>*

This is not to suggest that Jalon is entirely passive, and subject to exploitation by his brother. The experience of stigma runs parallel to support structures and mechanisms. Jalon’s own wife and children and some of his neighbours as well are supportive of him, helping him in his field or giving him household and food items when the needs arises. It is in this context that Muyinda derives the concept of ‘embodied sociality’<sup>115</sup> to reflect on

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<sup>113</sup> Interview with Lucy on 21.02.2013, Omiya Anyima sub county

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Jalon on 12.03.2013, Omiya Anyima sub county

<sup>115</sup> Muyinda in his work *‘Limbs and Lives’* (2008) explores the embodied sociality of people with mobility disabilities in war torn northern Uganda. Quoting work from Ingold (1991), Anderson (2002), and Monaghan (1995), he described sociality as a concept that looks at social organization as a fluid process. Ingold defines sociality as a constitutive quality of relationships, conceived as a ‘relational field’: “It might be helpful to think of social relations as forming a continuous topological surface or field, unfolding through time. Persons then are nodes in this unfolding, and sociality is the generative potential of the relational field in which they are situated and which is constituted and reconstituted through their activities.” Relational fields are interpersonal ties and social networks of any type. These can be kinship and family

how even though ‘disability as a limiting condition is at the centre of most of the social interactions and relationships that disabled people are involved in, the lives of disabled people in conflict situations should also take into account the qualities of their social relationships and interactions.’<sup>116</sup> Bodies are located within a social fabric and its underlying socio- economic and cultural context. At the same time, as previous sections have shown, the body predicates, or at least influences, the quality of interaction a person gets involved with. These interactions, defined in terms of social capital networks, determine the level of (re)integration in society. In our research, we systematically noted that the lower the wounded individual’s productivity, the more their social capital dwindled, resulting in more vicious forms of social isolation and stigmatization.

### **Discussion: Implications of the marked body for transitional justice theory**

The findings of this paper are much in line with the work of Scarry who argues that: *“The main purpose and outcome of war is injuring. Though this fact is too self evident and massive ever to be directly contested, it can be indirectly contested by many means and disappear from view along many separate paths. It may disappear from view simply by being omitted: one can read many pages of a historic or strategic account of a particular military campaign, or listen to many successive installments in a newscast narrative of events in a contemporary war, without encountering the acknowledgment that the purpose of the event described is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as*

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bases networks, territorial networks (neighbors or congregation), economic networks (colleagues, farmer groups, village saving and loaning groups) and many more. The generative potential between these interpersonal ties and social networks, what is in essence sociality, is interpersonal cohesion within these networks. The social cohesion is created and recreated through interaction between individuals. Muyinda applies the concept of sociality to “refer to the social dynamics that keep people together as a family, community, organization or institution or any other form of union.”

<sup>116</sup> Muyinda, Supra N. 68

*extensions of themselves.*”<sup>117</sup> Violations upon bodily integrity are the main outcomes of war.

The UN defines transitional justice as the “*the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation.*”<sup>118</sup> In light of this definition, it is surprising that so little attention is given to the marked body in transitional justice discourse. As Baines and Alcala point out in their article, much of the literature on transitional justice till date has been dominated by legalistic discourses and analysis of formalized institutional processes of truth and reconciliation commissions, compensation and reparations packages, retributive justice etc.<sup>119</sup> Such an emphasis on macro level changes and processes runs the risk of becoming elite discourses, by alienating everyday survival practices and concerns.<sup>120</sup> By focusing on the experiences of broadly defined ‘marked bodies’, this paper attempts to conceptualize these narratives within the purview of transitional justice thinking.

Bodies have assumed center stage in modern warfare, becoming the principle site for the performance of violence and conflict. However, the body seldom finds expression in peace processes: Bodies are seldom the *sites of peace*. In order to move away from the elite discourses surrounding transitional justice and include the every-day survival practices and aspirations of war affected communities in TJ thinking, it might be helpful to consider what peace means for various groups of war-victims. In this context, we want to put forth the concept of ‘embodied peace’ to understand the multilayered narratives of the present respondents, caretakers and their dependents.

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<sup>117</sup> Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985

<sup>118</sup> United Nations: “Guiding Note of the Secretary General: United Nations Approach to Transitional Justice. New York, 2010

<sup>119</sup> Alcala, Pilar Rian & Erin Baines: *Supra* N. 60

<sup>120</sup> Robbins, Simon: “Transitional Justice as an elite discourse.” *Critical Asian Studies* 44:1, 3-30. Robbins also recognized the disconnect between the needs and every day survival practices of one specific victim group, the families of missing in Nepal and the transitional justice debates which were ongoing on at high institutional levels.

Embodied peace may be conceptualized as a phenomenological approach to the analysis of peace as defined by one's own body, and the socio-economic context within which it is located. Embodied peace suggests a desirable condition of stability expressed in material, spiritual and embodied terms, where memories of the past are juxtaposed with the possibility of a hopeful future. For Jalon embodied peace would represent a situation where there would be a change in regime (*"How can there be peace of the current regime is still in power"*); where he would be compensated for the harm that was done to him; where he could be given a vocation skill and start-up capital that would be tailored to his injury; where he is free from the experience of stigma and discrimination and is recognized as a productive member of society and crucially, where the event of his injury no longer creates ripple effects on his children. For Sarah, embodied peace suggests a situation where she is able to raise enough money to pay Simon's medical bills and secure their survival. For Richard, a state of embodied peace would mean professional psychosocial and medical help for his father Jalon, the opportunity to go to school and to earn a professional degree. Embodied peace thus implies that peace exclude neither the marked body, nor their dependents and caretakers. Given the vast definition of embodied peace, it remains to be seen whether this is an achievable state of being. Nevertheless, we find this concept crucial to understanding survivor aspirations to peace, particularly of those who continue to suffer from untreated wounds. If transitional justice is to take the challenges, needs and aspirations of survivors with marked bodies and their caretakers and dependents into account, we need to consider how we can mainstream disabilities into transitional justice thinking and practices.

The third draft of Uganda's National Transitional Justice Policy (NTJP) provides an

interesting example of disability blindness.<sup>121</sup> While people with marked bodies are included in the definition of a victim, there is no consideration how people with marked bodies are to be included in all its various mechanisms. For example, how should they participate as witnesses in court cases, where limited mobility serves as a physical obstacle? While the document states that victims (including people with physical and mental injuries) have a right to participate in truth telling, it does not reflect on the limitations that people with mental injuries may have to express themselves. Again, while the draft policy recognizes that “there are unaddressed medical, physical, mental, social, psychological and psychosocial problems among the affected communities as a result of conflict”, it does not stipulate how people with marked bodies may be compensated for their decrease in productive potential, nor does it mention different reparation needs for different victim groups; ‘victims’ are consequently defined as a homogenized group throughout the document. So while the marked body is prominently present in the definition of a victim in the NTJP, there is no focus on the practicalities of how to mainstream people with disabilities/injuries into the transitional justice mechanisms. Furthermore, the policy does not focus on the delivery of public services tailored for the needs of war-affected people, including people with marked bodies, thereby excluding a huge need that was identified in our study. These services include healthcare, education, vocational skill training and welfare and livelihood support.

The lack of medical assistance which is affordable and accessible was identified as a major gap in post conflict service provision amongst the present respondent group. While government hospitals are free of charge, they rarely offer the specialized medical treatment

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<sup>121</sup> Justice, Law and Order Sector of the Ugandan government: Third draft of the National Transitional Justice Policy. 2013 Kampala. The NTJP follows a legalistic and institutional discourse that has a strong focus on retributive justice for the worst crimes, amnesty in exchange for truth/confession for ‘smaller’ crimes, national truth-telling and reparations for war-victims. This is a rewritten document after consultation with Civil Society Organizations. The policy now awaits ratification in Parliament.

that many of the people injured and disabled during the war need. Particularly for people located in rural areas, the decreased mobility, extreme poverty and decline in social capital mean that it was very difficult to reach these hospitals. Subsidized medical services provided by non-governmental organizations such as Refugee Law Project, AYINET, Handicap International, MSF & AVSI thus fulfill an important need.<sup>122</sup> However, medical care should not be seen as a panacea. For people living with the physical daily reminder of the war, these histories are carried in the body, shaping the way one defines and negotiates a ‘new’ identity. In this sense, embodied peace does not try to suggest a state of ‘recovery’- on the contrary the concept of embodied peace recognizes that memories are not sanitized medical procedures, where an impairment or disease is identified, treated and the patient declared ‘recovered’. Bergh’s article “Embodiment and Emotional in Sierra Leone” shows how a unidimensional focus on medical assistance for people with marked bodies hampered their reintegration into Sierra Leonean society. The ‘medical camps’ set up in urban settings like the capital Freetown categorized ‘disability’ as something ‘other’, or as an ‘anomalous’ category of people for whom reintegration was seen as a hurdle. “Rather than featuring policies of inclusion and disability mainstreaming, the creation of special camps, while perhaps medically needed and aiding people, also promoted marginalization”.<sup>123</sup> While it is important to assess the medical needs of people with untreated wounds and offer specialized medical assistance where needed, it is evenly vital to look beyond the purely pathological and medical needs of people with marked bodies.

Kenneth Bush has identified peace or the building of peace as “the creation of opportunities, and [...] political, economic and social spaces, within which indigenous

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<sup>122</sup> The number of organizations that offer these services is rapidly shrinking. MSF and Handicap International have left northern Uganda, AVSI is no longer engaged in the delivery of medical services, which then only leaves the Refugee Law Project and AYINET, who manage to reach out to only a small proportion of people with medical needs.

<sup>123</sup> Berghs, *Supra* N. 101

actors can identify, develop, and employ the resources necessary to build a peaceful, prosperous, and just society.”<sup>124</sup> Transitional justice must necessarily identify the needs, practices and concerns of different victim groups to ensure the participation of all local communities in this peace making process. This study has been an attempt to do this for what is arguably one of the most vulnerable survivor groups. Studies with other survivor groups are likely to produce both different and overlapping needs, therefore emphasizing the importance of micro-level analysis.

## Conclusion

By analyzing the embodied, gendered and socio-economic features of the ‘marked body’, this article has demonstrated the importance of disability mainstreaming in transitional justice mechanisms and thinking. While the geographical focus of this article was on northern Uganda, the lessons that can be learned from this study have far wider implications. We argued that in today’s armed conflicts the human body has become a new frontier of both domination and control. The World Health Organization reports that armed conflict and political violence are the leading causes of injury, impairment and disability, responsible for the condition of over four million people who currently live with disability. The experiences, challenges, and aspirations of people whose bodies were marked as a result thereof go beyond basic pathological needs and represent what we term ‘embodied peace’- a desirable condition of stability expressed in material, spiritual and embodied terms, where memories of the past are juxtaposed with the possibility of a hopeful future.

Bodies have assumed centre stage in modern warfare, becoming the principle site for the performance of violence and conflict. However, bodies are seldom the *sites of peace*. This article has discussed *how* bodies may assume centrality in transitional justice processes. While there is no easy solution by which embodied peace may be achieved, this article has

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<sup>124</sup> Bush, K. ‘A measure of peace: Peace and conflict impact assessment of development projects in conflict zones’. Working Paper, 1. Ottawa, Canada: 1998 The Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Program Initiative, IDRC.

attempted to narrativise the emotional, material, as well as embodied disjunctures that must necessarily be bridged for the scars of violence to heal.

# Parenting the Missing: Living with Ambiguous Loss in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda.

## Introduction

The issue of the disappeared remains one of the largest unaddressed and overlooked legacies of Uganda's turbulent past. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has recently estimated there are 12,000 people still missing in northern Uganda.<sup>125</sup> While the methodology to get to this number is not the most academically sound, research by other CSOs indicates that the total number of missing people in the LRA affected areas can easily surpass the 10,000. In 2012, the Justice and Reconciliation Project did a survey under 2,573 respondents in Gulu district, and 55,5 percent of the respondents reported that they had family members that were still missing.<sup>126</sup> Out of these, 60 percent had one missing family member, 24 percent had two members missing and sixteen percent had three or more family members missing. Children/Youth as Peacebuilders documented 1,036 children that are still missing in Gulu district, which is one out of 15 districts affected by the LRA conflict.<sup>127</sup> Lastly, incomplete and at the time of writing unpublished research of the Refugee Law Project has already revealed hundreds of names of people from Kitgum district that are still missing and every day more names are added.<sup>128</sup> What the work of these various (I)NGOs and CSOs shows is that the problem is very significant, but that estimates are based on inconclusive data. Fact is that we don't know how many people are

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<sup>125</sup> <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/photo-gallery/2013/08-30-uganda-disappeared-missing.htm>. The ICRC came to this number by measuring the number of missing persons that they documented in two sub-counties, and multiplying it by the number of sub-counties in the Acholi region.

<sup>126</sup> Voices: Sharing victim-centered views on justice and reconciliation in Uganda. Issue 3, 2012.

<http://justiceandreconciliation.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Voices-Issue-03-Web-Version.pdf>

<sup>127</sup> CAP: *For their name & in their name: Documenting & paying homage to Gulu district's lost children & youth: Those who died; those still missing*

<sup>128</sup> The national memory and peace documentation center, the Kitgum office of the Refugee Law Project conducts a comprehensive documentation of conflict related events. So far, they have documented over 5,000 conflict related events. The analysis of the number of missing people still needs to be done.

missing. There are only a few efforts to uncover the statistics in northern Uganda, and no efforts to find out countrywide.

This does not only indicate a lack of governmental and humanitarian interest and response to the issue, but also an absence of acknowledgement and reparation to the families of the missing. Moreover, the very limited research on this unique survivor group and their lack of visibility in their communities, in public debates and in the political arena means that their specific set of emotional, relational, cultural and economic problems remain largely invisible and poorly understood. With the exception of just a handful of small and localized projects,<sup>129</sup> nothing is being done to address the needs of this unique survivor group. However, the few projects that do exist demonstrate that it is possible to help this survivor group with relatively simple and cost efficient interventions. In this article, I focus on the emotional pains and social, cultural and economic problems of the parents of the missing and how transitional justice debates and practices in Uganda can be changed or adapted to improve their lives and help survivors to live with their ambiguous loss and strive for recognition.

The reason why this article focuses on parents is because, in light of the Lord's Resistance Army's recruitment tactics, they constitute a large victim group. However, there are also very many children with missing parents and siblings with missing brothers and sisters. The impact of missing parents or missing siblings will show both convergences and differences. More research is needed to explore the unique features of these victim groups.

## Methodology

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<sup>129</sup> Examples of these are interesting peer group projects that are done by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and a joined awareness raising event by JRP and RLP on the international day against the disappeared.

This study took an inductive qualitative life-history approach. Central in this study were the interviews I conducted with thirteen parents of missing persons. With most of these individuals, I conducted three to five lengthy interviews, which allowed time to explore complex issues and emotions. With four out of the thirteen participants we conducted one interview, either because they expressed no further desire to continue, or because my translator and my research assistant and I decided not to pursue further interviews due to the impact it had on participants. To triangulate the experiences expressed in the interviews, we conducted four lengthy focus group discussions with a total number of 50 parents and siblings of missing people. During these focus groups discussions, we discussed issues that came up during the interviews and asked for converging or diverging experiences. While the sample group is relatively small, I decided to keep it small so that we were able to invest more time in each individual. My experience was that the first interview was often a bit overwhelming for the parents of the missing, as their missing children are a topic that they do not often share with others. Usually people felt more at ease during a second and third interview, which aided discussions about complex emotions. Overall, while the stories of all the participants were unique, the emotional, relational/social, cultural and economic issues they faced had a large degree of convergence. This was also highlighted when we put the issues from the interviews up for discussion in the four focus group discussions.

The research took place from April 2013 till December 2013. The research locations were Kitgum Town Council, where we had four participants and one FGD, and the rural area of Omiya Anyima, where we had four participants and one FGD, and the rural area of Palabek Gem, where we had five participants and two FGDs. Palabek Gem was also the area where the ICRC implemented a peer counseling project for families of the missing, which changed the current day experiences of the people interviewed there, to which I will

come back. All the interviews were conducted in Luo, a language that I do not master, so a research assistant helped with all the translations and interpretation of meaning of various expressions. While this complicated the data collection, the research assistant also helped the research through his good ability to interpret meaning of concepts that are difficult to translate.

I found surprisingly little English literature about the issue of missing persons in post-conflict situations, which further indicates the marginalization of this group in post-conflict processes. The most helpful theory that I found was ambiguous loss theory created by Pauline Boss.<sup>130</sup> She realized that the ambiguity created by an unclear loss leads to a set of problems that are very different from more traditional understandings of grief following bereavement. Studies with families of missing persons by Simon Robins in Nepal<sup>131</sup> and Timor Leste<sup>132</sup> showed that there is evidence of a degree of applicability of ambiguous loss theory in these contexts. The findings of Boss and Robins also resonate in this study, which offers further prove of the universal applicability of ambiguous loss theory. In addition to field and literature studies, the author's own experiences as a coordinator of a war documentation center in Kitgum helped to inform the section about transitional justice.

### **Living with ambiguous loss.**

#### *Frozen grief*

In 1986, government forces of the National Resistance Army (NRA) arrested the first-born son of Odora Nakumiya. At the age of 22, Phillip was taken from his village in Omiya

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<sup>130</sup> Boss, P. *Ambiguous loss*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1999).

<sup>131</sup> Simon Robins, 'Ambiguous Loss in a Non-Western Context: Families of the Disappeared in Postconflict Nepal,' *Family Relations* 59(3) (2010): 253–268;

<sup>132</sup> Simon Robins, 'Challenging the Therapeutic Ethic: A Victim-Centred Evaluation of Transitional Justice Process in Timor-Leste,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* (2012) 83-105

Anyima and transported in eastern direction, where, a few days after his arrest, government forces perpetrated the infamous Namakora massacre. In the immediate aftermath of the massacre, Nakumiya organized a search party to look for Phillip, but without success. In the years that followed, Nakumiya went often to town to ask various government agencies what happened to his son. After about 10 years of wasting vital family resources on transport and bribes, and being severely frustrated by unsympathetic civil servants, he gave up. It was at around the same time, that the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) abducted Charles, his second and only remaining son. Similar to the case of Phillip, Nakumiya never uncovered what happened to Charles. While Nakumiya thinks it likely that both his sons are dead, the fact that he has not seen the bodies or heard confirmation about their death causes doubt.

Nakumiya's situation is a very clear example of ambiguous loss, which Boss classified as the *"most stressful and traumatizing loss since there is no verification, no closure, no rituals for support, and thus no resolution of grief."*<sup>133</sup> Ambiguous loss is a loss that remains unclear. Boss described it as *"a loss of a person who is there and not there at the same time"*. Betz and Thorngren described it as *"cruel in its unending torment."*<sup>134</sup> Boss distinguishes two types of ambiguous loss. One type is exemplified by Nakumiya's story above. It constitutes a situation where somebody is *"physically absent, but psychologically present"*.<sup>135</sup> Boss calls this *"Leaving without Goodbye"*. While both of Nakumiya's sons have disappeared physically, they are constantly present in Nakumiya's mind. Twenty-seven years after the arrest of his first son, Nakumiya continues to grieve his disappearance as if it happened yesterday. This is because the uncertainty of the loss has

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<sup>133</sup> Pauline Boss, 'The Trauma and Complicated Grief of Ambiguous Loss' *Pastoral Psychol* (2010) 59:137-145

<sup>134</sup> Gabrielle Betz and Jill M. Thorngren, 'Ambiguous Loss and the Family Grieving Process' *The Family Journal* (2006) 359: 356

<sup>135</sup> Boss, *Supra*, N 130

prevented him from reaching closure and the lack of information about what happened to both his sons has frozen his grief process.<sup>136</sup>

However, “*Leaving without Goodbye*” was not the only ambiguous loss suffered by Nakumiya. The abduction of both his sons created friction in the remaining family. Nakumiya’s wife, Margret, suffered a mental breakdown and she started to develop all kinds of illnesses, which Nakumiya relates to her emotional stress.

*“My wife kept mourning a lot [...] she kept on getting sick as her mind was always on that boy. This also impacted the relationship that we had at home. We were never happy. As a woman, she always kept on reminding the rest of the family of what happened, so it was always difficult to forget about my son.”*<sup>137</sup>

Boss described the boundary ambiguity as follows: “*from a sociological perspective, family boundaries are no longer maintainable, roles are confused, tasks remain undone, and the family is immobilized. From a psychological perspective, cognition is blocked by the ambiguity and lack of information, decisions are put on hold, and coping and grieving processes are frozen.*”<sup>138</sup> Margret’s mental breakdown caused another form of ambiguous loss for Nakumiya, that Boss described as “*Goodbye without leaving*”.<sup>139</sup> This is a situation in which someone is “*physically present but psychologically absent.*”<sup>140</sup> This is a situation in which an individual still inhabits the same body, but the person is not his or her own self anymore. Nakumiya’s situation of double ambiguity added to his stress. I uncovered the

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Nakumiya in Omiya Anyima, August 2013

<sup>138</sup> Pauline Boss, ‘Ambiguous Loss Research, Theory, and Practice: Reflections After 9/11’ *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66 (August 2004): 551–566

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

double ambiguity in at least five other cases, which makes it likely that double ambiguity it is a common factor that further complicates the situation of families of missing persons.

Nakumiya's case also made clear that grief resulting from ambiguous loss is different from grief that follows normal bereavement. In an unfortunate sequence of events, his daughter died of an illness during the time of displacement and more recently his wife was struck by lightning, killing her instantly. Nakumiya reflected on the differences in the grieving process of his daughter and his sons:

*“My daughter died a normal death which was God's wish. I saw her body, I performed her last funeral rites and I buried her. While her death was tragic, seeing her grave every day helps me to find rest. With my two sons I don't even know how they died of if they died. I will probably never get the opportunity to bury their remains and perform the last funeral rights. So it pains me a lot, because I did not bury them at my place. As long as I don't know their fate, they will continue to be in my head.”<sup>141</sup>*

Continued hope was one of the largest reasons why parents could not find closure. One of the participants in this study, a woman called Esther, explained how the hope of her daughter's return became a daily cycle of hope and despair.

*“Every single morning I wake up hopeful that this might be the day that Akello will return, only to go to bed in the evening depressed and disappointed that it didn't happen.”<sup>142</sup>*

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<sup>141</sup> Interview with Nakumiya in Omiya Anyima, September 2013

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Esther in Palabek, October 2013

With most of the parents of the missing interviewed for this study, the boundaries between hope and despair had become fuzzy and unclear. Esther was unable to hope without feeling despair, and unable despair without hope. Hogben argues that with cases of missing persons, worry becomes an ironic form of hope: “*worrying implies a future, a way of looking forward to things. It is a conscious conviction that a future exists, one in which something terrible might happen.*”<sup>143</sup> Similar conclusions were drawn in other studies I read on families of missing persons.<sup>144</sup> Betz and Thorngren describe how families of missing persons can go through cycles of hope and disappointment, which can last very many years.<sup>145</sup> While hope is often considered a positive emotion that provides strength and endurance, the hope experienced by Esther and other participants was cruel and painful. I asked all the parents whether they would want clear information on what happened to their missing sons and daughters, even if the news would be negative and take away their hope. The answers differed, and were often shrouded in uncertainty and hesitance. While a majority wanted to have clarity, others preferred hope over confirmation of their children’s deaths. They felt that giving up hope would be like betraying their children, or pre-empting something bad.

The need to know versus the need to hope was paradoxical. A clear example of this paradox could be found in the situation of William. William lost his son Charles when he was on his way to collect food from the village. Rumor had it that Charles was abducted with seven others and that they were all killed. Throughout the first two interviews, William talked about his missing son as if he had died, and he sounded so convinced about

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<sup>143</sup> Susan Hogben: ‘Life’s on Hold: Missing people, private calendars and waiting,’ *Time & Society*, (2006) 328-342

<sup>144</sup> Betz and Thorngren, *Supra*, N 134.; Hogben, *Supra*, N 143; Hunter Institute of Mental Health, ‘It is the hope that hurts; *Best practice in counseling models relevant to families and friends of missing persons*” 2001 [http://www.missingpersons.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/agdbasev7wr/missingpersons/documents/pdf/fmp08\\_hope-that-hurts.pdf](http://www.missingpersons.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/agdbasev7wr/missingpersons/documents/pdf/fmp08_hope-that-hurts.pdf); Missing People, ‘An uncertain hope: Missing people’s overview of the theory, research and learning about how it feels for a family when a loved one goes missing. 2012 <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk>

<sup>145</sup> Betz and Thorngren, *Supra*, N 134

the death of his son and the whereabouts of his remains, that I almost counted him off as a parent of a missing person. However, when I asked him whether he thinks a memorial needs to be constructed that has his son's name on it, he said that he wanted the monument to be nameless because he wasn't be hundred percent sure that his son is there. When probing further on this, he said that he was fifty/fifty percent sure. We came to the topic of exhumations, and William immediately rejected the idea of a community exhumation, as he said it would not bring clarity and people might mix up the bones, which would be a grave cultural sin. When I explained to him that within forensic anthropology it is possible to do a DNA check on the bones and I asked him whether he would want the mass grave to be exhumed by professionals, he became very hesitant as he was weighing the pros and the cons. The cons he identified were twofold: if the remains of his son would be found, the entire grief process would start again and he feared the pain, on the other hand, if the bones would not be found, he feared that it would even add to his current state of restlessness regarding the disappearance of his son. The pros that he identified was that, if the remains of his son were in the mass grave, then he would finally be able to give him a proper burial, which he identified as important both in terms of his paternal duty, and in spiritual terms as the spirit of his son would finally be able to find rest. In the end, William uttered a halfhearted preference for forensic exhumation. The UK based organization Missing People found the same hesitance in Great Britain: "*As more time goes by, many feel any answer is preferable to not knowing at all, however, this need is contradicted by an underlying fear of finding out.*"<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Missing People, 'An uncertain hope: Missing people's overview of the theory, research and learning about how it feels for a family when a loved one goes missing.' 2012 <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk>

The constant cycle between hope and despair also changed the informant's perception of past, present and future.<sup>147</sup> The continuous pondering whether their sons or daughters were alive or dead had become a dominant presence in the lives of all the parents interviewed. Some of the parents also experienced indecisiveness about how to engage their future. Christopher's case offers a clear example. In the nineties, Christopher fled the conflict zone with his family and settled in Kampala. However, because he couldn't raise enough money to provide for his family, his son and wife went back occasionally to help the extended family with the harvest. On the fifth trip that his wife and son made to Kitgum, their bus was ambushed. Christopher's wife was badly injured during the attack and his son got abducted. She became deeply embittered and blamed Christopher for sending them into a war zone. They divorced a few weeks after the event and not long after she committed suicide. Ever since the event, Christopher's perception of time has changed in that he keeps on reliving the last day he saw his wife and son. Ever since the abduction of his son, Christopher has been waiting for his return. Hogben also compared the situation of the relatives of the missing to a situation of waiting. In her words; "*Waiting [...] creates its own space where hope and worry engage the future in an extended or suspended present.*"<sup>148</sup> This also impacted negatively on Christopher's ability to make decisions regarding his future. For a period of four years, he was in doubt whether to move back to his village or remain in Kampala. His latest indecisiveness is whether to spend his small savings on cultivation, or save it for the school fees, in case his son returns. This reminiscing, waiting and indecisiveness all add to the already heavy emotional burden that the parents of the missing experience.

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<sup>147</sup> Hogben, *Supra*, N 143

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

*Ambiguous loss as a relational disorder.*

Boss argues that ambiguous loss is a relational disorder, because it creates friction and conflict within families and between affected individuals and their surroundings.<sup>149</sup> I documented similar patterns in the Ugandan case. All the participants in this study experienced various degrees of relational problems and social isolation. In some cases, the relational problems started immediately after the disappearance of the child, as was exemplified by the case of Christopher. The ‘blame’ cases I documented involved male participants who were blamed for their failure to protect. There was of course a clear gender component in this. Men are expected to be the protectors and providers of the family. Failure to do so can be seen as failure to live up to parental and masculine expectations and duties. However, this was not the norm in every family. While most families experienced friction, this was not always caused by blame and bitterness. In other cases it were the differences in boundary ambiguities and coping mechanisms that led to interfamily stress. Tekela Acola said that in the immediate aftermath of her sons arrest by security forces of Idi Amin, her husband gave up his will to live and in the months following the arrest, he withered away until he eventually died of sadness. Nakumiya’s case described earlier had similarities, and so had some of the other people interviewed. The boundary ambiguity of the two parents was very different, which led to the double ambiguity described earlier. One parent was emotionally struck harder. Different coping mechanisms created relationship problems and both Nakumia and Tekela felt that they could no longer count on their spouse for support. Besides the worry that they felt about their missing children, they also had to worry about a psychologically missing spouse.

Besides relational problems in the core family, ambiguous loss had also negative

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<sup>149</sup> Boss, *Supra*, N 130

consequences for the social interaction with other community members. All the participants in this study noted that over time, they started to experience differences in their interaction with other community members. Initially, most of the participants said that they found the people in their surrounding very sympathetic to their situation. However, as time past, the participants of this study noted that community sympathy waned. Boss noted: *“Because of the ambiguity, relationships dissipate as friends and neighbors do not know what to do or say to families with unclear losses.”*<sup>150</sup> Society expects people to ‘get over it’, which was the one thing that the parents couldn’t do. The parents of the missing interviewed for this study said that overtime, the sympathy that they initially received turned into annoyance and irritation. Regina, whose child Richard was abducted by the LRA in 2000 at the age of 15, noted that:

*“People in the community take the people with missing children as people with bad ideas and bad feelings whose agenda is not clear.”*<sup>151</sup>

It was a common perception amongst the participants in this study that fellow community members saw them as ‘unpleasant’ people without a sense of purpose. Community members increasingly shunned the parents of the missing and feeling the communal disapproval; parents of missing persons also increasingly choose to avoid community gatherings. Furthermore, while community members had difficulty to deal with the sadness of the parents of the missing, they in their own terms had difficulty to deal with the perceived happiness of others. Christopher expressed this in clear terms:

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<sup>150</sup> Pauline Boss, ‘Ambiguous loss theory; challenges for scholars and practitioners,’ *Family relations* (2007) 105-111

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Regina in Palabek, July 2013

*“Every time I go to someone’s home I see a lot of happiness, there will be children running around the compound, the parents are happily sharing and talking, this would make me think about my family. That is why I started avoiding people.”<sup>152</sup>*

This combination of factors decreased the social integration of the families of the missing and increased misunderstanding between them and other community members. This became a downward spiral. I documented that irritation and annoyance developed into unkindness, anger and spite. A returning issue in the group interviews as well as several of the in-depth interviews was the stigmatization and discrimination that people felt. The following quote is of Nixon, who lost his son Richard in 2004 at the age of twelve and who is now chairperson of one of the parents of missing person group’s set-up by ICRC.

*“We and the family have been going through a lot of discrimination from the community. They do think that my child joined the forces willingly. And constantly they would remind me and others that it is my son that is fighting and looting their property.”<sup>153</sup>*

This was a story that came also clearly to the foreground in the focus group discussions that I conducted in Palabek Gem sub-county. Many of the informants in this study claimed that they had been labeled as rebel collaborator because their children are perceived as LRA-combatants. This label, in itself deeply disturbing, induced ridicule and stigmatization in the community. Sometimes, verbal hostility turned into violence. I reported cases of people that tried to grab land from the parents of the missing, because ‘*they didn’t need it now that their sons and daughters were gone*’. I reported the worst types of violence whenever

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<sup>152</sup> Interview with Christopher in Palabek, August 2013

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Nixon in Palabek, July 2013

government security forces got involved. The following story of Alum, one of the focus group participants, is telling:

*“After my son went missing, I was maliciously reported to the government that I was a rebel collaborator, because I would cook for the rebels. They said that my son intentionally joined the LRA forces. Because of that, the government forces arrested me when I was five months pregnant. I was badly tortured, they gave me 105 strokes of caning.”*<sup>154</sup>

This quote clearly emphasized that the government explicitly targeted families of missing persons as rebel collaborators based on testimonies of community informants. Stories about the targeting of parents of the missing were common amongst the participants of this study. They all learned, either by experience or by hearsay, that public expression of their insoluble grief was unwanted and potentially dangerous. Parents of the missing learned to suffer in silence and alone.

### *The cultural gaps*

In most parts of the world, funerals and burials or cremations are quintessential rituals that emphasize a rite of passage between life and death and/or afterlife, as well as the change of status and identity of those left behind. Jennifer Hunter made a cross cultural analysis of rituals that follow death, and she writes that *“ritual plays a role in providing a sense of familiarity and expected structure within those chaotic natural processes that lie outside of human control. The common societal patterns and repetitiveness of ritual provide a sense*

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<sup>154</sup> Focus Group Discussion in Palabek Gem, July 2013

*of stability in times of personal or social disorientation.*"<sup>155</sup> Hunter quotes the work of Achterberg, Dossey, and Kolkmeier who state; "*rituals give significance to life's passages. They provide form and guidance to our lives, prescribing behaviors during the perilous times when bodies, minds, and spirits are broken. Without rituals, we would have no map for how to act, no occasions for people to share their common bonds and experiences.*"<sup>156</sup> Research by Cerel et. al., emphasized that the rituals that surround death go beyond their symbolic function. They play a very important role in the attribution of meaning to death and therefore in the psychological processing of a death. Their research amongst 318 children that were bereaved of a parent showed that children who attended the funerals generally fared better than those who didn't.<sup>157</sup> Hunter asserts that "*A rite of passage is a series of culturally constructed rituals designed to conduct an individual (or group) from one social state or status to another, thereby effecting transformation both in society's perceptions of the individual and in the individual's perception of him- or herself.*"<sup>158</sup> This relates back to the previous two sections; rituals help individuals and communities to give meaning to what happened and provide a sense of identity and belonging. When people are confronted with death, the rituals that surround the death herald the surviving relative's change of identify, from husband to widower or wife to widow, from child to orphan, or from 'normal' parent to bereaved parent. It also legitimizes a period of mourning and condones the temporary grievance behaviors that are connected to it.

Boss argues that one of the problems faced by people living with ambiguous loss is that there are no cultural mechanisms that help them deal with the loss.<sup>159</sup> While Boss drew

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<sup>155</sup> Jennifer Hunter, 'Bereavement: An incomplete rite of passage' Omega, Vol. 56(2) 2007 153-173,

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Cerel J, Fristad MA, Weller EB, Weller RA. Suicide-bereaved children and adolescents: a controlled longitudinal examination. *Journal of the American Academy Child Adolescence Psychiatry* 1999; **38**: 672-79.

<sup>158</sup> Hunter, Supra N 155

<sup>159</sup> Boss, Supra, N 130

this conclusion from research and experiences in Western contexts, I assert that, to a large extent, similar conclusions can be drawn in the case of northern Uganda. The most important rituals in the Acholi culture after someone dies are the ‘yik’ and the ‘guru lyel’ which in English is often translated with the first and second funeral rite. The ‘yik’ is done immediately after someone dies. It is a ritual of grief that usually lasts one to three days, in which the deceased is being mourned and it symbolizes that start of a mourning period. After the ‘yik’ is over, the clan members sit together and they decide when the guru lyel takes place. The guru lyel is a ritual that officially ends the mourning period. It is a ritual in which the family and clan members say farewell to the spirit, after which people should no longer be troubled by the death. The ritual usually takes four days and it involves dance, music, drinks and food. These days, due to people’s limited resources as a result of the war, guru lyel is usually being done for multiple deceased people in the same clan, which means that the official mourning time differs per affected family. Both ‘yik’ and ‘guru lyel’ can only be performed when the death of an individual is confirmed and where there is a body to bury. Both yik and guru lyel do not only signify the passing of the deceased, but also legitimize the period of mourning and symbolize the changed status of the survivors. So the inability to bury one’s child significantly increases people’s stress. This was emphasized by the following quote of Regina, who lost her son Richard in 2002:

*“Having the body of my child buried at home, would make me forget and move on, without the thought that he would come back. The grave also symbolized that I had a son [...]. But now that he is nowhere to be seen, it is so painful because there is nothing to proof that I gave birth.”*<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Interview with Regina in Palabek, July 2013

In addition Regina's stress that she has nothing to show that she once gave birth, the parents also expressed a desire to bury their missing children because of the spiritual need to help the missing child to transit into the afterlife. This is first and foremost the case when the child is presumed dead. According to Nakumia, the consequences of not doing the necessary rituals can have bad consequences for the spirit of the child:

*“When you do a ritual, you pave the way for the ancestors. Because the spirits of our ancestor's live in the clan shrine [...] if the last funeral rites are done, than the spirit can join the ancestors.”<sup>161</sup>*

Nakumia explained that the stress of not knowing and not having a body caused additional worry for the child's admission into the afterlife. In most of my informants, especially those from the rural areas where traditional beliefs were often intertwined with Christianity, the concern for the child's well-being in the afterlife was very real. In the Acholi culture, the 'ancestors' and deceased relatives play an important role in the lives of the living. The most important ritual to facilitate the entry into the afterlife and joining the ranks of the ancestors are the funeral rites, and these can only be performed when there is a body. Fortunately, there is also another ritual that can be performed in the absence of a body, called 'lwongo tipu' best translated as calling of the spirit. This ritual serves to guide the soul of a dead relative who is far away to come back home and find rest. It can also be performed when the body is lost. However, the problem with lwongo tipu is that it needs confirmation of a person's death, as it is considered a bad omen to conduct the calling of

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<sup>161</sup> Interview with Nakumia in Omiya Anyima, September 2013

the spirit ritual when the missing person is still alive. At the same time, not performing the ritual when the missing relative is dead is also considered a bad omen, as the spirit of a deceased relative can come back to haunt the family. These spiritual dilemmas came back in several of the interviews conducted.

The only participant in this study who was able to perform the lwongo tipu without fear for the wellbeing of the missing child was Mukasa. Two years after the disappearance of his son, he received reliable information about his sons' death from a cousin who had witnessed his son's execution. In the months preceding the news of his sons' death, Mukasa had experienced nightmares. Mukasa realized that this was the spirit of his son haunting him, because the spirit wasn't appeased. Mukasa feared that if he would not appease the spirit, worse forms of haunting would start to appear, which might affect the health and quality of life of the living.

*“It is very important for the ritual to be done, because if you don't, the spirit of the deceased son can bring the parents nightmares, sicknesses and other bad things in the home. It can befall on anyone in the family and might even kill them.”<sup>162</sup>*

From Mukasa's testimony, it became clear that lwongo tipu was important not only for the spirits transition, but also to protect the living. Furthermore, Mukasa also explained the social significance of the ritual. Lwongo tipu was a social ceremony that included the extended family, the clan and the neighbors, and it was the communal recognition of Mukasa and his wife as parents of a deceased child. After two years of ambiguity, it legitimized their mourning in the eyes of community members. Even though Mukasa's son

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<sup>162</sup> Interview with Mukasa in Omiya Anyima, August 2010

was still gone and even though his remains weren't found, which also meant that there was no grave to visually symbolize their status, Iwongo tipu aided communal recognition for their suffering and it heralded a long, but legitimized mourning process in which they could start finding closure.

### *The materiality of ambiguous loss*

The economic stress was something that came very strongly to the foreground in every single interview and focus group discussion that was done in this study. Initially, in some interviews, it was even difficult to go beyond the materiality of ambiguous loss. In the wake of a devastating conflict that lasted two decades, northern Uganda is left impoverished and underdeveloped.<sup>163</sup> Poverty is a major stressor in people's daily lives. While starvation and massive chronic malnutrition experienced during the war and in its immediate aftermath is largely a thing of the past, certain victim groups continue to experience hunger and payment of school fees, medical fees and other monetary services remains a source of constant concern.<sup>164</sup>

While poverty affects the vast majority of people in northern Uganda, its effects are different for different victim groups. For the parents of the missing, the economic stress was often exacerbated by their emotional distress and social isolation. Christopher's inability to make important economic decisions offers a clear example of the link between emotional and economic distress. Social isolation adds further to the economic distress. In northern Uganda, many economic endeavors are done in groups. Examples of these are farming groups and saving and loaning associations. These groups generally tend to bundle their resources, so that they can increase their production and negotiate fairer prices on the

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<sup>163</sup> Shailen Nancy, 'Misunderstanding chronic poverty?: Exploring chronic poverty in developing countries using cross-sectional demographic and health data,' *Global Social Policy* (2008) 8-45

<sup>164</sup> Based on the author's own observations during his seven years of work in northern Uganda.

market. Many of the parents of the missing persons did not join any group because of the various reasons mentioned in the previous section. This also meant that the parents of the missing had less social capital, which meant that their economic output was generally smaller than that of fellow community members, and that they could rely less on favors when they need it.

Second, and this was the largest concern that most of the participants in this study expressed, for the vast majority of Ugandans, pensions, retirement funds or lifesavings do not exist. Instead, people rely on their children to support them in old age. So when parents lose their children, it does not only create emotional, social and cultural distress, it also causes stress about their own financial future and survival in old age. The majority of the participants in this study were of old age, the average age being over fifty (whereas average life expectancy in Uganda is 53,5<sup>165</sup>). Many of the participants complained that they were getting 'weak', and in an economy where one's survival depends on hard physical labor, this is a real concern. Take for example the following quote of Mukasa:

*"I feel much more difficult now that he is dead, because he was the one person that would help me a lot. He would do a lot good things for me and support me in a lot of ways. If you look at me now: I am ageing, I am weakening day by day. Also my wife is getting old and fragile. We need a helping hand. We need someone to help us clean my compound, someone to start taking care of us. And that somebody is now gone."*<sup>166</sup>

The real poverty that many of the participants were confronted with exacerbated the reminiscence of the missing child. Nakumia eats enough to stay alive, but there are very

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<sup>165</sup> [http://www.indexmundi.com/uganda/demographics\\_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/uganda/demographics_profile.html)

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Mukasa in Omiya Anyima, August 2010

often days that he has nothing to eat, and for him, hunger continues to be a reality. Whenever he is hungry, he thinks of his two missing sons. He imagines that if they were still here, he wouldn't have to live in hunger, his needs would be taken care of.

*“I do not have joy in my life, because these were the only children who would be helping me by now. You found me in the garden trying to weed, but it should have been my sons that should be weeding alongside me. I shouldn't do heavy labor. I am getting too old. I always think of my children when I am working, or when I am hungry. I am suffering, and when I suffer, I think about my children. If they were around, they would be doing what I am doing. So when I am working alone, I begin to cry.”<sup>167</sup>*

All the participants of this study framed the disappearance of their children in terms of their very own poverty. Simon Robins<sup>168</sup> noted the materiality of ambiguous loss as an amplifier of distress in other post-conflict settings and underdeveloped countries as well. For example, in the context of Timor Lest, Robins concluded: *“In summary, the needs of families of the missing and the dead in Timor-Leste are dominated by the poverty they continue to live in.”* (Robins, 2012:14) So in addition to the studies of Robins, this study also argues poverty is an amplifier of emotional and social distress as well as a stressor in its own right.

### **Breaking the silence and addressing the issues**

While the issue of the disappeared is arguably one of the largest unaddressed legacies of armed conflict and state-oppression in post-conflict northern Uganda and

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<sup>167</sup> Interview with Nakumia in Omiya Anyima, September 2010

<sup>168</sup> Robins was also involved in the design of the ICRC project in Uganda.

potentially in Uganda as a whole, it is also an issue that has been silenced and rendered invisible. Neither the government nor civil society organizations ever put up regional points where people could document names and details of family members. Furthermore, at an individual level, many of the participants in this study said that they felt uncomfortable to speak out or that they stopped to talk about their missing children altogether. On the one hand, this was to avoid the negative communal responses and subsequent discrimination, stigmatization and social isolation at the community level. However, the silence was also induced by a perception of danger. The fear to speak out was enhanced by very specific labeling of the parents of the missing as rebel collaborators by security forces during the war. I documented several allegations that security forces killed and tortured the parents of the missing. Above I already gave the example of a torture case, but I also documented allegations of even graver targeting. I documented the following allegation during the focus group discussion with around 25 people, and most participants nodded in agreement.

*“In 1991/92 it happened in Anaka, a parish in Palabek Gem, the government surrounded everyone from the community, then they started asking people to give out names of those who have children in the bush, in this operation, they killed seven civilians who had children in LRA captivity.”<sup>169</sup>*

Alleged crimes such as these still reverberate very strongly in the collective memory of the parents of the missing interviewed for this study. They know that their fear to speak out doesn't stem from paranoia, they have the actual stories to proof that their perception of danger is real. While the stories of silencing from the informants in this study were

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<sup>169</sup> Focus Group Discussion in Palabek Gem, July 2013

enlightening, I only started to grasp the full extent of the silencing when I started to engage my friends, colleagues and acquaintances on this issue. I have asked dozens people in northern Uganda whether this issue of the missing is talked about in their social circles, in public forums and debates, e.g. on radio, or in society at large. The overall response was that it is not. While a relative of a missing person might occasionally ask returnees whether they have seen the person, talk about what might have happened to the missing and their relatives is largely muffled. This is a strong indicator that the issue has been effectively silenced at the community and individual level.

Therefore, civil society organizations should take the lead in opening the public debate about this issue. However, at the time of writing, even within Uganda's civil society and (I)NGOs, the issue of the disappeared is marginal at best. This is partially because there are no organized survivor groups in Uganda who demand political attention and acknowledgement to the issue, such as the "*Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo*" (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) in Argentina or the "Saturday Mothers" and Yakay-Der (Association for Solidarity and Support for Relatives of Disappeared Persons) in Turkey. Both these groups continue to play an important role in opening the debate about the disappeared in their respective countries (for more information the Argentine case, read Burchianti<sup>170</sup>, for more information on the Turkish case, read Arifcan<sup>171</sup>). While both these groups have met oppression and very significant challenges, they persevered through safety and encouragement in numbers and as such they have been able to influence public and political debates. Because Uganda lacks such a forum, parents of the missing interviewed for this study expressed that they don't know how to raise awareness of their issue or how

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<sup>170</sup> Margaret E. Burchianti (2004) Building Bridges of Memory: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Cultural Politics of Maternal Memories, *History and Anthropology*, 15:2, 133-150, DOI: 10.1080/02757200410001689954

<sup>171</sup> Umut Arifcan (1997) The Saturday mothers of turkey, *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 9:2, 265-272, DOI: 10.1080/10402659708426062

to engage authorities. Nakumiya's case provides a good example. He tried to engage the government to find out what happened to his missing son who was arrested by the Ugandan army. He went to the army headquarters, he went to prison authorities and the various offices of the local government, but lacking a strong institute or movement to back his efforts, he was ignored, ridiculed and forced to give up after he spend a personal fortune to uncover the truth. Nakumiya's case shows that relatives of the missing lack the infrastructure that can enable them to effectively fight the forces that silence them, to break the silence at the community level, and demand political accountability and public acknowledgement of their plight.

As a result, the issue of the disappeared is invisible at the national political level. This becomes for example clear when examining the third draft of the proposed transitional justice policy, written by the Justice, Law and Order Sector (JLOS) in consultation with civil society organizations. While the document claims to be victim oriented and provide a "*holistic intervention to achieving lasting peace*"<sup>172</sup>, the issue of the disappeared is not mentioned and the document fails to recognize the relatives of the disappeared as a unique victim/survivor group with unique problems and unique needs. This clearly emphasizes that the government does not acknowledge the plight of the relatives of the disappeared. There is no political will to take responsibility for direct government wrongdoing as well as acts of omission and to assist the families of the missing in whatever way possible.

Only recently, a number of civil society organizations have recognized the gravity of the problem and they turned their attention towards it. Organizations such as the Refugee Law Project (RLP), Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) and Children/Youth As

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<sup>172</sup> The (Ugandan) National Transitional Justice Working Group: 'National Transitional Justice Policy'. (May, 2013) At the time of writing, this was the latest draft, redrafted after consultation with civil society organizations. It awaits ratification by parliament.

Peacebuilders (CAP) have started to document the names of the missing and the stories of their relatives and through their work, the tip of the iceberg is slowly emerging from under water. At the same time, the International Committee of the Red Cross, in cooperation with KICWA (Kitgum Concerned Women's Association) demonstrate that while the issue of the disappeared might appear overwhelming in its scope, gravity and complexity, effective programs can be designed which can take the individuals that are forced to live with ambiguous loss out of their social isolation, it can take away the sharp edges of the emotional distress and it make the issue discussable again within their respective community. The stories of the participants of the ICRC project make it very clear that relatively simple interventions can have a huge impact. Take the story of Christopher as an example:

*“Before I joined the group, I never used to socialize with people. Not even visit with anyone at home, because of the pain and the grief that I had. [...] But after the group formation I started to visit the members of my group. I actually noticed that people also have the same problems that I am in. So from that point on, I decided that I shouldn't be living in the dark. I should open up, and share with my fellow group members. This is how the group has changed my life. [...] Just this morning, one of the women in our group came to find out how my night was. And even here, my friend Bob always passes by and he says hi to me. And even after his fieldwork he would come to my compound and we sit and talk. So the sharing takes place every day in my life.”<sup>173</sup>*

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<sup>173</sup> Interview with Christopher in Palabek, August, 2013

Christopher was one of the 214 relatives of missing people selected to participate in this pilot project. The participants were organized into peer groups of approximately 10 to 15 people. Within the peer groups, the families of the missing were encouraged to talk about their plight under the guidance of trained accompaniers who would take them through a series of steps that help them to learn to live with the ambiguous loss. ICRC ensured a small fund so that the group members could organize whatever they found most meaningful to end the project. The design of the project was inspired by Pauline Boss' (2006) guidelines that she used when working with families of missing persons following 9/11<sup>174</sup> and based on ICRC project with missing in Nepal<sup>175</sup>. All the informants of this study that participated in the ICRC study claimed that it had helped them to break their social isolation. Through their discussions, group members learned that there were many others who suffered the same, which meant that they finally felt understood, and at ease to talk about their plight. This in turn, had positive ramifications for the emotional stress that they felt. According to Nixon:

*“As a group we console each other, we share the different problems that we have. We also have a visiting program, when you hear when any is in a problem, we go to them and we console them. So this kind of sharing and networking help us to deal with the bad memories.”*<sup>176</sup>

Through the acts of sharing and speaking out, the participants slowly learned to find meaning in their lives again and to learn to live with the ambiguous loss. This doesn't mean

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<sup>174</sup> Pauline Boss, Lorraine Beaulieu, Elizabeth Wieling, William Turner, and Shulaika LaCruz, 'Healing Loss, Ambiguity, and Trauma: A Community-Based Intervention with Families of Union Workers Missing after the 9/11 Attack on New York City,' *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* (2003), Vol. 29, No. 4, 455-467; Boss, Supra N 137

<sup>175</sup> Robins, Supra N 131

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Nixon in Palabek, July 2013

that the groups take away the pain surrounding the ambiguity or that it provides closure, but it did help in the sense that people felt that it helped them to live with the idea that they might never find closure, and that without it, they can still live a positive life. So the ICRC project managed to break the social isolation and it softened the sharp edges of the emotional distress felt by the participants. Another major achievement was that it broke the silence about the topic in the community. I witnessed one community prayer / memorial service of the missing, organized by two groups in Palabek Gem trading center. It was the first time that the issue of the missing was discussed in a forum that included the wider community, and the turn up was enormous. Over five hundred community members were present. Among them were many more parents of missing persons, who, for the first in a long time, felt the courage to publicly announce the names of their missing families. While I feel that there is room for improvement, the data that I gathered suggest that a relatively uncomplicated and cost efficient project can have an enormous positive outcome for the families involved. This project has effectively demonstrated that something can be done to reach out to the families of the missing and help them in their plight.

While the work of these various organizations is notable, much more needs to be done. In essence, the transitional justice debates and landscape in Uganda needs to be widened horizontally so that it includes different victim groups and that it examines the specific needs of these victim groups, and vertically in the sense that transitional justice activities need to reach a much larger group of victims. First of all, projects similar to that of the ICRC should target all the war-affected areas or maybe even Uganda as a whole. This will not only improve the social and emotional wellbeing of the people that participate in such projects, but it will also open the discussion surrounding the disappeared at the community level and it might provide the parents of the missing with the right

infrastructural basis to get more organized. Second, both religious and cultural institutes should be included in these projects as they can play an important role bridging the lack of cultural and religious rituals that deal with this issue. A perfect example of this was the catholic memorial prayer for the disappeared that I witnessed in Palabek Gem. Third, civil society organizations should continue to break the silence and widen the transitional justice debate so that it will include the issue of the disappeared, and they should do this louder than has been done so far. Civil Society Organizations should engage and link victim groups, cultural and religious institutes, government, donors and academic and forensic experts. Fourth, civil society organizations should fight the general tendency to homogenize war victims as one group. Ongoing debates about acknowledgement, accountability and restoration and reparations need to identify the unique needs and the unique plight of the relatives of missing persons, which are different from those of people with disabilities and war-related injuries, male and female victims of sexual violence or former combatants, to name just a few other victim groups. As an example, transitional justice debates around truth need to re-examine whether the truth that is sought by the parents of the missing is a truth that can in actual sense be provided. While there are mechanisms that could clarify the fates of a proportion of the missing persons, e.g., through exhumations, such mechanisms are both politically and culturally contested and highly unlikely to occur. In the vast majority of cases, we will never find out the truth of what happened to people's missing relatives. A more realistic approach to address the distress felt by relatives of missing people are programs that teach the relatives of the missing how to live with ambiguous loss. Five, government institutions, in partnership with CSOs and donors, need to devise strategies that can take away the economic distress that relatives of missing people experience. Since the parents of the missing lost someone vital to look after them in old age,

how do you compensate them? Six, the Ugandan government, for example through the Ugandan Human Rights Commission or in partnership with CSOs & (I)NGOs, needs to investigate how many people are still missing. While the ICRC has estimated the total number to be 12,000 in northern Uganda, this is just another educated guess. Reliable data is needed. Organizations such as RLP and JRP are trying to do this, but lack the resources to conduct a comprehensive research on a national level. As long as the true extent of the problem is unknown, the government or other actors will also not be able to address the issue of the disappeared comprehensively. Seven, the Ugandan Human Rights Commission needs to investigate the alleged targeting, torturing and killing of parents of missing people as collaborators. If these allegations are indeed true, than the government of Uganda needs to publicly acknowledge this, apologize, pay reparations to those families affected, and make strong commitments of non-repetition.

All of this suggests that, while there are some cautious steps with positive results, there is still a very long way to go before we can say that the issue of the disappeared has been effectively addressed.

## Discussion

Writing about Nicaragua, Quesada wrote that “*wars produce a continuum of duress*”.<sup>177</sup> The parents and other relatives of the missing feel this very acutely. While the loss of close relatives is always painful, the problem with ambiguous loss is that it prevents closure, it freezes the grief process and changed perceptions of time. As was explained above, all the parents of the missing experienced or had experienced social isolation as a result of their

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<sup>177</sup> Quesada, Supra N 92

chronic grief, which defied to societal expectation to *get over it*, and it simply meant that they were regarded as less pleasant people to interact with. Both the emotional distress and social isolation were further induced by the fact that there are no cultural practices that can deal with the ambiguity of their loss. This meant that the parents lacked rituals and symbols to give meaning to their loss, which they themselves and the community could understand. Lastly, while the majority of people in northern Uganda live below the poverty line, the parents of the missing connected to their missing children. Poverty induced constant reminiscing and caused real concern over parent's survival in old age. While the issue of the disappeared has been effectively silenced, both by forces within the war-affected communities as well as forces within government, the silence is no indicator of a lack of gravity. In the case of Uganda, many things have gone wrong with regard to the missing and many things continue to go wrong. Important lessons can be learned from this.

First of all, during the conflict, as Nakumiya's story clearly showed, the parents of missing persons did not have any centralized and accessible points where they could register their missing persons. Proper registration could have made the reconnection easier of those missing persons who returned, it would have provided an overview of the scale of the problem and in the post-conflict situation, it could have aided transitional justice mechanisms such as reparation and mobilization to take part in projects such as the one implemented by ICRC. Furthermore, whilst registering, missing certificates could have been given to the families of the missing so that they would have something tangible that would symbolize their loss. ICRC's publication "Accompanying the families of the Missing" provides a great methodology how to do it and should be implemented from the onset of all armed violence and/or state oppression.

More in general, transitional justice needs to distinguish different survivor groups and microanalysis is needed to uncover the unique experiences, challenges, needs and aspirations of these groups. In post-conflict northern Uganda, the largest challenges/experiences of the families of the missing are deep emotional distress, social isolation and relational problems, a disconnect between their loss and cultural and religious practices and enduring poverty, made worst by the disappearance of the family member. Transitional justice thinking should go beyond legalistic and institutional (e.g., truth telling commissions) approaches to address the needs of these groups. While truth and reparations can be important elements to help the families of the missing, realistically, it is often not possible to establish the truth of what happened to a significant amount of those who went missing. While forensic exhumations could potentially shed light on the fates of some of the missing persons, exhumations are culturally controversial, politically contentious and very expensive. While the possibility of exhumations can be explored, transitional justice mechanisms should focus on assisting families of the missing in other ways. Pauline Boss has demonstrated that group therapy can help, which was also demonstrated by the ICRC project in Palabek Gem and Padibe West. The goal of group therapy is to teach people who live with ambiguous loss how to live with ambiguous loss. It is focused on five steps; to help families find meaning in their lives, tempering mastery (that is, thinking in duality, he is both there and not there), reconstructing identity, revising attachment and discovering hope.<sup>178</sup> Psychosocial efforts such as the ICRC project should enter mainstream thinking about transitional justice as a way to deal with the legacies of the past. Furthermore, cultural and religious institutes should be engaged to explore possibilities to either adapt or invent mechanisms that can deal with the missing. A memorial prayer for the missing by

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<sup>178</sup> Boss, *Supra*, N 130

the Catholic church in Palabek was a good example of this. Lastly, recognition of the gravity of the issue of the disappeared is of quintessential importance for the remaining families. In countries where the issue of the missing is neglected the lack of recognition continues to be a source of despair and misunderstanding. Recognition necessitates documentation as well as (symbolic) reparation and open engagement with the issue. Governments, community leaders, donors, CSOs, (I)NGOs and media should create an open atmosphere where families of the missing feel at ease to talk about their loss and where there can be open engagement between the relatives of missing people and the various stakeholders to address one of the worst legacies of a violent past.

