

Survival in war-torn Uganda

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Fig. 1. The majority of children in northern Uganda grow up in camps for internally displaced persons.

Summarizing a common academic critique, Tim Allen notes that humanitarian intervention more often than not compounds the problems of governance. But despite the growing bulk of criticism, business seems to continue as usual. 'Influential books like Barbara Harrell-Bond's *Imposing aid*, David Keen's *The benefits of famine*, and Alex de Waal's *Famine crimes*', Allen writes, 'present powerful arguments against what nevertheless remains a remarkably robust body of conventional wisdom about what should be done' (2005: 8).

Here I describe some of the slippery but very real non-formal aspects of economic life and war in Acholiland, northern Uganda, and attempt, in the words of anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom, 'an ethnography of the shadows' – that is, a description of those frontier realities of power, non-formal economic exchanges and everyday survival.

My principal method during this fieldwork was participant observation, or better, participant *reflection*. As anthropologists, Århem (1994) notes, we do our best to participate in the works, questions, joys and sorrows of our informants' everyday life. Then we take a few steps back to reflect upon what we have learnt and experienced, before again stepping forward to participate. This we do daily in the fieldwork encounter, but I was also able to step back more profoundly in both time and space, as I divided my fieldwork into phases, spending the periods inbetween in Sweden, reading, writing and trying to figure out the next step.¹

War in northern Uganda

Today's war in northern Uganda, although fought locally, is international and even global in character. Worldwide flows of imagery, weaponry and humanitarian aid become entangled with local socio-political realities. My informants articulated these complexities in their expressions of discontent. 'We are living with bad surroundings,' they often said ('*piny marac*' in Acholi). In narrating a young man's story of survival (I will call him Peter), I show how internally displaced people in the war zone understand and explain the fact that the international community has become increasingly and inescapably entangled with the politics and practices of this war.

On the existential level, I submit that people are actively practising a kind of knowing by engagement, and I therefore emphasize *meanings in use*. Such meanings are never fixed but are negotiated in an interactive socio-cultural and political process of interpretation and counter-interpretation, involving not only the most influential agents such as the rebel movement, the Ugandan government and international relief organizations, but also ordinary people with direct experience of the war. These interpretations and explanations are essential to any understanding, academic or popular, of the conflict. Peter's story should thus be read not as a simple anecdote, or an isolated incident, but as an *event* (see Jackson 2005): that is, it is a story among many similar stories that, when listened to, unfolds a violent pattern of dirty war in the most mundane everyday life.

The Ugandan army, led by Lieutenant General Yoweri Museveni, who is also the president of the country, is fighting the Lord's Resistance Movement/Army (LRM/A) rebels. The LRM/A, headed by Joseph Kony, can be seen as a successor to Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement, but with time it has incorporated elements from other rebel factions (see notably Behrend 1999, Branch 2005, Doom and Vlassenroot 1999, Finnström 2003, van Acker 2004). The LRM/A rebels have systematically avoided the Ugandan army. In hit-and-run raids, the rebels have instead focused their military violence on the non-combatant population, and they have abducted thousands of minors. They orchestrate their activities from outside, from bases in remote areas of war-torn southern Sudan, out of reach of Ugandan armed forces, and, at times, beyond Sudanese state control too.

In what has developed into a regional war of proxies, the Ugandan government supports its enemy's enemy. Together with the US government, another proxy ally against Sudan's Islamic regime, the Ugandan government has supported the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) rebels in southern Sudan. The Sudanese government has reciprocated, until recently offering open support and military equipment to the LRM/A rebels. Since the 2005 peace deal in Sudan between the SPLM/A and the Sudanese government, Ugandan support for the SPLM/A rebels has become public. The common enemy is now global terrorism and the LRM/A, and in October



Fig. 2. To survive war, children play war. A wooden model of an armoured vehicle, called 'mamba' in Uganda.

1. Material was collected in Acholiland (Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts), where I conducted anthropological fieldwork for a total of 12 months, in three phases (1997-1998, 1999-2000, 2002). The article was revised during a further period of fieldwork in 2005, and I especially want to thank Otim Jimmy, my long-time partner in research, who assisted me in amending it, as well as AT's anonymous reviewers.

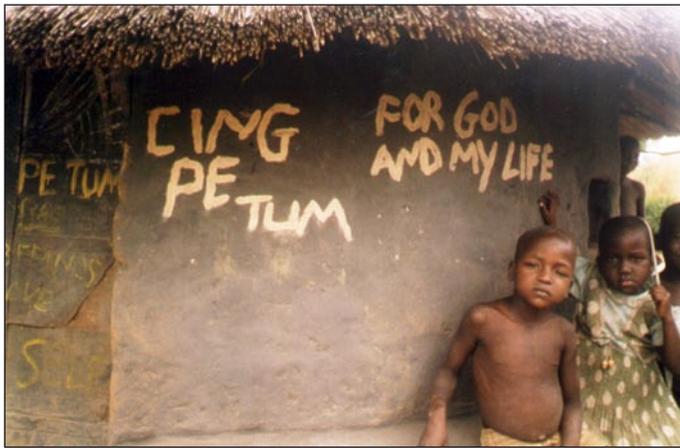


Fig. 3 (left). Children in Paloro camp. 'These hands cannot be finished' ('Cing pe tum'), reads the text on the hut. 'For God and my life', someone has added, in a rephrasing of Uganda's national anthem 'For God and my country'.

Fig. 4 (right). 'Life has become difficult' ('Kwo odoko tek'), the shopkeeper has written on his shop in Anaka, a trading centre converted into an enormous camp with more than 40,000 inhabitants.



2005 the International Criminal Court issued warrants for the arrest of the rebel leadership.

Compulsory camps and humanitarianism

As part of its counter-insurgency tactics, in the effort to deny the rebels food and other resources, the Ugandan army has forced large portions of the population into camps with strict curfews. This has also drained the rebels' intelligence networks. Officially the camps, called 'protected villages', were created to protect civilians against rebel attacks. In practice it is different. 'It is the people protecting the army,' camp inhabitants complained, making reference to the most common geographical structure of the camps. An army detachment is usually stationed in the centre of the camp, and from this privileged position it is supposed to protect the tens of thousands of people surrounding it. People found themselves being used as a human 'shield' (using the Acholi term '*kwoi*'): if a camp came under rebel attack, the army would frequently withdraw and launch grenades from a distance, right into the camp.

Today more than 90 per cent of the population in northern Uganda, more than 1.6 million people, are internally displaced. They are living in a chronic state of emergency, as highlighted in recent years by a growing number of humanitarian reports. The relation between the military and humanitarian efforts to end the war is complex. Northern Uganda is nowadays flooded with humanitarian actors, who shape the societal settings where they offer assistance. As Richards (1996) points out with reference to the war in Sierra Leone, the international community's aid and humanitarianism can rarely be neutral in the eyes of the locals. So when humanitarian organizations take over many of the functions of the Ugandan government, some will also be perceived, as the government is, as a partner to the army. In the 2000 national referendum on political systems, government representatives obviously took advantage of the situation. In their massive campaign, in which they benefited extensively from logistical sup-

port provided by the Ugandan army, they told people in the camps that relief and humanitarian assistance would be withdrawn if they did not vote for the existing government and what was then its no-party system. The multi-party political opposition, on the other hand, was prevented from campaigning by the Ugandan army and police; as the referendum approached, few opposition politicians were even allowed to leave Gulu town.

At the same time, humanitarian organizations rarely consider the broader issues of war and insecurity (Amisi and Juma 2001). Sometimes representatives of these organizations confuse neutrality with an explicit anti-participatory ideology, even ignorance (Harrell-Bond 1986, Finnström 2003). 'The failure to explore the relationship between economic globalisation and insecurity means that the international community appears purely in the role of saviour and humanitarian,' notes Orford (2003: 188). In the long run, Orford continues, such a course of development may result in 'an unjust international economic order and a neocolonial mode of governance.' A non-Acholi Muganda informant living in Gulu town came to a similar conclusion, claiming that the international NGOs now 'take a lean on the government' to the extent that they are 'welcomed as its lovers'. This love relationship, he told me in late 2005, is 'directed' by the government 'but not according to the needs [...] of the community. And that is going to cause a big-big-big problem, because people are politicizing everything now.'

The conflict in northern Uganda has had its ups and downs, with corresponding fluctuations in the interests and involvement of the international community. During lulls in the fighting, when international attention is turned elsewhere, some people try to walk back to their villages. They do this on a daily basis. But peace is illusory. On one occasion in late 1999, as a friend and fieldwork associate carefully wheeled our motorbike through the many people walking along the road with their heavy loads, he asked rhetorically, 'So, they call this peace? People are walking ten miles to collect food. What kind of peace is that?' His experience, more than mine, told him to regard these new developments sceptically. The Ugandan army often responds to increased rebel activity by ordering rural civilians to return immediately to the camps. People who are found outside the camps are sometimes treated as rebel suspects. Some weeks after my friend's comment, the army announced a 48-hour deadline for people to return to camps, after which the areas surrounding some camps were shelled and bombed.

But for the displaced rural population there is no easy solution. Even though they wanted to leave the camps, they also feared returning to the uncertain situation in their home villages deep in the rural areas. A common desire in the camps was therefore that the international community intervene to arrange and guarantee everyone's safe repatriation.



Fig. 5. A wrecked lorry belonging to Sudanese SPLM/A rebels on mission in northern Uganda, destroyed by the LRM/A rebels who have their bases in southern Sudan, stands as a monument to complex inter and intra-state proxy wars.

Fig. 6. 'United State of Amuru': sign outside a young men's hangout in Amuru camp.



As we have noted, various international organizations do their best to support the well-being of the internally displaced, mainly through distribution of foodstuffs, cooking utensils, soap, blankets and seeds. Recipients regard some of these with suspicion, and I frequently encountered people who questioned the quality of the relief distributed. In 2002 the leaders in some camps refused the maize flour that the Norwegian Refugee Council tried to distribute, saying that it was too old and thus spoilt (which one of the Ugandan staff members told me was indeed the case). It had to be transported back to town. People particularly rejected the US-produced cooking oil distributed as relief, again after the expiry date for consumption. Sometimes, showing me the sealed cans clearly stamped with a date that had passed, people would question the usability of the oil. It made men impotent, I was told. 'Why do you give us this stuff, that you would not consume yourself?' was the question I frequently encountered. And distributed cow peas, people complained, caused cholera.

Over the years humanitarian organizations have become involved in the structuring of the camps, and are now caught in a catch-22 situation. Humanitarian aid and relief programmes, as we know, are intended as an emergency response, when something must be done at once. They are by definition temporary (Harrell-Bond 1986). But after two decades of war, it is increasingly difficult to talk about a state of emergency in any conventional sense, as the situation becomes more and more permanent. Some of the camps for internally displaced people in Acholiland have been in existence for more than ten years, and so have the international organizations' measures to alleviate human suffering in these same camps. Ironically, the UN and other representatives of the international community to some extent maintain the camp structures. Any international relief is distributed exclusively to camps that are recognized by the Ugandan government. As always, war is processual, and emergency relief operations will therefore increasingly be caught up in the politics and practices of war (see also Keen 1998).

Shadow economics and a story of survival

As Nordstrom notes, 'In the frontier realities that mark political upheaval, the people, goods, and services that move along shadow lines are often closely and visibly linked to the most fundamental politics of power and survival' (2001:216). These shadow economic and political links 'move outside *formally* recognized state-based channels' (Nordstrom 2004: 106, italics in original), but are at the same time deeply intertwined with the formal structures of the state. Many of the local agents of the state, notably soldiers, are also powerful actors in the shadow economy. Various international organizations are also entangled with the shadow economy, since trust and personal ties are important aspects of the non-formal exchange. The shadows and the formal state practices intersect in a myriad of ways, 'but they do not give up their own identity in this intersection' (Nordstrom 2001: 230, italics in original).

In other words, a government soldier who gets involved in the shadows will in most situations remain a govern-

ment soldier. Indeed, this was the conclusion drawn by my informants. And personnel of the international relief organizations who become involved in the shadows can never fully detach themselves from the organizations they represent, at least not in my informants' experience. Nordstrom quotes Nietzsche's 'the doing is everything' (2004: 73).

The camps in western Acholiland lie on the border of Murchison Falls National Park, along the Karuma-Pakwach highway that connects Kampala with the West Nile region. The wild game in the park is a source of luxury food for the people in the area: not only Acholi but also people from the West Nile region frequent the park to poach the game. In the camps, game meat is a welcome addition to the monotonous diet of home-grown vegetables and relief food. Of course, it is illegal to hunt these animals.

When ammunition and guns are captured from rebels or found in hidden rebel armouries in the bush, they are taken to the local army quarters before being shipped to Gulu town to be registered. Sometimes Ugandan soldiers will keep some of the captured weapons for highly dubious personal use, such as night robberies and petty harassment, often with the tacit agreement of the local army commanders (Finnström 2003). In the camps, army soldiers will sometimes lend captured guns to young men, who sneak into the national park to hunt. In return for the loan of the weapons the soldiers demand half of the meat, while the hunting party share the remaining half. Obviously, on their poaching missions the young men have to avoid not only park rangers but also mobile army units, which may take them for armed rebels.

In late 1999 Peter, who lives in one of the camps, went to the park as a porter for a Ugandan army soldier we shall call Opoka, who had a machine gun. This was not the first time Peter had gone hunting in the park, and several other young men came along as porters. This time, however, they returned from four days in the park without any meat, and Opoka parted company with Peter and the other porters. After about a week, soldiers came to investigate rumours that Peter had a gun. They did not find Peter at home, as he was away working in his garden. Instead they arrested his younger brother and another young man. When Peter heard of this, he went into hiding, but the soldiers eventually located him. He was arrested and ordered to confess where the alleged gun was hidden. In the effort to make him talk, they set Peter's hut on fire, destroying his camp shelter. This is Peter's story:

I was arrested and taken to the army barracks together with another boy called Olum. Some person claimed that we had a gun. We told the soldiers that the gun was not ours, but the owner of the gun was an army man called Opoka. So they refused our talk. They start beating us, and they tied my arms and my legs. We were beaten seriously, and they burned our bodies with a melting plastic cup. They continued beating us before taking us back to the army jail [in the camps, an empty pit latrine]. We were ordered to disclose the identity of the man who had the gun. We agreed and we were taken to his place, but the man was not around. So the soldiers thought that I was deceiving them, and then they start beating me again. They start firing their guns. They just emptied two magazines, and two bullets hit me. From there they took me to the army barracks again, where the commander again ordered the soldiers to shoot me, as he claimed that I still did not tell the truth. However, the soldiers now objected, and I was eventually brought to [a local] hospital, where I stayed for two days. After that I was taken to Lacor [Missionary] Hospital.

The army commander did not allow Peter to leave the camp, but after two days in the camp's hospital, a sympathetic police officer provided him with a letter authorizing him to travel to the missionary hospital in Lacor, outside Gulu town, where his bullet wounds could finally be tended.

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Fig. 7. A woman outside her temporary shelter in one of the camps in Gulu district.



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Fig. 8. Sign in Gulu township.

Peter's hunting missions reflect his everyday existential struggle with extreme poverty. Yet the ramifications of such illegal hunting parties extend beyond the camps and the destinies of young men like Peter: the game meat travels farther. To augment their income, Ugandan soldiers usually sell their share of this meat in Gulu town, or in the camps themselves. The potential buyers are visitors to the camps who have the means of transport to smuggle it back to town, and who are not stopped at the army's roadblocks. In town I met a Western staff member of the International Organization for Migration, who told me that he occasionally bought bushmeat from the soldiers in the camps, which he put in the back of his white NGO pick-up and took back to Gulu town. His account was not unique. 'Those who may be on the forefront of aid may as well be in the backyard of profiteering,' as Nordstrom notes (2001: 226, n.6).

The displaced people in the camps, of course, take careful note of such exchanges. My expatriate informant told me that he consumed some of the meat himself, but took some to Kampala, where he sold it to friends and colleagues at the Kampala headquarters. For him the profit must have been insignificant and the risks equally negligible, but I was left with the impression that the whole process boosted his ego, as he was able to offer friends and superiors some exotic wild meat. His *meaning in use* was rather different from that of Peter. At the other end of this illegal trade route, however, are the young men in the camps who take the full risk on themselves. The buyers in Kampala know little, perhaps, about the young displaced men who put themselves in jeopardy. If caught, as Peter's experience shows, they may be taken for rebels, while the providers of the guns will deny any knowledge of the affair.

The many years of evolving armed conflict in northern Uganda, and in other parts of the world, mean that millions of individuals have, like Peter, been forced to leave their homes. In the jargon of international aid, they are internally displaced persons rather than refugees. To say that they are internally displaced obviously indicates that they have moved but remain in their country of origin, while the term 'refugee' is usually restricted to a people who have fled their country of origin, whose refugee status is acknowledged by international law, and who thus become 'a disquieting element' which 'brings the ordinary fiction of sovereignty to crisis' (Agamben, quoted in Orford 2003: 210). Peter and other internally displaced persons,

on the other hand, do not pose such an explicit threat to the nation-state's sovereignty. They remain in the shadows.

A note in conclusion

I have narrated and contextualized Peter's story of survival, with the aim of showing how internally displaced people in the war zone understand and explain the fact that international humanitarianism has become increasingly and inescapably entangled with the *realpolitik* of war and everyday life. His story, I have argued, is not an anecdote but a lived event that exemplifies today's global realities. Such events are part of a violent pattern of dirty war, of worldwide flows of imagery, weaponry and humanitarian aid. It involves not only Peter and other internally displaced persons but also powerful actors such as the Ugandan army and international humanitarian organizations.

I offer an open-ended conclusion, in the form of an appeal. A sad irony of international and humanitarian jargon is that internally displaced persons are completely dehumanized through the frequent use of the abbreviation 'IDPs'. I maintain that we must be wary of reproducing such acronyms, or even when we make analytical distinctions between internally displaced persons and refugees. The internally displaced persons in Acholiland, I hold, are refugees in their own country. Unlike most other refugees they have not fled the crisis that caused their predicament – in this case the war. They are thus not refugees in the sense that they have found a safe haven, or a way out of the shadows. When we are drowning in the statistics of today's refugee flows, stories like Peter's are necessary, I believe, to remind us of the lived complexities out there in the war zones of the world. The doing is everything. ●

