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Rejection and Resilience: Returning from the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda

Tim Allen[a], Jackline Atingo[b] and Melissa Parker[c]

[a]International Development, London School of Economics, London, UK; [b]Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa, London School of Economics, Gulu, Uganda; [c]Global Health and Development, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, UK

ABSTRACT
This article focuses on young people who returned from the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda, mostly as children, over ten years ago. They are, by definition, resilient, because they have survived, but there are important variations. For the most part, those who managed to gain status in the LRA, are those most likely to present themselves as 'resilient' according to notions of self-reliance and entrepreneurialism. The majority are not in this position. They are mainly living in rural locations, and commonly face social rejection and extreme poverty. Supporting normative models of resilience has exacerbated deprivation of the most vulnerable.

Introduction

International donors and aid agencies have commonly connected the reintegration and resettlement of former combatants and war affected populations with ideas about resilience. This is part of a broader trend. The term resilience has been deployed in a variety of contexts since the 1970s, and especially after 2000 (Bhamra *et al*. 2011). Its influence has been apparent in fields of scholarship from engineering, psychology and ecology to political theory, geography, and law. In a review article published in 2011, Almedom noted that the term had also become ubiquitous in disaster reporting and had been adopted by US Department of Homelend Security (Almedom 2011, p.149). Between 2013 and 2019, a dedicated academic journal was published to highlight and study it (Resilience 2013), hailing 'resilience' as a central concept, which cuts across diverse disciplines and usefully informs policy frameworks. However, not everyone has been enthusiastic, and in recent years, the use, and over-use, of resilience as an analytical construct has become a focus of considerable debate, not least in the way it has become politicised and linked to neo-liberal policies (see, for example, Walker

CONTACT Tim Allen ✉ t.allen@lse.ac.Uk

and Cooper 2011, O' Malley 2010, Almedom 2011, Reid 2012, Chandler 2012, Joseph 2013, Cretney 2014, Welsh 2014, Evans et al. 2014, Brassett and Vaughan-Williams 2015, Duffield 2015, Dunn Cavelty *et al*. 2015, Ilcan and Rygiel 2015, Howell 2015, Garrett 2016, Felli et al. 2016, Hilhorst 2018, Humbert and Joseph 2019, Oliver and Boyle 2019, Munive 2021). Indeed, some literature reviews have noted that the resilience agenda has qualities of a 'fad' whose time came and has now gone (Vernon 2004, van Breda 2018).

Nevertheless, it is the case that resilience-inspired strategies have been introduced widely, and the notion of resilience has sometimes become so embedded in discourses that it is not defined at all, although its actual implications may be diverse, and even contradictory.

In very general terms, resilience is associated with the capacity to recover a pre-existing or stable state after a shock or disruption. Thus, with respect to people who have suffered individually or collectively from traumatic events, those promoting a resilience perspective argue that focus should be less on the kind of adversity that has been experienced, but more on how adversity is dealt with.

This article reflects on such ideas in the light of long-term research carried out during the heyday of enthusiasm for resilience between 2013 and 2020 with children (now young adults) who returned from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda more than ten years ago. The examples we foreground have emerged from long-term research, which has systematically followed up and interviewed a sample of returnees who passed through a large reception centre in Gulu town, between the late 1990s and 2012 (Allen *et al*. 2020, Parker *et al*. 2021). They all speak Acholi, which is a form of the Luo language. We also draw on earlier research carried out by the authors with former LRA recruits that occurred in very difficult conditions, while the fighting was still going on in the region before 2006. The article is divided into four parts. Part one outlines the main processes shaping abduction and return in northern Uganda. Part two discusses usage of resilience discourse in the region, noting overlaps and tensions between ideas expressed in English, and the connotations of words used to translate those ideas into Acholi. The third part presents six case studies, noting ways in which aspects of the lives described relate to possible dimensions of resilience. In the fourth part, points implicit in the case studies are drawn together, and interpreted with reference to other literature about people returning from the LRA and to patterns we have discerned by statistical analysis. The article then concludes by underlining dangers in embracing resilience orientated assistance schemes and perspectives, suggesting that, in practice, they may exacerbate or overlook the deprivation of the most vulnerable.

Abduction and Return

The conflict involving the LRA started in the mid 1980s and continued until peace negotiations in 2006 (Allen 1991, 2006, Allen and Vlassenroot 2010). When those failed, the LRA's attacks resumed, but across Uganda's borders in South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo, and in the Central African Republic. Since 2006, northern Uganda has been relatively peaceful, but the legacies of extreme violence have been far-reaching. In 2003, the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs referred to the situation as a 'moral outrage' (Aljazeera 2003). At that time, more than a million people were forced to live in atrocious conditions in internal displacement camps. Survival was linked to food distributions because cultivation of crops was severely limited. Sanitation was minimal and crude mortality rates associated with infectious diseases were extremely high.

In addition, the camps were poorly protected, and the population was exposed to LRA attacks, which included atrocities such as clubbing mothers and their babies to death and bodily mutilations (i.e., cutting off noses, lips and limbs). Also, large numbers of people were abducted, especially from the late 1990s. How many is debated, but it is probable that over 24,000 children and over 28,000 adults had been forcibly recruited by the LRA by 2006 (Allen *et al*. 2020). Being taken in this way was typically described by those affected as going to the bush (*olum*), a space where established moral norms are not necessarily applied. They were required to perpetrate or watch extremely violent acts, and some were forced to kill or maim their own friends and relatives. The girls were 'given' to LRA commanders or occasionally other combatants as 'wives'

An unknown number of those recruited died, but the majority eventually found a way of returning. Some did so informally, having escaped or having been released. Others surrendered or were rescued by the Ugandan army (UPDF) after it crossed the international border into what was then Sudan in 2002 to attack the LRA base camps. Over 20,000 were formally registered and returned through aid-supported reception centres. Initially, these had been set up in Gulu town to deal specifically with returned children and young adults, including mothers returning with infants, but in response to an escalation in the numbers needing to be processed, a dozen more centres were established in various parts of the region (Allen and Schomerus 2006).

At the reception centres, returnees were provided with food, clothes and medical care. There is no doubt that many of the young people returning from the LRA were fearful about what would happen to them, and often openly troubled by what they had seen or been forced to do. Psychosocial counselling was sometimes offered, but those providing this kind of care had little, if any, professional training. Instead, returnees were provided with instructions about appropriate ways to behave when re-joining their families.

Emphasis was also given to forgiveness, and to social healing – with local rituals being actively promoted by some reception centres and several aid agencies.

After a period at the reception centres, usually a few weeks or months, almost all these young people were taken to where their families were living and left there. Usually, that meant placing them back in internal displacement camps. Even at the time, this was criticised as a problematic approach. The camps were often dangerous places, poorly protected and monitored. In addition, many of those who survived abduction by the LRA had been required to torture and/or kill the relatives of those they were now expected to live with (Allen 2005, Allen and Schomerus 2006).

Among reception centre staff, there was emphasis on supporting the resilience of those they were assisting. Of course, everyone 'reintegrated' (or, more accurately, returned and resettled) following periods with the LRA might be called 'resilient', simply because they survived circumstances in which large numbers died. However, the word was mostly used in more specific ways, suggesting that some people are more resilient than others, or even implying that there are those for whom the term is inappropriate, because they are not behaving in ways that are perceived to be properly resilient.

The latter perspective suggests that resilience is a choice, and one that might be incentivised and rewarded. A consequence is that the term 'resilience' denotes status, and potentially becomes a label that excludes those deemed less worthy of help. Our findings reveal that such modes of exclusionary resilience, shaped by ideas of self-reliance and entrepreneurial endeavour, have, over the years since people returned, orientated attention to former LRA recruits and their children living in urban and peri-urban places. They are commonly connected to support networks in which old LRA hierarchies play a role. However, the majority of children and young adults who returned from the LRA are not in this position. They are mainly living in rural locations, and commonly face social rejection and extreme poverty.

Understandings of Resilience

Resilience is a prominent concept in discussions about vulnerable groups in northern Uganda, much as it is elsewhere. There are assistance schemes with the term in the title, such as the Northern Uganda Resilience Initiative, and the Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters programme. The word is sometimes used without much explanation, as if we all know what it means, or alternatively is applied quite precisely, but in divergent ways. To give some examples of the latter, in northern Uganda 'resilience' has been used to refer to (i) those who do not have symptoms of anxiety or depression (Haroz *et al*. 2013); (ii) a capacity to deal with

environmental stresses (Kansiime and Mastenbroek 2016); (iii) the LRA's facility to endure as a rebel group (Day 2019); (iv) coping responses to trauma (Harnisch and Montgomery 2017); and the communal expression of antipathy to former LRA combatants (Akello 2019). Meanwhile, many aid agencies tend to link resilience with entrepreneurialism or an ability to take advantage of incentives (for example, UNHCR 2017). As Schiltz *et al*. (2019) have observed, ideas of resilience and self-reliance have become inseparable in humanitarian responses. World Vision Uganda, one of the most active international NGOs in the region, explains on its website that it promotes 'resilient livelihoods' by providing tools and resources to build self-reliance' (World Vision 2018), and a documentary film made by the United Nations Development Programme presents positive accounts of successful individuals to show that the people of northern Uganda 'have seized on opportunities and shown resilience, thereby arising from the ashes of the twenty year insurgency' (UNDP 2016).

A further complication is that the word resilience, like many other English terms, does not translate into Acholi in a straightforward way. That is important, because the language of resilience has been used by aid agencies and other actors as if it does. An implication is that the active promotion of 'resilience', when presented to Acholi people in their own language, does not necessarily mean that which is intended – a matter that is compounded by the multiple, overlapping, meanings and associations in English. Additionally, the way in which livelihoods are described by Acholi people in their own language is translated into English from Acholi concepts. This, in turn, seems to have affected the multiple ways in which Acholi 'resilience' is described in English-language publications.

In the Acholi language, '*ciro can*' is a possible translation of the English word 'resilience' that overlaps with the above-mentioned World Vision notion of self-reliant livelihoods. It means deliberately deciding to make the most of a difficult situation, when there is the possibility of choosing not to do so. It suggests an expectation of improvement over time and an ability to move on from a bad event or circumstance. '*Ngat eni tek*' (this person is strong), or '*cwinye tek*' (strong hearted), might be said about someone who is able to '*ciro can*'. In contrast, '*kanyo can*' might be an alternative translation of resilience into Acholi. It suggests that a circumstance is forced upon someone, and while they have no capacity to resist, they have endured or persevered. A girl who was given as a wife to an LRA commander and has returned with children that are rejected by her relatives may be considered resilient in this way. The term '*kanyo can*' is used to indicate that she is not 'resilient' from choice, or because she is strong, but because she and her children are alive. This kind of resilience is expressed in the chorus of a well-known Acholi traditional song: '*Kany mogo dong akanya ya, aciro kwe, ci mogo dong acira ya*', which means: 'Just persevere with other things and go on with life however difficult it may be for you'. There is also a connotation to *kanyo*

that suggests it cannot be forever, because that will mean death, while *ciro*, is a longer-term proposition. *Ciro* implies that the troubles encountered necessitate adaptation to overcome them and, eventually, to thrive, potentially making someone a stronger person. Other expressions commonly used, include: '*tute matek*' (struggles a lot), '*wa tye ka temo*' (we are managing), or '*tute ki kwo*' (getting on with life).

These Acholi phrases capture aspects of the way the word 'resilience' is deployed in English, but they are not exact translations, and they are not a kind of topology of experiences. Sometimes they are used in overlapping ways. Someone may be viewed as 'kanyo can', because they carry on, even though they may become emotional or despairing about their condition. Yet, they may also be said to be trying to find a way of being '*ciro can*', and even when they are weeping, a relative may encourage them by telling them that the fact that they keep trying shows that they are '*cwinye tek*' (strong hearted). In addition, it is worth noting that the more development-oriented aspects of how 'resilience' may be used in English are more likely to be captured with other terms. Both *kanyo* and *ciro* suggest that help and change would be welcome, rather than a commitment to entrepreneurial self-help, or a response to other such neoliberal policies. From an Acholi point of view, it would probably make more sense to say that providing aid effectively means *medo kero ki dano* (giving capacity to people to do something).

Researching Return

Previous ethnographic research by the authors before, and during, the LRA conflict, usefully informed the research presented here (see, for example, Allen 1991, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2015a, 2015b, Parker 1996a, 1996b, Allen and Schomerus 2006, Atingo 2008, 2021, Allen and Vlassenroot 2010). An aspect of that earlier research had been to assess the activities of all the reception centres, and to observe the return of abducted children and young adults. At that time, there were case file records available at all these centres, and it was possible to generate a sample of 251 females and 635 males from eight of them (a 2 per cent sample), including GUSCO and the other larger reception centre operating in Gulu town by World Vision. All these people had passed through the centres and had ostensibly been reunited with their immediate families. However, there had been no concerted effort to follow them up after they had left the reception centres. They had mostly been transported to widely dispersed internal displacement camps, which were considered too dangerous to visit after dark, because of the danger of LRA attacks.

Over three months, efforts were made to find those in the sample (Allen and Schomerus 2006). 238 were found, mostly living in the camps to which they were sent. Some information was also found about a further170 from

relatives and neighbours. However, no information at could be found on the remainder, which was more than half of the sample. That was grounds for serious concern, although it should be noted that looking for those returned from the LRA in displacement camps, some of which were several hours drive from Gulu town, was extremely challenging. Some camps could only be reached in a military convoy. Of those returnees located, it was too early to know how effectively they had reintegrated. Most were still living in displacement camps with relatives, dependent on food distributions like other residents. It was noted that there were numerous reports of abuse and name calling. Also, there were fears expressed that those returning from the LRA were affected by malevolent or polluting spiritual forces, often referred to as *cen*.

It had been hoped to build directly on the foundation of this earlier effort to locate LRA returnees. However, by 2013, the reception centres had mostly closed, and case file records had been lost. Where they had gone is unclear, but it seems likely that hard copies were destroyed when funding from donors stopped. It was particularly unfortunate that the thousands of files previously available at the former World Vision reception centre in Gulu were no longer available. Luckily, the majority of GUSCO records were found by the authors in heaps in different parts of the former GUSCO reception centre buildings. A total of 3,040 files survived. These files were ordered by the date of return (i.e., the date when the Ugandan army passed those returning from the LRA to GUSCO). They were placed in piles by year of arrival, from 1997 to 2012. One in ten were then taken from each pile, making a total sample of 304 GUSCO case files. 103 cases were female, and 201 cases were male. The majority returned from the LRA between 2003 and 2005 and were still children when they arrived at GUSCO.

Fieldwork took place between August 2013 and August 2020. Working with former GUSCO staff, who were all Ugandans from the region, intensive efforts were made to find those in the sample. This involved visiting places they were recorded as having been sent to, and contacting their extended families, local council members, and clan elders. School teachers and other formerly abducted people also provided help. Of the 304 returned people whose files were selected, 230 individuals were successfully located. Using the Acholi language, they were interviewed to elicit socio-demographic information, including their age, ethnicity, place of birth, location, and duration of abduction. Time was then spent encouraging respondents to reflect on their time with the LRA, their experiences of life at the reception centres; and the issues they faced in their day-to-day lives.

The authors additionally undertook follow-up interviews with 40 people in the sample (20 males and 20 females), and, in each case, one other member of their immediate family. The people selected were chosen to provide a mix of current residence between rural and urban locations. These follow-up

interviews were very detailed, and often took several hours. They were also followed-up with further meetings. With permission of the participants, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated. Data collected from the entire sample was coded on MaxQDA and patterns discerned by statistical analysis. Overall findings and ethical issues arising in the research, have been published elsewhere (Allen *et al*. 2020, Parker *et al*. 2021). The case studies presented below draw on this body of work. They are based on a minimum of three interviews with the people concerned and have been chosen to be illustrative of the nature of 'resilience' among those returning from the LRA. Names given are pseudonyms, and in a few places, details have been altered to preserve anonymity.

Cases Studies

Grace

Grace was abducted from a village in northern Uganda in 1992. That happened before the Acholi population had been forced to move to internal displacement camps. She was 10 years old and taking drinking water to her mother who was working in the fields at the time. Twelve years later, she managed to escape with two children that she had given birth to while living with the LRA (her eldest child had died several years prior to her escape). At the time of her escape, her children were aged three years and three months respectively. They were picked up by the Uganda army (the UPDF), which had crossed into southern Sudan to attack the LRA bases and taken to GUSCO.

Staff at GUSCO attempted to trace her family. Sadly, both her mother and father had died while she had been living with the LRA. They also contacted her children's father's relatives, but they showed no interest in helping to care for the children and refused to even meet them at the reception centre. Eventually, Grace and her children were taken to her brother's homestead with some basic provisions (food, mattress, pots and pans) and 300,000 Ugandan shillings (about 80 USD). Her brother was living at the edge of an IDP camp on ancestral land, but life was far from straightforward. His paternal uncle had taken him into his homestead and looked after him when his father died, but he had also taken ownership of their father's land. Although her brother was now a young man, his uncle seemed reluctant to allow him to cultivate anything other than the smallest plot of land with a hand hoe.

Clearly, much had changed since her abduction and day to day life was difficult. Reflecting on this, she said: '... all my friends had moved on ... even if they are not settled with their husband, at least they knew where to take their children, but look at me, I am their father and mother. Kony has ruined me ... I do not have a future ... But I thank God I am alive'.

Perhaps looking for a way to leave the homestead, and build a new life, Grace became involved with another man in 2006. So far, she has had two children with him, but the relationship is fraught, and she does not feel accepted by his relatives. To quote: '*Cimu tok* doesn't stop. It just doesn't stop.' (*Cimu tok*, which literally means 'pointing the back of the head', is an Acholi term and is often translated as 'stigma'). When asked to provide an example, she said: "My mother-in-law gives a lot of work to my children from the bush. One day, I said: 'you are giving them too much work', and she replied: 'You are not worth being in the compound. You have killed in the bush and now you have come here and will try and kill [us] too'.

Such hostility and aggression is distressing, and she is understandably concerned for the welfare of her two eldest children. They are treated very differently from the other children. Her husband refuses to contribute any-thing towards the cost of their education, and expects them to work much harder in the garden than his own children. To quote: " . . . he insists they dig in the garden from Monday to Sunday, from morning to evening, and if they go to school, he wants them to go and dig beforehand. Whenever I intervene, he says: ' . . . if you want to manage your children alone, then you can leave this home'.

In 2016, she left the homestead and went to find her brother. Although he was willing to live with the children, his wife was unhappy about the idea; and Grace thought it best to return to her husband. Her children are clearly unhappy with current arrangements and she is worried that one day they will either run away or elope with an unsuitable person. Whenever they ask about their biological father, she tells them that he has died (even though he is in fact alive), because if she takes them to his family homestead, 'there is nothing there for them. It hurts them a lot'.

Feeling alone and with tears trickling down her face, she said: " I have lost contact with everyone I knew when I was at GUSCO . . . Kony warned us that if we tried to escape, people would . . . chase us away from the land. He told us: 'if you go back, you will be killed. We thought he was lying . . . but now we have seen the reality. He is right'.

Despite her isolation, those who know Grace and her story tend to say positive things about her: *Grace cwinye tek, gi mako ento tye ka yele me gwoko lutino ne kene* (Grace is strong hearted, she is struggling to take care of her children alone). Her experiences might best be described as being '*kanyo can*. She is hanging on, and determined to persevere.

Joseph

Joseph was abducted in 1997 from a village in Gulu district when he was nine years old. His brother, mother, three other women and another young boy were abducted at the same time, but his brother and the three women were shot dead within hours of being abducted. He does not know what happened

to the young boy, but his mother was still alive when he eventually escaped from the LRA in 2006. Joseph was an escort to a major at the time of his escape, and he was never 'given' a 'wife'.

As with many other young men and women, Joseph's account of life with the LRA depicted a toxic combination of terror and enduring physical and emotional brutality. In his first interview, for example, he said: 'whenever government soldiers attacked us, people died – so many people died. If you refused to kill, or tried to escape, you were killed'. He went on to say that by the time he escaped, he was just: ".so tired of being beaten anytime . . . the coldness, the scarcity of food and water, and being forced to kill . . . "

Following a period of time at GUSCO, he was reunited with his family who, by then, were living in an internal displacement camp. Life was challenging, not least because he experienced considerable pain from bullet wounds. Returning 'home' also generated fears among his family, all of whom were acutely aware that it was virtually impossible to survive life with the LRA without participating in murder. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that they were fearful for their lives. In Joseph's words: 'They said I want to kill them because I have stayed in the bush for too long and I am possessed by *cen* (i.e., a malevolent and polluting spirit)'.

These fears have not abated. When Joseph's family eventually returned to their ancestral home, they were reluctant to give him land to cultivate subsistence crops. The situation is complicated by the fact that his father has a second wife. She has four sons, and they are all asserting their right to cultivate his father's land. In 2015, Joseph highlighted the difficulties of accessing land, when he said:

> The land we have has become small . . . my brothers took most of the land and this has caused a lot of conflict . . . They say it would be better if I could get land elsewhere. I had sugar cane, and I planned to sell it and buy some land [with the proceeds], but it was all burnt . . . now I am just renting a house and life is not easy for me . . . there is nowhere to run to.

Joseph's options are certainly limited. His primary school education was interrupted when he was abducted, and he did not feel able to go back to school when he returned from the LRA. Although he participated in a training programme run by GUSCO, he did not have sufficient financial resources to utilise the baking skills acquired. However, he is married with two children and, by all accounts, his wife's relatives are less troubled by the fact that he spent so many years with the LRA. In fact, they gave him a garden to cultivate some crops.

Nevertheless, Joseph's family remain hostile. In 2017, his brother accused both him and his wife of using witchcraft (*lajok*) to kill his animals and damage their crops.

> I feel a lot of pain in my heart because it is my mother and brothers doing this to me . . . it is because I was abducted, but it was not my will to be abducted . . . it was just bad luck. But they are not seeing this. They [act] as if I applied to be abducted . . . This makes me so sad. Sometimes I feel like committing suicide so I can leave them in peace.

Kanyo can is the Acholi term used for Joseph. He is managing, without expectation of improvements in his life. About him it is said: '*Ngat ma yele gire kene onong ni kwo pelare and gin ma romo timo ne peke*' (He is someone that has seen that he or she cannot change their situation, there is nothing they can do, and life continues).

Lily

Lily was abducted in 1994 with her brother and two other children from a village in Amuru district. Initially, she lived with the LRA as a *ting ting* (a term usually translated as 'baby sitter'), but shortly after she began menstruating, she was 'given' to a commander. He died in a battle, and several years later, she was 'given' to another commander. A year later, she gave birth to a girl. Her second 'husband' died in combat, and soon afterwards both she and her daughter were released by the LRA in 2004.

Following a period of time in GUSCO, Lily was reunited with her parents who were living in an internal displacement camp. They were initially pleased to see her, and eager to be given news about some of her other siblings who had also been abducted too (three of her six sisters, one of her four brothers). But, there was no good news to impart, because her sisters and brothers had died or were still with the LRA. It was not easy adjusting to life back with her family. They were struggling to eke out a living, and some family members resented the fact that she had been given a mattress, food, pots and pans, when they did not have access to some of these items themselves. They were particularly concerned about the lineage status of her daughter and struggled to welcome her into the homestead. Comments such as 'this child is possessed by *cen*' were common.

Lily did not settle. She was terrified of being re-abducted and it was not long before her parents agreed that she should leave the camp and go and stay with one of her sisters, who was living with her husband in Gulu town. While she was there, she was contacted by Innocent. He had been the escort to her former LRA husband, and they had always got on well together. They began living with each other on the periphery of the town; and they went on to have three children together, with Innocent treating Lily's eldest daughter in the same way that he treated his own children. Such an outlook contrasts starkly with the ambivalence and hostility expressed to the girl by their respective families.

Lily and Innocent initially rented land to cultivate subsistence crops but, over time, they managed to cultivate sugar cane and beans. By selling these crops in the market, they were able to buy a piece of land. Reflecting on these

changes in 2017, Lily said: 'We have worked so hard. When you last came, we were living in a hut with a grass roof. Now we have an iron sheet on it . . . Our neighbours think we have got money from the bush, and that we hid it when we returned. Even our relatives are asking where does it come from – they do not believe it comes from hard work'.

Neither Lily nor Innocent hide the fact that they were abducted. In fact, Lily once met MP and JA for an interview wearing a T-shirt that had been given out by an aid agency to formerly abducted people with the words 'from survivor to thriver' emblazoned across the front. Although their relationships with neighbours are often tense, they are both Pentecostals and take the view that: 'in life, you need to be tolerant [and] to ignore certain things'.

This is not always easy. On one occasion, some boys living in the vicinity deliberately damaged their sugarcane. They reported the incident to their local councillor (LC1) who intervened and ordered the culprits to pay 90,000 Ugandan shillings (about 25 USD) for the damage. They refused and instead tried to provoke a fight by reminding Innocent of his time in the bush as a rebel fighter. He walked away; and eventually they paid them 30,000 Ugandan shillings, with the LC1 pocketing 10,000.

On another occasion, Lily saw a young girl being stung by a swarm of bees. To assist her, she lit some sticks in the expectation that the smoke would chase the bees away. Unfortunately, some of the sticks fell on the ground. It was really dry and, by mistake, she started a fire. Worried by the speed with which it was spreading, she tried to dig a ditch around the fire. Neighbours looked on in horror, but they refused to help her. Instead, they simply abused her for the time she had spent with the LRA.

Such events explain why, in 2017, when Lily was reflecting on the day-to-day challenges of returning from the LRA, she said: '*Cimu tok*' (i.e., being stigmatised) ' . . . has become part of our life. It is here to live with us'. She went on to talk about a neighbour who persists in saying that: '*cen* (spiritual pollution) is surrounding our home'. Interestingly, she reported shrugging off the accusation, by saying: 'If you're saying my house is surrounded by *cen*, then I am not seeing it. My house is surrounded by God.'

While religious beliefs undoubtedly help manage some of this hostility, it is also the case that both Lily and Innocent have been able to access resources from NGOs based in the town. World Vision, for example, has helped Innocent secure medical treatment for wounds he picked up while fighting for the LRA, and their children currently receive scholarships to attend primary school. Lily and Innocent are also doing everything possible to ensure that their children do not feel stigmatised in all aspects of life. They not only send them to schools some distance from their neighbourhood, but they have also found schools where the teachers are sympathetic to their children and do not taunt them by referring to them as the children of 'rebel fighters' or 'children of the bush'.

Whereas Grace might be referred to as 'strong hearted', with the term reflecting a degree of admiration for her determination to persevere in spite of her awful circumstances, that term is applied openly to Lily by LRA recruits, and she is proud to use the expression for herself. One comment about her was: '*Dako eni cwinye tek calo tye ki lagwok kome mo*' (this woman is strong hearted as if she has got something that protects her). Among other things, it is noted that her strong heart gives her the confidence to speak to authorities and aid agencies to secure support for her family.

Rose

Rose was abducted in 1996 when she was 11 years old from the roadside. Soon after her abduction, she was allocated to a battalion and 'given' to a captain in the LRA. She spent seven years in the battalion and, during this time, gave birth to two of his children. At the time of her escape, her children were aged 3 and 2 months respectively. Following a period of time at GUSCO, they were all taken to her 'home' village. However, the 'home' she returned to was very different from the one she had been abducted from. Both her parents had been killed in front of her by the LRA on the day that she had been abducted, and she had no other brothers or sisters. In her absence, her uncle had assumed responsibility for cultivating her father's land, and her aunt had sold other pieces of his land.

Life was challenging, and she was acutely aware that her relatives were deeply ambivalent about accepting her back into the homestead. However, it was not long before she became involved with another man, and she moved to his homestead. They went on to have five children together, but the relationship did not work out. In spite of promises to the contrary, 'he said he cannot live with the children born in the bush . . . his relatives even call his own sons, rebels . . . '

With no other options available to her, Rose returned to her uncle's homestead. Tensions mounted, not least because it was hard to cultivate enough crops on the limited land available. In 2019, these tensions reached a tipping point; and her aunt went to the local councillor (LC1) in the village (who also happened to be her son-in-law). She convinced him that Rose was planning to strangle her with a rope. There was, she said, no other explanation for finding some rope in her house; and the presence of the rope 'proved' that she was a *lajok* (witch). A few days later, the councillor came to her hut with several other men. Purporting to have a letter from the Resident District Commissioner, which had actually been forged by a village local councillor, he instructed them to destroy her possessions (including her Amnesty Card – which had been issued to confirm that she

had been awarded amnesty), and to remove and burn the grass thatch on her house. Rose and six of her children were evicted. Reflecting on events, Rose said:

> They threw us by the roadside. We had nowhere to go. I am a moving corpse ... my aunt is accusing me of being a *lajok* [witch] because she knows that if she talks of land people will not support her, so she is using witchcraft as a way to get the community to react faster ... they hate me, because of the time I spent in the bush.

Fortunately for Rose, a young man called Emmanuel heard that she was living on the roadside near Gulu town. He had been the bodyguard to Rose's former LRA 'husband' and he remembered her as a good and caring person. In fact, when asked about his memories of life with the LRA, the first thing he mentioned was how he had been mercilessly beaten for dropping one of her husband's bags. Guards were under orders to make sure that he did not eat for a week. However, Rose managed to find a way to dodge them and give him food and water without anyone knowing. From then on, he thought of her as 'his mother'.

When he heard of Rose's misfortune, he was living in Gulu town. He had returned from the LRA seven years previously, and survives by cultivating a small plot of land and renting a *boda boda*. Although he is married to a woman who was not abducted, he remains socially connected to numerous men and women who spent considerable periods of time with the LRA, and many of them live on the periphery of Gulu town. Recounting events, he said: 'To be honest, I cried, and when I told others, they could not believe what was happening to Rose. They cried too. ... we all agreed we should stand with her'.

They gave her cassava, materials to construct a dwelling, and encouraged her to join their savings group. Using an extensive network of connections, they managed to persuade a Catholic organisation to provide her with a plot of land and a house near Gulu. However, Rose refused to accept the offer unless the land was bought for her, and legal documents were produced to show that it was in her name. She felt that she had been let down by empty promises in the past, with the recent burning of her Amnesty Card illustrative of the lack of interest in protecting returnees. Angry and distraught, she said that she wanted to write to the LC5 and ask to be returned to the LRA.

Her request to return to the LRA, led senior authorities within the district (including the LC5, the Paramount Chief) to hastily organise a series of meetings with Rose and dozens of other formally abducted people. Many spoke up about the need for action. Her case was taken to court and seemed to be taken seriously. However, during the COVID-19 lockdown in May 2020,

a hearing of her case occurred without her knowledge, and her claims were dismissed, presumably after a bribe was paid. A few months later, Rose was assaulted and raped.

Rose has publicly made her plight known. In Gulu town, people will say *dako eni tye ka tute ki kwo* (this woman is struggling with life), and the phrases '*ngat eni tek*' (this person is strong) and '*cwinye tek*' (strong hearted) capture her outlook. She is remarkably 'resilient' in the Acholi sense of '*ciro can*', and has been able to mobilise considerable support as the former 'wife' of a captain in the LRA. Others who returned from the LRA respect her, and recall her acts of kindness. However, her defiance in the face of abuse by neighbours exacerbates her situation, and antagonises those wanting to persecute her. They want to crush her and act in ways described as *kanyo can*. As far as they are concerned, if she remains alive, there is no hope. That is the reality of her situation, and they are determined to make her experience that reality.

Samuel

Samuel was abducted in 2003 and returned to his family through GUSCO in 2009. He was recruited as a young boy from Kitgum, and became a body guard to one of the LRA's top commanders, who provided him with a degree of protection. However, when he returned 'home', he faced a lot of rejection, but he says that cannot be compared to what he went through with the LRA.

He is a good example of someone who is referred to with the term *ciro can*. He has striven to overcome his circumstances, aims to be self-reliant, and has been able to present his life in a manner that appeals to NGOs. Even those who disparage him recognise that he is 'strong hearted' and determined (*cwinye tek me ciro peko eni weng*). Reflecting on his situation, he says, '*akanyo lok pa dano akanya*' (I just persevere whatever people say), and '*dano ka pe I cii itimo bal*' (if you are not tolerant of people, you fall into their trap).

Samuel has been faced with accusations from neighbours, who fear and abuse him. His brother, who also spent time with the LRA, receives similar treatment too. To illustrate his problems, he spoke about an occasion when his neighbours went to the police and said that he was in possession of guns and was arrested. No evidence was found, and he was released. Similar rumours circulated again several months later. He explained that:

> . . . they came here and they wanted to arrest me but . . . they did not find me. My brother was arrested, but we went and bailed him out. The case has been closed and the magistrate said my father should not be disturbed for having us here. But they are not accepting that. They are continuing to disturb us and saying we should not settle there. They are saying they should arrest me and imprison me.

Reflecting on these events, he observes: '*A deno can I cing dano ma kany ento pe gu bi tura*' (I have suffered at the hands of people here, but they will not break me). Samuel claims not to care about what people say. His focus is to compete with those that were not abducted, and to own resources like them. As his father commented: '*Latina nwang calo labadita, dano otema yelo ne ento mede amede ki tice*' (My child is as strong as a catapult, people have tried disturbing him but he just continues working hard).

Samuel is mostly engaged in mixed farming. He is rearing pigs, and he has also managed to buy a *boda boda* (motorcycle) for taxi work. He earned the money by selling pigs and crops; and he said that he does not want to just sit and wait for handouts from well-wishers. Unlike many others who have returned from the LRA, he has settled with his father on paternal land, with a wife and his two children. He emphasises that he focusses his strength on farming, and works hard. Unlike most of those who returned from the LRA, he asserts his rights to farm the land of his patrilineal ancestors, and he maintains that the hostility to him is linked to greedy neighbours who want to use his LRA past to claim his family's land and sell it.

> . . . This has always been our home and when I came back, I found my family back here . . . Every child you see and even my father was born here . . .. They [the neighbours] don't want us to stay well, because my father is hard working, and I am hard working too. We are not lazy. They see that if they leave us free, we will develop more than them. They want us to keep suffering and wasting money in court. And that is not little money! I can be arrested and we have to get money to bail me out . . .. They feel ashamed because I have been working hard and supporting my family. I have pigs and a motorbike. They feel jealous because I came back from the bush, and am doing good things. I am better than them.

Beatrice

Beatrice lives with her mother in a relatively remote rural location. Her case illustrates most starkly what '*kanyo can*' can mean in practice. She is surviving, but has little hope that her life will improve. The one choice she persists in making is not to die.

Beatrice was initially abducted in 1994 at a very young age, when she was collecting firewood, but she was released after a few months. Tragically, she was abducted again in 1997. Speaking very slowly, and with frequent pauses of ten minutes or so, she explained that she was hiding in a church, but her whereabouts was revealed by a girl who sang with her in the choir. She spent nine years with the LRA, and initially said she could remember nothing about it, but later started to recall incidents. She described terrible beatings. On one occasion, she did not eat food that was given to her. To punish her, a huge amount was cooked, and she was forced to sit and eat it with a group of other

girls. They could not finish it, and they were all given a hundred strokes. She also recalled being beaten when music was played and she did not dance in the way required.

Beatrice spoke, too, about being 'given' to a man. She was a virgin, and he forced himself upon her. Later, he beat her for showing resistance to his sexual advances. She said that, when she remembers it, she feels like committing suicide, and she thinks that the memory loss and epileptic fits she has subsequently experienced were caused by those events.

When Beatrice returned from the LRA, she passed through GUSCO reception centre. Here she was 'taught' how to live in 'the community', and told not to behave violently. She was sent to live with her uncle and then later settled with her mother. Initially she felt OK on her return, but things began to deteriorate after 2007. Her memory started to go, and she asked for prayers to be said for her, because the spirits of people she was forced to kill were disturbing her.

Beatrice did not have any children while she was with the LRA, but for a time stayed with a man after returning, and had two children with him. However, he sent her away, accusing her of being possessed with *cen*. She described her affliction with spirits in this way:

> I experience dreams at night. When I am sleeping, I see a face asking me to make a sign of a cross and I always plead with it that I am innocent . . . I did not do anything bad, it was not my fault . . . I was just forced to do it. My mother would listen to everything and call my name. It happened twice during the daytime when I was just standing and I felt something just holding me then I saw this face again asking me to make a sign of cross, after I fell and became unconscious. Later I could not explain what happened to me . . .. My mother is the one currently taking care of me and my children. Some relatives and other people sympathize with me, but others talk negatively, calling me mad, abnormal, good for nothing and stupid. (*lapoya, lababa, konya peke dok laming*). Some say that I am possessed with the spirit of the dead (*tipu pa jo mu too*). [A few weeks later] I was possessed in the market place where I was trying to sell tomatoes. Everyone laughed at me and said, "the spirit of the people she has killed has come" (*cen pa jo ma en oneko ni dong gu bino*).

At the time of the first interview, it was clear that Beatrice was struggling, but in the years that followed her problems increased. In 2017, she spoke about her sister, Monica. She had been abducted by the LRA, and returned with two children from the bush. One of those children was accused of stealing a calf, and hostility towards Monica and all her children intensified. Monica then took poison and killed herself. Beatrice was devastated by what happened to her sister. She asked:

> Who will support me? Look at me. I am useless to the family. I cannot do anything. I wish I was the one dead. I know that is my mother's wish too . . . I am so worried about my children . . . The main challenge is the sickness, I don't

sleep – If they could x-ray my head and help me understand why I forget everything it would be good. I really hate myself ….” Her mother added: “The world is cursing her.

With reference to her sickness, it was noted that Beatrice is sometimes given medications from the local dispensary, but it is not clear what those tablets are for. Her symptoms have remained the same. Her mother says:

> A foam comes out of the mouth. She never experienced these symptoms before she was abducted. The symptoms start when she screams and says that she can see a group of people with rosaries around their necks. She keeps on screaming … and then she begins singing: “*Polo, Yeso lara* (a Christian song about salvation that says: “Heaven, Jesus come and save me”).

When Beatrice’s mother was asked if there was something particular from the past that was affecting her daughter, she mentioned an incident where Beatrice was forced to watch people being killed. It was also apparent that she did not know everything about what had happened to her daughter. That was eventually revealed by Beatrice in private.

The man she was ‘given’ to in the LRA accused her of being a coward, because she refused to kill a man. Others then killed that person, and her LRA ‘husband’ then forced her to have sexual intercourse with him on top of the corpse. Those watching were told it was done as an example of what happens if orders to kill are not followed. Following this horrific event, she killed whenever she was told to do so. She did not tell anyone what had happened when she came back, because it was, she thought, an abomination. She thinks she will be forever cursed by it.

The latest communication with Beatrice occurred during the COVID-19 epidemic in May 2020. She rang to say her mother was sick, and she had no food. One of us (Atingo) registered her with the district authorities to receive food relief. She is still hanging on.

Return and Resilience

These six case studies capture strikingly different experiences and generalising from them presents challenges. That is an issue evident in the wider literature on return from the LRA in northern Uganda. Since we started working on the topic, there have been a considerable number of other scholars studying similar and related themes. Much of this work took place towards the end of the LRA’s activities in northern Uganda, or soon after the security situation improved (e.g., Akello *et al*. 2006, Blattman and Lundberg 2007, Pham *et al*. 2007, Mazurana *et al*. 2008, Blattman 2009, Blattman and Annan 2010, Annan *et al*. 2011, Akello 2019) There is also a literature discussing the experiences of those returning over the longer term, such as Baines (2016), Atim *et al*. (2018), Denov and Lakor (2017), and

Dubal (2018). These publications have contributed interesting information about what has been happening to the particular individuals or selected populations the authors have worked with. However, they present a conundrum in that they offer such contrasting interpretations. In broad terms, the literature falls into categories, that implicitly foreground the different Acholi conceptions of what might be translated into English as 'resilience'.

At one end of the spectrum, there is Dubal (2018), whose book is based on research focussed on former LRA recruits who are quite positive about their experiences as rebels and take pride in how they have managed since their return. His key informants are very much of the *ciro* sort. He even goes so far as to suggest that much of the criticism of the LRA and stories of suffering are based on lies told to obtain free things from aid agencies. He also suggests that there were many purported returnees who had never in fact been with the LRA. Baines (2016) takes a less provocative approach, but still emphasises a *ciro* perspective. She writes about the 'complex victimhood' of her informants, who were linked to an organisation based in Gulu town called the Women's Advocacy Network (WAN). The wives of senior LRA commanders play a leading role in the organisation, including Eveline Amony, a much-favoured 'wife' of the LRA's overall leader, Joseph Kony. Baines' research recognises the serious challenges returnees face, but also highlights how those she has worked with express their agency and resilience – in the sense of having capacity for self-reliance.

Along similar lines, Blattman and Annan end up arguing that the young people whom they surveyed in 2005 and 2006 generally managed to overcome their problems. Their methodology, based on structured interviews with people who claimed to have been with the LRA, is the kind of research that Dubal most objects to. At the time, there were incentives for people to claim that they had been abducted by the LRA, because that was a way to access benefits, such as relief items and school fees. As Dubal argues, many people were prone to invent stories and exaggerate their experiences in ways that were intended to impress potential providers of aid. Yet, leaving such matters aside, Blattaman and Annan maintain that returned LRA recruits managed to move on with their lives in the kind of ways that Dubal and Baines describe. They even suggest that young men who spent time with the LRA are twice as likely to take on minor community leadership roles than young men who had not been abducted (Blattman and Lundberg 2007, Blattman 2009), and that the majority of women who had returned form the LRA had positive relationships with their families and neighbours (Annan *et al*. 2011). The implication is that being with the LRA gave people skills and provided new opportunities for those willing and able to seize them. It has potentially enabled them to exemplify the kind of resilient livelihoods promoted by aid agencies such as World Vision and UNDP.

However, these findings are not corroborated by other researchers, and towards the other end of the spectrum are accounts emphasising the endless awfulness of experiences. Quite a bit of the media coverage and advocacy literature has promoted this view, dwelling on heart-rendering accounts, and suggesting that these are the norm. The most prominent example is the very successful, but much criticised, publicity work of the NGO called Invisible Children, including their Kony 2012 campaign (Allen 2012, Invisible Children 2012, Schomerus *et al.* 2012). This *kanyo* kind of Acholi 'resilience' as basic survival tends to be described less often in the academic literature, partly because so much of the focus has been on those returnees from the LRA who are part of externally funded support networks and/or based in urban locations; and there tends to be an emphasis on the social agency of informants. An interesting exception is the article by Denov and Lakor (2017). This presents a grim assessment of the experiences of those returning. The research of Denov and Lakor has occurred through the *Watye Ki Gen* (We Have Hope) network of LRA returnees, which is run from the Word Vision office in Gulu town. Like WAN, it is often criticised by rural-based returnees for replicating LRA hierarchies, and for privileging urban based beneficiaries and their relatives (Parker *et al.* 2021). In this context, the emphasis on the *kanyo* qualities of the current livelihoods of LRA returnees is surprising.

Another researcher who presents a comparably bleak view of the current circumstances facing some returnees from the LRA is the anthropologist, Grace Akello. Her work is not so affected by the debates and priorities of the urban-based networks, or the concerns and perspectives of aid projects. She has carried out fieldwork in mostly rural places, working in the Acholi language; and she has assessed the integration of LRA ex-combatants. Unlike the returned children and young adults who passed through reception centres, her informants are generally people who returned as mature adults through the formal amnesty process. Those she has studied are living with relatives on ancestral land and are effectively being punished by their own families and neighbours for the atrocities and hardships associated with the LRA.

Akello herself is not explicit about the matter, but in terms of the Acholi concepts used to translate 'resilience', her returnees from the LRA face lives that might be characterised as *kanyo*. Meanwhile, their neighbours' activities might be said to express their resilience in terms of *ciro can*, partly by joining together to persecute those who benefitted from the amnesty. Far from forgiving combatants, they apply their own form of justice by making them miserable. Akello actually uses the English word 'resilience' to describe this behaviour. She argues that it is 'resilience' in the population, responding to the 'repressive state amnesty mechanism' (Akello 2019, p. 266). The enduring impacts of the war leave survivors feeling angry that those responsible have not been held accountable. As a result, they make the lives of ex-combatants

'unbearable' (Akello 2019). Akello describes scapegoating that may take on accusations of witchcraft (*lajok*) of the kind described in the accounts of Joseph and Rose, and resonate with other studies of such phenomena (e.g., Allen 2015a).

Akello's research methods, like those of other anthropologists working in the region, such a Dubal, are open to the criticism that it is not clear whether the cases they write about accurately represent overall experiences of return. Meanwhile, the approaches of other scholars, such as Baines, are constrained by working within a particular LRA support network, or, like Blattman, by relying heavily on questionnaire surveys of people claiming to be LRA returnees. There is a problem too that so much of the recent work has occurred in urban locations, and even with the same individuals (Clark 2008, Finnström 20182018Schiltz *et al*. 2019, Torre *et al*. 2019). In Gulu town, there was occasionally irritation expressed by those interviewed about having been approached previously by different researchers without any perceived benefits. This contrasted sharply with those interviewed from the GUSCO sample who were found in rural locations. They had a marked tendency to complain that they had been abandoned since they left the reception centre, and that promises about follow up and support had been broken. Also, an ongoing problem for the majority of those living on ancestral land is that their right to cultivate plots is based on the agreement of clan elders and relatives, and that agreement is often contentious. In this context, the use of the sample from the GUSCO records proved illuminating when the whole data set was analysed with MaxQDA. These findings are discussed in detail elsewhere (Allen *et al*. 2020, Parker *et al*. 2021). A few key points relating to notions of resilience are noted here.

Based on answers to questions about current residence and livelihoods, it is apparent that the likelihood of living on ancestral land generally declines in relation to the time someone has spent living with the LRA. That is the case for both women and men. Those who spent the longest time with the LRA are likely to be those who obtained a command position, or who were protected by someone who held such a position. They are the most likely to have directly participated in extremely violent events, or at least to have witnessed such events. Although there are exceptions, such as Grace, there is clearly a tendency for them not to live in rural locations. Many have been forced to leave, and they have managed to find work and accommodation in urban locations, drawing on their links to LRA support networks, which almost invariably replicate LRA hierarchies (Ocitti *et al*. 2019). They are the most likely to have received some degree of continued assistance from aid agencies, and they are most commonly contacted by other researchers. Some of them have learned to recount their experiences in ways that resonate with expectations, and even report attending workshops to help train them to do

so. Although they may face serious difficulties, which they are often adept at articulating, they are commonly managing better than other LRA returnees in terms of their living arrangements and capacities to make choices.

An assessment of the likelihood of currently experiencing stigma and open abuse adds to these insights. Data analysis revealed that such experiences were less likely, the longer the time spent with the LRA. Those who spent the longest amount of time with the LRA were less likely to be living in rural locations with hostile neighbours, and if name calling or hostility occurred, they had the confidence and capacity to dismiss or rebut such behaviour. Overwhelmingly, those who spent long periods of time with the LRA in our sample could be described with the term *ciro* in the Acholi language. Their 'resilience' for the most part, coincides with the World Vision agenda of building self-reliance, even if many of them have actually benefitted from a degree of sustained support and monitoring by NGO staff, philanthropists, and externally financed support networks. Unsurprisingly, they have often learned to speak about their past and present lives in ways that conform with aid agency expectations. Lily and Joseph broadly illustrate livelihoods that are typical in this group, while Rose is something of an outlier. She has tried repeatedly to live on ancestral land but has been pushed into a peri-urban area against her will, where she is struggling, but receiving some assistance from her former LRA connections.

Meanwhile, the majority of returned children and young adults in our sample may be placed towards the other end of these probability assessments. The cases of Grace and Beatrice are examples, and Sam is too, even though he is managing better, despite relentless antipathy from his neighbours. Overwhelmingly, this group has been largely left to their own devices by international actors, aid agencies, human rights activists, and researchers. That may, to some extent, reflect exclusionary models of resilience, which seem to justify assisting those most capable of helping themselves, and inadvertently end up overlooking the deprivation of the most vulnerable. Few of those living in rural locations had been followed up since leaving GUSCO. Many stated that they felt abandoned. They are dependent on relatives for assistance, and that assistance is often minimal, or may suddenly be withdrawn. They are commonly stigmatised and abused by member of their own families and are more likely to be experiencing the extreme hardships described, for example, in the case Beatrice. Their 'resilience' is mainly a matter of survival.

Conclusion: A Lens for Not-Seeing

The insights we have outlined about the experiences of children and young adults who returned from the LRA over ten years ago resonates in various ways with findings from other scholars who have been working in the region

on related themes. However, our work differs in that it is focussed on a random sample of people who can be verified as being former LRA child recruits, and is informed by a long-term perspective, based on direct observation of what has been happening since the war was ongoing. This approach helps explain the contrasting arguments in the literature and the seemingly contradictory findings about 'resilience'.

We have noted that conceptions of resilience shape ways of seeing, and that those ways of seeing can be partial. They can potentially obfuscate and euphemise the lived realities of the most vulnerable. Also, a normative conception of resilience may orientate support in ways that can exacerbate deprivation. Our analysis shows that, usually, those who managed to gain status in the LRA, are relatively better off now. They are mainly living in urban or peri-urban locations. Linked to LRA support networks such as WAN or *Watye Ki Gen*, they are likely to be receiving some form of external, aid-funded assistance. They tend to present *ciro* qualities, that might be viewed as responding to aspects of a self-reliant conception of resilient livelihoods promoted, for example, by World Vision and UNDP. Although, it should be stressed that *ciro* does not mean the same as 'entrepreneurial capacity'. Rather, it suggests a perseverance and determination to make the best of whatever opportunities are on offer. Typically, that involves talking about livelihoods and experiences in ways coinciding with aid funding criteria.

Meanwhile, those who have experienced life with the LRA as something that had to be endured obediently, and with little scope to exercise choice (due to their position in the LRA hierarchy), are likely to be those who are now comparably worse off. They have been systematically overlooked by the organisations that facilitated their return and excluded from externally assisted support networks. To the degree that they are self-reliant, it is not in the manner valorised by aid agencies. Those dependent on the largess of their relatives are likely to be persistently stigmatised in ways that negatively influence their daily life. They have unreliable and limited protection from those with whom they reside; and they encounter antipathy and fear from their neighbours who were living for long periods of time in internal displacement camps. The possibility of allegations about witchcraft (*lajok*) is a constant possibility. They face a life of perpetual troubling uncertainty. To paraphrase Rose, they are in danger of being thrown aside, with nowhere to go, condemned to becoming a moving corpse. The 'resilience' of this large group of returnees who are now young adults living in rural locations is of the *kanyo* kind. They keep going, because there is no other option, and few have expectations of the situation changing, unless, perhaps, they can move away to places where it is possible to hide their pasts. Hopefully, that has been the effective strategy of the 74 individuals in our sample of 304 who we could not find after years of searching. If they have not died or been killed, they are 'resilient' in yet another way: by successfully disappearing.

A note on ethics

In-country ethics approval was provided from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (reference number SS2925). The research team was acutely aware that information accessed was often of a sensitive nature, and confidentiality was carefully maintained. In line with UK and Ugandan ethical requirements, the study was explained verbally in Acholi and each participant received a copy of the consent form. Participants provided written informed consent, and in cases of limited literacy, a thumb print. In a small number of cases, participants wanted to have discussions away from their homes. They travelled to an agreed meeting place and their expenses were reimbursed. The availability of psychosocial support is acutely limited in northern Uganda, but in those instances when participants articulated acute mental distress, interviewers provided details of a practising psychiatrist at Lacor Hospital, Gulu who was willing to provide support free of charge. There were a few cases where advice was sought and, where appropriate, travel expenses were covered by the project. There were also a small number of instances where there were practical things that could be done to assist or protect individuals in extreme circumstances, and occasionally, financial, and other assistance was provided.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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