

The figure of the abducted Acholi girl: nation-building, gender, and children born into the LRA in Uganda*

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ABSTRACT

Based on analysis of newspapers and secondary sources, this article examines the gendered construction of the national imagery of the war between the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in an effort to expand current conceptual understanding of the exclusion experienced by children born of forced marriage inside the LRA. Uganda developed as a militarised and masculine post-colony and yet nation-building for President Museveni involved crafting a national imagery that drew upon development discourses of gender and children to position himself as the benevolent father of the nation. Invoking Veena Das' 'figure of the abducted woman', I argue that the Ugandan government mobilised the figure of the abducted Acholi girl to legitimise both its governance and the war. The article concludes that the resulting narrative provided no legitimate social or political space in the national imagery for the children of the abducted girls.

Keywords: Uganda; Lord's Resistance Army; militarised masculinity; nation-building; wartime sexual violence; child soldiers; forced marriage; born of war.

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INTRODUCTION

The war in northern Uganda began in 1986, with the Ugandan army fighting what would become the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). By the time the war shifted into neighbouring countries at the end of 2006, the LRA had abducted between 24,000 to 38,000 children and 28,000 to 37,000 adults to serve as porters, soldiers, domestic servants and 'wives' (Pham *et al.* 2009; Baines 2011). Forced marriage-like relations inside the LRA led to the conception of thousands.¹ Findings from my longitudinal empirical study spanning five years with children born into the LRA² show that they feel socially marginalised in their post-conflict communities (Stewart 2015, 2020). Research with and about these and other 'children born of war'³ provides important analysis of their lives in their immediate social contexts, highlighting the urgency of their protection and justice needs. This article represents my effort to make sense of the children's experiences in relation to larger systems and processes of power beyond their immediate contexts. Specifically, I argue that the Ugandan government's mobilisation of a gendered narrative of the war and nation provides no legitimate social or political space in the national imagery for the children of the abducted girls. As such, this article situates the experiences of the children as a national and international problem of accountability and responsibility with regards to the war from which they were born. My hope is that this analysis will inform more effective advocacy and result in greater support for the wellbeing of the surviving children and their mothers in northern Uganda. Furthermore, I hope that this innovative framing of the children's experiences of exclusion will inform future research about and interventions in support of children born of wartime sexual violence and their mothers in other contexts.

Existing research examining the regulation of sexual relations within the LRA illustrates how the female body was central to the nation-building project of leader Joseph Kony (Baines 2014). The analysis presented below is alternatively situated in relation to the nation-building agenda of the president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni. Veena Das suggests that during the Partition of India, the female body 'became a sign through which men communicated with each other' (Das 1996: 56). Similarly in Uganda, the centrality of girls' sexuality in the war suggests a power struggle fought upon girls' bodies. Both leaders used the sexuality of abducted ethnic Acholi girls to their own ends. Kony used them as reproducers of his nation, as actively sexual bodies (Baines 2014). Meanwhile, I argue, Museveni used their sexuality to construct them as vulnerable and in need of his masculine, paternal protection. This article analyses Museveni's gendered nation-building and identifies the complex and historically informed systems and structures of power responsible for the inception of the war and its ongoing legacy, including the exclusion of children born into the LRA.

While this article is part of a larger five-year study that employed primarily qualitative methods with 29 children born into the LRA, their mothers, and

several community stakeholders (Stewart 2017), the following research involved discourse analysis of contemporaneous Ugandan newspaper articles⁴ and Museveni's 1997 memoir, as well as secondary source research. The first part of this article offers a historical account of the war up to its current status. The next section draws on scholarship about gender and nation-building to understand the operation of militarised masculinities in the post-colony. I then apply this framework to the case of Uganda and argue that the Ugandan state used narratives of development and childhood to craft its national and international image as a modern nation. Then, the article considers how gender shaped narratives about the war. Finally, I discuss these narratives and how the politicisation of the sexuality of Acholi girls led to the exclusion of children born into the LRA from the national narrative about the war and consequently from social and political legitimacy.

THE WAR

Imperial British control laid the social, economic and political foundations that enabled the lengthy conflict in northern Uganda. The divide and rule approach identified the northern Acholi as preferable for police and military service and the southern Bagandan for economic development (Atkinson 1994; Amonge 2014). Transition from a divided colony to a militarised post-colony further entrenched regional divisions and reinforced portrayals of the Acholi people as inherently violent, primitive and 'war like' and southerners as progressive, better educated, and integrated into the national economy (Finnström 2008; Dolan 2009).

The colonial history of divisive, militarised rule continued into independence with the first president of Uganda and arguably continues to this day. Almost two decades after independence, Yoweri Museveni helped overthrow Idi Amin in 1979, then led a guerrilla force called the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) in opposition to the new government. In early 1986, the NRM/A seized state power from an Acholi president and Museveni appointed himself president and head of the army. Acholi soldiers from the previous government immediately fled north and regrouped as the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA) to fight the NRA's efforts to control the north. At the same time, the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) began under the leadership of a spirit medium, Alice Lakwena. Both the UPDA and HSM fought the NRA and in 1988 Lakwena fled to Kenya. The remnants regrouped as the Lord's Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony, a former UPDA fighter (Behrend 1999).

The NRA counterinsurgency targeted the Acholi population, an arguably misguided conflation that the majority of the Acholi supported the LRA (for example, see Justice and Reconciliation Project 2013) and also revenge for the atrocities committed by Acholi soldiers in the 1985 Luwero war (Finnstrom 2008). During the war's early years, the NRA committed gross crimes against the Acholi population: forcible displacement of 100,000 people, stealing cattle, burning homes, raping men and women, and hundreds

of extrajudicial executions. Meanwhile, the LRA felt betrayed by many Acholi and consequently punished those it believed were collaborating with the government by killing and maiming (Allen & Vlassenroot 2010). The LRA soon began abducting (mostly) Acholi children and young people to fill its ranks, but also to build itself against what Kony thought was Acholi moral impurity, and forced marriage became the norm (Baines 2014). This was the early stage of the LRA's nation-building project. Meanwhile, after the initial period of attacks on the civilian population, the NRA moved into a more supposedly protective role. Government and military tactics to oppress, however, simply became more insidious under the weak guise of protection (Branch 2014), which Chris Dolan (2009) argues constituted a form of 'social torture'.

Peace talks at various points throughout the war failed and after the last attempt to bring an end to the war in late 2006, the LRA moved into neighbouring countries, where government forces continued to pursue them (Atkinson 2009). In 2017, Museveni announced the withdrawal of troops and end of the African Union force tasked to find Kony. Communities in northern Uganda meanwhile continue to come to terms with the losses and injustices endured throughout the war. While many suggest that people are 'forgetting the war' (Stewart 2017: 185), research suggests that the violence and insecurity continue in covert ways. A poignant example of this ongoing violence and insecurity is manifested as the lived experiences of exclusion of children born into the LRA, including stigmatisation and structural violence that are rooted in their pasts. I have demonstrated elsewhere (Stewart 2020), for example, that the children are sometimes held accountable for their fathers' assumed guilt, resulting in physical, verbal and/or emotional rejection from the places of their everyday lives, such as school. In the next section, I employ a historical lens to expose the larger systems and structures involved in producing these lived experiences of exclusion.

GENDER AND THE MILITARISATION OF THE POST-COLONY

The exclusion of children born into the LRA has its roots in the gendering and militarism of colonialism in Uganda. In what follows, I explain how colonisation across Africa produced and perpetuated into independence a militarised masculine form of governance, which facilitated the violence inflicted on the Acholi and resulted in a gendered narrative about the war that left no legitimate social or political space for children born into the LRA.

These historical roots begin with the Western family trope, which was indispensable in the legitimisation of imperial social hierarchies, as though it were natural to any social grouping. As Frantz Fanon (1967) explains, the imperial family construct relegated colonised men, women and children to the subordinated space held for women and children, while the colonial powers represented the authoritarian father. Recognising the masculine power embodied by colonialists, some African men became 'complete replica[s] of the white man' (Fanon 1967: 23) and imposed authority over other Africans around

them. In much the same way, the colonies moved into a nationhood that sanctioned hegemonic masculinity where men, women and children had different access to resources and rights and in which the father of the nation authoritatively oversaw his wife (the nation) and children (his subjects) (McClintock 1995). Such configurations of masculine power produced dictators who felt unaccountable to others (p'Bitek 1967), which contrasts with the moral relationality that is fundamental to 'African belief', as described by Acholi scholar Okot p'Bitek (1986: 19). The Acholi society, p'Bitek explains, is sustained through participation in which each person is bound by the moral responsibilities of their social relationships as mother, father, daughter, son, uncle, grandfather, and so on.

The hegemonic power of the authoritarian father of the nation is maintained via militarisation, which Cynthia Enloe insists occurs through 'the gendered workings of power' (Enloe 1995: 26). She and others (Nagel 1998; Cockburn 2010) demonstrate common processes of inculcation of a model of hypermasculinity in militaries around the world. Given that colonialism and nationalism in Africa were structured through a gender hierarchy that is predicated on the power and authority of men over women and children, and more symbolically of masculinity over femininity, institutionalisation of a post-colonial militarised masculinity in the state is not surprising.

Masculinities and femininities are sets of practices that 'occur across space and over time and are taken up and enacted collectively by groups, communities, and societies' (Schippers 2007: 91). Carried out over time and across space, the collective embodiment of the practices of a model of masculinity in a society make it hegemonic because it serves the interests of one group over the other (Connell 2005). More broadly, a hegemonic gender model provides a rationale for the structure of social organisation at all levels, from the self to global relations of domination. And while hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily violence-based, the necessary gendered power relations are most commonly and effectively sustained by invoking violence as a mechanism of hegemony (Myrttinen *et al.* 2017).

In a context of militarised masculinity, military violence maintains and legitimises the power of the state. In her discussion of gang rape during the Peruvian war, Kimberly Theidon concludes that militarisation requires a form of hypermasculinity that is constructed not only by rejecting any characteristics considered to be feminine, but by 'scorning the feminine' (Theidon 2007: 472). Rape, she found, established hierarchies of power among soldiers and between armed groups and civilian populations. It facilitated this erasure of the feminine among those armed, while forcing the feminine upon the population, most notably emasculating men. Chris Dolan (2002) also points to the close interrelation of gender and militarisation whereby the hegemonic model of militarised masculinity is reinforced by the violence of armed conflict while simultaneously contributing to the violence.

In the context of Africa in particular, Kopano Ratele (2012) argues that colonial aggression made violence unexceptional, whether direct and visible or

quiet and indirect, referring to structural violence during colonialism up to now. Poor and unjust economic, political and cultural conditions can become resources for the reproduction of violent masculinities while causing the ‘collapse of alternative masculinities’ (Dolan 2002). Violence is a continuum and ‘includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value’ of victims (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 1). Sometimes overt and public and other times invisible and privately experienced, violence is always mediated by a dichotomy between legitimate/illegitimate. A militarised state will claim to use legitimate violence, but the illegitimate invisible structural violence is fundamental to the process of the militarisation of masculinities across the continent.

Applying these ideas about the rise and functioning of a militarised state to the case of this article, Uganda becomes recognisable as a militarised masculine state, drawing power from the structural violence that emasculated and infantilised northern Uganda historically and through the war. The concept of emasculation as used here is understood in the context of the masculine state, which is structured upon the imperial family hierarchy, as outlined by Fanon. While the term emasculation is founded on the problematic premise that feminisation is inherently negative (Schultz 2018), in this context of the imperial family hierarchy, feminisation and thus emasculation is part of the process of infantilisation because it refers to the process of subordinating men to the dominance of the authoritarian father figure of the nation. The next section examines Uganda as a militarised state and how it operated under the guise of a legitimate modern national imagery by deploying narratives of development and childhood.

GENDER, CHILDREN, AND THE NATIONAL IMAGERY

As political scientist Claude Welch observed of Uganda in 1967, ‘Most of the trappings of the colonial period were simply carried over’ (Welch 1967: 309). The colonial regime in Uganda had established a strong force prior to independence in 1962 with the aim of crushing opposition to colonialism. A government report in 1954 read: ‘The highest priority is to be given to the strengthening of the Uganda Police Force’ (Mukherjee 1985: 248). Mahmood Mamdani links the colonial military apparatus to the post-independence militarisation of the state: ‘[T]he repressive machinery of the state, in particular the army, the police, and the security services had been groomed and sustained by Britain’ (Mamdani 1983: 28). These legacies, A. Kasozi writes, facilitated the instability in which ‘political violence, carried out by the military, the police, and other agents of state, became an accepted means of attaining political goals and resolving internal political conflict’ (Kasozi 1994: 12). Independence was thus not only a continuation of colonial institutions but also of colonial-like rule.

Uganda’s post-independence leaders have been shown to be opportunistic elites who enabled the consolidation of British neo-colonial control (Mamdani 1996). In his examination of power in the post-colony, Mbembe (2001) explains that state power was usually embodied by a single person. In Uganda, Rebecca

Tapscott (2018: S123) explains that Museveni effectively ‘fus[ed] the military, the NRM regime, and the Ugandan state’ whereby he serves as both president and head of the military, while controlling all levels of social organisation in ways that reinforce the hierarchy modelled on colonial patriarchy.

Museveni sought legitimacy both domestically and internationally via a national imagery he crafted using narratives of development and childhood. Shortly after taking power, Museveni launched into his nation-building project by embracing international development programmes. Uganda quickly became a favourite among Western donors and institutions. A Human Rights Watch report stated, for example, ‘The World Bank has been one of the strongest international supporters of President Museveni’ (HRW 1999: 151). A 1996 report sponsored by the Ugandan government referred to the president as ‘the darling of the western countries’, adding that Western sources see Uganda as ‘a success story of the structural adjustment programmes’ of the IMF (Mugaju 1996: 61). Reflecting the most lucrative contemporary development narratives, Museveni drew attention to the state’s inclusion of women. Also, by the mid-1990s, children became central to the nation’s appearance as modernising.

The Museveni regime, I suggest, used this development rhetoric to maintain the war and international donor income (Atkinson 2009). The government’s violent expressions of power, however, contradicted the national imagery that Museveni presented both at home and internationally. State-sanctioned violence reflected the colonial patriarchal structure that treated the colonised, in this case the Acholi, as children under the violent authority of the figure of the head of household. Museveni used these narratives of gender and children to emphasise his status as father of the nation. The actual practice of violent authority left the Acholi emasculated and infused with a militarised hegemonic model of masculinity that disrupted social harmony.⁵

Feminist scholarship tells us that the nation is an inherently gendered construct. The state is masculine, exerting control over the feminine entity. The idea of a nation in the project of nation-building ‘typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope’ (Enloe 2014: 93) whereby men represent the builders and ruler and women are symbolically the flesh, soil, mother, home, and culture of the nation. Reflecting this very sentiment, in his memoir Museveni (1997: 210) referred to the nation as ‘this mother of ours’. The Ugandan women’s national anthem refers to women as hardworking mothers of the nation and ‘Mothers of baby Uganda’ (Cheney 2007: 123). In nationalist discourse, women are expected to be the biological, cultural, and ideological reproducers and also responsible for demarcating ethnic or national boundaries. Women entered the nationalist imaginary not as political subjects, but as mothers and wives. Uganda was no different.

By the time of the NRA/M’s coup in 1986, the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace had just come to an end in 1985 and Women in Development was common rhetoric in the field of international

development and aid, which aimed to highlight women's essential role in development. By the end of the 1980s it was replaced with Gender and Development, an approach that targeted unequal gender relations, and was followed by gender mainstreaming by the 1990s, which was a strategy to make gender central to all development considerations. As Museveni forged lucrative international alliances, he accepted and followed, at least on paper, the impulse of the mainstream international women's movement and development rhetoric to improve women's conditions.

Feminists writing about nationalism suggest that nation-building requires women to be reproducers of ideologies and citizens (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1992; Mayer 2012). The regional and international legitimacy of Uganda as an independent nation was determined through its development, which was (and arguably still is) evidenced in large part on women's bodies. The Ugandan government used women to portray modernisation in Uganda with few actual gains that could be credited to the state. Government still expected women to maintain their social role and place in society, while it benefited from the accolades—for example, for allowing women to visibly occupy jobs in government. A 1996 state-sanctioned report stated, 'The NRM has recognised the pivotal role that women play in the national development process', adding that women were expected to contribute toward development, but their most important role remained in the family: 'Women must therefore take up the challenge to contribute to the modernisation and transformation of their country' and then, 'Equally important to mention ... [t]he strategy must avoid disruption and dislocation of cherished and fundamental institutions like the family on which the future survival of humankind depends' (Mugaju 1999: 66). The female in Uganda, thus, embodied simultaneously the traditional and the modern, but still under the control of men who benefited from the national rhetoric that 'guarantees women's inferiority, for the favored members of the nation—the loyal sons—[who] must defend our women's "purity," as well as the "moral code" of the nation' (Mayer 2012: 10).

By the mid-1990s, children also became central to the nation's modernising imagery. The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out the specific rights for children universally (everyone under 18), with consideration for their particular vulnerabilities and dependence that separate them from adults. In response to the cultural conflict over the Western conceptualisations of children's rights, the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) adopted its own African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Children (ACRWC), reflecting African values. In Uganda, The Children Act passed in the national legislature in 1997 and supported all the rights of children laid out in the UNCRC and ACRWC 'with appropriate modifications to suit the circumstances in Uganda' (S.3, 4.c.).

For Uganda as a nation whose leadership has firmly sided with ideas of Western development discourse, the narrative of global rights for children was necessarily prominent. Museveni refers to development as the metamorphosis of a butterfly or cockroach. He explains that 'in its metamorphosis[,] society in Europe has gone through several stages in order to reach its present state,

just as a butterfly or cockroach does ... The problem with Africa is that not only has its society not metamorphosed, it has actually regressed' (Museveni 1997: 188). He then states that to 'bring about modernisation', African leaders must 'monetize the whole economy... [to] undermine the subsistence existence of most Africans' (1997: 188). In order to modernise, he explains, they need 'educated manpower ... We must send all our children to school' (1997: 199–200). This economic focus underpinned Museveni's argument for a single party democracy for the first ten years of his presidency – it was necessary, he argued, to combat sectarian divisions in the country because political parties favour ethnic or regional interests, rather than the interests of the nation as a whole. This effort to nationalise politics required development of the economy, or in his words, 'the crystallisation of socio-economic groups on which we can base healthy political parties' (1997: 195).

This authoritarian practice of a single party helped situate Museveni as father of the nation. Some claimed (Okuku 2002) this was a thinly veiled elite monopoly of political power favouring a collection of ethnic and religious groups to the exclusion of others under the power of a father figure. Prior to national elections in 2016, the NRM tweeted 'True father of the nation' with photos of Museveni playing with two small children. In 2015, an NRM umbrella group crowned Museveni as '*Baba Ya Taifa*' or 'Father of the Nation' in recognition of his liberation struggle and development and security efforts (*Chimp Reports* 18.4.2015).

In her ethnography of the political identity of childhood in Uganda, Kristen Cheney (2007) suggests the nation's children embody Museveni's metamorphosing. Based on her fieldwork carried out in 2000–2001, Cheney observed that children occupy a highly symbolic place in the nation-building narrative. The education of children was seen as a fundamental means of achieving development, symbolising the state's apparent faith in the IMF's Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) which called for broader investment in primary education as a means of fuelling economic growth (World Bank 1991). As Museveni wrote in 2000, 'By educating every child, we are investing in our children. By investing in children, we are empowering our people' (Cheney 2007: 51). The NRM recognised schools as crucial sites for social reproduction, and targeted primary school students 'for assimilation into the national discourse', promoting children's collective identities as 'the pillars of tomorrow's Uganda' (Cheney 2003: 80), a refrain in the national youth anthem.

Political will, however, was still largely limited to rhetoric, much like the empowerment of women. For instance, Museveni introduced Universal Primary Education in 1997, but in the words of Dolan, 'Universal Primary Education is by no means universal' (Dolan 2002: 70). All children are expected to present in Western-style school uniforms (just one of the many costly requirements to attend school) to effectively represent 'the next generation of civilized people' (Moran 2012: 120).

Ideological inconsistencies also suggest a pragmatic instrumentalisation of Western development goals, as opposed to a true embrace of Western values.

For example, in 2003, Museveni referred the LRA to the International Criminal Court (ICC), but in the past decade he has attacked the legitimacy of the ICC, expressing a decisively pan-African position (Mwesigire 2014). This contrast gives credence to arguments that Museveni's LRA referral represented a strategy to legitimise his military campaign (Ojok 2020). Also more recently, Museveni contradicted his previous embrace of the liberal social values of Western development agendas when he angrily argued that the imposition of Western values threaten 'the core African values on the family' as he signed the Anti Homosexuality Law (Mwesigire 2014).

Despite the inconsistencies, I suggest that by linking children with development, Museveni pragmatically inscribed Western economic ideology onto children and childhood in Uganda. Not coincidentally, this positioned him as the father of the nation who would provide education and protection for his children, while leaving many children realistically incapable of manifesting successful configurations of childhood. As I will explain next, Museveni's rhetoric and how he actually used his power are two very distinct practices.

GENDER, CHILDREN, AND THE LRA WAR

The national imagery put forth by Museveni conflicted with the realities in the north. This section traces how the national imagery crafted by Museveni and his position as the father of the nation pushed a narrative about the war that both omitted and was predicated upon the militarised oppression of the Acholi and a fight over the control of the sexuality of Acholi women and girls. The outcome, I suggest, is that children born to women and girls abducted by the LRA are excluded from belonging both nationally and locally.

Infantilising the Acholi

In 1997, Human Rights Watch reported, 'Northern Uganda today faces an acute humanitarian crisis' (HRW 1997: 4). Meanwhile, the NRM regime made light of the conflict. Museveni's memoir has no mention of the LRA or Kony in its index and only refers to the 'Kony bandits', or simply 'bandits', in the few references to the war. '[T]he whole question of the 'northern problem' is overdramatised', he wrote (Museveni 1997: 213).

Records of violence committed against the Acholi as though the entire population was responsible for the rebellion suggest the NRM strategically used violence to subdue the north from early on (Branch 2010). In 1991, Amnesty International reported alleged abuses by NRA soldiers in the north, including extrajudicial execution, rape (male and female), beating and arbitrary arrest. Given the militarisation of the state and Museveni's position as father of the nation, violence carried out on the Acholi population in the first phase of the war and the forced displacement of most Acholi people, as well as the government's stubborn insistence on a military resolution, all suggest a desire to maintain the conflict.

Numerous times throughout the war, Museveni or representatives said the war would be over soon. In a parliamentary address in April 1997, Museveni stated, '[T]he remnants of Kony's group have broken into small groups that are being picked off one by one, or they are surrendering in droves' (HRW 1997: 76). At the end of 2002 or early 2003, Museveni promised peace by April 2003 (*The Monitor* 3.2.2003). Media reported other instances. In 1996, for example, Museveni was quoted as saying, 'I give him about seven months, and he will either be killed, his group wiped out, or captured' (*Agence France Presse* 19.3.1996). In 2001, he stated, 'This is the last warning to Kony and his mentor, Bashir. We are going to crush them if they don't stop killing our people. We shall not allow these criminals to capture power in Uganda' (*New Vision* 16.2.2001). The following year, Major General James Kazini of the UPDF affirmed Museveni's promise: 'The Army Commander Maj. Gen. James Kazini has threatened to resign at the end of this year if Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) are still in existence. "You call me on December 31, if Kony is still alive I will resign", Kazini told a press briefing ... in Gulu' (*The Monitor* 8.5.2002). In 2004, the BBC (22.10.2004) reported that '[t]he Ugandan military says it is winning the war against the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) ... Museveni has described the rebels as a "crushed force." Claims that the rebels are on the verge of imminent defeat have been made in the past, but the LRA has continued to wreak havoc on the lives of civilians living in northern Uganda.'

Reports suggest, however, that Museveni may have been reluctant to completely end the war. Soldiers themselves may have financially benefited from the perpetuation of conflict, but in his ethnography of the war, Sverker Finnström (2008) found his informants could explain the war in no other way than revenge against the Acholi for past atrocities (particularly in Luwero during the early 1980s, which involved Acholi soldiers). Other sources point to financial benefits Museveni gained through international aid and reconstruction projects by selling the state's simplistic narrative of the war and the LRA to the international community (Dolan 2009). Lip service, rather than actual political will to end the war, characterised much of the state rhetoric of the time.

Chris Dolan (2005) likens the violence experienced by the Acholi civilian population at the hands of the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF, previously NRA) to incest, referring to the intimate level of the violation because the perpetrators are representatives of the father figure of the nation. This unequal relationship dynamic can be traced back to the colonial ethnic divisions that favoured the south. These disparities were not only maintained but reproduced by the state's enthusiastic adoption of the Western development discourse on modernity and progress. Promoting a progressive discourse, Museveni offered a disparaging assessment of the Acholi region in his memoir: 'In the case of the Acholi area ... the colonialists did the most damage by keeping the area backward' (1997: 212). In the same way that he diverted responsibility by blaming the colonialists, he went on to paternalise

the population by accusing them of being unmotivated and ungrateful for the government's efforts to develop the region. A former child soldier in Museveni's NRA explained that they were indoctrinated to believe negative things about the Acholi. She said they were told that the Acholi 'are swarthy and red-eyed cannibals, killers, like animals and thieves with numbers and tattoos on their foreheads! They have killed your parents and once they find you, they will eat you all!' (Ochola 2006: 33) In 1997, a NRA commander in Gulu blamed the army's reported violence on Acholi soldiers: 'If anything, it is local Acholi soldiers causing the problems. It's the cultural background of the people here: they are very violent. It's genetic' (HRW 1997: 59). Notably, research affirms no real association between violence and Acholi masculinity (Dolan 2002; Tapscott 2018).

These sweeping generalisations and accusations justified the strong military force used against the Acholi people, as though a violent father were disciplining his children, reminiscent of the patriarchal power structure used by colonials to control the colonised. The state rhetoric of Museveni being the father of the nation protecting his citizens contradicted the actual structure of power in which he emulated much more closely a colonial authoritarian father humiliating, controlling and punishing his children. The lived experience of this contradiction stripped the masculinity of Acholi civilian men who were unable to protect their families, as was socially expected per Acholi gender norms (Tapscott 2018), and who became victims of male sexual violence. As a mechanism of disempowering the Acholi generally, the military targeted Acholi men to victimise sexually, understanding it would undermine Acholi sense of self and communicate their subordination to state authority and dominance (Dolan 2009). Philipp Schultz (2018) argues that the effect of rape on men in northern Uganda's hetero-patriarchal social order extends far beyond the explicit violation and must be understood as 'a layered and compounded process' (Schultz 2018: 1118) of 'displacement from gendered personhood'. Considered within the historically situated patriarchal model of colonial rule outlined in this article, this loss of gender identity was part of the overall infantilisation of the Acholi population, perpetrated by their own rhetorical father.

This infantilisation of the Acholi was further entrenched by the government's forced displacement of much of the Acholi population into 'protected villages' – internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps. The government claimed it was simultaneously protecting the Acholi from the LRA while also being suspicious of their involvement. One critic against the protected villages felt that southerners believed that 'they (Acholi) are having what they deserve. It's their turn now. When they have enough ... they'll stop' (HRW 1997: 161), echoing the sense that the Acholi were being treated as misbehaving children. As the incest analogy suggests, however, the violations against the population were more damaging than if they had come from an outside force because the government was claiming to be protecting the people at the same time that it was enacting and enabling this violence. Dolan's idea of incest and the

infantilising attitude represented in Museveni's statements evoke the metaphor of the nation as a family.

Captive or rebel?

The metaphor of the national family failed to represent the reality on the ground as Museveni and government representatives struggled to be clear about who was a perpetrator and who was an innocent civilian, and who was a rebel versus a child victim. This confusion challenged the state's image as a progressive force protecting the rights of children. Government spokespeople nevertheless seemed to strategically interchange the labels to promote a simplistic portrayal of the war as good versus evil.

My review of newspaper articles from the late 1990s and early 2000s suggests the government referred to captives as rebels if they had been killed by the UPDF but referred to them as captives or abductees if they were rescued. In November 1998, for example, a UPDF commander told the local government-appointed Regional District Commissioner (RDC) that more than 14 'Kony rebels' were killed by UPDF soldiers, while 24 'children who were in captivity' were rescued (*New Vision* 27.11.1998). Earlier that year, the UPDF director of information and public relations Capt. Shaban Bantariza updated the media after a clash stating, '[T]wo rebels were killed, two guns with six magazines recovered and three captives rescued' (*New Vision* 22.7.1998).

The military deviated from this strategic labelling only to advertise itself as the masculine protector of the nation's children by drawing attention to the abduction of children while simultaneously flaunting its military wins. At a 1998 rally in Kitgum, for example, organised by the local RDC and the UPDF, the army 'paraded 74 LRA rebel captives' they had rescued the day before (*The Monitor* 5.6.1998). This practice of ambiguously identifying those killed and those rescued continued throughout the war. Five years later in 2003, Lt Paddy Ankunda announced that the UPDF 'killed four LRA rebels, captured one, and rescued 10 abductees' (*New Vision* 19.10.2003).

Advocates drew attention to the reality on the ground of indiscriminate violence against abducted children. In 1998, a spokesperson for Concerned Parents Association (CPA), an organisation formed in 1996 by parents of abducted children to seek their release, accused the government of ineffective action and indiscriminate killings: 'Who are the rebels? Our children whom you [UPDF] failed to protect and someone is pushing them to confront you' (*The Monitor* 12.10.1998). Earlier that year in June, officials of humanitarian organisations in the north met and agreed that the army must stop killing captives as though they were rebels. As the World Vision associate director put it, 'About 99% of Kony fighters are children abducted from schools and villages. We should stop calling them rebels and the UPDF should spare them during confrontations' (*New Vision* 8.6.1998). '[I]f you go against the rebels militarily, you are causing the death of our children', explained a concerned parent of an abducted child in 1997 (HRW 1997: 78). Such frustrations with the

government's level of violence and apparent indiscriminate identification of who was and who was not a rebel continued throughout the war as Acholi civilians and leaders called for a negotiated settlement.

Accusations of failure to protect children challenged Museveni's self-portrayal as the father of the nation. One of the original parents of CPA shamed the government for its failure to fulfil its role as protector of the nation's children: 'How many more years should we wait and how many lives will have been destroyed? Everybody is a native of this land and the government is the father. Are we saying we have failed to solve this problem, shall we continue for another decade like this?' (*The Monitor* 12.10.1998) Nevertheless, Museveni continued to push a simplistic narrative of the war and presented himself to the world as a concerned leader and father of the nation – an image that helped give him the reputation as the 'star pupil' of structural adjustment, as discussed earlier, resulting in significant aid money and support from international allies (for example, 55% of the national budget in 1999 came from the international community) (HRW 1999).

The figure of the abducted girl

In her analysis of the mass abduction of women from both sides during the Partition of India, Veena Das invokes the idea of the 'abducted woman in the imaginary of the masculine nation' (Das 2007). Das suggests the story of the abducted woman is intrinsically related to patriarchy and thus has implications for the masculine state. In other words, the gender relations inherent in the use and circulation of the image of the abducted woman and her rescue reproduced the gender power of the state. The figure of the abducted woman, Das continues, is associated with imagery of social and sexual disorder, which was employed by the Indian state in its narrative of recovery so that, by re-establishing the authority of the husband/father and the ordered family, the state could be reinstated as a masculine space in which men are in control and men bring order to chaos (see also Mookherjee 2015: 154–8). I suggest that this idea of the figure of the abducted woman relates to how the Ugandan government operationalised the figure of the abducted girl in support of its nation-building agenda. State discourse represented abducted Acholi girls as being in need of protection and reproduced the state with Museveni as its representative and the father of the nation who would rescue her. In this narrative, girls were rescued and not presented as mothers, but largely only as girls. The children of the girls and young women, therefore, had no place to exist legitimately in the national discourse.

The mass abduction of 139 school girls from St Mary's College in Aboke in 1996 triggered an outpouring of international attention, becoming the cause célèbre of child rights advocacy groups (Dolan 2002). From the moment of the abductions from St Mary's, I suggest that Museveni's narrative about the war shifted to focus on the recovery of vulnerable Acholi girls as both a method of constructing order out of the seeming chaos that was the war and a way to bring his nation-building efforts back into focus. Ultimately, abducted girls became part of the national

imagery as girls with their sexuality controlled and not as reproductive females (as they were in Joseph Kony's nation-building project) nor as mothers whom the government failed to protect from abduction and sexual violence.

Finnström (2008) notes how the international rally behind the 'Aboke girls' rested on the same one-sided narrative that depoliticised the LRA and the war. Since abducted boys were more likely than girl abductees to become LRA fighters, the innocence of the abducted girls seems to have been a more salient symbol for the government, as well as international advocates, to exploit. In August 1996, 39 school boys were abducted from Sir Samuel Baker Secondary School in Gulu district and as of 2014 only 13 had ever returned, yet there was barely a mention of them or other abducted school boys in the media (*The Monitor* 20.9.2014).

The abductions from St Mary's College provided the state with a simple narrative that drew on concerns in development discourse about gender and children and thus resonated with the international community. This facilitated a perception of the Ugandan government as responsible and aligned with Western values because it shared the same outrage. According to reports, the government benefited from this international sympathy and concern. A news article from 1998, for example, reporting on a visit from the Belgian State Secretary for Development Cooperation, Reginald Moreels, demonstrates the link between the abducted girls and international support, both in terms of state legitimacy and financial assistance:

Moreels said he will visit protected villages, humanitarian organisations and hold talks with district leaders. He said the issue of abducted Aboke girls is an international human rights concern. He said his visit is instrumental to Belgian assistance to the people in northern Uganda.

"We have several projects in the north as part of bilateral and multilateral projects. We are supporting efforts towards human rights, displaced persons and refugees", said Moreels.

He said Belgium has plans to open an embassy in Uganda because Uganda is a key player in the Great Lakes Region. (*The Monitor* 9.6.1998)

Over the years, the government's focus on the rescue of abducted girls became increasingly apparent. In 1997, the military publicly celebrated the return of three of the Aboke girls (*Agence France Presse* 6.1.1997). In 2003, the state-owned newspaper *The New Vision* (26.6.2003) reported the public rally celebrating the recovery of girls abducted from a boarding school. Presented as a state triumph, the article also depicts the girls' public appreciation for their rescue. Another *New Vision* article paints a picture of extremes, reproducing the narrative that celebrates the recovery of Acholi girls. Readers are led to imagine the wonderment and gratitude of the recent returnees, while also highlighting the material success of the government:

Former LRA rebel fighters were on Sunday mesmerized by the glamour at the Speke Resort Beach at Munyonyo on the shores of Lake Victoria ... About 60 former fighters, many of them women, admired the scenery and golden rays of the

setting sun. The women and children stared into the lake as if transfixed ...

The former fighters, accompanied by Lt. Col. Eric Otema, arrived in Kampala on Saturday. President Museveni was expected to parade them before Parliament and diplomats yesterday. "We want them to know that whatever Kony and his supporters tell them about suffering in Uganda is not true", Otema, the 4th Division commander, said. The former fighters were booked into Fairway Hotel. "Kampala is very beautiful", one said. (*New Vision* 9.9.2003)

The portrayal of the abducted girl as innocent, victim, vulnerable and desexualised makes her image socially acceptable and thus available to the nation as a political tool. The emphasis on the figure of the abducted girl both as vulnerable and deserving of an education locates the girls within the development discourses of gender and children's rights, both central to the state's image as a modern nation. For example, when publicly 'handing over' a rescued young woman who had been one of the St Mary's abductions 13 years earlier to her parents, Museveni insisted these 'children' belonged in school: 'My opinion is that they (former captives) should go back to school. It is important that we put aside funds, a programme for these children' (*New Vision* 15.3.2009). Publicly celebrating the rescue of the girls with statements reflecting their innocence as children is necessarily grounded on the assumption of authority over the sexuality of the girls. In this framework, girls must remain virtuous children in order to fulfil the dictates of modern development – go to school, marry, bear children, live in a monogamous and nuclear family.

The growing phenomenon in the LRA of forced marriages presented a power struggle between the two symbolic heads of households (Museveni and Kony), which came to centre on the control of the girls' sexuality and ultimately presented Museveni with a contrast that benefited his narrative to the international community. Feminist theories of the nation argue that female bodies are fundamental to the masculine project of nation-building as sites upon which national identity is articulated and, therefore, in the view of the masculine state must be controlled (Mayer 2012). In the LRA, abducted girls and women were made to serve as biological (and moral) reproducers of the 'new Acholi nation' (Baines 2014). Sexual relations within the LRA were strictly controlled through the practice of forced marriage to protect the moral purity of the nation project. This practice resonates with feminist theories of the gendering of the nation, which suggest the risk of defilement and thus of reproducing the enemy, thus implying that female bodies must be vigilantly controlled and guarded (Mostov 2012). In Museveni's nationalist project, however, the abducted Acholi girls were depicted as daughters of the nation, whose bodies had to be protected and rescued by the father (represented by the state). Positioning himself as father of the nation rescuing his vulnerable daughters projected an ethic of responsibility and concern that resonated with international donors. Particularly in contrast to Kony's instrumentalisation of the girls' sexuality for his nation-building project, the figure of the abducted Acholi girl in Museveni's narrative proved especially effective and resonated around the world.

Being able to employ the figure of the abducted girl in such a politically salient way also depended on and simultaneously reinforced another aspect of the war – the emasculation of Acholi men. Museveni positioned himself against the Acholi population as the true protector of Acholi girls on the premise that Acholi men had failed as fathers and husbands to protect their children. This posturing was particularly poignant because, as Holly Porter (2019) explains, the forced marriages of Acholi girls inside the LRA undermined the traditional authority of fathers and male elders to govern their youth's sexuality. Such relations occurred outside of the structure of *luk*⁶ and other customary payments that formalise sexual relations (Porter 2019). Consequently, Museveni's emphasis on his role as the father of the nation and the protector of the sexuality of his abducted daughters further emasculated Acholi men, rendering them subordinate in the imperial family order and contributed to the process of infantilisation of the Acholi population.

While it galvanised international attention, in reality, Museveni's narrative of rescuing the abducted girls failed to live up to its responsibility to support the nation's daughters. One former Aboke abductee, for example, called on him as father of the children of Uganda to end the war. She appealed to Museveni's ideology of development-as-nation-building: 'If we really are the children of Uganda in the North, what can the government do to stop this? ... I ask for more help from you to bring peace and children's rights to our country. We want to have a voice in our country to develop it, not destroy it' (HRW 1997: 90–1). She asked him to support formerly abducted girls so they can rightfully take their positions in the nation as the future who will bring development and wealth to Uganda. To date, however, no state reparations or support have been provided to help formerly abducted young women or girls go to school.

The promised support for the girls and young women that was inherent in Museveni's alignment with the values of Western development agendas failed to materialise, while his posturing as the father of the nation rescuing his vulnerable daughters necessarily excluded their children from public legitimacy. The salience of this narrative required the girls and young women to be only girls, not mothers. It also necessitated a contrast with Kony and the LRA where the girls were constructed as mothers of the new Acholi nation. Reflecting on their time in the LRA, some of the children in my empirical study expressed that their time in the bush was the only time in which they felt like they were part of a family (when they had both parents and siblings) and, thus, the only time in their lives when they felt a sense of belonging (Stewart 2017). Deploying the figure of the abducted Acholi girl to construct a national imagery ensured that the children born into the LRA did not belong outside the bush. Without public acceptance of their legitimacy, the children have few options to leverage their rights as citizens.

In 2014, Evelyn Amony, chairperson for the Women's Advocacy Network (WAN), an advocacy group of war-affected (largely formerly abducted) women from across northern Uganda, presented a petition in the Parliament

of Uganda (WAN 2014). The petition called for comprehensive reparations that would 'restore our dignity and recognise our rights as citizens of this country'. The petition legitimises the women as mothers by referencing their dutiful labour as 'our cardinal responsibility of looking after our children that were born in captivity'. By insisting they are devoted mothers raising citizens of the nation, the women attempt to insert their children into the national imagery. Notably, central to the petition were demands to hold the government accountable for the ongoing harms endured by their children, including stigmatisation and structural violence. These demands gain additional weight by the mothers' charge that the government failed to protect them (the mothers) as children of the nation when they were young, which resulted in their abductions and forced motherhood. Situating their children's experiences of exclusion within this wider frame of reference raises questions of accountability and responsibility and suggests that the government bears significant responsibility for the welfare of children born into the LRA.

CONCLUSION

This article explores the construction of the Ugandan national imagery of the war to demonstrate the complexity and historical depth behind the exclusion of children born into the LRA by showing how their mothers were only narrowly conceived as girls, leaving no legitimate social or political space for their children. Uganda has a long history as a divided and militarised entity. Significantly, gender hierarchies and a hegemonic gender model inherited from colonialism interacted with Western narratives of rights and modernity to foster the kind of context in which the government could wage and perpetuate the war in the north of the country. Contrasting with the LRA's political instrumentalisation of the abducted girls as reproducers of the new Acholi nation, Museveni positioned himself as the father of the Ugandan nation rescuing his abducted Acholi daughters. Employing the figure of the abducted girl aided the war project and contributed to the nation's image as a successful sovereign state. In such a narrative, girls were rescued and imagined only as girls. Because this national discourse of the war omitted the motherhood of the abducted girls and young women, the children who were born into the LRA were denied public legitimacy. Furthermore, by not acknowledging their motherhood, and consequently not acknowledging the existence of their children, Museveni was removed from being responsible for them.

While this article is about Uganda, the analysis contributes more broadly to literature about gender and the nation in terms of how the female body is instrumentalised in projects of nation-building. More specific to scholarship about gender and the nation in contexts of war, this article encourages us to look for strategic narrative constructions of the figure of the girl and/or woman in fighting forces, and to consider what is excluded or denied when these narratives are operationalised for nation-building projects. Donna Seto (2015) argues that children born of war are created as part of a strategy of war and

they are subsequently strategically obscured from political attention. In the case of northern Uganda, children born into the LRA were integral to Kony's political project. They represented the fulfilment of their mothers' (forced) role as reproducers of the new Acholi nation. In contrast, the children's exclusion was central to Museveni's nation-building efforts – his mobilisation of the figure of the abducted girl (as a girl and not mother) served to construct order against the chaos wrought by the LRA and thus vitalise his legitimacy as the sovereign leader – the father of the nation – of Uganda.

The Ugandan case of the exclusion of children born of war from the national imagery via the strategic deployment of a narrative about their mothers, and conceptualised within historical and macro-level systems of power, presents a potentially valuable entry point for further research about children born of war in other contexts. Historical research about children born of war (Lee 2017) identifies pathways for creating the conditions for inclusion, which involve government-driven re-education that targets national discourse. Such efforts, however, require widespread political will. My hope is that the comprehensive framework presented in this article can inform effective interventions at the local level to support the well-being of children born of war in the absence of widespread political will to take responsibility.

NOTES

1. In 2015, local organisation Watye ki gen released results from its effort to document the number of children currently living across northern Uganda: 952. However, they had not yet reached all areas, and many were either unaware of their efforts or hesitant to come forward. Other research (Stewart 2017) estimates that approximately 2,500 to 3,000 children were born. This accounts for the hundreds, and very possibly over a thousand, who died before transitioning out of the war (deaths at birth, from illness/malnutrition, abandonment, killed in battle, or lost) as well as those who died after. To date, those who died before transitioning out of the bush remain undocumented.
2. With approval from this study's participants, I refer to them as 'children born into the LRA' rather than the more common refrain, 'children born in captivity' because their experiences in the bush cannot uniformly be described as living in captivity.
3. This is a global population that refers to 'persons of any age conceived as a result of violent, coercive, or exploitative sexual relations in conflict zones' (Carpenter 2007: 3).
4. Accessed online via AllAfrica.com.
5. 'Social harmony' is a term used by anthropologist Holly Porter (2016) to denote an Acholi ideal of moral and cosmological balance.
6. Customary payment to formalise sexual relations.

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