



Research Article

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Teso's Re-Forgotten Children Born of War in Uganda: At the Margins of Analysis and Interventions

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Abstract

Attention to Uganda's children born of war, also known as children born in captivity – to former child soldiers, emerged, following the publication of a thesis on Uganda's forgotten children born of war was fronted by Apio (2007). From that time, various academic researchers have analysed the plight of these children and their findings have influenced interventions targeting them. However, progress has still left some of the areas that were not at the epicenter of the war at the margins. Teso was as well intensely affected by the war but because it was not at the epicenter of the war, it fell through the cracks. This article uses empirical data analysed from Teso sub-region, as part of a study on children born of war in Uganda. These indicate that the plight of these children is not different from those in Acholi and Lango sub-regions, and also provide additional insight that is essential for the broadening of knowledge on the subject. This paper argues for academic and development practitioners to pay attention to the needs of Teso's children born of war - as a precursor to their sustainable integration and post-war justice benefits like reparations.

Keywords: Teso, children born of war; LRA-war; war-affected children, integration, reparations

1. Introduction

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war in Uganda garnered international attention around 2004, after several prior efforts aimed at advocacy by civil society with the aim of attracting attention towards the war crimes and crimes against humanity meted at civilians in the Acholi, Lango, Teso and West Nile sub-regions of the country. These efforts sought international backing in order to persuade the government of Uganda to allow intervention into the war by other states such as the USA and members of the E.U¹. Notable advocacy included efforts such as those of *Kacoke Madit* comprised of Acholi in the diaspora, a parliamentary motion passed by Hon. N Robert Mao (8th Parliament), cultural and religious in northern Uganda and visit by the United Nations under secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs remarks on the conflict. According to Jan Egeland, OCHA reported his description as "the world's worst form of terrorism"² and the Guardian "Northern Uganda to me remains the biggest neglected humanitarian emergency in the world...For me, the situation is a moral

¹ Internal Crisis Group. Northern Uganda: Understanding and Solving the Conflict 14 April 2004. Accessed on <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/77-northern-uganda-understanding-and-solving-the-conflict.pdf>

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/uganda-northern-conflict-epicentre-terror-egeland> Accessed on 18/3/2023

outrage, but I'm heartened that the security council devoted so much time to northern Uganda" which was followed by comments by the British PM's (Sir Emyr Jones Parry) described the war as "one of the great crises out there which is not recognised enough" and the need for countries outside the AU to join in the cause through donations and other support to address the conflict³. It is important to emphasize the importance of how the agenda on intervention was framed. Global concern over terrorism after 9/11 was significant in garnering international support. Moreover, expression of commitment at the level of the UN and Britain (for example) was pivotal in enabling intervention through international NGOs providing humanitarian assistance in coordination with the office of the Prime Minister in Uganda.

The Juba Peace Talks enabled many persons formerly associated with the LRA to return to Uganda after the cessation of hostilities. The reintegration of persons formerly associated with the LRA and their children (who were integrating) coincided with other programs of post-conflict recovery that were being coordinated by the office of the PM on behalf of the government of Uganda and UN OCHA on behalf of international actors providing humanitarian assistance. It is important to note that most of the arguments in rebuilding states after war are dominated by socio-economic and political reconstruction that targets broader society. Debates on the need to target individuals (their victim-hood and needs related to the same) are more recent within claims and interventions for post-conflict reconstruction. Indeed, so much debate on victimhood surrounded the plight of direct victims and side-lined the indirect ones such as children born out of that war as illustrated in the model below:

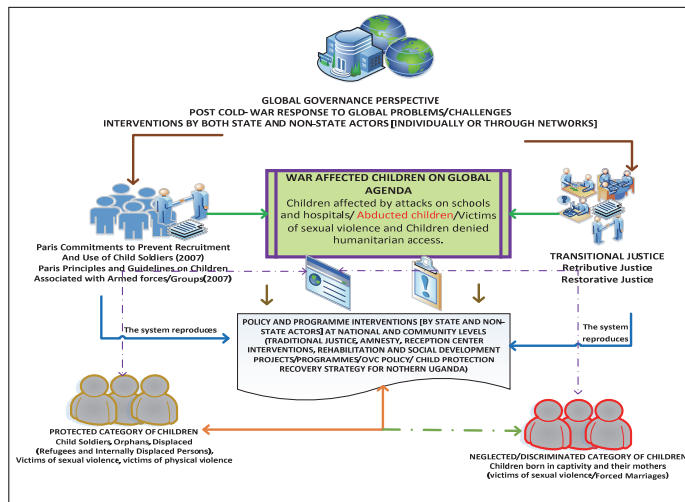


Figure 1: A conceptual Framework (Akullo, 2023)

The model illustrates that at a national or local level, implementation of both transitional justice and the Paris Principles and Guidelines relies on various actors and strategies adopted to suit the context and choice of a particular state. The United Nations normative approach provides for choice among various mechanisms for the adoption to suit the transitional justice needs of a country⁴. In Uganda, policies, programmes and projects were designed which involved government (the army and civilian officials), non-government actors and the community. These assisted persons returning from captivity (former child soldiers and their children) to reintegrate into the community. The

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/oct/22/2> Accessed on 18/3/2023

⁴ http://www.unrol.org/article.aspx?article_id=29 accessed on 12/08/2015

interventions assisted various returning persons (commonly referred to as Formerly Abducted Persons to resettle and start a new life, the categories presented in the left bottom part labelled 'protected category of children' but others have since return experienced reintegration (mothers of children born in captivity) and integration (the children born in captivity) challenges. They are marked as 'Neglected/Discriminated Category of Children' on the bottom right.

It was not until 2007, that Apio (2007) provided a ground-breaking thesis on the need to address the forgotten children born of war was significant for both academic analysis of this category of war-affected children, as well as the increased interventions targeting them in Uganda. Much of the focus has been on these children, often studied along with their mothers - females/girls that had been abducted by the Lords' Resistance Army (LRA) rebels in Uganda (Atim et al., 2018; Bergmans, 2017; Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2015; Ochen, 2015). The focus tends to be on the two areas that were the epicenter of the war - Acholi and Lango. This has resulted in sub-regions like Teso, that were not at the epicenter of the LRA war as much as Acholi and Lango, at the margins of analysis and prospective interventions that require information (statistics and empirical data).

Akullo (2019) observes in her thesis, that integration challenges for children born of war exist in Teso, as is the case in Acholi and Lango. In this paper, I argue that, from a social justice perspective, being on the margins may reflect a semblance of non-recognition as essential actors with agency, when matters of integration, reintegration and transitional justice are being discussed and addressed. Akullo (2019) provides insight into the conceptual differentiation between reintegration and integration, in an attempt to help understand how mothers and children end up in situations of stigma and discrimination, following their return from LRA captivity. She also explains the concept of "sustainable integration" from a long-term ability to have a livelihood, respect on the basis of dignity and be able to survive in the new areas of post-captivity-habitation. She also argues for the need to ensure the recognition of children born of war, as persons with agency, as a precursor for their potential benefit from re-distributive benefits such as reparations reparations that may possibly emerge after the trial of Ongwen at the Hague.

This article conceptualizes children born of war as minors born out of either consensual relationships or sexual violence involving women and armed soldiers within the context of war (Mochmann, 2008). The fathers may be enemy soldiers, occupying forces, peacekeeping forces or children of child soldiers. In Uganda, these children include: those born to child soldiers, those born to females/girls that were abducted, those born to LRA sexually violated females in IDP camps and those fathered by government forces who sexually violated or were in consensual relationships with women in IDP camps (Apio, 2007; UNOHCHR&UNHRC, 2011). Of the three categories, those born to abducted females have received the most advocacy and academic attention (Akullo, 2019). Part of the reason is the vast amount of national and global concern towards their parents (mothers) as a protected category of war-affected children. Although their parents are no longer children, at the time of abduction they were - an argument that partly surrounds debates around mitigating factors for criminal proceedings in cases such as Kwoyelo (Porter & Macdonald, 2016) and Ongwen (The Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen, 2016). The second reason for less attention being given to the other two categories is the complexity in conducting research around those who were fathered by government forces at a time when the regime is still in power (Akullo, 2019; Bergmans, 2017).

2. Methodology

The research from which this paper was extracted used a case study design (Anderson, 1993; Bryman, 1988; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2014) as it explored the integration of these children in its natural setting. Selected places in Teso as some of the areas that were victimized by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) abduction in Uganda were consulted. Other empirical studies that have used case study designs when researching these children include Apio (2010), Atingo (2008), Ochen (2013) and Stewart (2017). Using interviews, focus group discussions and notes taken in a field diary, information was obtained from research participants between July and September 2016. Participants

were purposely selected for their knowledge of integration and transitional justice. They included: security officials (former local militia), community leaders, authorities in academic institutions, NGOs and community members. The field data was thematically analysed for content useful for understanding integration and transitional justice.

In order to justify the need for attention to be extended to other areas that have received less analytical attention, and interventions that target mothers of children born of war and their children, this paper discusses what it is about the region that is similar to Acholi and Lango. It then extends these known narratives and discourses by highlighting additional knowledge derived from the analysis of the situation in Teso Sub-region.

2.1 Rape as a breach of social harmony

The respondents in Teso discussed rape or sexual violence suffered by the females from the sub-region as a crime that disrupted the social order. Using the example of rape among the Acholi, Porter (2013) noted that most victims of rape are unwilling to disclose their experience because of shame and the community's interpretation and response to the vice. For Porter (2013), rape or sexual violence is regarded a disruption of social harmony rather than a crime. Moreover, the female victims have limited agency in addressing the vice, when due to the patriarchal nature of society, the males tackle the issue.

Apart from children born to abducted females, there are other categories of children born of war to non-abducted females (Victims of war-related sexual violence in internally displaced people's camps). However, these are not easily identified, nor is there knowledge of their experience stigma and discrimination as children fathered by armed soldiers. One of the respondents from Teso (a former head of the arrow boys), framed the integration challenges of those born in captivity as a 'question of identity' in the context of the patriarchal structure of the Teso. The paternity of these children and the context within which they were born makes them non-members of their maternal communities, subsequently leads to their exclusion and discrimination. This, however, is not the case for those born to non-abducted females, because the inability of the community to identify their fathers makes them have what he refers to as 'identity confidence'.

Silence over rape or sexual violence emerged in Teso as well. This silence prevented females who returned from captivity from disclosing what happened to them, or even wanting to discuss the paternity of their children when found pregnant or with a child in the community. One of the respondents argued that knowledge that one was raped during the insurgency in Teso, or was held as sexual slave in captivity meant that such a female risked being socially isolated. Examples of phrases used to describe stigma and discrimination in Teso included: 'outcasts', 'murderers', 'don't fit in', 'are not free people', 'they are short tempered', and 'cannot interact with you on something for long' (Akullo, 2019)

2.2 Government's response as a form of rescue

Stewart's (2017) thesis on rescue explains that government action towards enabling reintegration of the formerly abducted reflects acts of rescue synonymous with the State as a masculine entity charged with protecting its citizens. Such protection is similar to how a father would protect his children and wife. She compares her argument to that of Das (2007) in the case of India and Pakistan's response to mothers of children born of war and their children. In both cases, the State made decisions regarding the reintegration and integration of mothers of children born of war and their children respectively. These decisions did not include a consultation and inclusion of their views as persons with agency. Instead, having the women settle back into communities that they once belonged to was seen as a way or rescuing them from the situations that had emerged due to the war and ensuring that order was restored. This order necessitated that the family structure was restored to its natural order. Furthermore, Stewart (2017) describes such acts of rescue as a spectacle

of the 'heroic' actions of government and a focus on the formerly abducted. This may be interpreted as a response to the initial failure to protect them from abduction.

The research participants from Teso confirmed this perspective in both the focus group discussion held and interviews. A number of former local militias in the 'arrow brigade' were part of the group. Their interaction with the formerly abducted participants clearly portrayed a display of their efforts as a brigade and the continued protection of these persons after returning from captivity. In interviews too, reference to 'we rescued them', 'we worked with government forces to rescue' "we picked them from Rachele, GUSCO and World Vision and helped them reintegrate" were common. Problematic with the approach that predominantly focuses on the formerly abducted among those returning from LRA captivity is that these children were overlooked while providing support for reintegration (Apio, 2007). A similar argument in relation to neglecting children born of war by focusing on their mothers was advanced by Carpenter (2010) and Seto (2013). Akullo (2019) argues that in the case of Uganda, the predominant focus on the mothers of these children rendered them appendages, a similar description as 'secondary victims' provided by (Carpenter, 2007; Clark, 2014; Seto, 2013). Hence, all these scholars argue for specific focus on children born of war. Furthermore, Akullo (2019) and Neenan (2017) argue that the specific targeting of these children needs to take into consideration that many may still be under the custody of their mother – hence the need to broaden support in practice, to both mothers and children.

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2.4 *The discourse on the transmission of trauma*

The argument that trauma is transmitted from a mother to her child or children is advanced by Denov (2015). According to this argument, the father of children born in captivity possess 'bad blood' or 'evil spirits' responsible for influencing them into committing atrocities. Communities therefore believe that such traits are transmitted through the father's DNA right into that of their children. Such transmission would be responsible for the high possibilities that such a child may replicate the behavior of his or her father.

In Teso sub-region, two respondents in the study strongly defended this view. Regardless of their exposure and academic qualification, they argued that bad traits such as those that the LRA rebels have are transferred by blood to the child that such a rebel fathers. The conversation below depicts that the mother who was sexually exploited by the rebels carries a curse or bad trait that is later on transmitted to children that are conceived by her, whether or not the father of those children is a rebel (Akullo, 2019). This view corroborates the perspective on the transmission of trauma, or stigma in this case, not only to children fathered by the LRA, but also those whose mother happens to once have been a victim of sexual violence committed by the LRA (Stewart, 2017; Bergmans, 2017). Hence, there is need to protect not only children born in captivity and their mothers, but children who are born after captivity. One way of ensuring such protection is by pushing for respect (Akullo, 2019). Drawing upon arguments made by Honneth (1995), she argues that ensuring respect is one way of countering stigma. It pushed for the acknowledgement of the right to dignity of all persons, regardless of their identity or historical background. Therefore, when such is the case, those pushing for respect advocate for community's view of these mothers and all children associated with them, as persons whose plight was beyond their liking and in need of respect as human beings. Important to note however, the deeply rooted thoughts on transmission may take a while to counter. Nonetheless, with experiences dealing with HIV/AIDS related stigma in Uganda, such efforts too can register some positive strides.

2.5 *Additional lessons on children born of war emerging from Teso sub-region*

In addition to supporting the existing arguments and theses explained above, lessons learned from researching the integration of children born to formerly abducted females from Teso adds to existing knowledge. The additions are essential for broadening the understanding of children born of war in Uganda. They include: children born in captivity as a hidden population; these children being a reminder of abducted children still in captivity or missing; concerns of responsibility for these children and the family as a safe space for integration. These are explained in the sub-sections that follow.

2.6 *Children born in captivity as a hidden population*

Children born in captivity who returned with mothers originally from places in Teso are not easy to come by. Some of them may easily be traced through from Obalanga Human Rights Health Care Association (OCHER), a community based organisation that partnered with Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) and World Vision and GUSCO in Acholi and Rachele in Lango sub-regions. However, research participants noted that tracing these children after they return from captivity and their mothers are reintegrated is a challenge due to the experiences of stigma and discrimination. In addition, some of the mothers face social stigma and discrimination when they return to a disrupted family structure causes them to relocate to other places.

It is important to explain that relocation to other places was not unique to Teso sub-region only. The same occurs in Acholi (Atim et al., 2018; Bergmans, 2017; Stewart, 2017) and Lango (Apio, 2016) sub-regions. Using the argument of 'push and pull' factors in migration (Lee, 1966), the movement of these children and their mothers from their initial locations to others is influenced by

unbearable circumstances in their first point of settlement and the anticipation that life in their destination could be much better. In the excerpt below, a case of relocation was explained by a respondent who was influential in aiding the local militia (arrow boys) that fought against the LRA as well as enabling reintegration through partnership with Rachelle and World Vision:

In Teso, I came across not more than five (formerly abducted females). One is called Helen. She was abducted and (following her return) we got her desperate in Soroti town. By the time she came back, she found that her mother had died. Her sister had also committed suicide. Her uncles had even sold the little land where they were staying so she didn't have anywhere to stay. Some donors from Canada gave two million shilling to assist Helen in starting a basic business. After sometime she went either towards the landing site or somewhere. I have taken two to three years without seeing her.

Relocation was justified as a means of ensuring that the people involved move to new locations where their identity is unknown, making them less susceptible to experiences of stigma and discrimination from community members. While this is so, the reality of life in the new areas requires follow up with methodologies suitable for researching such 'hidden populations. The group that relocates is a 'hidden population', because it is not at all certain what the nature of their reintegration/integration is.

2.7 Children born of war as by-standers in post-conflict civil -military relations

Although this is not explicitly discussed in most of the literature, concerns over civil-military relations in the LRA post-conflict society have centered around issues of reintegration. Most of the public discourse reflect the military (UPDF), despite some acknowledgement of war-related human rights violations, as significant actors in maintaining the relative peace realized after the cessation of hostilities between Uganda and the LRA in 2006. The implementation of Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration positioned government and the UPDF as significant actors in enabling the return and cooperation with other non-governmental actors in enabling the reintegration of persons formerly associated with the LRA (Akello, 2013; Akullo, 2019; Carlson & Mazurana, 2008).

In Teso, research participants acknowledged the role played by the national military forces in collaboration with GUSCO and CPA in the return and reintegration of affected persons in Teso. In addition, the collaboration between government forces and the local militia (Arrow boys) was vital in ensuring the protection of persons in Teso (Akullo, 2019). Among beneficiary communities, research participants argue, increased confidence among many members of the community in considering armed forces such as these as partners in their quest for security and development. This experience and view reflect arguments on the need for cooperation between civilians and the military as explained by Janowitz (1960) and Schiff (1995). Both argue that since the military come out of society, it is essential that these two sectors of the civil military intersecting circles cooperate with each other.

Indeed, the Arrow boys in Teso, like the Amuka in Lango, were demobilized, albeit temporarily, as a community approach to boost government military security in the two sub-regions. Following cessation of hostilities, they were demobilized. However, in Teso, focus group participants communicated strong concern in ensuring sustainable peace in Teso and argued for the need for transitional justice implementation not to marginalize the area, by paying more attention on Acholi and Lango agency. Responses from Teso, Acholi and Lango suggest that children born in captivity are more of bystanders and yet they ought to be included in these debates.

In cases where allegations of children born of war to government forces are brought to the fore, not much discussions prevail in political and legal discourses around the subject (Akullo, 2019). As it is argued, it takes two to tango). What empirical data on children born to LRA war indicates, is a "silence" over the pace of these children in civil-military relations relating to the post-war northern Uganda. They are only presented as evidence of the challenges (isn't this in itself injustice??) involved in hiding non-state military actors responsible for war-related crimes - in this case, war-related sexual

violence.

It may be important for analysts to explore this category of children in civil-military relations, especially if there exists (sentence not flowing around here) a scenario (as seems to be depicted in literature on the LRA) where some harbour sentiments of rejection leading them to desire to re-join non-military forces. The impact of prospective reactions on communities that rejected them as matters that need to be thought through. The above argument or claim, would not dispute the dominant discourse of civil-military relations in Africa being centered around the issue of *coup d'tats* (Khisra and Day, 2020)

2.8 Children born in captivity: a reminder of abducted children still in captivity or missing

A respondent from Lwala Girls Secondary School, one of the schools in Teso sub-region whose students were abducted by the LRA, likened the plight of children born in captivity and their mothers as linked to the community's expression of their concerns over missing children. The respondent argued that there are a number of children – both boys and girls – who were abducted by the LRA and have never returned. Their status, alive or dead, is unknown and this bothers their relatives and the community members. Hence, for those whose relatives never returned, seeing the children born in captivity or the formerly abducted, ignites such concerns and it serves as a ground for resentment leading to stigma and discrimination.

Other actors who have expressed concern over missing persons linked to the LRA war include UNICEF⁵ and the international committee of the Red Cross. The latter supports 350 families of missing persons in Kitgum district.⁶ As can be observed in the excerpt below, one of the social workers argued that any efforts seeking for justice linked to the LRA war need to ensure that parents of such missing children's transitional justice concerns are met.

I am looking at it at a critical point because as we are here, some of these children who were abducted are nowhere to be seen. They have not come back. There is still that bitter sense from the respective parents, or the guardians who are still alive...Whereas we look at reconciliation, there is still something missing. There is still a demand by some of those families whose children have not come back. Wherein, they are even asking for compensation, for the abducted children who have not come back (Focus group participant).

2.9 Children born of war and reparations claims

Reparations are one among many transitional justice options that a country (society) emerging from a history of war-related crimes may adopt as a remedy to violations. The need for reparations for children born of war and their mothers, for the Teso research participants, is an agenda that cannot be separated from broader transitional justice needs of the Teso community. Uganda's transitional justice debate has predominantly focused on binary choice between peace and justice (Allen, 2006; Baines, 2003; Branch, 2005, 2007). The peace versus justice debate notwithstanding, Huyse (2008) argues for the need to transcend such binary focus and adopt options that support both. This is because while some options may be preferred at a particular point in time, others may appeal to communities and victims at a later point. By the time of writing, Uganda has not yet passed a law on Transitional Justice. What exists is a draft transitional justice policy approved by cabinet in 2019⁷.

The participants from Teso (especially those in the focus group) seemed to conceptualize transitional justice, as an agenda that pursues the interests and meanings of the concept fronted by the Acholi. For them, the agenda seems to prefer traditional justice practices; the trials in Uganda

⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/newsline/02pro6lra.html> (accessed 27/10/2018).

⁶ See <https://ugandaradionetwork.com/story/icrc-introduces-program-to-comfort-families-of-missing-persons> (accessed 27/10/2018).

⁷ See: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2019/07/08/transitional-justice-and-the-implementation-gap-in-uganda/>

(kwoyelo) and the Hague (Ongwen); and suggestions for truth and reconciliation. While not disregarding the importance of these processes, there was a general claim that reparations, when instituted, need to be for everybody. This is because the LRA war affected various categories of persons, albeit, in different ways and magnitudes.

3. Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, the case of Teso is important because it provides a classic example of a case that justifies a number of the existing narratives and discourses on Uganda's children born in captivity. Furthermore, they add to existing literature on Uganda's children born in captivity by bringing to light other perspectives. Hence, a reading of this paper provides deeper insight into the plight of Uganda's children born in captivity. It is also helpful for doing a comparative analysis with similar children in other sub-regions (Acholi and Lango) where they have been studied.

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