

Securing Youth: Humanitarian Futures in Post-Conflict Uganda

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School  
of Duke University

2021

ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

The dissertation considers how young people in northern Uganda navigate post-conflict life through participant observation, interviews, and ethnographic focus groups with youth working as security guards, current and formerly incarcerated youth, and young people seeking employment in South Sudan. It offers a detailed, sustained view into the everyday practices young people undertake to envision a future after prolonged civil conflict despite intense social, political, and economic constraints. I worked extensively with individuals who occupied different positions of vulnerability and security in order to investigate how these categories overlapped and intertwined in their daily lives. By doing so, the research makes broader interventions into theories of youth and of post-conflict recovery including how individuals encounter post-war legal authority and what strategies young people employ when the resources and opportunities afforded to them through the expansive humanitarian network that once surrounded them leaves the region, or transforms into something else entirely.

I argue that the constraints young people face, coupled with the state's attempt to securitize them as a potentially destabilizing political and economic force, generate impossible predicaments which often require them to take on increasingly dangerous risks, which in turn open them up to further securitization in a cycle that leaves young people unable to build anything but fraught futures despite being the future of the

nation. A central aim of my research was to destabilize the "post" in post-conflict, not only to point to the ways in which conflict has afterlives (which is well-trodden territory in anthropology) but also to disrupt the clean temporality the term presumes. I argue that young people do not take the "post" as a new dawn from which to build possibility, but instead draw on their past experiences to make sense of the present despite the uncertainty of the future. Building on other recent scholarship, my research interrogates the durability of the "post" as a way of opening up pathways which young people (and others) draw on to make sense of their daily lives.

## **Dedication**

For Aciro Gloria, Piloya Emily, Janae, and Josiah, who keep me thinking about the future.

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The opinions expressed herein and any oversights and errors are my own and do not reflect the individuals or organizations named above.

## A Note on Name Use and Language

Any names, dates, or locations in this thesis that might disclose the identity of any one of my interlocutors have been changed. Unless naming an official in a publicly available source, all names are pseudonyms, selected at random from a list of commonly-given Acoli names. These names are normally imbued with meaning surrounding the circumstances of that individual's birth or family environment. In choosing these pseudonyms at random, the meaning behind the names used here is therefore incidental.

Throughout this dissertation, I refer to the community and area of northern Uganda where I work as Acoli/Acoliland rather than the more commonly anglicized spelling of Acholi/Acholiland.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, I have chosen to use the Acoli term *acikari* rather than the more widely understood Swahili term *askari* to refer to the private security guards that play a significant role in this research (particularly Chapter Three). This might come as a surprise to some Ugandan readers or readers who are familiar with the Ugandan context. *Askari* is a widely used term, including in northern Uganda. My decision to use *acikari* is two-fold: first, to help emphasize the regional implications of northern *acikari* in the larger hierarchy of both labor and social status in the country, and second to draw attention to the politics of language use when referring to a group of

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<sup>1</sup> I have given names their more common spellings, however (i.e. Odoch rather than Odoc).

individuals who are frequently marginalized within wider society. Younger readers, readers with more formal education, or readers with stronger ties to cities, towns, and centers over more rural space might find *askari* more fitting, but my intention is to ground the term in a more visibly local idiom.

## 1. Introduction: *Anyim pe Ngene*

She curses the future  
for coming too soon  
& clings to a grandfather clock  
that's out of tune,  
hoping it'll correct a future  
that's gone askew.

(Harriet Anena, *A Nation in Labour*, 2015, 31)

### 1.1 *An Attack*

On the evening of June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, shots rang out from the center of Gulu Town. From Pece, a division just adjacent to town, I could hear them clearly. I stood on the verandah of the building I was staying in at the time and watched as crowds fled the downtown area. Some walked nonchalantly as they headed back home, as if on their nightly commute, while others were frantically running away from the direction of the gunfire. The juxtaposition of these two responses only added to the uncertainty of the moment. Information was sparse and the source of the unrest was unclear. For longtime residents it was a reminder of the not-so-distant past of sporadic gunfights that littered many nights during more than twenty years of conflict.

As more information trickled in across the night and the morning after, we learned it was an attack on the Central Police Station (CPS), an echo of an assault elsewhere in Gulu District just two weeks prior. In the middle of the night on May 27<sup>th</sup>, a Local Defense Unit (LDU) tied to the national army was attacked in Opit, a trading center 30 kilometers from Gulu Town. One soldier and a small child were killed and a

stock of weapons and ammunition were stolen. The following week police arrested Dan Oola Odiya, National Deputy Mobilizer and spokesperson for one of the prominent opposition political parties – the Uganda People’s Congress (UPC) – on charges related to the attack. The attack on the CPS in Gulu Town was a rescue attempt, most reports detailed – presumably by the same men who attacked Opit two weeks prior. A number of the guns confiscated in the aftermath of the attack matched those stolen from Opit, it had been widely reported.

Without much thought – and with little mention in the press – residents quickly pointed out the obvious: more likely than not, the attackers were unemployed young men paid (for some, “bribed”) in exchange for their participation. The attack was surely political – regardless of the veracity of the official explanation of UPC involvement – but, for the attackers, it was also assumed to be deeply pragmatic, much more than political ideology or loyalty to a particular party or cause.

When I first arrived in Gulu that summer in early May, I met with a friend of many years, a young man who was in his early twenties. We caught up over updates on each other’s families and the activities that had occupied our time since the last time we saw each other. He revealed that during the national election held earlier that year he had been a crime preventer, a voluntary force comprised of (mostly unemployed) youth who receive basic military and police training in exchange for “keeping order” – that is, “preventing crimes” – at a local community level. Monetary support is promised, but for

most it never comes. It is widely understood that these groups are mobilized during national elections, and, in the minds of many residents, crime preventers serve as armed intimidators for the ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), standing guard at polling places and regularly accused of mobilizing votes. As we continued speaking, my friend emphasized his reason for participating: "...but to sit here idle like this with nothing to do, no, it's not OK." He was now back at home, without much to do and with no expectation of being called on again as a crime preventer now that the election was over. He was worried for what would come next. *Anyim pe ngene*, the future is unknown.

Three weeks later a new report came out on the attack on the CPS in Gulu Town. The attackers were "duped into rebellion," the headline read. The Resident District Commissioner for Gulu made a statement declaring that "the alleged recruiters promised the youthful attackers jobs at an unnamed farm and a forest where he claimed an unnamed businessman had been extracting timber." The promise was for temporary employment as casual laborers. Once on the farm, the youth were "armed with machetes and whistles tasked to begin military training." Some fled after becoming suspicious; others, such as those now in custody from the attack on Gulu (and suspected to be involved in the attack in Opit as well), were employed not as casual laborers on a farm or in a forest as promised, but as armed participants in two prominent attacks on military and police installations in Gulu District. The public discourse around the attack

as being one undertaken by youth looking for work – even at risk of their own lives – is telling, even more so because it appears to have played out precisely as community members suspected. The knowledge these community members were pulling from was situated in their experiences of recent history and was animated in the “post-” of the contemporary post-conflict moment, in those residual spaces left in the aftermath of war.

This dissertation investigates precisely those spaces through the prism of young people: both as figures called upon by the state, non-state actors, and the general public through oscillating optics of hope and anxiety, and as individuals simply trying to construct a livable present despite the intense constraints that press against them.

This project investigates how Ugandan youth navigate the limits and possibilities of post-conflict life and the interventions, humanitarian and otherwise, that are designed to help them do so. In 2012, the country's finance minister declared that the most essential service government could offer would be to transform its young people into a “future productive force.” This desire is a response to an enduring anxiety for governmental and non-governmental bodies alike over the demographics of a country which has one of the youngest populations in the world, the majority of whom remain unemployed. In northern Uganda, where protracted conflict has been present throughout the full span of young peoples’ lives, this concern is even more salient. While youth are often figured in humanitarian discourse as harbingers of a more productive, participatory future characterized by peace (Malkki 2010), there remains a

concerted unease over their liminal position in a time of abrupt social transformation. For many, the image of idle, unemployed youth represents the possibility that young men might again take up arms and lead the region back into war.

That youth are imagined as both the problem and the solution – a site of both anxiety and of hope – points to larger questions regarding the durability of humanitarian intervention and the temporality of crisis across conflict and its aftermath. This dissertation therefore centers the contemporary experience of young people navigating the immediate aftermath of war in the northern Ugandan town of Gulu, as well as the changing nature of state and non-governmental programs that are attempting to ensure that their futures remain “productive.”

I argue that the constraints young people face, coupled with the state’s attempt to securitize them as a potentially destabilizing political and economic force, generate impossible predicaments which often require them to take on increasingly dangerous risks, which in turn open them to further securitization in a cycle that leaves young people unable to build anything but fraught futures despite being the future of the nation. A central aim of my research is to destabilize the “post” in post-conflict, not only to point to the ways in which conflict has afterlives (which is well treaded territory in anthropology) but also to disrupt the clean temporality the term presumes. I argue that young people do not take the “post” as a new dawn from which to build possibility, but instead draw on their past experiences to make sense of the present despite the

uncertainty of the future. *Anyim pe ngene*, the widely circulating proverb attests.

Building on recent scholarship, my research interrogates the durability of the "post" as a way of opening up pathways which young people (and others) draw on to make sense of their daily lives.

## **1.2 War and Thereafter: Making Sense of the “Post” in Post-Conflict**

The war in northern Uganda between the Government of Uganda (GoU) and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) – the primary rebel group in the area – lasted roughly twenty years, beginning shortly after the current president, Yoweri Museveni, came to power in a 1986 coup and dissipating in late 2005 and early 2006 when most LRA contingents had left Uganda and entered the Juba Peace Process from their bases in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This was not, however, the end of the war. For many years the Ugandan state and its military, the Uganda People’s Defense Force (UPDF), remained at the fore of counter-LRA missions in neighboring states including the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan. The Juba Peace negotiations ultimately failed (see Chapter Two), leaving the conflict with no formal resolution or cessation of hostilities. As a result, many kin relations remained splintered between home communities and rebel camps hundreds of miles away, with families unsure of the fate of their sons and daughters. Northern Uganda, for many years, sat at an uncertain impasse of not-peace/not-war (Richards

2005b). As I often heard residents say: “the guns are silent but the conflict is not over.”

While much has changed in the years since, the conflict nevertheless continues to reverberate in everyday life as communities attempt to settle ongoing land disputes and come to terms with the consequences of an entire generation coming of age during wartime. In 2021, at the time of writing, northern Uganda is still regularly referred to as a “post-conflict” setting.

The aftermath of the war and of ongoing violence is a significant challenge for communities across the region, but so is the aftermath of humanitarian intervention which carries with it its own wake. The large and ongoing influx of development professionals, missionaries, and now “voluntourists” has generated a lucrative service economy for these communities and their expanding numbers (Nibbe 2010). Gulu Town, once an important but relatively modest trading hub for northern residents and Kampala-to-Juba business, has become a booming peri-urban space replete with dozens of national and international banks and a new assortment of multi-story luxury hotels. On July 1, 2020, Gulu officially attained city status.<sup>1</sup> Youthful residents, many having spent the majority of their lives displaced from their family homesteads, have flocked to towns such as Gulu in search of work and opportunity. Former internally displaced

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<sup>1</sup> Because Gulu did not attain city status until after this research, I refer to Gulu throughout this dissertation as either Gulu Town or Gulu.

persons (IDP) camps, consequences of both state violence and humanitarian complicity,<sup>2</sup> have transformed villages into rapidly growing town centers (Whyte et al. 2014). The many organizations that once provided emergency relief at the height of the war have reinvented themselves as centers of peacebuilding, development, and entrepreneurship. In this context, youth-focused programs have proliferated and young people have become a major focus of state, nongovernmental, and community-led intervention programs.

Simultaneously, the withdrawal of the Ugandan military from the area after the end of active fighting, and the continued influx of NGOs and expats, has led to a flourishing security economy. Two prominent sources of employment for young men and women – finding work in the peace and development industry or, especially for young men, in security – couple livelihoods with an abiding humanitarian apparatus. *Acikari*,<sup>3</sup> or private security guards, are central actors in this shifting geography, and index many of the contradictions of post-conflict life. Whereas NGOs and commercial properties relied on the military for protection when the conflict was active, they now hire private guards to secure their offices, compounds, and property. Many *acikari* are ex-combatants unable to find work elsewhere, often moving quickly from the frontlines

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<sup>2</sup> See Branch 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See the note on language at the beginning of this dissertation (*xv-xvi*) for an explanation of why I choose to use the term *acikari* here to describe the young men and women working as private security guards in this dissertation rather than *askari*.

to working as guards. With few exceptions, most of the *acikari* I have come to know over the last decade have stressed that they joined a company only because it's "better than sitting at home." For many young men in post-conflict northern Uganda, security has become a way of "finding something to do," of occupying time away from home. It is a way of finding work in those residual spaces of a post-conflict landscape. While employed, most struggle to make-do in a position that provides only a meager salary that cannot support a family. Working security – that is, holding a gun – is often a stopgap for unemployed youth to appear productive (e.g. Mains 2019, 151-180). What does it mean, then, that the most promising future is one in which youth do not earn enough to support themselves and in which they remain tied to an economy dependent upon the potential deployment of violence?

This dissertation studies the afterlives (Arif 2016; McKay 2012) of war and humanitarianism in a context where the idiom of emergency (Redfield 2013) no longer applies despite the deep carry-over of programs, institutions, and discourses of intervention, and where the economies that sustained the war have been transformed and domesticated into spaces such as the NGO compound, the walled private home, the prison cell, and privatized pieces of land. This is the post-conflict present that feels unending. But post-conflict has a history. The term originates in 1992 when Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the then-UN Secretary General, sought to elevate the role of the United Nations in international political affairs, including in the long-term interventionist space

of life after wartime (Hozić 2014, 21-2). Born of a new era that hoped to move forward from the Cold War, it was “an ambitious call for engagement in the international community not only in prevention of conflicts, peacemaking, and peacekeeping but also in *post-conflict peacebuilding*” (22). A commitment to the newly marked post-conflict period was framed as a space for new political possibilities not just for the country or region in transition but for the world as a whole. This was the same period which saw a massive upsurge in civil conflicts and so-called “new wars” (Richards 2005a). And so a wide-reaching agenda for disarmament, international containment, and “capacity building” for democratic governance (Bah 2020; Coles 2007) emerged with a great deal of aspiration in tow. Almost thirty years later, post-conflict is widely utilized as a durable conceptual framework within international institutions, among states, and within civil society, but its chronicity remains unclear.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Marielle Debos (2011), for example, rejects the opposing categories of war and peace, instead preferring war and inter-war (the former referring to active combat, the latter where violence takes more subtle forms despite the absence of outright aggression between the state and rebels) (413). Debos explains that she does this “in order to portray a situation where war is always emergent, and where people are waiting for the next war while hoping that it will not break out” (413) and while I understand the desire to break apart the clean dichotomy of war/peace, and the interest in highlighting the anticipatory frames through which war is often waged as work or otherwise, inter-war seems to carry with it an assumption of ongoing war that may or may not play out within such an overbearing rubric where everything becomes war or a prelude to it (411-2). Nevertheless, her article makes an important contribution to the literature on the ways in which “war is a recurrent ‘situation’ that belongs to political and social routine” (416), including the rhythms of seasonal variation (415), and an anticipated future (425) for a peace that, while “impl[y]ing a less violent mode of governing,” nevertheless enacts “a more selective use of violence on the part of regular forces and pro-governmental militias,” and thus another opportunity for work for arms-carrying men (412). I’m also reminded of what Aida Hozić wrote with regards to her native Bosnia: “Being without worries - existential worries - is not something

Despite post-conflict being a space to start imaginative social projects, I focus here on its legacies. By this I don't just mean the legacy or aftermath of conflict itself, but of the changing socioeconomic space brought about in its wake. That is to say, conflict may have aftermaths, and the language post-conflict is an attempt to harness those aftermaths under a legible heading. But what is the duration of the "post"?<sup>5</sup> What is its lifespan? What comes after the "post"? As one colleague once joked, is it "post- post-conflict"? The quip may be amusing, but it reveals central tensions present within configurations of how we think about the temporal frames of life after conflict. Can post-conflict itself have a future? And what kind of future might that be? These are weighty questions, many of which will remain unanswered by the end of this dissertation. But they animate its contents and their provocations speak directly to its contents.

While the oblique temporality of the post is difficult to pinpoint, there is no question that at the center of these questions is the time measurement of the generation. The young man standing guard at the office of a local NGO reminiscing about his time in the bush, the young women just released from a prison sentence after the violent assault of a co-wife, and the groups of youth chasing opportunities in South Sudan that

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that anyone can afford in this city after the siege; ontological uncertainty is not an academic issue but a way of life in Sarajevo" (2014, 20).

<sup>5</sup> For another take on the currency of the "post" – here of postcolonialism and postsocialism – see Chari and Verdery 2009.

only an ongoing war and humanitarian crisis can provide all problematize the simple dichotomy of conflict and post-conflict. As Carolyn Nordstrom has written with respect to land mines in Angola, “Many people's lives are defined not by whether war continues or peace emerges, but by a chance encounter with violence” (2007, 47).

The uncertain peace of contemporary northern Uganda, then, provides a privileged view into how these transformations take place in real time, as organizations and programs shift their priorities away from the emergency relief of the internally displaced persons camp or the food distribution system and towards developmental, future-oriented outcomes. These interventions now focus on containing what both state and non-state actors consider the next emergent threat: unemployed, idle youth. This tension between threat and care speaks to the ambivalence of the post-conflict moment more broadly, including the figures that populate it: the refugee, the global health subject, youth. In all three, humanitarianism and security – a presumed peaceful, redemptive outcome, on the one hand, and anxieties about risk and failure, on the other – are flip sides of the same coin. By considering the place of young security guards, (ex-) inmates, and migrants to South Sudan and a range of programs that seek to secure the futures of young people in northern Uganda, this project explores the changing scope and duration of intervention by investigating the depth, durability, and aftermath of humanitarianism in an uncertain post-conflict moment.

### **1.3 Humanitarianism/Security**

Twenty years of conflict have left a massive humanitarian footprint in northern Uganda and while many of the largest international organizations have either scaled down their programs or shut their doors entirely, the number of non-governmental organizations in Gulu and nearby towns continues to rise. The aftermath of prolonged intervention in northern Uganda has produced a “republic of NGOs” (Mann 2014; Schuller 2016) that, while no longer engaged in emergency relief (Redfield 2013), nevertheless carry forward structures and agendas of the previous, more properly “humanitarian,” moment. Humanitarianism has not only extended beyond the moment of emergency but has also bled into development efforts that focus on long-term sustainability (Bornstein 2005; Ferguson 1994a; Li 2007; Scherz 2014), human rights (Englund 2006), and peace-building (Shaw and Waldorf 2010).

Humanitarianism is distinguished from other forms of intervention by its emphasis on emergency, life-saving care. China Scherz, working elsewhere in Uganda, for example, makes a clear distinction between development, humanitarianism, and charity. One of the important criteria she uses for distinguishing between the three is their temporal frames of intervention. She notes that each is differently oriented in terms of both action and outcome: humanitarianism in the immediate present, development in the future, and charity somewhere in-between but without the crisis-mode typically present in humanitarianism (2014, 5). The differing “logics of care” (5) across these fields

– and I would add peace-building among them – reveal important distinctions that change the form, scope, and duration of their interventions and offer useful ways of scholarly categorization. But in practice these are almost always moving goalposts. An ethics centered on emergency relief may drive humanitarian organizations but they frequently continue to operate in regions long after any clear sense of crisis.

Development organizations may be structured around teleological futures of human advancement but medical service and food distribution programs at the height of the war were closely aligned with agricultural training programs and other development-oriented frameworks. Organizational cultures and driving principles – both stated and affective – do carry important differences, but I would argue that the humanitarian moment bleeds far beyond a presentist, emergency focus not only in terms of much debated “mission creep” but in the perpetuation of logics of intervention. Throughout this dissertation I therefore use the terminology of humanitarianism to refer to the larger “ethos that compels people to address the suffering of strangers” (Wilson and Brown 2009, 2), what Erica Bornstein calls “the subtle shades of humanitarian efforts” (2012, 11). Humanitarianism has emerged – in the aftermath of its interventions – as a locally relevant idiom used to describe organizations and acts spanning a wide range of motivations, ideologies, and practices, few of which map cleanly onto distinctions such as those outlined above. Didier Fassin, writing at a much larger scale, described this as the emergence of a moral economy of humanitarian reason (2012, 7). Humanitarianism

“persists” (Beck 2017), in northern Uganda and elsewhere, in ways that have largely been understudied.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A brief overview of the anthropology of humanitarianism is useful here. Humanitarianism, as a field of study, emerged just after (and often alongside) scholarship on development in the late eighties and early nineties. Scholars disagree on the extent that the anthropology of humanitarianism literature should be considered separately from similar fields such as human rights, international development, peace-building, and others, as briefly discussed above. The history of anthropological writing on humanitarianism is often read across time as a movement from alliance with humanitarian goals, aims, and ethics to a critique of them (Ferguson 1997; Ghosh 1994). We see this in the shift from the early predominance of applied anthropology within development schemes to an emphasis, today, on the violence of care (Ticktin 2011) and militarization of humanitarian concern (Finnström 2013). Michel Foucault lies at the center of critical literature on both humanitarianism and international development. There are three primary tracks of Foucauldian critique here although they often overlap. The first, rooted in his earlier writings on discourse and power, tended to dominate the first treatments of development (Escobar 1988; Ferguson 1994a), although it still regularly provides the theoretical framework of more recent work. The second considers humanitarianism alongside Foucault’s notion of governmentality as a means of highlighting the ways in which humanitarianism does not merely enframe or represent its objects through discursive strategies, but also how it operates as a form of governance which manages the lives of its subjects (Fassin 2012; Feldman and Ticktin 2010). The third, often but not always indistinguishable from the second, situates humanitarian intervention in conversation with Foucault’s notion of biopolitics ([1976] 2003), that is, on the “making live and letting die” in which humanitarian organizations take part (Redfield 2005). The role of NGOs and questions about the state and sovereignty are recurring themes. The anthropology of humanitarianism and international development emerged at the same time of the contemporary “globalization” literature which came to ask about the limits of the state in what was often described as an increasingly globalized world (while many others, like Cooper [2001], asked what was so new about globalization). In Africa, influential work which reconsidered modernity and global connection in settings that had long been considered “traditional” or “backwards” flourished (e.g. Bayart 2000; Ferguson 1999; Piot 1999). The NGO, an association named “in terms of what [it is] not” (Fisher 1997), nongovernmental, fit well into literature on what broadly emphasizes “the retreat of the state.” Other scholars, such as Beatrice Hibou, argue that the NGO is not a sign of the retreat of the state, but of what she calls “the continual formation of the state,” or new spaces of state formation in post-colonial Africa (2004). Still others categorize NGOs as neither new forms of sovereign power nor arms of contemporary states, and instead mark their impact by overlapping demands of “a large NGO complex actively pursuing governance projects alongside, in place of, and occasionally at odds with those of the state” (Redfield 2010, 190). In this way, they “glue” globalization together by acting as intermediaries between states and populations (Schuller 2009).

Recent anthropological literature on humanitarianism signals a shift away from a strict focus on the targets of intervention towards a more expansive view of the larger landscape of actors, sites, and practices played out in the contemporary everyday (Bornstein and Redfield 2010; Fassin 2012; Malkki 2015; Besteman 2016).<sup>7</sup> Some of this work constitutes an emergent area of study in what we might call ethnographies of peace and peace-making (Moodie 2010; Malkki 2015), what Amitav Ghosh (1994, 413), in a discussion of international peace-keepers twenty-seven years ago, proclaimed “an anthropology of the future.” This dissertation contributes to this discussion by engaging a question that often holds only a peripheral place in the literature: what happens after the moment of humanitarian emergency passes, when intervention is thought outside of the crisis it presupposes and within the prolonged liminality it produces (Feldman 2017)? An anthropology of humanitarian futures, drawing on calls for scholarship that is attentive to future-making endeavors more broadly (Munn 1992; Appadurai 2013; Pels 2015), contributes to a growing field of work that rethinks how futures are forged in an age of intense uncertainty (Weiss 2004; Goldstone and Obarrio 2016). Peace-building projects working between state and NGO concerns for building young people into a “future productive force” rely on an expectation of peace-after-war, an expectation youth rarely share (Vigh 2008, 2015). While an ethnography of peace begins to take us in

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<sup>7</sup> The humanitarian encounter, it should be remembered, is always a cultural encounter (Li 1999), marked by differential positions of class, gender, and race (Clarke and Thomas 2006; Bernal and Grewal 2014).

this direction, there is a need for anthropological research that considers how the post-conflict moment draws out the temporal and ethical contradictions and anxieties at the heart of intervention in diverse contexts, particularly around the category of youth where, as we will see, humanitarianism and security bleed together.

Drawing on critical anthropological treatments of how the lives of those seen to be suffering are made into appropriate objects of intervention (Malkki 1996; Sontag 2003; Fassin 2008, 2010; Nguyen 2010; Ticktin 2011; O’Neill 2013) through programs that often take bureaucratic and ad-hoc forms (Douglas 1986; Dunn 2012; James 2012), this dissertation asks what humanitarianism looks like to affected communities after the moment of crisis has passed (Landau 2002; McKay 2012; Schuller 2016). Following how individuals and communities imagine both a humanitarian present and a future enables us to explore the uneven confluence of concern over youthful futures *and* the resultant humanitarian outcomes.

The unprecedented density of organizations and the diversity of programs in the region point to how an enduring humanitarian apparatus (Foucault 1980; Agamben 2009) continues to govern lives well beyond the immediacy of active conflict – and under the oscillating optics of threat and care (Feldman and Ticktin 2010). Humanity, Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin point out, “find[s its] concrete expression... through the governing work that operationalizes these ideas to produce order, prosperity, and security” (2010, 5). The notion of humanity permits and enlivens certain kinds of

governance that take place by state and non-state actors, at once expanding the reach of both. Humanitarianism thereby finds meaning in the contemporary world through the ways in which it governs across a wider apparatus that includes the state, NGOs, and citizens themselves.

In this way, humanitarianism and security go hand in hand, producing a tension within the very object of humanitarian care (in this case, youth) (Duffield 2001; Ticktin 2005; Lakoff 2010). The last ten years has brought a wide range of work on the forms of violence that underpins humanitarian practice and care (Varma 2020). This has included research exploring the nexus of humanitarianism and militarism (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010), the “armed love” of the securitized state (Ticktin 2011), and the violence of intervention itself (James 2010; Schuller 2012; Asad 2015). As anxiety widens about a growing cohort of idle youth, they become increasingly targeted by both humanitarian and security actors alike (and, it must be noted, these actors are sometimes one in the same) through practices of moral control (O’Neill 2012, 22). Just as I argue that northern Uganda has transformed from warscape to securiscape (Chapter Three), so too has the humanitarian and development apparatus made a significant shift toward securitization (Chapter Four).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin O’Neill makes this point clearly in his work with Guatemalan youth targeted by a North Carolina evangelical sponsorship charity. Contemporary interventions, he argues, circulate around a “subject of prevention: the individual imagined and acted upon by the imperative to prevent” (2013, 205). This subject brings together the “integrated efforts” (207) of security and seemingly non-security actors with a singular aim: prevention for the sake of securitizing youth

In northern Uganda, modes of humanitarian governance intersect with a changing landscape of state power. African states in the postcolonial period have gone through a series of transformations in both sovereignty and governance (Bayart [1989] 2009; Mamdani 1996; Mbembe 2001, 2003; Hibou 2004; Roitman 2005; Elyachar 2005; Ferguson 2006; Piot 2010), while negotiating these mutations in relation to an often-predatory global economy (Bayart 2000; Guyer 2004; Cooper 2014). In many cases, these transformations have produced an increasingly criminalized and securitized state (Reno 1998; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Nordstrom 2004b; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006) in which contestations over moral orders of violence play out amidst the backdrop of an elusive civil society (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999).

Private security firms are a relatively recent – often post-Cold War and in the case of northern Uganda, post-conflict – piece of this security puzzle, one which both extends and undermines state power (Diphorn 2016). A state’s power can be extended, for example, when these firms and their youthful employees become eyes and ears for the state in turbulent times or in defiant localities (Hellweg 2011) but it can also be undermined when a security agent’s uniform and gun stand in for a living wage, thus

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in Guatemala City. At once a deeply personalized and aspirational strategy, these interventions turn the practice of security onto the self. He writes, “For the sake of security, in the spirit of salvation, child sponsorship makes the work of gang prevention dependent upon the practice of self-cultivation” (205).

potentially, as in the case of Gulu, making youth available to the next violent insurgency (Debos 2011; Hoffman 2011). This positioning is complicated by the fact that such violence may be threatened but rarely deployed (Lombard 2016), used instead, as we'll see in Chapter Three, as a type of bluff (Newell 2012) in a context where guns rarely function properly and many guards flee when faced with imminent threat. Even so, the securitization of youth by youth demands an attention to the ways that security (re)configures the relationship between state and society around the figure of the unemployed young person in need of transformation, a transformation undertaken by actors ranging from NGOs to Uganda Prisons Service. In northern Uganda, this often takes place through the state's seemingly arbitrary (Tapscott 2017a) attempts to both claim and deny authority (2017b) at strategic moments, leaving security personnel unsure of what consequences a particular incident might produce and those caught in the net of those uncertainties without clear recourse. Here young people working between state and non-state deployments of violence remain at the helm of a future that increasingly resembles the recent past, in the process destabilizing the "post" in post-conflict.

## **1.4 African Youth**

Youth have become a particularly salient category in African studies since at least the 1990s when policy makers and scholars began pointing to significant

demographic trends on the continent. While young people had frequently been featured in earlier work it was during this decade that African youth became a research subject unto itself, now the basis for both academic monographs and focused policy prescriptions. Africa is home to the ten countries with the youngest populations in the world and Uganda has long held onto its position at or near the top of that list.<sup>9</sup> In 2019, Uganda's median age was 16.7 years old.<sup>10</sup> Over three quarters of the population is under thirty and the youth unemployment rate is among the highest on the continent. These figures draw our attention to the stark generational divide within the Ugandan populace and are frequently cited within government documents and the circulating reports of international organizations. In development practice, youth are set apart from the demographic category of children and are a shifting category marked differently across governing bodies and changing frequently over time. The United Nations defines youth as anyone aged 15-24 years old. Uganda, on the other hand, in its 2016 National Youth Policy, defines youth as anyone aged 18-30. In 2001, its National Youth Policy utilized a different set of numbers – youth were those between 12-30 years old. The East African Community offers still another range: 15-35. These definitions of youth often stand in contrast to colloquial understandings and public articulations of a generation

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<sup>9</sup> Where Uganda falls on this list depends upon the category by which “youth” is measured. By median age, the ten countries with the youngest populations are, as of 2019: Niger, Mali, Chad, Somalia, Uganda, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Mozambique, and Zambia.

<sup>10</sup> Notably up from 15.9 years old in 2015, when it was number two on that list.

that is not yet adult. For a young person aged thirteen they might at once be a child or youth depending on who is doing the measuring and for what purpose. Populations, Deborah Durham reminds us, are evaluated – “not just out there waiting to be seen and counted,” but “constituted through... practices” of governance to conjure response (2018, 274). They draw governing bodies to act.

Despite the certainty of Uganda as home to one of the youngest populations of the world, it is at times much less clear who, exactly, is a youth. If demographic snapshots are the result of governing practices – numerical or otherwise – then they are also categorizations constructed through relationships to others. As a category that at once bounds and orders social position, the act of naming youth as a distinct group disaggregated from others is necessarily relational, which Bourdieu has famously said is “socially constructed... in the struggle between the young and the old” (1993, 95). Broadly, youth represents an ambiguous and imprecise stage of life occurring after childhood but before adulthood. Youth are social shifters, however, and these categories are nothing if not unstable. Whether one is employed, married, has children, or owns property can all determine whether they are considered a “proper” youth or adult, regardless of their numeric age. Failing – or refusing – these social markers or others might allow one to remain “youth for life” (Brummel 2015) or, as Alcinda Honwana describes, stuck in a perpetual liminal space of waithood (2012). Deborah Durham highlights the important relational aspects of age categories when she writes, “To call

someone a youth is to position him or her in terms of a variety of social attributes, including not only age but also independence-dependence, authority, rights, abilities, knowledge, responsibilities, and so on” (2004, 593). These are dynamic relational categories that cohere across lifeworlds (Bucholtz 2002). They are malleable identities and social positions that can affect one’s access to resources and have an immediate bearing on material distribution.

In spaces of accelerated social change such as violent conflict responsibilities and burdens can shift dramatically, reshaping social and cultural categories in the process (Lubkemann 2008). This was particularly the case in northern Uganda where massive displacement and the economic hardship that most families endured as a result of the long-standing conflict disrupted established roles of both generation and gender (Namuggala 2018, Oloya 2013). The result was rapidly shifting categories of childhood and adulthood. Victoria Flavia Namuggala argues that youth was less a part of culturally grounded terminology in northern Uganda than a concept deployed and made legible by the vast humanitarian network that came to govern various elements of social life during the war (2018, 53). As we will see in Chapter Two, the figure of youth and the child were central organizing frameworks for humanitarian interventions during the war, particularly around the child soldier (see also Shepler 2014).<sup>11</sup> However,

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<sup>11</sup> The figure of the child is a recurrent theme in development and humanitarian discourses, both as a universalizing trope of suffering and resilience and as a promise for post-conflict peace

today youth *has* become an enduring cultural category spoken in relation to an older generation that is, as the numbers above make clear, in the overwhelming minority. The relationship between generations and social context is dialectical: “Age and intergenerational relations are shaped by, but also shape, political and economic processes, and are centrally implicated in economic and political restructuring” (Cole and Durham 2007, 2). “We the youth” was a common refrain deployed by young men and women to articulate their needs vis-à-vis an older generation as well as the governing bodies that were perceived to be barriers to the realization of their futures. Claiming a youthful identity can be a strategic choice.

In these shifting contexts youth in Uganda – and the continent as a whole – are frequently generalized under two primary camps, what we might call the either/or of youth studies in Africa. In the mid-2000s there were a series of edited volumes that encapsulate this trend well. “Vanguard or Vandals” (Abbink and Kessel 2005) and “Makers or Breakers” (Honwana and de Boeck 2005) were both important collections of anthropologists and other scholars interrogating the category of youth on the continent in novel and pathbreaking ways. In the title of each, youth are teetering across a blunt

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(Malkki 2010, 77). Yet, children do not everywhere inhabit the same social category. The universalizing image of the child occludes the very different social positions that young people occupy across nations and cultures. In many contexts, “Children and youngsters... are often not regarded, nor do they regard themselves, as future or proto adults but as social actors in the present with a marked role and presence in the very heart of the societal context” (de Boeck 2004, 182).

divide – they are either vanguards or vandals, makers or breakers. These titles capture the quintessential discursive framing of youth studies during this time period and despite a great deal of work – including in those volumes – that has pushed back against this oversimplification it still dominates conversations on the continent.

Each side of the either/or divide reads the same socio-political moment through two opposing lenses. The first emphasizes the promise and agency of the overwhelmingly young population to point out its potential for future world-building. In this telling, young people stand at the cusp of historical change and carry with them capacities for innovation that could transform the nation. Youth, here, are a dividend paying regular gains to their country through their commitment to hard work and entrepreneurialism (Durham 2018, 276-7). The second camp reads the demographic and socio-relational trends as foretelling a bleak future – or, more cynically, a bleak present that continues to become more dire. Here the future brings not hope but anxiety over the “ticking time bomb” of ballooning youth populations (Ighobor 2013). Commentators in this camp point to what is commonly referred to as the “youth bulge” to express concern over crippling unemployment rates, stagnated economic mobility, rising crime rates, and, in the context of northern Uganda and other areas that have seen recent conflict, the prospect of a return to war as a result.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Comaroffs gloss this well in their piece “Reflections on Youth, From the Past to the Postcolony” (2005). On the one hand, the term youth “congeals pure, utopic potential” in its

The irony, of course, is that despite their obvious differences both camps have a significant amount in common. If the first camp is the vision that undergirds intervention programs throughout Uganda then the second camp is their *raison d'être*. Here population becomes the site of governance across cause and consequence. Most importantly, both of these narratives obscure much more than they reveal: namely, how young people themselves construct their lives within the larger social, economic, and political constraints of the moment. This is what Jean and John Comaroff, for example, write about when they argue that youth is a historically situated social category that is forged only through the power dynamics of an imperial world order. Much unlike the

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abstract form (273). Here young people are the harbingers of a future more prosperous and more enlightened than the present. They stand in as a symbol of hope and possibility, and the force which will bring that hope and possibility into material form across a generational transition. On the other hand – and what the Comaroffs say is more grounded in everyday reality – youth “[index] a faceless mass of persons who are alike underclass, unruly, male, challengingly out of place – and at once morally immature and physically powerful enough to seize the initiative from their elders and betters” (273). Here “juveniles are also the creatures of our nightmares, of our social impossibilities and our existential angst” (268) such that they must be managed “as the infantry of adult statecraft” by an enlightened older generation (273). This can be contrasted with Mamadou Diouf (2003) who, in a very different tone, sets out what he sees as the defining characteristic of the African continent in the contemporary moment: the discursive shift of youth as model citizens ushering in a new post-colonial era to youth as a threat to both civil society and the independent state (4). Diouf, as a historian, is concerned with how this transformation took place and what it means for our understanding of citizenship in post-colonial Africa. The narrative begins in the waning years of colonial rule, where young men and women played a prominent role in decolonization struggles and, thought to be led down this path through the supervision of adults (the leaders of the struggle), were taking part in a cross-generational struggle (4). The piece reads as a lament where contemporary youth are described as having broken with the past which led to “the fragmentation or dissolution of local culture and memory, on the one hand, and the influences of global culture, on the other” (2).

transhistorical and transcultural category they are writing against, youth are steeped in the social circumstances of their time; “For, as surplus citizens, youth are not born; they are made by historical circumstances. And rarely as they like” (2005, 273). The goal, then, is to take the position of young people in contemporary Uganda seriously both on their own terms and the terms that are made for them by the structural forces that shape and impinge on their life trajectories.

Taking this call as my starting point, I draw from anthropological scholarship on the social navigation of youth. An analytic of social navigation stays attuned to “the way in which agents seek to draw and actualize their life trajectories in order to increase their social possibilities and life chances in a shifting and volatile social environment” (Vigh 2006, 11). Navigation highlights both the agency and experience of young people as well as the social forces that they respond to in their daily lives. It emphasizes movement and multi-directionality in young people’s life choices, for it is not just young people that are on the move but also the social terrain of their actions. Young people migrating to South Sudan for work in response to shifting humanitarian economies – the subject of Chapter Five – demonstrates this forcefully. Social navigation therefore comprises of both “the immediate configurations of the social terrain and to its imagined reconfigurations” forcing young people to “simultaneously address both the immediacy of finding their bearings in a turbulent situation and the drawing of possible lines of flight into the future” (131). It also opens up space to explore “the contexts and motivations behind the

often-drastic measures taken by Africans to contend with largescale economic and political transformations on the continent and beyond” as a way of theorizing crisis as something other than exceptional (Makhulu et al. 2010, 4). Navigational practices – or “tactical modes of life” (12) – are strategies for “investing in enduring forms of value” (18-19) in contexts which, for many analysts, could only produce momentary acts to stave off some sort of bare life. This dissertation therefore focuses on the lived experiences (Jackson 2013) and perspectives of young people themselves (Nordstrom 1997; Jeffrey and Dyson 2008), paying attention to the structural factors that constrain their lives, on the one hand, and to the ways in which they actively maneuver in and out of circuits (Feldman 2010) of post-war intervention, on the other. Navigation under intense constraint can also be a form of survival (Bolten 2012), of labor (Makhulu et al. 2010), of making do, or even, in the context of few opportunities, of waiting.

An anxiety over youth idleness in Uganda has haunted many of my conversations with and about youth over the years. A sign adorning the side of a small *acikari* shelter beside an ATM owned by Stanbic Bank put it succinctly (Figure 1): “If you have nothing to do don’t do it here (*ka i peke ki gin atima pe itim kany*).”



**Figure 1: A sign in Gulu Town addressing youth idleness**

The criminalization of idle youth in Uganda – as elsewhere on the continent – is the product of colonial penal codes which sought to push indigenous populations into the labor force. While one method for doing so was the imposition of taxes through the intermediaries of indirect rule another was the carceral frameworks that would be the consequence of their nonpayment. To be idle was to be unproductive not for the self but for the colonial authorities. It cut into a bottom line and harbored the potential, so the British worried, for communal revolt. These colonial trappings of productivity and its absence cast an ever-present shadow on contemporary Uganda. The crime of being “idle

and disorderly” has been on the books ever since and while Museveni publicly called for the law to be repealed in 2019 (Okiror 2019), this was more than thirty-three years into his tenure and police and other state agents continue to use idleness as a mechanism to ferry weight or extract small sums from youth occupying public space in ways that are deemed to be “unproductive.” Being idle is associated with perceived risky behaviors and, for young people themselves, the feeling of being stuck (Sommers 2012). Idleness, particularly for unemployed young men (Mains 2012; Ralph 2008; Sommers 2015), disrupts expectations of social and generational mobility (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; Jeffrey 2010) with significant consequences for both personal and political futures (Diouf 2003; Honwana and de Boeck 2005). Young people frequently comment on their dashed prospects when they describe themselves as being “just home” or more harshly as being “redundant.”<sup>13</sup>

Idleness and forms of waiting that dominate young people’s lives is as much about present challenges as it is about reckonings of the future. If youth quite literally “figure” the future (Cole and Durham 2008) then forms of ongoing waithood disrupt the temporal frames of which they are at the helm. Youth and children have long held prominent roles in the national imaginary of the Ugandan state and its future. As Kristen Cheney has described so clearly, young people and children in particular figure

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<sup>13</sup> These expressions are widely used and speak to the ways in which Anne Allison, writing in a very different context, describes the feeling of being unmoored as “not only a condition of precarious labor but a more existential state” (2013, 9).

significantly into developmental and nation building rhetoric and practice. Young people are “the pillars of tomorrow’s Uganda” (2007, 3), so the national youth anthem proclaims, and as such the “development of the child... complements development of the country” (11). Museveni regularly addresses youth in the country as *bazukulu*, the Luganda word for grandchildren. His invocation of youth as the offspring of his sacrifice – of the war that brought him to power in 1986 – draws attention to the ways in which obligations of nation and kin converge in the figure of youth. It is through youth, after all, that the future of a nation is reproduced. The form of patronage politics Museveni attempts to foster between himself and the young citizens of Uganda is a diversion from the reality that at the head of one of the youngest populations in the world is a septuagenarian leader who has refused to leave office after decades of decrying African leaders who overstay their time in power.<sup>14</sup> Every citizen under thirty-five years old – recall, over 80% of the population – has never experienced another president. In a familiar move of using the metaphor of the family that places political elites as “parents” and citizenry as children (here, grandchildren) to facilitate state corruption (Nordstrom 2007, 59), Uganda’s youth remain sidelined despite their significant role in a national imaginary of the nation’s future. In times of prolonged

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<sup>14</sup> In 2005 presidential term limits were removed to allow Museveni to run again, and in 2017 presidential age limits were rescinded to remove any remaining legal barriers for Museveni to continue as president well into the future. In December 2020 he gave an interview clarifying his position: “I will leave power and go if a useful person comes up.”

uncertainty – particularly in the context of an uncertain post-war moment – the stakes of this imaginary take on a heightened weight.

### **1.5 Fieldwork, Methods, Collaboration, and Language**

The research for this project was undertaken over roughly twenty-four months in Uganda: two preliminary summers in 2015 and 2016 and then more formally over an 18-month period in 2017 and 2018 with two months of follow-up in 2019. During this time I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with three primary groups: young men and women working as private security guards, current and formerly incarcerated youth, and those who risk their lives following the war economy into active conflict in South Sudan.<sup>15</sup> The research took place in eighteen districts in northern Uganda with the majority conducted in Gulu, Kitgum, Lira, Nwoya, Amuru, and Omoro. This period however is more broadly informed by twelve years of experience living, working, and conducting

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<sup>15</sup> I did not set out to become an anthropologist of security or incarceration. As I narrate in the introduction of Chapter Two, I had begun this project as the natural outgrowth of a five-year research project on memory and conflict narratives while a graduate student at DePaul University. Conversations about youth dominated nearly every discussion and given my experience working with university students it formed the starting point of this project. However, I initially intended to place my focus squarely on two intervention programs – one led by a Ugandan NGO and another by a local government office – and the young people that circulate in and out of their initiatives. This changed once I began taking security guards more seriously as essential pieces of postwar humanitarian infrastructure and I had the opportunity to join an organization working in prisons as a research associate which would provide me access to prisons in a way that would never have been possible otherwise.

ethnographic research in northern Uganda annually from 2009-present.<sup>16</sup> An extended tenure in Uganda has allowed me to structure my research around collaborations with a wide range of actors. Much of what appears in these pages would never have been possible without the long-term relationship building that occurred well before this project had been conceptualized. As a result, the research took place in an eclectic assortment of sites: NGO compounds, government offices, countless homes, classrooms, prison blocks, construction sites, police stations, and many others. It also demanded that I could never treat these three primary groups as mutually exclusive in any real way. I frequently met incarcerated youth who had once worked as *acikari*, *acikari* who now worked in South Sudan (either as a guard or pursuing an alternative field), and young people who worked in South Sudan who had formerly been incarcerated in Uganda. Drawing on these cross-cutting experiences was essential to my broader understanding of the themes of this dissertation.

My research with *acikari* included both participatory research during their work shifts and more extended forms of ethnography in their non-work lives. I was interested not only in the everyday practice of how they securitize banks, businesses, and NGO compounds in Gulu and Kitgum districts but also in the ways they understood themselves as peacetime combatants and inhabit their new identities. In order to explore these questions, I shadowed guards in the spaces they protect, particularly NGO

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<sup>16</sup> With the notable exception of 2020 due to restrictions in place to combat COVID-19.

compounds, accompanying them on their day and night assignments where I learned what the rhythms of a work shift – twelve hours and usually in isolation – look and feel like in practice. During preliminary fieldwork, the young men and women I interviewed emphasized how vulnerable they feel during their shifts and in their life position more generally. Vulnerability and risk figure prominently in local youth discourse about futures. With this in mind, I paid particular attention to everyday practices – walking the perimeter, staying awake during night shifts, and employing strategies for camouflage – as a way to interrogate how security and vulnerability are embodied. I also accompanied guards to their home communities to better understand how *acikari* fit into broader social fabrics.

I was also particularly interested in the ways the *acikari* has been gendered as well as the gradual inclusion of women into security positions and made this a prominent component of our conversations, including with friends and family members. Lastly, I also considered security logs which document security routines at a slightly larger scale, marking the relationship between guard and company. Taken together, this information provided insight into the everyday lived experiences of young people providing security for humanitarian programs as they negotiate their ambiguous status of inclusion/exclusion within the current post-conflict moment.

My research with current and formerly incarcerated youth originated from my intention to join a Ugandan NGO and take part in the day-to-day of an organizational

workflow that had youth at the center of their interventions. Making life in and out of prison such a prominent part of this dissertation was by chance: the organization that took me on as a volunteer research associate for the duration of my fieldwork had wanted to begin a music performance program in prison. They had instruments but no instructors. Having performed, taught, and recorded drums for the previous nineteen years I offered to train a number of young men and women in music performance both inside prison and outside upon their release. Drawing on my past as a musician, a Ugandan guitarist and I developed a curriculum which we have co-taught for the past four years. This put me in prison up to three times a week – more when a performance was coming up – and provided a level of access and insight that would have never been possible without these affiliations. The bands that emerged – one inside prison and one outside – created new spaces for collaboration and improvisation that broke down extant barriers by fostering a space for co-creation. Band members wrote, recorded, and performed songs that communicate their life experiences to an audience that often holds significant stigma against those who have spent time in prison – some of those lyrics appear here. These songs - and the bands more broadly - have generated new mutual understandings between the artists and the community members they return to live alongside. This work has provided essential insights into the carceral experience in Uganda in ways that even standard ethnographic research could not make possible and

challenged me to think about carceral forms of captivity alongside other forms of social constraint.

As a research associate with the organization I conducted research on recidivism and the gendered labor histories of current and formerly incarcerated youth. This included organizing and analyzing single and group interviews, ethnographic focus groups, collaborative research, news reports and policy documents, and applied arts methodologies, most notably through music collaborations. The group of (ex-)inmates I spent the most time with usually fell within three main categories: those who were trained in entrepreneurial skills by the NGO I was following as part of this research, those who I personally trained in the band on both the men and women's side of prison (who were often not participants in the other trainings), and those who took interest in my regular presence in prison as a percussionist and built a relationship from casually introducing themselves either inside prison during their stay or outside of prison upon their release. Like the NGOs that curate their interactions and opportunities with and for incarcerated youth, then, my relationships were always circumscribed by my role as musician and my proximity to others. It often took many weeks – even months – for me to convince people that I was not an employee of an organization in any formal way, even if I did hold valuable relationships to those that were.

What is important here, for the purposes of this dissertation, is the context of who I was and who I was not able to follow-up with outside of prison. The stark

confinement produced by thirty feet concrete walls topped with razor wire twisted onto itself meant that my relationships within prison were consistent, regular, and even regimented. I knew when I would meet a given music student including the dozens of drummers I trained over three years. While some of those with whom I spent the most time would occasionally leave prison for work outside – inmates are frequently hired for manual labor at a far below-market wage which goes directly to Uganda Prisons Service (UPS) – my presence was almost always on a schedule, one that inmates, prison staff, and myself could anticipate.

Once individuals were released, however, it became increasingly difficult to re-initiate contact outside. I learned this along the way, and began sharing my contact more regularly within prison when I realized that few would be able to trace their peer's paths once they walked out those reinforced iron double doors of the main prison gate. This was particularly true for women who, in my experience, were more likely to return to deep rural homesteads with little means of communication and significantly greater family pressures that often made it difficult to maintain long-term, post-release contact. There were exceptions that inform my findings throughout this dissertation, but in the end they were more limited in number than I had hoped.

Therefore, the notion of how formerly incarcerated youth draw on – or attempt to draw on – NGO and other resources is being taken up by those who are proximate enough that they consider the chance of garnering a modicum of support within the

realm of possibility. For as many ex-inmates who fall within this category – and who make up the majority of the more detailed ethnographic cases that appear in Chapter Four – at least as many do not. In order to mitigate this limitation as much as possible I collaborated with an informal research assistant who conducted interviews within his extended networks, folks who are far removed from the circle of this NGO or my presence, which generated similar findings.

My research on migration into South Sudan was built around the life histories of the young people I have met over the past ten years. This research took place entirely in Uganda<sup>17</sup> through long-form one-on-one interviews with men and women who had either previously worked in South Sudan or were currently employed across the border but were in Uganda on leave. The standard rhythm of Ugandan NGO workers returning home across the border during their leave periods made for a natural approach for conducting these interviews. Most were eager to process their time away while also having more leisure time than normal. The outcome was a collection of compelling personal testimonies connecting life at home and over the border that were deeply reflective of a life in motion.

I also conducted dozens of ethnographic focus groups (Fernandes 2006, 16-21; Press and Cole 1999, 143-56) to better understand the broader experience of young

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<sup>17</sup> This is a limitation I had to work within in response to both logistical challenges and a family emergency back in the United States that required me to cancel a planned trip to Juba at the end of my fieldwork period.

people in the region. While my research focuses on the three groups above, I did not want to generalize their life trajectories across young people more broadly. I had already spent many years living and conducting research in the north and had a strong sense of how family pressures and socioeconomic struggles manifested themselves in daily life, but I also hoped to build my previous findings out into a much broader map to remain attentive to the nuance of intersubjective experience (Jackson 1998). Ethnographic focus groups, Andrea Press and Elizabeth Cole explain (1999, 149-50), differ from traditional focus groups in important ways. For my application, the most important were that members of the group were friends and acquaintances that already knew each other's backgrounds before meeting and that we met in a space that would naturally host such a group discussing issues of importance (the sitting room of a member's home, an open outdoor space nearby, etc...). These groups discussed issues ranging from work and family to relationships and life aspirations. One benefit of engaging already-established peer groups was that the conversation was informal and they were able to share their thoughts in a natural and supportive environment. It also meant they were able to seamlessly build off of one another's points both to commiserate but also to tease, prod, and laugh with one another in ways that a one-on-one interview, either formal or informal, cannot replicate.

Ethnographic focus groups also allowed me to better control for a tendency to let Gulu stand in for the rest of northern Uganda. Northern Uganda and the conflict

between the GoU and the LRA have garnered worldwide attention many times over the past thirty years. The conflict became synonymous with child soldiering and the “peace vs. justice” debate in transitional justice circles at a time when both were at an apex. As a result, Gulu was flooded with students, scholars, and journalists covering the war and its aftermath. And while many did venture outside of Gulu to speak with communities in more rural spaces, life in Gulu has frequently been let to function as a stand in for the entire region. Life in Gulu, however, could not be more different than Palaro, Pajule, Kalongo, or Anaka. When my research focus began calcifying around security guards – an industry for which Gulu is the major hub in the north – and my commitment to the Ugandan NGO began filling much more of my time in the field than I had initially planned (due to the immense generosity of the organization and its staff as well as the new connections I was able to make around a study of crime and security), I resided in Gulu for a much larger period of my research than I had initially planned.<sup>18</sup> And so the focus groups I conducted were designed to complement my time spent outside of Gulu in order to understand how young people were faring in their contemporary lives across as much of the region as possible. The culmination of this effort was much larger than just the many voices that are included throughout this dissertation. They provided a real

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<sup>18</sup> My initial research design was structured such that I would split my time living in Gulu, Pabbo, and Kitgum to better account for the different life experiences in diverse settings while still maintaining a home base in spaces that had their own unique histories of both war and humanitarian action.

framework for thinking about young lives across vast lines of difference and enriched the project significantly as a result. In the end, ethnographic focus groups were held in eight districts with nearly one hundred participants over an eighteen-month period.

Lastly, a note on language. I undertook concentrated language study in Acoli (Luo) under the guidance of two skilled instructors, Nono Denis and Jean-Marie Owachgiu. The focus of instruction was to acquire entry-level conversational skills and a vocabulary relevant to my research program. Interviews were conducted in mixture of Acoli and English though English was used more frequently. Even when my language skills were inadequate to have detailed conversations these language learning sessions have given me a foundation from which to communicate with residents in their first language, providing insight into local idioms and cultural conceptions of youth, maturation, and social personhood. I engage language throughout this dissertation as a means to draw connections between conceptual arguments and their local meaning and use.

## ***1.6 Chapter Overview***

The dissertation develops these arguments across four subsequent chapters. Chapter Two, “Accumulations: History, Youth, War,” provides the historical backdrop to the project, situating Acoli history within the history of Uganda and the colonial encounter. It does so by contextualizing the history of region and the war more

generally with an attention to youth discourses at various stages. This chapter outlines the ways that youth have always been at the center of humanitarian imaginations throughout the conflict, from being the pinnacle of international child soldier rhetoric to how young people have figured into NGO and state programming throughout the war and current recovery period. It will also foreshadow the ways in which history has accumulated in the bodies of young people, indexing contemporary anxieties as historical accumulations.

Chapter Three, “From Warscape to Securiscape: Threat, Vulnerability, and the Bluff,” introduces what I’m calling the transition from warscape to securiscape by framing the place of security in the post-conflict period (practices, discourses, institutions) with attention to how people of various backgrounds encounter securitized spaces and individuals. It then focuses specifically on the figure of the *acikari* – the private security guard – to elucidate how they navigate their simultaneous position as a figure of security and vulnerability, as the human infrastructure of contemporary security networks.

Chapter Four, “Arbitrary Assistance: Incarceration and Making Life after Prison,” brings the reader into the prison as both a site and cultural category, delineating how young people (and by extension, others) encounter post-war legal authority for the first time and with what social ramifications. It then focuses more squarely on the place of intervention by/in the prison by both state and NGO workers as they attempt to

transform youth into “productive, peaceful citizens” of Uganda and as those young people return to their communities and continue (or are cut off from) receiving financial and social support.

Chapter Five, “Choosing War: Trading (In)securities Across the Uganda-South Sudan Border,” carries the reader outside of Uganda as young people, frustrated by their inability to enact the future they have conjured, follow the war and humanitarian economy across the border to South Sudan. This chapter argues that, drawing on deep histories of trade and other networks that traverse this borderland, Acoli youth from diverse educational and economic backgrounds are exchanging their physical security for economic security, often at significant personal costs. While the humanitarian and war economy has shrunk significantly in northern Uganda since the late 2000s, it has flourished across the border. For many of those who were able to acquire university-level papers and yet remain without work for years after graduation, the risk feels greater to stay in Uganda than it does to re-enter a warscape despite the many life-threatening incidents they have experienced. This chapter demonstrates how young people navigate the uncertainty of post-war life in often unexpected ways, including choosing to return to war.

Taken together, these four chapters put forward new ways of thinking about how young people navigate post-conflict life through ethnographically-informed and conceptually grounded research.

## **2. Accumulations: History, Youth, War**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides the historical and contextual scaffolding for the rest of the dissertation. In it, I argue that young people in northern Uganda carry with them the historical accumulations of the past. While young people are certainly the vanguards of history, not only on the cusp of history but of actively producing that history, it is essential to also understand the ways in which they both conceptualize and carry – including in an embodied form – the histories that came before them. This is not a particularly novel point, but it bears repeating in a context where young people are frequently discussed as being *disconnected* from history. This dissertation project itself emerged precisely against that widely circulated assumption.

From 2012-2014 I conducted research on the construction of sites of memory throughout the region. At the time, sites of memory had become an essential tool in the repertoire of the peace-building organizations that stayed behind after the conflict left the region. The project explored how documentation and memorialization initiatives curated historical narratives in northern Uganda by considering their emergence alongside the impasse of not-war/not-peace in the region and followed the ways in which sites of memory became key battlegrounds for contested histories. While sites had a variety of influences and motivations, there was one that they all shared: youth

engagement. As I listened to NGO and government officials discuss their rationales for memorialization, nearly every one of them made the case that they were building sites of memory so that young people understood what had happened and learned from the lessons of the past. So that they would not make the same mistakes that led to the war. Yet, I saw very little youth engagement at these sites, and never heard of young people visiting these sites except for organized tours or consistent access to internet or other resources not available at home.

Sites of memory were also meant to strengthen cultural ties across generations. Many consider the war a breaking point between generations, the literal fracturing of cultural heritage from their youth. This was illustrated most clearly for me when I spoke with older men who held various positions of authority in their communities. "You see this boy, he does not know," I was told as a young man stood peering around a wall just behind us, listening intently to a conversation I was having with an elder from Kitgum. The young man, despite his demonstrated interest in the content of our exchange, was presumed to have no bearing to engage in the history we were discussing. He was written off as being concerned with "other things." Yet, after our conversation, the young man approached me eager to learn about the colonial memories of Acoliland the man had shared. Young people recognize that they carry with them the consequences of the past, whether of the war or otherwise. This chapter works to spell out some of those

histories, and begins thinking about the temporal frames that animate them in contemporary Uganda, including the “post” of post-conflict.

The chapter begins by conceptualizing historical accumulation as a useful analytic for thinking the history laid out here into later chapters. It opens that history with a discussion of the fortification of an Acoli identity and the colonial stratifications that hardened group identities. It then outlines the ways that youth have always been at the center of humanitarian imaginations throughout the conflict, from being the pinnacle of international child soldier rhetoric to how young people have figured into NGO and state programming throughout the war and current recovery period. Taken together, the chapter foreshadows the ways in which history has accumulated in the bodies of young people, indexing contemporary anxieties as historical accumulations.

## ***2.2 Accumulated Histories***

In conceptualizing the notion of accumulated histories, I draw on the work of Nancy Rose Hunt, Ann Stoler, and Laurence Ralph. Each ferries our attention to the ways in which lived, embodied histories bloom into lived, embodied everyday of the present and the future. Each write about polyvalent, affective futures which cannot be essentialized as mere aftermath or consequence of a singular event such as war or violence. Instead, these moment(s) find their way into the recesses of lives and communities that bear upon future-making projects of the present. Articulating the sort

of histories laid out here, then, is about tracing the often fragile and wavering – though acute – forms of embodied memory that young people carry forward.

Nancy Rose Hunt, in her book *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo* (2016), provides a unique roadmap for thinking about what the violence of (colonial) histories produce. She proposes the notion of afterward, itself composed of “numerous afterlives,” as a way of thinking beyond the more widely circulating aftermath. While the adjustment may seem slight, it carries a significant shift. She writes, “Reducing the force of event to *aftermath* limits angles, flattens perceptibility, intellects, and moods. Not unlike a continuous linearity, a doubled event-*aftermath* form misses layers, accidents, the uncertain, in a word, the *aleatory*...” (4-5). Different from a straight Foucauldian reading, Hunt argues that the marking of bodies is always partial (2). Central to Hunt’s argument is what she refers to, drawing on the work of Georges Canguilhem, as the “shrunk milieu” of Congolese life (16). The shrunk milieu describes a social space where conditions of possibility are reduced but potential maneuvers nevertheless remain in part (240). Her attention to affect and other forms of living, thinking, and feeling asks us to reconsider the cause-consequence calculation of basic historical narration of the continent. What colonial forms do in the Congo are not at all singular. What comes after – or even amidst – them, then, are not either.

Ann Stoler gives us another framework for thinking through what she has for some years referred to as “imperial debris” (Stoler 2008). In her more recent work she

develops to the concept of duress as an imperial durability that persists. Like Hunt, Stoler is making a clear argument against the compartmentalization of past and present into conceptualizations that render colonial afterlives into mere leftovers or traces. Instead, she stretches our vocabulary to think about the past as “a durable mark” (Stoler 2016, 6), “deep pressure points of generative possibilities or violent and violating absences” (5). She writes (7):

Duress, then, is neither a thing nor an organizing principle so much as a relation to a condition, a pressure exerted, a troubled condition borne in the body, a force exercised on muscles and mind. It may bear no immediately visible sign or, alternatively, it may manifest in a weakened constitution and attenuated capacity to bear its weight. Duress is tethered to time but rarely in any predictable way. It may be a response to relentless force, to the quickened pacing of pressure, to intensified or arbitrary inflictions that reduce expectations and stamina. Duress rarely calls out its name. Often it is a mute condition of constraint.

What Stoler is speaking to here is an endurance that, like Hunt’s afterlives above, speak to the multiple forms of both affect and material constraint that carry forward.

Laurence Ralph conceptualizes these afterlives under the rubric of injury for the Chicagoans he writes about in *Renegade Dreams: Living Through Injury in Gangland Chicago* (2014). Injury, Ralph notes, is not “an objective condition, something that a doctor could identify or diagnose” despite the proliferation of physical injury in the spaces where he worked (5). Rather, Ralph conceptualizes injury as the embodiment of structural violence over the long durée, where history begets structural violence. Injury is not the response or aftermath of a particular event but the culmination of generational

foreclosure, a plurality of moments – some slight, others more overt – which are carried forward through both the environment and embodiment of said violence. Injury is more than just debilitating. Ralph writes about these historical inflections as having the potential for action and response as “a generative force that propelled new trajectories” (17). New, different futures can emerge from injurious presents, though the injury is carried along. He proposes thinking about history as *emergent*, “a contemplative juxtaposition between how life was, how life is, and how life could be” (16).

I take from these three thinkers a propagative method for thinking with temporal frames that span past, present, and future. Afterlives, duress, and injury all provide vibrant, responsive ways of thinking through the predicament of categories like post-conflict. Sediments of history seep into the practices, ideas, and, yes, bodies of young people. History accumulates. When an older generation speaks of history, they often refer to life before wartime. For young people, this has been their entire lives. And so these two competing temporal framings at times come into opposition. What I’m suggesting is we tie them together, consider the durable histories that animate(d) life across generations as well as the deep footprints that recent history – especially when that history includes a history of conflict and political repression – have on the present. And the future.

### **2.3 Acoli Personhood and the Colonial Encounter**

The war in northern Uganda was a product of a number of overlapping and intermittent historical events. There is perhaps no explanation of the war more prominent than that of a north-south divide traced to the colonial demarking of difference and bureaucratic management, which begins with the debate on the origin of Acoli identity vis-à-vis the south of the country. This history therefore begins there, though will end somewhere else.

Much has been written about the origin of the Acoli as a discrete social, cultural, and political unit (e.g. Allen 1994; Amone 2015; Atkinson 1989, 1994; Behrend 1999; p'Bitek 1971a). Heike Behrend (1999), for example, argues that, "The Acoli did not exist in precolonial times," and that their emergence was a distinctly colonial phenomenon prefaced upon the fixation of new administrative districts (14). The indirect rule policy of the British required intermediaries, even where it could not find a clear (or cooperative) authority structure to work through. The result was often the articulation and codification of political power where it had not existed before (Reid 2012a, 218-221), and Behrend's argument is that this was the case in Acoli: the invention of an identity. Ronald Atkinson (1994), on the other hand, argues that "the colonial and post-colonial representations of ethnic identities in Uganda, however distorted or manipulative, have not been plucked from the air or created out of nothingness," and instead have their roots in the gradual formation of a social identity across an extended period of time

which, by the time the first Europeans arrived in what is now Acoliland in the 1850s, already had the makings of a coherent polity (2). Jakayo Peter Ocitti (1973), for example, describes how Acoli maintained a segmented sociopolitical system of small groups or clans which gradually combined to form chiefdoms (6). This was, in many instances, spurred by increasing connection with both regional and global capital, from the arrival of Arab slave traders from Sudan to the hardening of British presence into the formal colonial bloc that would become Acoli. The instrumentalization of Acoli as an identity – as well as its gradual construction – in this reading is prefaced upon an already existing and fluid group affiliation (Azone 2015). Acoli identity, then, was not merely “imposed from above” (Finnström 2008a, 31) but rather the result of centuries-long processes concretized by colonial violence.

That political organization – smaller groups that at times joined but nevertheless remained largely decentralized – would have significant consequences for the form of colonial rule to come. The earliest European writings on northern Uganda emphasized the region’s alleged lack of coherent political authority. Whereas the British found in the Buganda kingdom of the south a readily-recognizable – and even familiar – socio-political order, they found no such system in the north. The Buganda occupied lush and highly arable land and for the British who saw hierarchy and singular leadership as “the *sine qua non* of the semi-civilized state” (Reid 2017, 18), this became the center for colonial management. The north, on the other hand, was less suited to commercial

agriculture and had no king to speak of. The British struggled to make sense of the decentralized and segmented political order of the Acoli. As a result, “Non-Bantu-speaking peoples of Uganda were defined in terms of what political institutions they were perceived to have lacked rather than in terms of how they organized their political life” (Finnström 2008a, 40).

J.R.P. Postlethwaite, an agent of the colonial administration, noted his aggravation with the lack of an apparent power structure in the north when he wrote, “I became so discouraged by the absence of any real chiefs with definite, permanent tribal authority, that I found my mind turning for salvation to the old Buganda Agent policy of the Eastern Province of Uganda and, in fact, I actually installed one or two Banyoro as advisors to individual chiefs” (Postlethwaite 1947, 56; also cited in Finnström 2008a, 40). There was a clear desire to find a ready-made structure that could be easily be coopted by colonial bureaucrats who wanted little to do with long-term settlement. When they could not find such a structure, they constructed their own and laid it on top of what was already in place. Rennie Bere, Postlethwaite’s successor, echoed this anxiety when he emphasized that the colonial state must “make the Acoli conscious of their unity as a single people” in order to build a single political faction that could be administered by a recognized hierarchy of chiefs, or *rwodi* (Bere 1947, 8; also cited in Finnström 2008a, 37).

Colonial administrators consequently established a central Acoli authority through which colonial decrees and regulations could be passed.<sup>1</sup>

Following this “lack” of political organization, colonial bureaucrats wrote about the Acoli as best suited for military service and flexible labor. As early as 1919, in the first ethnography of the Acoli, E.T.N. Grove (1919) wrote, “War was the constant occupation of the Acoli before the Government took over their country” (163). This characterization was carried forward through colonial administrators and the Acoli were put into corresponding state positions. Under the new colonial system of the British, northerners found themselves in a much different position than southerners. Generally, occupational preference was given to “southerners (notably Baganda) for agriculture and the civil service, northerners (including the Acoli) for the security establishment” (Dolan 2009, 41). Ali Mazrui (1975) writes that the impression, held by the British, that northerners were the better recruits was directly related to challenges they found in the south in addition to the political organization of the north. He describes how Buganda – and other Bantu communities of the south – undermined recruitment into the King’s African Rifles – the African-sourced regiments of British

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<sup>1</sup> A central Acoli authority has remained a contentious prospect. The revival of Ker Kwaro Acoli, the centralized Acoli cultural forum which was formally institutionalized in the 2000s, is itself highly contentious and many still push back against any kind of strict hierarchy, despite the ways in which cross-clan collaboration has led to important forms of recognition by the state and subsequent political power (Paine 2014). Local chiefs themselves have also seen significant transformations in the perceptions of their authority and legitimacy by their constituencies, especially as a result of the changing post-war donor landscape (Komujuni & Buscher 2020).

military efforts – because the kingdom already had a consolidated military force.

Despite the regular resistance the British found in the north (the Lamogi rebellion being just one example), the political organization was such that recruitment could be individualized in a way it could not in the south, which had a consolidated, hierarchical structure of military control (35). That the north was more rural, by Mazrui's account, was a major factor in creating an "ethnocracy" built upon a "military-agrarian complex" where young men in the countryside "became conscious of their membership in the Ugandan nation" through conscription and militarization (39). Some fifty years later, one might say the same for the ranks of private security comprised of young men – and now women – from the north. Northerners were not only used for security, however, as they also constituted much of the labor reserves for the colonial administration.

Joan Vincent, writing about Teso in eastern Uganda, argues that colonial labor configurations, rather than the introduction of cash crops or other export markets, are what connect rural communities with the larger global economy (1982, 11, 212). She describes the ways in which Uganda was central to Britain's place in the larger world system as an example of how "the nineteenth century development of modern Europe rests upon the productive forces of tropical countries" (5). Uganda's role was, in part, a response to Britain losing access to cotton from the American south after the civil war

(9),<sup>2</sup> just as the conscription of northern military bodies was facilitated by Britain's involvement in the two world wars.

There was nothing "natural" about the separation between northerners and southerners – neither group was better equipped for work in agricultural or security sectors, of course – but such separation was hardly arbitrary. Splitting these two groups provided an effective check on the otherwise politically powerful southerners. Northerners could be sent south as either security to force resistant southerners to continue cultivating their land for the British Crown or as replacement laborers for those same southerners (Mamdani 1984, 10). The British "had a vested interest in helping the demilitarization of the kingdoms" (Mazrui 1975, 35) which made the north as a "political periphery... attractive for military recruitment into the imperial armed forces" (36). It was an effective strategy for colonial rule.

As a result of these colonial stratifications, relations to the central state were formed along regional lines and frequently articulated through labor differentiation, what Mahmoud Mamdani has argued amounts to class (1976). Few infrastructural projects were connected to the north as colonial administrators located themselves in the southern capital of Kampala. It also lost much of its male population as they migrated towards the south and elsewhere to become the laborers and soldiers for the colonial

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<sup>2</sup> And, Vincent makes clear, the "establishment of viable capitalist farming in the Kenya highlands" (6).

administration, leaving the north densely populated by female-headed households which were of little concern for the British to provide the type of infrastructure reserved for single-headed households elsewhere in the colony.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, as independence erupted in 1962, the north was left at a considerable infrastructural disadvantage while the south was already heavily integrated into the burgeoning nation's commercial endeavors.

Ann Stoler (2007) argues that to consider colonial archives mere repositories of history would be misguided, and instead urges scholars to consider colonial archives as “both transparencies on which power relations were inscribed and intricate technologies of rule in themselves” (267), that is, to “critically [reflect]... on archives not as sites of knowledge retrieval but as sites of knowledge production...as monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography” (268). In this spirit, thinking about how the colonial archive in northern Uganda *produced* new meanings but also how it *supplemented* existing meanings about Acoli identity within the emergent Ugandan polity reveals timely parallels to the political order of contemporary Uganda. This is not to say that one can follow a straight line from the colonial order in historical Acoliland and arrive in the present-day. As we shall see, this is far from the only pathway to understand the conflict in northern Uganda. Rather, as Frederick Cooper (2007) has written, “colonialism has

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<sup>3</sup> While, at the same time, bearing the weight of reproducing the capitalist economy of the colonial venture (Vincent 1982, 230).

left no single set of memories but rather a complex array," but it is nevertheless in this complex array that "one can find bits and pieces of illuminating recollection" (264).

## **2.4 War and Peace in Museveni's Uganda**

Uganda became independent in 1962 under the joint leadership of *Kabaka* Edward Mutesa II (the king of Buganda) as executive president and Milton Obote as prime minister. This was a relationship of convenience with a complicated history<sup>4</sup> that left independent Uganda with a less-than-stable start. In 1966 Milton Obote suspended the constitution and dissolved the partnership. Obote was Langi – a northerner but not an Acoli. His place in political power relied heavily on the northern makeup of the military. In 1969, towards the end of his first period in power, "northerners,<sup>5</sup> nineteen percent of the population, comprised sixty-one percent of the army" (Kasozi 1994, 54).<sup>6</sup> Political power was, from the start, militarized. Uganda would never see a peaceful transfer of power following a series of coups which would bring Idi Amin (1971-1979), Milton Obote (for a second period, 1980-1985), Tito Okello (1985-1986), and, ultimately, Yoweri Museveni (1986-present), among many others for short reigns in between, to power.

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<sup>4</sup> See Otunnu 2016, 145-95 for a detailed retelling of the rise and fall of this relationship between Obote and Mutesa.

<sup>5</sup> Here he means all northerners, not just Acoli.

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, 15.5% of the police force was Acoli, who were just 4.4% of the national population (Kasozi 1994, 54).

During the periods of Obote II and Okello many Ugandans consider the Acoli responsible for the violent suppression of anti-government sentiment coming from central and southern Uganda. As a result, Museveni's insurgency was presented "as a confrontation between Bantu and non-Bantu speakers and more specifically as a struggle between southerners and northerners" (Mutibwa 1992, 156-7).

From 1986 – when current President of Uganda Yoweri Museveni came to power in a coup – until late 2005 – when the LRA was pushed out of Uganda by the Ugandan military and entered the Juba peace talks – northern Uganda was the site of an intensely drawn-out and bloody civil conflict. For twenty years an entire third of Uganda remained in turmoil, taking a particularly significant toll on civilians. The population found itself in an extremely precarious situation, stuck between two violent groups: the first being an historically antagonistic national army (the UPDF), the other a rebel movement that was born in the north but was enacting significant retaliation on those who refused to take part. A young Acoli woman I spoke with in Lira put it aptly when she told me, "For us, we cannot support the government. We have seen what they have done. But we cannot support the rebels, either. How can you support a group like the LRA? No, we cannot support anyone."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sverker Finnström recalls a similar conversation with a young woman who told him, "I do not support the rebels, nor am I supporting the government. I am just in a dilemma. I would like to support the rebels, but they are killing my people" (2008a, 118).

The LRA emerged from the dissolution of a number of earlier rebel groups, most notably the Uganda National Liberation Army/Uganda People's Democratic Army (UNLA/UPDA) and the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) led by Alice Lakwena. The UNLA was the military force that, together with Tanzanian intervention, overthrew Idi Amin in April 1979 and later became the national army during Milton Obote's second term (1980-1985). It was primarily made up of Acoli and Langi from the northern regions. After Museveni came to power in an additional coup in 1986, the UNLA fled north fearing retribution for their "often vicious anticivilian violence" (Branch 2011a, 60). The National Resistance Army (NRA), Museveni's army, followed and the UNLA fled to southern Sudan and regrouped as the UPDA. They returned to northern Uganda to attempt to overthrow Museveni but were unable to do so. By 1987 the UPDA began to split and many joined a burgeoning new movement, the HSM.

The Holy Spirit Movement emerged as a response to the increasingly coercive and oftentimes violent practices of the UPDA on the Acoli civilians.<sup>8</sup> The HSM promised to "cleanse" the Acoli by mending these internal conflicts and forging a new Acoli identity uncontaminated by the violence of the past. In many ways, the HSM was cut from a similar cloth as other millennial movements which built political movements under the language of prophecy, spiritual power, and protection through righteous action (Wenzel 2009). While this was the official position of the HSM, many youth joined

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the HSM and Alice Lakwena herself, see Behrend (1999).

as a response to a lack of alternative leadership at a time where rebellion felt necessary, rather than the desire to cleanse their peers (Finnström 2008a, 75-6). The UPDA and HSM began to turn their arms against one another and eventually the UPDA dissolved as some fighters took a government-sanctioned amnesty and others joined the HSM.

Meanwhile, as the HSM followed the Nile River south in a move to overthrow the Museveni government, it picked up new support along the way in Lango, Teso, and other northern and eastern regions, “testament to the political appeal [the] movement had throughout the north and east of Uganda” (Branch 2011a, 67). Ultimately, as the HSM migrated south their prospects became increasingly untenable against the military superiority and numbers of the NRA. The HSM was defeated and Alice Lakwena went into exile in Kenya.

After the UPDA and HSM disbanded, the remaining fighters again joined the next available militia; this time it was the LRA led by Joseph Kony, a group that would far outlast its predecessors. A young Kony claimed a relation to Alice Lakwena as a means to build support. While Kony too used the language of “cleansing” and “purity” (Titeca 2010), these tropes were secondary to the language of a southerner vs. northerner regional war (Branch 2011a, 70-1). The LRA branded those who opposed them as Museveni supporters and traitors to the north. Violent coercion became a regular tactic after public support began to wane. Many civilians were tired of war. They shared the grievances of the LRA but were increasingly disinterested in joining a rebel group that

became gradually more violent against the civilian population. Like my friend in Lira, they remained trapped between two groups who were poor representatives of their interests.

Sverker Finnström (2008a) argues that explanations of the conflict in northern Uganda have been dominated by what he terms “the official discourse,” an account of the conflict that actively disengages with the ambiguous positions of individual, state, and international actors in favor of an “irrational rebel group vs. benevolent state” narrative. This discourse paints the LRA as the irrational rebel group without a claim to legitimate grievances or a cogent agenda, and the GoU as the benevolent – albeit under-resourced – defender of human rights. The LRA, embodied in the mythico-histories of the figure of Joseph Kony, represents the barbarity of civil rebellion on the continent, a barbarity that is found beyond the rational world we inhabit (Mbembe 2001). Uganda’s position as one of Africa’s most cited “success stories” makes this narrative all the more convincing (Tripp 2010, 2; Finnström 2008a, 63). The story very quickly, then, makes particular engagements with the conflict allowable whereas others become disallowable. The conflict is consequently understood as “humanitarian rather than political” in a move that disassociates cause and contribution from effect and consequence (Finnström 2008a, 141; Dolan 2009, 248).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The organization that is perhaps the most oft-cited as perpetuating this discourse, American NGO Invisible Children, echoes Finnström and Dolan’s words nearly verbatim. In a promotional

This perpetuation of the “official discourse” is dangerous not only because it disengages with the conflict, but also because it paints critical readings as insensitive to the brutal violence that affected communities have undergone for over twenty-five years. In effect, it silences alternative readings, removing any space for critique. A main goal of Finnström’s work, then, is to place the LRA’s various proclamations and manifestos within the context of the existential uncertainties of the Acoli in order to better make sense of what is otherwise considered senseless violence. His unit of analysis is therefore their “meanings in use,” the multiple meanings and significations that they carry in the lived experiences of those affected by the conflict. Rather than focus on the “authenticity” or “legitimacy” of such documents, Finnström shifts our attention to the work that they do in conversation with individual lives. As the conflict leaves the 1980s, these meanings in use become increasingly informed by the dynamics of the larger region and, by the 2000s, humanitarian intervention.

In the 1990s, for example, the manifestos frequently cite Museveni as the source of LRA grievances, and call for the restoration of multi-party democracy, constitutional federalism, socioeconomic justice, ending “destabilization” in the region (here the reference is clearly about South Sudan and DRC), etc... (Finnström 2008b). By the 2000s,

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video leading up to the Kony 2012 campaign and in the interviews that followed, they regularly declared “this is a human issue, not a political issue.”

the political claims remained but at the same time other warnings began circulating, penned by LRA, which targeted humanitarian intervention more forcefully: “Make sure that the ICC question is answered and we have been directed to kill any white person moving anyhow in this region, they come like NGOs but they are the one talking bad about LRA, so you should also know that white people are like Museveni” (Finnström 2012). The war had become international.

At the same time, there remained an important localized articulation of “Acoliness” in the ranks. Daniel Komakech, for example, writes about the durable currency of the *Acoli manyen* (the “new Acoli”) as an “attitudinal-psycho value” amongst fighters (2019). The nostalgia of an untainted past is operable in this term which is not temporal (new vs old) but rather about a “re-Acolicisation” LRA fighters undergo through training and practice (110). This is true for both men and women, and women took significant roles within the LRA, as escorts, security at rebel headquarters (including Kony’s), as spies, and as commanders (105-109). Fighters were therefore both steeped in complex local identities and navigating sprawling international political networks.

In the early 1990s, the LRA began receiving support from Sudan. This was in many ways a tit-for-tat response to the GoU’s support for the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) operating in what eventually became the independent nation of South Sudan (Prunier 2004). Omar al-Bashir, then president of Sudan, was happy to provide support to any group that was a menace to Museveni given Museveni’s outspoken

support for the SPLA insurgency in southern Sudan. Sudan's financial and military support transformed what was then a domestic insurgency into an international conflict. It was a pivotal change in the dynamic of the conflict and provided the LRA with ready-access to training, munitions, and safe bases from which they could conduct cross-border raids. The civil war in Sudan provided the right conditions for the LRA-Khartoum partnership that would come to inform the conflict's financial, regional, and political dynamics for years to come.

In 1996, hundreds of thousands of Ugandans were summarily ushered into internal displacement camps by the GoU under direct orders of President Yoweri Museveni. It was the culmination of a new counterinsurgency strategy. Forced encampment became an act of triage: the UPDF announced that any person found outside of the camps would be considered an LRA combatant and dealt with accordingly. If you were a civilian, you were expected to stay within the bounds of the camp. The government listed a litany of reasons for the creation of camps: "to avoid abduction; to save the properties of the innocent; to save the lives of people; to cut the communication between the masses and the rebels." Yet, as Chris Dolan points out, "This juxtaposition of a concern with protecting peoples' physical security and a suspicion that these very same people might be supporting the rebels – and therefore in need of containment – reflected fundamental ambiguities in the relationship between people in northern Uganda and the southern-dominated Government" (Dolan 2009,

108). This juxtaposition of concern and confinement will echo itself in the treatment of youth – especially those who are incarcerated – after the war ends. By the time the LRA left Uganda and began shifting into the DRC in 2005, nearly two million people were forcibly displaced by the Ugandan government under intimidation and bombing campaigns by the UPDF.

The LRA was indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2005 with Museveni's enthusiastic support. As the arrest warrants were unveiled, the first state-referral in the tenure of the ICC, President Museveni shared the stage with then-Chief Prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo in a move that signaled where the political alliances of international justice lie in Uganda, much to the dismay of civil society groups working in the region.

The ICC has been regularly critiqued for its emphasis on potential violations of international law taking place on the African continent at the exclusion of others (Clark 2018; Clarke 2019; Kagore 2012). Responses to the LRA arrest warrants exemplify these critiques, and add another: the political collusion of the ICC with a state known for a comparable record of violence. The UPDF is in many ways as culpable as the LRA for the violence of the more than twenty years of conflict, as local testimonies continue to assert (Odongyoo and Lamony 2006). The arrest warrants only detail those crimes perpetrated by the LRA's top leadership with no mention of state violence (Branch 2008, 2011a, 179-215; Akhavan 2005), further obscuring it from consistent scrutiny.

At the same time, the LRA relocated to neighboring states after being routed out of Ugandan territory by the UPDF. Shortly thereafter on July 14, 2006, the LRA entered internationally-brokered peace talks with the GoU. The Juba peace talks, named after the capital city of South Sudan where they took place and brokered by the Vice President of the then–semi-autonomous government of southern Sudan, Riek Machar, marked a pivotal turning point in the history of the conflict. While there had been a handful of other peace talks of varying success over the years, this was the first set of talks to insist on addressing root causes; include monitors from civil society, government, law, and the international community; and establish an effective timeline for progressively signing on each agenda item, all the while having buy-in from all the parties involved, including an international negotiator. The conditions were right, it seemed, for a protracted peace between the LRA and the GoU. These conditions, however, soon deteriorated through accusations from a number of sources that each side was “not serious about peace.”

Rumors occupied a central role in the dissemination and interpretation of information in Acoliland throughout the war (Finnström 2009), and the Juba peace talks were no exception. Rumors circulated throughout the duration of the peace talks that neither side was “serious about peace” and these rumors became powerful instruments for negotiating political power between both sides. Such accusations have allowed each side to shore up political support and assure onlookers that the only thing to blame for the prolongation of the conflict is the intransigence of the other party. The GoU, for its

part, was able to convince Moreno-Ocampo so effectively that he regularly and publicly dismissed the LRA as merely biding their time to rearm. As the Chief Prosecutor, such a public denunciation of one of the two parties engaged in ongoing peace talks can have a massive effect on their outcome (Branch 2011a, 190-1). The LRA has variably been described as “religious lunatics” (Titeca 2010, 59), “bizarre,” “mad,” and “resolutely non-political” (Finnström 2008b, 120-1).<sup>10</sup> So when Kony expected the forthcoming peace agreement to result in his ICC warrant being dropped, “along with money and a position in the government,” it was clear that he would get none of these demands, regardless of how poorly such thin representations of the LRA might hold up to scrutiny (Allen and Vlassenroot 2010, 18).

Kony signed on nearly every agenda item of the peace process from the LRA’s heavily fortified base in the DRC’s Garamba National Park. In the last days of negotiation, however, Kony pulled out of the talks and refused to sign the final agenda item (the final peace agreement), citing the ICC arrest warrants and what he argued was the GoU’s intent to sabotage the peace process for political purposes. On December 14, 2008, the UPDF, supported by the militaries of the DRC and the Government of South Sudan with additional support provided by the US military, began bombing LRA camps in Garamba (Atkinson 2010). The operation failed to capture any meaningful targets and

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<sup>10</sup> Note that Titeca and Finnström are writing about others placing these labels on the LRA, not describing the LRA this way themselves.

instead resulted in massive retributive attacks perpetrated by the LRA on the Congolese communities living nearby.

Many mark this as the collapse of the peace talks, citing reports that the attack had been planned well before the final agreement's deadline as proof that the GoU was never serious about ending the war; others identify Joseph Kony's failure to appear at the signing ceremony two weeks earlier as proof that the LRA – and Kony in particular – was only using the talks to reorganize and rearm his troops. In the end, it was certainly a combination of factors that led to the talk's collapse. Regardless of one's assessment of who fomented the talks' collapse, this attack, dubbed "Operation Lightning Thunder," was the proverbial nail in the coffin for the Juba peace talks. It remains conjecture whether either side would have signed the final agreement if the other would have acceded to this-or-that additional criteria, but by the time Operation Lightning Thunder commenced, the war entered a new phase.

Military operations continued in the region and, when the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009 was signed into U.S. law, President Barack Obama sent 100 military advisors to the region to coordinate regional troops and provide military intelligence to assist in tracking Kony's whereabouts. The African Union developed a Regional Task Force (AU-RTF) specific to the LRA. This task force was comprised of personnel from a number of regional African countries but was primarily led by senior UPDF officers. The LRA had split into small, highly mobile units

of a few dozen soldiers that have spread out over a huge area of DRC, CAR, South Sudan, and, it was speculated, Sudan. Many believed at the time that the unit Kony traveled with was hiding in Kafia Kingi, a disputed enclave on the Sudan/South Sudan border safely inside Sudan, an area where the AU-RTF and others do not have the mandate to patrol. In 2017, two years after Dominic Ongwen was handed over to the regional task force in Central African Republic, the US and Uganda withdrew their support for the AU-RTF citing the small number of fighters remaining. The force never did capture Kony, who it is speculated is still in Kafia Kingi and directing remaining personnel from his base there. The LRA conflict is ongoing, albeit in entirely different terrain and at a substantially reduced magnitude.

## ***2.5 Humanitarian Intervention and the Figure of Youth***

In November 2003 Jan Egeland, then the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, toured IDP camps in northern Uganda. Afterwards, he dubbed the LRA conflict and the situation in northern Uganda “the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world today,” no small claim just eight months after the US-led intervention of Iraq.<sup>11</sup> The line was picked up by a plethora of news sources and international organizations and the profile of the

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<sup>11</sup> *The Guardian* (U.K.). 2004. “Northern Uganda ‘world’s biggest neglected crisis’” 22 October. Available Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/oct/22/2>.

conflict immediately escalated, producing a massive increase of international attention along with “the intervention of hundreds of state and non-state external actors” (Perrot 2010, 187).<sup>12</sup>

Egeland’s declaration was grounded in the massive displacement he witnessed as well as outrage over child soldiering. During the height of the war and its immediate aftermath, the figure of the child was everywhere in international renderings of the conflict. From an American vantage point this eclipsed when the Kony 2012 video produced by the NGO Invisible Children went viral, but this had been the case long before. A great deal of writing, in the form of memoir, popular nonfiction (Eichstaedt 2009, Jagielski 2012), and even multiple graphic novels (Axe and Hamilton 2013, Dysart and Ponticelli 2009), regularly used the child soldier as the narrative crux – the very encapsulation – of the war. There are a number of reasons why this was so successful as a genre. For one, Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* (2007) had earlier become a bestseller, a launch title for Starbucks’ reading club (itself modeled after Oprah’s Book Club), and brought the image of the child soldier to the fore. It was a familiar rendering.

In addition, the child is effective in construing conflict and making moral claims about intervention and peacemaking. Liisa Malkki (2015, see also 2010) argues that the figure of the child does ritual and affective work in the context of international human

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<sup>1212</sup> Even before Egeland’s widely circulated remark made its rounds in 2003, NGOs involved in relief operations increased more than tenfold by 2000 as the result of the massive displacement that took place beginning in 1996 (Dolan 2009, 52).

rights programs by identifying five registers in which they inhabit: "(1) as embodiments of a basic human goodness (and symbols of world harmony); (2) as sufferers; (3) as seers of truth; (4) as ambassadors of peace; and (5) as embodiments of the future" (80). She traces a discourse of the child through a Christian teleology in which children are first identified alongside an understanding of original sin, then as a site of potentiality, and finally as a "moralized, sentimentalized figure" (87) that must be protected from the ravages of the (adult) world while being simultaneously imbued with a foresight and knowledge that has much to teach this same (adult) world about peace. The figure of the pure child is presented as the quintessential object worthy of intervention. The official discourse in northern Uganda is perpetuated upon unstable ground by often combining images of child soldiers grounded in no particular place on the continent with a decontextualized narrative of unimaginable suffering (Finnström 2008a, 108-112).

The reality for young people living during the conflict was much more complex. There was significant harm done to young people and children and Acoli testimonies during the war attest to this. Insecurity was a fact of everyday life during the most active periods of conflict, particularly in the mid- to late-nineties. Ambushes were common and most didn't dare to travel far from their nearest town center and many in rural areas relocated whenever possible. Catherine Lamwaka, a Uganda journalist and researcher, recounts the mood in 1996:

On one hand, some parts of the town were bustling with activities, while others were subdued, with people nervous, tense, and fearful of rebel attacks. Reports

were circulating through the town of incidents on the roads; of people being killed, beaten, or abducted; of vehicles and homes burnt by the rebels. Everywhere, even as residents went about their business, there was uncertainty, nobody knew what would happen next. (2016, 271)

For young people the most significant risk was abduction. When taken by the LRA children and youth had a wide range of experiences. Most were initially used as porters to carry looted goods. Many escaped or, at times, were released after days, weeks, or a few months. Others remained with the LRA for years. Still others never left, and came of age in “the bush.” This was especially the case if they crossed into rebel bases in South Sudan. The experience is also highly gendered, and the widespread cases of sexual assault against young women and forced marriages to commanders are well documented (Lamwaka 2016, 298-300). Sexual violence was also a widespread tactic Uganda’s national army used against Acoli men both young and old (Schulz 2021).

These experiences, however, fail to fully capture life as lived during the war. Subjectivity is never wholly negated through such acts of violence and the narrative of the child soldier frequently fails to account for the complex relations that emerged as a result. Young people made choices during the war, whether in civilian life or in the bush, some of which reaped a more advantageous social position than they had during peacetime. I sometimes met former combatants in prison who described their time in the bush as a significantly better life. In prison they lost social standing and a subsequent sense of worth and reminisced – at times, boasted – of when they supervised a small contingent of fighters, when others would have to listen to *them*. This was not just the

case for those newly confined in a carceral setting. Civilians also decried the newly reduced social meaning of their post-conflict lives (Dubal 2018). As discussed in Chapter Three, security guards who are former combatants drew on their time with the LRA through their daily practice. The bush, for some, was a training ground for their future career (even if that career carries significant barriers to establishing a meaningful life), a place of skills-training. Through the simple binary of victim-perpetrator, Erin Baines writes, “The lived experiences of war are reduced to the event, an act of violence. Stories of victimhood are interested in the vulnerability of the person and integrity of a human being, while stories of perpetrators are steeped in notions about the extraordinariness of evil, regarding perpetrators as people beyond or outside humanity” (2017, 5). But both “victims” and “perpetrators” are complex (Baines 2009, 2017) and must be recognized “as political subjects and agents... recognizing that victims’ actions are not merely forms of tactical survival... but ones that speak to questions of morality and humanity in the face of violence” (2017, 133). Many young people returned home to new challenges, losing kin relations forged in the bush among other forms of “meaningful social life” upon their re-entry into civilian settings (Dubal 2016). Sam Dubal writes:

Life within the LRA offered all kinds of transformative experiences. Rebels forged new kinship relations. They reconstructed their relationships with God, as they witnessed miracles and reached new depths of spiritual consciousness. They reconfigured their understandings of politics as they resisted and fought against the Ugandan government. Rebels returning from the front lines of war often developed a more profound discontent with the everyday violence of peasant life in Acoliland. These experiences transcended the boundaries set by the notion of humanity, and by doing so, brought the very category into question. (2018, 5)

And yet despite all of this, the figure of the child soldier continued to demarcate the experiences of young people of all backgrounds in both international and local press, bringing with it a significantly expanded humanitarian apparatus.

An immense influx of funding followed. Funds specifically for humanitarian assistance “increased from US\$19.5 million in 2000 to US\$56 million in 2002, and US\$119.5 million in 2007,” with “official development assistance and official aid [increasing] from US\$817 million in 2000 to US\$1.2 billion in 2005” (Perrot 2010, 189). The United Nations Children's Fund tripled the number of officers it employed for child protection programs between 2004-2006 and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began piloting work in IDP camps as part of the slow expansion of the organization's mandate to include IDPs in their otherwise refugee-focused work (Dolan and Hovil 2006, 7). As a result, a sort of parallel state developed, filling the public, emergency needs of conflict-affected populations through private, international humanitarian organizations. The heavy presence of (mostly international) NGOs allowed the state to evade providing public programs that might otherwise be considered state responsibilities. A complex network of professionals, experts, and expats stepped in where the state stepped back. Nearly every state function one could imagine was taken over by the NGO community in northern Uganda, from food

distribution to the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants.

This is not merely the proliferation of aid, however. The entire region of northern Uganda was reconstituted as a site of conflict, defined by and through the management of civil war. What at first appears to be the retreat of the Ugandan state is in fact a much more complicated web of national, international, and non-state actors collectively transforming the very position of social relationships in the context of war. For twenty years Gulu functioned as the base for nearly every NGO working in the north; only The World Food Programme, World Vision, and CARE were able to travel into rural communities during wartime, leaving the rest blocked in town. Gulu became a hub of international (largely Western) staff where internet cafés and hotels began rapidly appearing. The provision of social services were directed through this network of largely international humanitarian organizations and, especially within the context of the camp (where individuals had no freedom of movement and consequently no real access to building a livelihood that did not at some level depend upon these humanitarian structures), they became an essential part of daily life (Feldman 2018).

Adam Branch (2011a) provides a useful continuation of Finnström's work here. Branch is primarily interested in the nexus of statecraft and human rights intervention within the context of forced internal displacement in northern Uganda. Placing Finnström's official narrative more specifically within the human rights industry that

operates in northern Uganda, he argues that “human rights intervention is always open to antidemocratic political instrumentalization and always has the possibility of undermining political autonomy among those subject to it” (9). By considering the ways in which this potential for manipulation is experienced by the subjects of and the national and international forces that circumscribe such interventions, Branch reveals a close affinity between the official discourse and humanitarian complicity in the forced displacement of northern Ugandans.

This complicity has taken a number of different forms. The Acholi Inn,<sup>13</sup> the highest profile hotel operating in Gulu during the war and the host of nearly every military, political, or humanitarian delegation to visit the region, was owned by a high-ranking UPDF commander, Colonel Charles Otema (Nibbe 2010, 69-70). One Acoli civilian remarked: “We see four-by-fours going from the NGO compound to their office then back home. Why don’t they go to the camps? [...] People come here, make reports, go away and we never hear about the report any more. We still die here and nothing happens. People just make money out of the conflict” (cited in Perrot 2010, 203). The perspective that the war generated (and still generates) great wealth for military, political, and humanitarian agents (Nordstrom 2004b, 2007) was and continues to be widespread, and in no place was this more pronounced than in the camps.

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<sup>13</sup> Here I use the anglicized “Acholi” rather than Acoli because it is the official name of the hotel.

Finnström's official discourse, Branch would argue, is most effectively deployed by the network of international human rights organizations and Ugandan government officials that made a policy of forced displacement not only possible, but politically and financially advantageous. He explains, "Where the conditions are right, human rights interventions can become the building blocks of lasting administrative structures intended to normalize states, economies, cultures, societies, and individuals in line with given models" (2011a, 36). These interventions discipline their subjects by reconstructing sociopolitical relations between state and citizen. What we see in northern Uganda is not the straightforward "retreat of the state" that is often attributed to diffuse state power in Africa but rather the re-articulation of state power through non-state or, perhaps more accurately, fractal-state actors. It is instead the "continual formation of the state" (Hibou 2004).

There was a mutual dependence between the Ugandan state and the aid agencies that managed the region, where "...the regime of state violence against the Acoli in the camps was only possible because of the intervention of the aid agencies, and the aid agencies could only carry out their management activities because of their direct and indirect reliance on state violence" (Branch 2009, 478). The IDP camp is perhaps the most transparent example. It was only by forcibly displacing nearly the entire Acoli population that the conflict became labeled a humanitarian emergency and the majority of NGOs began their operations. This is not to dismiss violence inflicted on the

population by the LRA. However, it was the GoU much less so than the violence of the LRA that pushed peasants into the IDP camps for “protection,” and it was only by declaring the region a humanitarian emergency (Redfield 2010) that the international community was able to intervene with Museveni's support.

In thinking about these new terrains, Finnström confronts what he calls the magical imagery that makes these depoliticized narratives possible. In his piece “Humanitarian Death and the Magic of Global War in Uganda,” he explores the ways in which “local realities are deeply entangled with larger regional – even global – warsapes,” and that what is commonly used as a trope to describe the irrationality of the LRA – “magical terror” – is more appropriately assigned to our understanding of the “emplacement of global forces on the African scene” (2012, 107). African warsapes are indeed increasingly global, if they could ever have been considered otherwise (Reid 2012b; Reno 2011). This “magical” terror produces the circumstances that allow the complexity of the conflict to be reduced to black and white images: “us versus them, victim against perpetrator, and the secularized and modern Ugandan government and its international partners in development defending the Ugandan citizenry against the primitive barbarians of the LRA” (Finnström 2012, 107). These explanations are on many levels recycled colonial narratives, Finnström argues, remade for the modern age (108; 2008a, 29-61). Their magic, then, is in the reanimation of colonial narratives in the

services of state and humanitarian action; it is in the excess of “humanitarian reason” (Fassin 2012).

Chris Dolan, the director of Refugee Law Project at Makerere University’s School of Law, echoes Branch when he contends, “In many instances these [international humanitarian organizations] can be regarded as complicit bystanders; like doctors in a torture situation, they appear to ease the suffering of victims, but in reality they enable the process to be prolonged by keeping the victim alive for further abuse” (2009, 1-2). The aid agencies depend on the violence of the state for their very existence just as the state depends on these international, non-state actors to sustain the “bare life” (Agamben 1998) of the peasantry in the camps, what some scholars have described as genocide (Otunnu 1998; Otunnu 2009). The bare life of an Acoli peasantry fits neatly into the official discourse, carrying with it an appearance of inevitable need: their suffering *demands* action and what action other than international intervention could possibly fulfill that need (Malkki 1996)? Branch’s analysis of human rights intervention in northern Uganda is a significant contribution to our understanding of the official discourse at work.

## **2.6 Conclusion: After War**

As we will see throughout this dissertation, post-conflict life has been a mixed experience. There are gains found in the absence of active warfare, in the absence of the

regular and overt violence of the LRA and the GoU. As we move further away from the time period when Uganda was the battlefield, it becomes increasingly difficult for the GoU or UPDF to carve out exceptional wartime spaces. At the same time, it is not uncommon to hear that life in the bush was easier, more desirable, or otherwise more amenable to a kind of future-making that feels exceptionally foreclosed after one's "return" to civil society (Denov and Lakor 2017; Dubal 2018). Looking back at wartime as an easier period – either articulated through the language of nostalgia or of material needs met in a way they were not now – was consistently brought up during my research. For many of those who have gone to South Sudan to find work amidst an ongoing conflict (Chapter Five), this is an explicit motivation for doing so. These individuals *do* identify a break between life during wartime and life after, though in terms of decreasing opportunity and, for others, stigma for returnees (see Chapter Three).

The cessation of hostilities brought new challenges that were in many ways a continuation of the war itself. As families began returning to their homesteads after the disbandment of IDP camps many found somebody else occupying their land. Sometimes this was a neighbor or even a disgruntled family member, other times it was a soldier or a commercial enterprise taking advantage of the confusion that displacement had caused. Land conflict is, single handedly, the most pressing issue in Acoliland today

(Meinert et al. 2017; Whyte and Acio 2017),<sup>14</sup> and a significant number of the young people in these pages have been either displaced or incarcerated as a result (see Chapter Four).

The massive displacement across the region throughout the war has also remade relations between town and village. When camps were constructed, scores of people were forced away from rural homesteads and into new domestic arrangements. After camps were degazetted and disbanded, many had transformed what had once been quiet roadside communities into new town centers, what Susan Reynolds Whyte et al. refer to as “urbanization by subtraction” (2014; see also Branch 2011b). And new semi-urban forms of presence, especially for young people, in these new town centers formed new configurations of citizenship (e.g. Callaci 2017).

The political landscape of the region has also transformed significantly. Today it’s much more difficult to read contemporary political struggle through a coherent north/south divide. Though the north remains an opposition stronghold in the general sense, significant political elites fly the NRM flag and with the conclusion of the war it’s not uncommon for people, young and old, to represent NRM colors when it’s financially generative to do so. In the recent 2021 presidential elections the NRM was reported to have won over 50% in every northern district, its highest turnout yet, though these

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<sup>14</sup> Land conflict was also a challenge before independence. See Lagace 2016.

results are currently being contested under allegations of rigging. Nevertheless, it is clear that the politics of 1986 are not the same as today.

A central tenet of this dissertation is that the “post” of post-conflict both obscures more than it elucidates by marking too clean a break across moments and experiences and that it interminably marks a place as forever in recovery, principally defined by a moment of war no matter its duration. It seems increasingly difficult to imagine what comes after “post-conflict.” Whether it is the *acikari* who dreams of being a driver were it not for the cataracts he acquired during the war that blur his vision, the young man in prison who describes his time with the LRA as preparation for his time behind bars, the boy who first joined security because he was infatuated by the uniforms of the military men that traversed his home in the IDP camp where he grew up, or the young woman working for an NGO in South Sudan who calls herself a “professional endurer of war,” young people in northern Uganda regular draw on and interpret their present circumstances through the lens of the past while also taking bold risks to forge futures that respond to the challenges of the present. The figure of the “Ugandan youth” stands in for larger societal anxieties stemming from both the uncertain transition after war as well as larger intergenerational conflicts. In this way, the primary goal of this chapter is to provide a general history which will re-emerge in the pages that follow.

### 3. From Warscape to Securiscape: Threat, Vulnerability, and the Bluff

“From the first day, it became obvious that security does not exist, in fact it cannot exist, in the world today. Nothing I have encountered since then has challenged this conclusion. Security may exist in policy – good words printed on a page. Security may exist in the hearts and minds of people – ideals to be cherished. Security may exist as an industry – complete with infrastructure and personnel. But it does not exist in practice.”  
(Nordstrom 2007, 181)

#### 3.1 Introduction: Analog Security

In 2018 President Yoweri Museveni revealed a state-of-the-art CCTV system. *The Observer*, a leading newspaper, emphasized its purpose:

With the installation of Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras in urban areas, "the game is finished" for city criminals, President Yoweri Museveni has said. While launching the national safe city CCTV project in which at least 359 CCTV cameras have been installed in Kampala over the last three months, Museveni said now criminals can be monitored from near and far, during the day and night, before and after crime. "I could see by day and by night and not only seeing but actually recording so even if you come back afterwards you can roll back and see. But this one will also help me because even me in State House, I can now plug in and see who didn't respond. Because it not only helps me respond but it also helps me to monitor these sleeping policemen because I will not only be seeing the criminals but also these sleeping policemen and women. The game is finished, it's finished for the criminals." Museveni said.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Uganda Radio Network (2018)



**Figure 2: President Yoweri Museveni unveils a new CCTV system for fighting urban crime – The Observer, October 10, 2018**

The project is reportedly a partnership with Chinese company Huawei Technologies Ltd. and the Ministry of France and brings together IT experts, security professionals, and government officials with the shared goal of ending urban crime. One catalyst for the project was the assassination of the Assistant Inspector General of Police, Andrew Felix Kaweesi, who, one year prior, was gunned down by assailants in a drive-by shooting. Riding two motorcycles, they were easily able to flee. Other government officials faced similar attacks, and the CCTV cameras were proposed to avoid the drawn out and frequently unsuccessful investigations that followed. Museveni touted the system as the solution to crime not only against his officials, but also to the general populace. He called these cameras the “artificial eyes” of the state, capable of seeing all

things at all times – a network of cameras installed and integrated into a single system that is guaranteed to identify and track anyone on the wrong side of the law. Two years later, he claimed success in an interview with NBS Television: “The security has improved mainly because of the technical interventions... the security services had got infiltrated by bad elements like criminals and corrupt people. Even now they are there but things are now much easier because of cameras and other technical interventions” (Kazibwe 2020).

Security in Uganda is not, however, built around technologies of digital surveillance. The cameras that are part of the security system are said to cover a few hundred select corners of Kampala. Outside of the capital, security takes on a markedly different form. “Our security is analog,” one private security guard joked with me after I shared the President’s words with her. “Let them record, but a camera cannot apprehend. A camera cannot shoot a gun. Let us remain with our analog security which Umeme cannot disturb.”<sup>2</sup>

Private security makes up a significant portion of security personnel in towns and cities throughout the country. In northern Uganda, private security companies have become a regular feature in the post-conflict landscape. This chapter considers the place

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<sup>2</sup> Umeme is the national distributor of electricity and is often used linguistically interchangeably with “electricity” as a result. Throughout the country, but especially in the north, frequent blackouts make them a constant source of frustration. Here, the guard is making commentary on both the unreliability of electricity and of security technologies.

of young men and women employed as low-level private security guards, called *acikari*, in the aftermath of prolonged conflict. The last twenty years has seen a significant rise in the presence of private security actors on the African continent. While much has been written about the intertwinement of humanitarianism and security, the place of international security corporations on the global stage, and private policing, very little has taken account for the lives of those who take on low-wage, high-risk security positions, particularly on NGO compounds and other spaces of humanitarian presence. This chapter highlights the human infrastructure in the private security industry as an essential texture of postwar life. Through ethnographic portraits of a number of young men and women working in these positions, it introduces what I call the security bluff, a multi-valent strategy that I argue is at the heart of contemporary security practices. Part security affect (Masco 2014), part embodied practice (Higate 2012), and part performative pretense/deceit (Newell 2012), the security bluff is a deeply improvisational and often instantaneous technique that small-scale security actors employ to make judgments about the value of their lives vis-à-vis the object of their watch. The cumulation of these bluffs make clear ethnographically what Rebecca Tapscott calls the “institutionalized arbitrariness” (2017a) of the Ugandan state and its security apparatuses. This chapter peoples such apparatuses by demonstrating how they rely on the disposability of post-war bodies as *acikari* attempt to diagnose and assess threat in ways that are often deeply anti-state. The temporality of security (Holbraad

and Pederson 2013) for the *acikari* is not the same as for the state. While the state is focused on futureproofing in both the immediate (employment) and long-term (creating what they hope will be an enduring security infrastructure which codifies insecurity and idleness as threats that need coordinated, armed response), the *acikari* is working within the temporalities of immediate threat and risk of the confrontation and the space afforded for imagining a future through salaried work and building a family and a home. The bluff is where these two temporalities converge.

### **3.2 The Shape of Security**

Securitization is a central organizing principle of our age. Borders have become the laboratory for biometric security technologies keeping unwanted migrants from crossing into Europe (Frowd 2018) and elsewhere (Maguire et al 2018). Cities have become fortified enclaves (Caldeira 1996, 2001) designed to infrastructurally materialize the inequalities of their populace (Murray 2011; Glück 2017). In Africa, security was also a central organizing principle of the colonial project, which marked young Africans as threats to be contained by funneling them through official labor configurations, especially as towns quickly began to urbanize (Burton 2005, Burton and Ocobock 2008).

Daniel Goldstein, in his influential 2010 article, argues that while security has been the focus of many disciplines (notably political science), anthropology has long neglected it as an object of study (488). Writing in a post-9/11 era when national and

international security dominate media cycles Goldstein describes a contemporary moment that is represented as ripe with constant threats that must be assessed and responded to. His call is for a critical anthropology of security which would “break with this familiar framing of the security moment to explore the important relationships between security discourse and practice, human and civil rights, and the entailments of neoliberalism by offering a perspective on these issues that is at once ethnographically sensitive and attuned to contemporary global interconnections” (487). Anthropology, he contends, has an opportunity to provide insight into the conjuncture of global security regimes and local, everyday practice (489) and, in so doing, scholars might break away from an emphasis on top-heavy state projects which often says little about how these projects actually hit the ground. It might also be a way to move more firmly towards analyzing the *force* of security by foregrounding the lives that animate that force and imbue it with what frequently gets read as the mystical power of security’s dominance, rather than its fractures.

The postcolonial – and especially the post-Cold War – period has seen a significant upsurge in the presence of private security actors on the African continent. From heightened debates about the role of the state in local adjudication processes to the development of securitized enclaves within both emergent and long-established African cities, security is a key point of contention in examinations of the African state and its role in regulating the lives of its citizenry. Security had made appearances in various

strands within African studies – work on war, witchcraft, and mechanisms of punishment in small-scale societies are three such examples – but the discipline still remains relatively behind in recognizing the emergence of a significant novel actor: the young, uniformed, private security guard that dots compounds, offices, and tracts of land everywhere on the continent. When AbdouMaliq Simone wrote about people as infrastructure (2008) he described the amalgamation of individual actions as integral to the larger, structural form of the African city. His call to extend debates about infrastructures to include not just the wood, concrete, and steel of our daily lives but also the “conjuncture” of people undertaking simultaneous yet distinct activities in the African city emphasizes the flexibility of life as lived through nearly endless iterations. Low-level positions such as the *acikari* literally people the infrastructure of security across the country.

The term *acikari* is an “Acoli-ization” of the Swahili term *askari* which is used more widely across Uganda and East Africa.<sup>3</sup> It roughly means soldier though it is used to capture a wide range of security positions including those working in the military, police, and private security. The term can be traced back to the conscription of indigenous populations into colonial armies including, for British East Africa, the King’s African Rifles. The name stuck and began to encompass all positions of security in the

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<sup>3</sup> See the note on language at the beginning of this dissertation (xv-xvi) for an explanation of why I choose to use the term *acikari* here to describe the young men and women working as private security guards in this dissertation rather than *askari*.

colonies – then mainly soldiers and police officers. The carry-over of the term to refer to private security guards, then, draws on a shared positionality of those working in security vis-à-vis wider society – both as exception and those who have the power to deploy the might of the state. But with a connotation of colonial collaboration, it also has the potential to carry with it a sense of duplicity and treachery. We see this most clearly in South Africa, where *askari* has a very particular use: to describe apartheid collaborators. Jacob Dlamini (2014), for example, refers to *askari* in South Africa as “ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) members who, through voluntary defection or torture, had switched sides to fight against their former comrades” (37). The Security Branch had its own “*askari* project” which included compensation for defectors who used their previous experience to fragment their former colleagues in the anti-apartheid movement (42). In Uganda this isn’t quite the case. Despite the history of *askari* referring to indigenous security forces exercising the power of colonial control, the term has been normalized to describe everyone from a UPDF soldier or an officer working for the Uganda Police Force, to a private security guard or an officer of the Uganda Prisons Service. However, the term does retain an uneasiness towards the relative power differential marked by the presence of a gun or other weaponry. Home guards and young men providing unofficial community security during the war were also referred to as *acikari*. Attaching the term to private security therefore builds on this complex legacy which emphasizes potential violence as a marker of relative power.



**Figure 3: A transport vehicle for a local private security company<sup>4</sup>**

Private security is not new in itself, and most of the literature that engages the topic with an African focus bleeds into related fields with important distinctions such as private policing. While private policing can take many forms, it draws on a neoliberal logic of decentralization to promote market-driven security arrangements where individuals and groups take on the responsibility of establishing and maintaining the functions that otherwise fall upon the police: responding to emergencies, apprehending citizens deemed criminal, and serving as a vector between society and the criminal justice and carceral system. The result is a “distributed” security network where private police work in tandem with official state structures but, as many scholars have noted, often leave citizens with *less* secure lives by introducing “multiple violent actors

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<sup>4</sup> Note that none of the *acikari* that appear in this chapter work for Securiko, the company featured in the photograph.

compet[ing] for power, wealth, and legitimacy” in poorly delineated partnerships (Goldstein 2017, 193).<sup>5</sup>

Tessa Diphorn (2016), for example, argues that private security in South Africa stands in as not the retreat of the state or a loss of sovereignty but rather as a node through which multiple actors and practices perform situated, overlapping sovereignties that, together, “create ‘the state’” (19). Policing is a plural practice for Diphorn, “a social process that is executed by a range of actors to maintain a particular social order” (13). Importantly, though, this plurality is not merely a shelf of options from which one chooses at any given time (even if the decision of who you call and when you elevate claims matters intensely to the organization of these forces). Private security is more than just one such option. Instead, each element of security and policing in South Africa are co-constitutive in performing “an organized, purposive, and communal social activity that is defined in relation to crime” as well as uneven forms of sovereign power (13). Here the neoliberalization of policing does *not*, necessarily, entail decentralization

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<sup>5</sup> Jean and John Comaroff (2006) understand sovereignty as “the more or less effective claim on the part of any agent, community, cadre, or collectivity to exercise autonomous, exclusive control over the lives, deaths, and conditions of existence of those who fall within a given purview, and to extend over them the jurisdiction of some kind of law” (35). And yet as the state becomes dispersed, the bureaucratization of state power transforms into “a licensing-and-franchising authority” that privatizes and distributes practices of rule across actors who often have much to gain from the practice (16).

by means of sequestration but rather by an uneven reproduction of the state security apparatus.<sup>6</sup>

Diphoorn moves away from the notion of institutions however and instead focuses on practices as a way to emphasize the habitual performance, uncertainty, and capacity for violence by officers who people private security (22-23). This emphasis allows her to demonstrate the ways in which “twilight policing practices are iterative” and therefore, “through their habitual enactment... lead to further actions and meanings” (23). Through an “ethnographic analysis of the daily policing practices of armed response officers and their interactions with other actors in Durban, South Africa,” Diphoorn therefore asserts that security, like sovereignty, is multiple, disputed, and uneven, disrupting a linear reading of securitization that often appears in the literature (27). The bluff of security in northern Uganda that will be described below is

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<sup>6</sup> As she argues throughout her book, security in South Africa is not an either/or across a public/private divide (7-8). Despite the massive securitization of the South African state under privatized models (“where the ratio of security officers to police officials is estimated to be high as 7:1” [9]), the state is far from absent in the practice of security or policing. Rather, private security and the state complement one another both through their enactment of security regimes (which “reinforc[e] apartheid-based social divisions” [16]) and the way they produce state effects (“they influence how citizens perceive the state and its ability to act as their custodian” [22]). Sovereignty, for Diphoorn “is a form of power that is relative to the performance, assertion, and infringement of other sovereign bodies” (19). She writes: “The meaning of the state is reliant on the meaning of the nonstate, and vice versa. Nonstate policing practices are thus mechanisms through which ideas and representations of the state are discursively fabricated... Thus, even as nonstate actors may undermine the authority of the state, they simultaneously seek a degree of recognition from and partnership with the state.” (20). Her analysis therefore seeks to recognize the “multistranded engagements between sovereign bodies” (20). Her notion of “twilight policing” – the title of her book – comes from Lund’s notion of twilight institutions, which stand between public and private realms (21).

one such example of how these iterations disrupt securitization narratives that presume an intactness that has never been present.

Janet Roitman's discussion about the "pluralization of economic regulatory authority" in the Chad Basin is instructive here (2005, 152). She describes how these borderlands that sit at the margins of multiple states have developed into a "illofficial" (173) network of displaced laborers and former military personnel who have taken up banditry as a form of work. While formally unregulated, the immense traffic in goods that crosses through this space provides productive sites of capital accumulation that are regulated by these individuals that appear to be displaced by the formal economy. This regulation, however, is not merely the collection of informal and unassociated regulatory acts undertaken by a ragtag group of dispossessed actors in a precarious economic time. Their activities have substantial ties to the state. Regulation at the edge of the state often functions as contract work on behalf of officialdom of both the state and formal commerce. Regulatory acts taking place at the borderlands "are very often financed and organized by military personnel, customs officials, wealthy merchants, and local administrators, such as governors, party delegates, and local chiefs" (157). Quoting a customs official, Roitman writes, "The problem is that there is a sort of amalgam, and one doesn't know who does what. The multiplicity, the incoherence, the mix of uniforms brings on confusion. The pluralization of regulatory authorities speaks to the germination of this separate yet interdependent relationship, although it does not imply

the totalizing power of the state over the economic activities taking place within its borders. The regulatory authority of the state is exercised “by controlling access to such possibilities for accumulation” that are taken up by the economically dispossessed, but the unofficial regulators at the margins of the state also “grant access to possibilities for accumulation, protection, and services” for “those who find themselves outside the bounds of national welfare and security” (178-9). There are also important relationships fostered at the nexus of unofficial regulators and the general populace that lives at the borderlands. “Power is not sovereign,” Roitman writes, and so it is the *experience* produced through the social configurations “at the multiple points of its exercise” that elucidate the compound nature of economic relationships (196).

Here is yet another space where sovereignty is made multiple. While Roitman is squarely focused on economic regimes of control, her insights tie forms of subject making to the legitimizing and de-legitimizing of various (here, economic) activities. They also map well onto the consequences of the pluralization of security authorities. As we’ll see in the case of the *acikari* I work with below, guards stand in complicated positions vis-à-vis police officers and the military. On the one hand, many guards previously aspired to join either institution but then failed to do so due to financial, educational, or other barriers. At the same time, guards are often at the forefront of everyday security encounters in towns and cities across the country and as such are linked in a clearly – though not always so transparently – delineated hierarchy that

frequently places them as first reporters. *Acikari* themselves are nevertheless low-level employees in the companies that hire them. Some keep the numbers of various police contacts in their phones to use in emergency situations but many others are dependent upon management to suture the connections between the guard – a private company representative – invested with a modicum of authority including the possible use of deadly force and the state apparatus that has its own, much more robust rules of engagement. At the highest profile security placements – at banks with state interest, the homes of government operatives, or, notoriously in Gulu, hotels whose ownership has close connections with the UPDF – a mix of uniforms patrol the property. It is in the intersection of class, power, and the potentiality of violence that these tendrils of the security state at times align.

These alignments also emerge during heightened states of emergency. For example, a curfew was put into place during a spate of violent attacks in the summer of 2015. The perpetrators, dubbed “iron bar men” based on their weapon of choice, had come to Gulu after being pushed out of another nearby town and began a nightly spree attacking *bodas*<sup>7</sup> and others walking through town. It was impossible to move at night during this period not only because of the risk the iron bar men posed – many who tried, including a number of close friends, found this out the hard way – but also the strictness of the curfew once the UPDF arrived in Gulu. During this period, *acikari* would

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<sup>7</sup> Motorcycle taxi drivers.

sometimes go on joint patrols with UPDF and police when they were deployed. One guard stated it resolutely at the time with regards to these partnerships, “They don’t mind that I’m private – we are all of the same mind.” The “same mind,” for him, allowed for a working partnership which he saw as elevating his own position through his association with the soldiers in camo.

But it’s important to note that while policing and private security guards have much in common, they are not the same position, and the emergence of the private security company has important post-conflict lineages in northern Uganda that do not map neatly onto a nation’s police force. Northern Uganda has seen a revolving door of groups organized under the rubric of security both during and after the war. During the war, security was officially in the hands of the UPDF. Police were involved in community crime prevention and arrest, but their power was dwarfed by the heavy military presence in the region, particularly in and around the IDP camps in which the majority of the population lived. Other forms of extra-state security entities also played an important role during this period. The Arrow Brigades for example, were paramilitary groups made up of citizens armed with basic tools and mobilized to augment the Ugandan state’s security forces – namely, the military. These groups were abandoned by the state at a critical moment and became a significant target of the LRA (Branch 2011a, 73). The new social reality of the camp brought new forms of security. Homeguards took over where Arrow Boys had left off, providing community self-

protection as the UPDF failed to provide the protection it was purportedly there to deliver. Private security companies provided occasional security for caravans traveling dangerous routes during the war but were otherwise absent from the region. Most people recall companies beginning to open offices right around the time period of the Juba Peace Talks – when war would not come to an end but the relative peace of the region seemed here to stay. The war left northern Uganda – especially towns like Gulu, Kitgum, and others – deeply securitized. One significant way we can see the footprint of prolonged intervention is through the securitization of public space (Glück and Low 2017). Humanitarianism has an infrastructure, a significant part of which is designed around security (Smirl 2015). Compounds had become the primary architectural form for NGOs and other offices that had remade the infrastructural landscape of the area. Reconfigured space can transform social relations, particularly around ideas about perception, crime, and risk as “gates do not reassure so much as suggest something dangerous kept at bay, and streets emptied of casual pedestrians make a frightening freak of the rare passer-by” (Lutz 2017, 425). It was not just the landscape that had changed, however. Compounds required personnel, including that of security. The infrastructure of the war – both physical and social – was in place and re-imagined as securitization in a post-war period.

Private security guards were frequently former combatants who had gone through various levels of training with the LRA and therefore seen as ideal candidates

for security positions. The circulation of young men from the bush to the burgeoning security market is indicative of the larger transformation of northern Uganda from warscape to what I am calling a securiscape,<sup>8</sup> a sociopolitical and economic space increasingly dominated by security logics of threat and containment of which the installation of cameras is just one small component. At the center of the securiscape is the figure of the young person, frequently gendered male, who sits idle as the town develops around him, and the figure of the *acikari*, frequently their peer in charge of protecting the private property of domestic and international bodies ranging from NGOs to businesses and banks.

Security in post-conflict northern Uganda is also not just the assemblage of its infrastructure: walled compounds, *acikari*, signage, and razor wire. It's also the descent of "security talk" into the ordinary (Caldeira 2001, 19-101; Das 2006). Jean and John Comaroff describe a growing obsession with crime across the continent and well beyond it as integral to contemporary understandings of citizenship, law, and well-being.<sup>9</sup> At its center is what they call a phenomenology of fear which oscillates across a "longing for

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<sup>8</sup> One might say the securiscape is just another necropolitical fashioning of the relationship between state and citizen (Mbembe 2003).

<sup>9</sup> As the Comaroffs remind us, "criminality, broadly conceived, serves not merely as an index of undoing, of things falling apart, of doubts about the legitimacy of the law itself. It is also the object of political demand, an alibi for assertive efforts to remake the authority of that law in pursuit of the liberal-democratic idyll of 'the good life'" (2016, 7). Concerns about law and crime in colonial Africa – and Uganda in particular – were frequently premised upon labor relations between the colonial power and an indigenous population that variously succumbed to but also frequently rebelled against the demands of the Crown (a theme that we'll return to while discussing the site of the prison in later chapters).

the security of persons and property against the immanent danger of violation” and “a deep suspicion of the state... [and] its will to protect against, rather than to commit or condone, corruption and predatory crime” (2016, x). In northern Uganda, this ambivalence looms large. On the one hand, there are legitimate security concerns that the average Acoli family faces on a regular basis, and security guards themselves are not immune to this danger. Aber, a young woman whose husband had left her and made her the primary caretaker of her children, joined a company as an *acikari* because it was the only place she could find work. She commuted ninety minutes by bicycle each day from a village outside of town to Gulu. She described how she had to leave her young children at home while she worked her day shifts at a local business in town and had no family to watch them in her absence. On more than one occasion someone had taken advantage of the children’s inability to stave off potential theft and walked away with any possessions of worth she had at her home, including her meager savings on a quickly dwindling *acikari* salary. Her investment in stronger padlocks had yet to secure her home in her absence and she was running out of solutions as a widow renting in a neighborhood near town where she was two months behind rent. On the other hand, northern Uganda perhaps more than any other region in the country has long been skeptical of the state and its security apparatuses’ ability or willingness to act in their interests. Two decades of war, much of it experienced as aggression on behalf of the state and the UPDF, has eroded any enduring trust in a government that remains in

power now for more than thirty years. But this ambivalence – between a desire and demand for protection on the one hand and a deep mistrust of those who may provide it on the other – animates daily conversations and encounters around security in the region. The securiscape of contemporary northern Uganda carries with it vestiges of the past even through its current mutations. As Mats Utas has written, “the identities of security provider and violent aggressor are constantly shifting” (Utas 2017, 170).

### **3.3 Ex-People**

Odoch once told me that security companies are looking for ex-people. I was struck by his word choice. He was describing to me the ideal *acikari* candidate, summing up the life experience of himself and his colleagues under a moniker of past identities, all of which revolved around knowing how to use a gun. “We want ex-people to come join us,” he said as he imagined the advertisement a new security company might run on the radio while doing their initial recruiting, “Ex-police, ex-soldier, ex-people.” Odoch himself was an “ex-person.” He spent half a dozen years in the bush with an outfit of the LRA as a foot soldier. His responsibilities were few, but he did become an expert at quickly assembling and cleaning any gun he got his hands on. After escaping and returning to his home village, he avoided going through any rehabilitation programs and instead looked immediately for work, which led him to the growing security industry. Ex-combatants make good guards, he explained. “Generally, the

normal people can fear. They say, 'this man is a person who has come from a village, from the bush,' so they feared. Most of them they fear talking on me because, eh, if you are, if they know for sure you are back from the bush [laughs] the head is now stubborn, they keep on you if you tell something, but you keep on fighting straight away, so people fear talking on me. So that is also why I'm well known in any organization, so... I work with many organizations, that is why if I go, no one will not again not accept me. So, everyone is welcoming me and I continue with my job" as an *acikari*. Fear and uncertainty are currencies that Odoch depends upon for his employability in a tight job market with few opportunities for young men like himself. Security fits.

It is unknown exactly how many guards have experience with the LRA, but the number is high. In the early years of the private security industry in Gulu – those first few years after relative peace had begun to stabilize – guards were often returnees fresh from the battlefield. I recall vividly in 2009 the young faces that stood at the outposts of every international NGO compound in town, young men (by that time there were few, if any, women in security positions) who had barely made sixteen or seventeen years old. One put it to me succinctly at the time: "When we returned, they asked our skills. For me, I knew how to hold a gun, so I was sent here."<sup>10</sup> In addition to a military skillset that could now be put to active, civilian use, Odoch also brought with him a work ethic that

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<sup>10</sup> Joan Vincent describes how when soldiers returned to the countryside in Teso they were frequently put to work as guards as a way to stave off any potential dissatisfaction among militarized men by allowing them to maintain a security-adjacent status (1982, 229).

employers – even those in the security sector – valued. *Acikari* will be the first to tell you about the lack of support they receive from their employers which, combined with difficult work sites and conditions not to mention the “job of the gun” itself, require a toughness that few are said to have and an environment few are said to be capable of enduring. Young men like Odoch are not just experienced with the gun, but also the conditions of “the bush” (*lum*), a space Sam Dubal has written extensively about as imbued with moral import. *Lum* is marked as dangerous, violent, and cruel to live in, in stark opposition to *gang*, or home, the safe site of domestic life (2018, 86-114).

While Odoch was not born in the bush and thus not a “child of the bush” in terms of origin he was nevertheless, like the many youth who went through similar experiences early in age, significantly transformed by living his formative years “outside” of the traditional structure of Acoli domestic life. This mark of difference, for the *acikari* and even for workers in general (Dubal 2018, 3), maps, among other things, onto a discipline and endurance that is perceived as difficult to find in young people who have never left town. How else, one guard asked me, can I explain how he can survive the unforgiving rain and cold of rainy season without a proper jacket or cover at his assignment? How else, he continued, could he go the whole night without sleep and then continue to his second and third job the very next morning? It’s an identity that lingers. It may bring stigma to many aspects of their lives, but here it also points to a

durable trait that stands in stark opposition to the discourse of the idle young person, the very object of their watch.

It is not just an identity of “ex-people” that comfortably places young men like Odoch into positions as *acikari*, it’s also a much deeper historical trajectory that has, since the colonial period, marked Acoli as “the martial race.” Acoli and other northerners overwhelmingly dominate the ranks of security companies across the country. The exact numbers are not available, but you would be hard pressed to scan the rosters of any private security firm and not find an Opio, Okello, or Otim listed among its personnel. This is not just the case in northern Uganda. It is also the case in Kampala and elsewhere throughout the country. Stereotypes endure from the colonial stratifications that placed Acoli and other northerners in military positions described in the previous chapter. It has led senior military officials to, in the late 1990s, state “It’s the cultural background of the people here: they are very violent. It’s genetic,” (Finnström 2008b, 126) and secondary school children in the late 2000s to call their young Acoli peers “Kony’s.” It is also a primary way *acikari* understand their position as security workers.

While guards are frequently Acoli, managers are less so, and many describe their experiences as stained by “tribalism.” Tribalism here functions as a way of noting the differential treatment one receives based solely upon their ethnic identity. One guard lamented that tribalism was the most difficult part of his two-months training when he first joined a company.

What was hard was tribalism. There was lots of segregation. There were the Baganda [generalizing Baganda for all southern and western identities] and *they were taking us as if we weren't people*.<sup>11</sup> Life amongst them was hard and that was what made the training hard. When it was for the meals, when you are a Northerner you are given less. And as well as assigning you where you should work. It is done in accordance to where you come from. And at the training venue, we were being given tests and there were sites where people were deployed every day so that you could get used to work. It was never favorable for us. Even up to today I find it hard.

Another guard shared a similar experience:

There is a lot of tribalism. In the offices, it is only the Baganda. The others are given positions that they know can never gain them anything. Like for me, I was deployed where in a day I don't get anything. I only have to wait for my salary. It is my salary that I have to use to rent a house and buy the food I eat. It is my salary, the 180,000 that I have to send home. You are deployed in accordance to where you come from. You are taken at times to risky places where your life is at stake [as a result of being an Acoli].

Here “offices” are marked distinctly from “posts” or “assignments” that an *acikari* must fulfill. Office life is associated with a higher class reserved for Baganda, while Acoli are understood to fill the “martial position” of the guard. Note also the emphasis on salary and having the ability to make a manageable life cut short. More will be said in the following section on this point, but the importance here is the recognition of barriers within the security infrastructure that places Acoli guards as socially immobile. Most guards are not making explicit connections between the historical continuities of colonial practice and contemporary security work – though it is not a

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<sup>11</sup> Emphasis mine.

history with which they are unfamiliar – but they are reading the risk they accumulate as guards through a social stratification that places them far below others. The aspirations of young people across the country are deeply tied to being able to live a good life which often means being able to own land, build a house, marry, and have children, as well as fulfill the various social obligations one accrues as they traverse this social pathway. Salary is almost always as much about obligation and responsibility to others as it is about the ability to support oneself. Here your life is at stake dually by the tribalism he identifies: his failure to support others (the money he has to “send home”) as well as his own physical security by being sent to posts which carry significantly heightened risk. Young people are regularly making decisions to accrue one risk over the other, though the better option is never quite clear.

As we move further away from the war, a new generation of youth have begun to occupy security positions. Not just “ex-people” but also those who were too young at the time of the war to gain experience with the gun but nevertheless were constantly in its shadow. This generation grew up in IDP camps enamored by the uniforms and power that soldiers carried across the region during the height of government and rebel attacks. In interviews and focus groups I always enquired about the “why” of joining security. If a goal of this chapter is to consider both the structural condition of the vocation of the security guard as well as how young people forge pathways both within and against such conditions, then this “why” is one of the spaces through which young

people exert their agency and, through their words, clearly articulate the deep ambivalence that settles in its wake. The space of the camp, while frequently unprotected, was nevertheless rife with uniformed personnel of the UPDF. Many *acikari* describe their first interest in security through their childhood memories of war and displacement. “When I was growing up, I wanted to become a soldier,” one young man shared. His father died in 2000 when he was two years old, and he and his sister were sent to live with relatives shortly thereafter. He suffered significant mental and physical abuse in his relatives’ home and frequently dreamed of escape, a state of being that life in a camp quickly evaporated. The stature and power of the uniformed soldier appeared to be a way out, a way of reclaiming the strength he felt had been taken from him both through his father’s untimely death and his relatives’ abuse. He failed to make it far enough in his education to join the UPDF,<sup>12</sup> so he joined the next closest thing: private security.

Odoch described ex-people in terms of lingering identities that found a ready-made home in the security industry, but he was also describing a much heavier burden that reflected an injured sense of personhood. While he was with the LRA, he was caught in a firefight off-guard. The scene was chaotic: the UPDF and his battalion

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<sup>12</sup> He also forged his documents in order to find work as an *acikari*: “I had lots of interest so I had to forge my documents. For this job, I had to forge Primary Seven (P.7) results. With the forged results and a good brain, I was recruited for this job. There were others who forged as well but the truth was known and they were not recruited. With me now, some of my colleagues think I made it to Senior four (S.4). My bosses don’t even know that I forged and I am still performing well at work.”

exchanged shots for more than an hour and just as it seemed they had gained the upper hand an explosion took place just a few feet from his position. “The smoke of the bomb is now in my eyes,” he explained, opening one eye widely with one hand as he inched closer so I could see the cataracts that enveloped the area just behind his pupil. He was not being metaphorical despite the poetic language he was using. The smoke from the bomb was literally in his eyes, impairing his sight and making it impossible for him to quit his work as an *acikari* to pursue his true passion: driving. He could never pass the driving examination with his poor eyesight, and he couldn’t afford the surgery to have his cataracts removed on his salary as a guard. He was stuck, weighed down by an injury that haunted him. Driving would allow him to be more than an ex-person, he thought, where the weight of the past would no longer limit his future. But for now, he was still holding a gun each night at the international NGO office he guarded, waiting for a means of escape.

### **3.4 Making a Life as an Acikari**

“Hungry, Angry, and Armed.” So ran a June 2017 front page headline in the *Daily Monitor*, one of Uganda’s leading dailies. The front-page illustration depicted a young man in a crisp, light blue uniform complete with tactical pants, boots, a cap, and a name badge. Inside next to the story (Kafeero 2017) were photographs of two private security guards with their guns – one with a rifle, one with a shotgun – aimed ahead in a

ready position. Next to the photographs were their salaries. *Acikari* receive occasional press coverage but it is almost always in regards to a recent encounter turned deadly: the death of a guard, the death of a thief, or a death caused by misreading a security situation. The pull of a dramatic crime story is the currency many newspapers are prepared to boost. This story was remarkably different.



Figure 4: *Acikari* cover story in the *Daily Monitor*

The cover story focused on a Kampala based security company, Range Protective Services (RPS), which was owned by prominent businessman Habib Kagimu as one of a

number of ventures under the Habib Investments Limited consortium. Employees of RPS hadn't been paid for more than six months and were threatening to withhold their labor. Salaries range widely, but less prestigious firms can hire inexperienced guards at as low as 120,000 shillings per month (~\$35) and even the most highly sought-after positions top out at 300,000-400,000 shillings (~\$75-100), with take-home pay often being much lower. It's worth noting that this salary is paid for daily twelve-hour shifts across seven-day work weeks. Some companies offer small periods of leave, or a day or two off a month, but others do not. Pay is a regular complaint for guards, as it is across most industries in which young people find themselves. But it takes a particularly risky character when the workers being short changed are armed, as the *Daily Monitor* piece emphasized.

Guards working for RPS were struggling to make do despite being regularly employed – a rarity for most young people in the country. “One guard,” the article noted, “said his children in the village have dropped out of school and his wife has threatened to leave him because he can no longer support them.” A year prior, guards had had enough and those who were based in Kampala went on strike.<sup>13</sup> At the time it had been four months without pay – more than two months less than the current situation – and while the company paid some of their arrears immediately in order to

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<sup>13</sup> It's worth noting that the article makes clear that their colleagues posted elsewhere in the country remained working without pay and without a critical mass of support for a strike.

settle the dispute, the guards suspected of leading the action were fired and left without recourse. It seemed little had been learned by management since that action, as the assistant to Habib Kagimu was reported to have been frustrated by the *Daily Monitor's* involvement by covering the story. "Workers," the paper quoted him as saying, "are bound by 'an oath of secrecy' and 'should wait to be paid instead of complaining to the media.'"

One *acikari* I spent time with during his shift described how the system was rigged against the most essential position for maintaining security: the guards themselves.

When I just joined, I received 160,000. When I joined, the money for the uniform was chopped out and the NSSF<sup>14</sup> and I got 160,000 in my account. Right now, I am getting 180,000. This is for the 3 years that I am now in. The money is sent 200,000, but because of the cuts of NSSF and the bank charges, I get 180,000. Recruiters think of their stomachs only (*gi tamo pi iyi gi keken*). They should care about others. Like for me, I have used my uniform for about 3 years now. I even have to buy my own shoes. They need to be fair. In a day, we work for them about UGX 400,000 but they only pay us UGX 180,000 at the end of the month."

The young man interviewed here is pointing to two significant challenges related to his pay, both of which are telling indictments of his relationship with the company that employs him. First, it costs money to work. Private security companies are not, by

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<sup>14</sup> The National Social Security Fund

policy,<sup>15</sup> permitted to deduct the costs of equipment or any other job-related responsibilities from salaries, but this policy is commonly rebuffed. When guards are forced to carry the burden of these costs it has a significant impact on their ability to fulfill their life responsibilities. The comment in the article about the guard unable to cover school fees and having intimate relationship challenges is widely shared, even when salaries are paid on time and in full. When they aren't, it often leads to financial crisis for an individual or family already depending on razor thin margins to make ends meet.

But the second point he is making is that there is a massive discrepancy between the amount of money their labor generates for their company and the share that they bring home. Security companies charge their clients large sums to deploy guards to their premises. These clients include prominent banks, forex exchanges, lucrative businesses in town, and, especially in northern Uganda, NGO offices and the home compounds of their employees. Contracts stipulate whether or not the guard will be armed (it costs significantly more for an armed guard), how many are needed, and other specific provisions that may be fulfilled upon request such as amount of security experience, and each raises the total cost. These contracts can quickly cost millions of shillings per month, with guards only seeing a tiny fraction of that total. They are not naïve, and do

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<sup>15</sup> This policy is part of the much larger Internal Affairs guidelines under the Statutory Instrument No.11 of 2013.

not expect to receive the total paid to their employers, but with a significant discrepancy between the sum of money changing hands and the amount ending up in their bank accounts their ongoing social struggles become increasingly difficult to accept. It is also guards, not managers, I was frequently reminded, who were putting their lives on the line.

Note also the language being used here. Recruiters – that is, the security company representatives that advertise and then hire new recruits – are described as only thinking about their stomachs (*gi tamo pi iyi gi keken*). Not far from the language of consumption incarcerated youth will use to describe their relationship to the state in the next chapter, the metaphor nods both to the perceived greediness of company staff and the inequities *acikari* experience as a result. Jean-François Bayart's politics of the belly ([1989] 2009) is instructive here. The politics of the belly evokes the literal figure of the "big man" whose power is made manifest in the physical protrusion of a large belly – a sign of having the means to eat well, even excessively. At the same time, it is a marker of an act of consumption – the accumulation of power, wealth, and status through patronage networks and the fruits that are collected thereby. Guards frequently commented on how drastically different they were treated across assignments. Some worksites provided tea, water, and a meal for their twelve-hour shifts, showing what many read as a form of care. These gestures were more than once tied to a larger sense of mutual commitment. If a guard secures (in Acoli, *gwokko*, literally to care for) one's

home or business then the owner should also care for them. In other assignments, however, the experience was much different. One guard put it succinctly: “For the rich especially, when we are working at their places they take us like dogs, as if we have no value. When you are working, there is lots of scorn (*cac dwong tutwal*). They take *acikari* as those with no futures.”

Guards frequently described their worst worksites in this way – that they treated them like dogs. *Gwok* also means dog and draws from a related linguistic registry as security and the act of care. Dogs, after all, are primarily meant to protect. On an NGO compound, that comparison also evokes what Greg Beckett has written about the political valence of being treated “like dogs.” In the context of Haiti, where he works, he writes that “Many Bel Air residents experience humanitarianism as dehumanization,” arguing that as “the humanitarian aid apparatus has transformed social relations of respect and recognition into relations of gratitude and dependency” (2017, 38). Dependency itself is not the issue. As in Uganda, there have long been relationships of dependence in Haiti. The difference, for Beckett’s interlocutors, is that this is dependence without *respè* (a key term in the article, something akin to respect); “Instead of reproducing valued and desired social relations of mutual dependence, humanitarianism transforms care into a dehumanizing relationship in which some people are treated not as persons but as dogs” (36). While all social and economic classes may participate in the political networks that are “founded upon equality” and

simultaneously be “producers of inequality” (Bayart [1989] 2009, 228), “not everyone ‘eats’ equally” (235).

While being an *acikari* may leave you “treated like a dog” and with little financial savings from which to build a future, it is nevertheless, some shared, better than sitting at home. Working as a guard offers limited financial benefits, and sometimes having a job – any job – is the motivation for joining a security company rather than the prospective salary. And intergenerational pressures loom large. One young man put it thus: “If you are a boy born in a family and my father has no bicycle, I have to struggle to get a bicycle. I found my father only had a bicycle... why didn’t I get a motorcycle? You don’t rush to get rich, I found my *mzee*<sup>16</sup> with this, let me do this or that. It is slowly, step by step. When I was in Kampala I was always busy. I am happy, and am doing the same here.” In Acoli, to guard is *kur*, which also means to wait. Patience, here, is sometimes a strategy for avoiding the uncertainty of the future even if that uncertainty is felt acutely in the present. The encouragement to slow down and wait for financial opportunity is a common refrain and while some take it as a way to weather the waves of under- and non-payment, others take it as a reminder that a job as an *acikari* can sometimes carry unexpected benefits.

It is very clear to any *acikari* the power that NGOs and other offices they guard have in the region and the wealth they control and many have hopes that their

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<sup>16</sup> His elder. Here he means his father.

proximity to such wealth may afford opportunities for advancement. In an economy with few opportunities for young people to make a life, taking risks hoping that an opportunity might, after adequate investment, cash out is commonplace.<sup>17</sup> I once had a short interview with an *acikari* I hadn't previously met. We shared the same birth year and month and hit it off quickly. Like many guards, he spent time with the LRA – for him, six months after being abducted while he was in primary school. He returned and sat for his P7 exam in 2005 and then sat home for two years until enrolling in a technical school for carpentry and joinery. While he completed his certification, he was unable to afford the tools he needed to do the work and struggled to find something to support himself. He joined the police using fake documents but didn't receive his salary for more than five months. "My boss was not easy." He left the police and joined one of the newest security companies in Gulu for two years, but has since been home for another year. "I had the knowledge of carrying a gun" from the LRA and police "so I was taken." After one more eight-month contract with a prominent NGO he was without work again, and this time his in-laws began calling, threatening to take his daughter and wife back to their home if he cannot support them with steady work. He made 130k and

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<sup>17</sup> I'm reminded here also of the many young men who took the risk of attempting to associate themselves with the LRA during the Juba peace talks to leverage a possible demobilization support package (Cakaj 2016, 91), another seemingly unthinkable risk youth have made amidst intense constraint.

200k each month, respectively, for his two security positions (approximately \$35 and \$55 USD). He ended the interview recounting a story he once heard.

There was this con man, he went into a church and a pastor he was kneeling in the front of the altar, and this man he waited until the man closed his eyes, and when he did he took a picture. That man he found a *mzungu*<sup>18</sup> and said “I am taking care of blind people in the community, please can you help?” And that *mzungu* gave him lots of money and kept sending it. And he kept sending her pictures. He was getting that land, then building, building, what, what – he built his entire home on that.

The story is thick with commentary on loaded assumptions, manipulation, and the redistribution of money under the guise of conceit. But what he drew from it was the ease with which money flowed from the wellspring of foreign donors if one has patience to develop such relationships. His work as an *acikari*, he hoped, would bring him closer to the wellspring this mythical con man was able to build his life upon. He was without land, without a decent home, but his hope remained that he too might one day gain access to the flexible capital that the vernacular of NGO uplift might provide.

The *Daily Monitor* article concludes by outlining the regulatory framework that oversees private security companies in the country. What began as a telling investigation into the unjust labor practices that undergird private security ended with a short summary of the bureaucratic overwatch the Inspector General of Police has at his disposal, with an implication that more needs to be done to limit the risks inherent in an

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<sup>18</sup> *Mzungu* is a widely used Swahili term that refers to a foreigner, usually white.

armed workforce. Much was left unsaid, but it revealed a central truth of the private security industry: the young people at the helm of the work are overworked, underpaid, and, if disgruntled, present a significant threat to the face of security in the country.

### ***3.5 Practices of (Dis)engagement and the Security Bluff***

In this context of shifting boundaries between threat and opportunity, guards regularly depend on what I am calling practices of (dis)engagement. These practices refer to the calculations and subsequent actions guards take to balance their own security with that of their responsibilities as securitizing agents. The decisions that guards make with regards to the violent life chances of their labor are a way of engaging with a compromised socioeconomic space. The proliferation of non-working guns, inadequate protection, and poor working conditions leave *acikari* with few options in the urgency of a security event. Often times, bluffing is the best strategy for survival.

Sasha Newell's writing on the bluff (2012) is instructive here. In his work in Abidjan, Newell argues that the bluff – an “ability to imitate with precision” (1) – is an essential tool in the repertoire of young people aspiring for a level of (or at least appearance of) success that has been foreclosed to them. The bluff is a performative deceit that requires significant investment in getting it right. As such, it can also fail, as something “transparent, banal, laughable... [or] shoddy” (Jackson 2010, 52). The purpose of bluffing success or wealth, in Newell's case, is not to deceive or appear as if

you have actually achieved that success but rather that you can demonstrate a mastery of “faking it.” In so doing it produces new social hierarchies between those who are able to do so successfully and those who are not. It is a skill that develops with practice to produce something that “is neither fake nor real, but rather” becomes authentic only “through manipulation of the imaginary” (2010, 261). For Newell this stands at the center of social relations more broadly and cannot be discounted or sidelined as separate from the “real” aspects of social life, arguing that “the relationship between representation and reality is not easily divided; fictions and fabrications are (and always have been) social facts” (109).<sup>19</sup> And while bluffing is a form of social commentary, it produces real material effects, as *acikari* know intimately well.

Most shifts, especially night shifts, are long, quiet, and isolated. Some posts draw more attention than others and call on an *acikari* to engage clients throughout the night, but this is rare outside of the small footprint of Gulu’s center (and even there most nights pass without incident). Shifts come and go, guards patrol the perimeter, taking care to be seen when they want to be and blending into the night’s shadows when they don’t. Many guards work other jobs during the day and try to squeeze whatever sleep they can into their shifts – an ongoing point of contention between employers and security companies. Guards insist even when they rest that they are alert. It was once

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Jackson, for example, writes about the “trickster entrepreneurialism” that has become a source of pride in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2010, 53).

described to me as a kind of “strategic rest,” one item in the larger tool kit of securitization strategies that *acikari* employ. “We sleep with one eye open, always.” Sleeping, like all forms of security, is a form of waiting.

But to wait, for these young guards, is also to anticipate. Being a good guard depends upon being prepared to respond to anything that might come your way, a readiness that can mean life or death in the heat of a moment. The entire security industry depends upon it. In addition to learning the ins and outs of practical security work such as how to handle and maintain their gun, properly fill out log books, and effectively follow the directions of their clients, they are trained to always be vigilant, a relational posture that marks threat and property through the art of securitization.

*Acikari* come from a wide variety of backgrounds and while all are required to undergo a certain amount of training, this has changed dramatically over time, and many of those who were trained early on, or who have more formalized military training either from their previous work with police, UPDF, or LRA, speak condescendingly about recruits who came in the years after them. One young man contended that he had to help re-train his colleagues by confidentially providing support on how to properly maintain and use their weapons so often that it had become like a second job. During a conversation about the not-uncommon situation of an *acikari* being given a non-working gun, or a gun with no bullets, he first drew attention to the under-trained guard as the most dangerous situation. He shared a story about one of his

fellow guards while working on the compound of an international NGO's head office (a highly sought-after site where only the most experienced guards are sent):

There was a colleague of mine who was given a gun and he ended up shooting his leg since he never got enough training. For him, he worked for a different company. For him, they didn't teach him how to check a gun. [The security company] didn't do it. He got a wound that he wasn't prepared for. He wasn't given an idea on how to operate one... Some colleagues of mine are given guns and they don't know how to operate them and once they come to me and ask, I tell them how to operate them. You only tell that to someone who works in security like you. You don't tell a civilian about the colleague who you taught how to operate a gun. I don't tell my supervisors about having taught a colleague how to operate a gun since that will tarnish his CV with the supervisors saying that they have trained him yet he has no skills. This is also because the majority of the people trained nowadays don't get enough training. The training they get is very small as compared to the level of training that we got because last time someone died during trainings and the training days were reduced.

It's important to emphasize the discretion he employs to protect his colleagues as well as the greater mission of security. This was a recurring theme among guards that I spoke with over many years and many different categories of sites. Regardless of the education level or amount of working experience, guards regularly balance the well-being of their colleagues, their employer, their clients, and themselves despite these often operating at odds with one another. His commitment to training his colleague was both to protect him from future harm but also to uplift the image of the *acikari* in the community. The public, he later argued, expects an *acikari* to be armed, and when s/he is not it is like carrying a moving target on their back. The absence of a gun can denote poor pay (even by *acikari* standards) and therefore a heightened susceptibility for

manipulation, low-skill and therefore an easily neutralized barrier to the property being guarded, or poorly resourced and therefore a line of defense that is more likely to abandon their post if met with overwhelming/out-proportioned force. At the same time, he connected what he perceived as diluted training with the risk of harm – even fatal harm – during previous rounds of training.

At the center of his discretion was concern for how to mitigate risk in the immediate term for both himself and his colleague. The temporality of risk for the *acikari* is almost absolute in its presence in the here and now. A guard's primary objective is to suspend the rapid escalation of threat that can quickly escalate during a shift, but s/he might also one day be paired with this colleague and wants to ensure that s/he has back up when s/he needs it. Guards may work alone, in pairs, or in teams depending on the size of the worksite and they often do not know one another before beginning an assignment. Vigilance in these circumstances also includes one's colleagues. Ocen, a guard in his late twenties who worked for the best equipped company in Gulu described how in addition to being strategic in evaluating possible threats from outside a gate, one must also be watchful of threats from inside: "Now for me, if we are the two guards deployed here. I don't trust you, you also don't trust me. So when we are working we are also monitoring each other. We should be one in our work, but you also need to monitor the other one. Monitoring means you should monitor the action, the talk, the words that are said. You need to have those senses. You need to monitor your colleagues

very well. For me I work with many strangers. If something is trying to happen I am prepared.”

Ocen is not unjustified for being wary of a possible rogue colleague. Stories abound of private security guards, frustrated by their work conditions, providing cover for others to burglarize the assignment, or worse. Your colleagues could, after all, be faking. When visiting a remote farm prison to see a friend who had been sentenced to two years as the result of a complicated family land conflict, I took the opportunity to meet with half a dozen other inmates to learn more about their labor histories in the context of their current daily work requirements on the sprawling farm of the prison. A number of them had previously worked in security – either as *acikari* or in informal community security roles. There is, Ocen told me, a “thin line” between security and crime and the pathway from guard to inmate is well traveled. But it’s not just the possibility of transgressing the work of security that may lead one to prison. It is much more often the risk of accusation that changes an *acikari*’s life course.

There are strict rules of engagement that all *acikari* must follow as outlined by the security companies. The two most important relate to location and use of weapon. Each assignment has its own boundaries. Sometimes this is made obvious by the presence of a compound wall, but others such as shops in town need to have a clear demarcation of what portion of the verandah and building falls within the jurisdiction of the security assignment. “Before you shoot someone, you have to ensure that it is in your

assignment. You can't shoot someone who is still on the way and not in your assignment. You would have broken the rule if you did." And breaking such a rule comes with the heavy price. Many *acikari* who have ended up in prison as a result. There are also strict rules of engagement with regards to *how* you can use your weapon: "...before you shoot to kill, there are acceptable shooting positions that even the government recognizes. You can shoot the leg but if someone also has a gun then you have to shoot to kill because with their gun they can end up killing you." It's worth noting that despite the stark consequences of disobeying these rules, the dozens of guards I have discussed them with all had slightly different interpretations once we discussed specific cases, whether hypothetical or not.

Guards are acutely aware of their vulnerability to the law even as they are meant to enforce it. One wrong move could not only cause injury or death, but also arrest and incarceration. Guards were constantly biding their time – even in the event of an obvious trespass – so that any engagement they make would leave clear evidence of its justification. One guard told me that even when working in a compound with a wall, it is best not to engage a thief who jumps over the razor wire at night:

We first wait for them to jump into the premises. When the person is in now, that's when we can take our approach. Because you must also work according to the rules. You cannot get someone anyhow when a person has no gun, no weapon, nothing that can act. When a thief is carrying a gun you give no warning. That one now you don't need a witness. The witness is the [intruder's] gun. Now if someone jumps over the fence with no gun, you first monitor. You watch and wait for someone to steal something. Once someone carries

something, once they have broken glass, now for you to have a witness you can take them. But you don't panic. You monitor and keep your stand.

Here again, the guard waits before taking action. The waiting is what secures his own future by ensuring an airtight case not only against the perpetrator, but also in defense of himself. The waiting also, abruptly, must turn into action. The guard continued by emphasizing that the moment that evidence presents itself, you must act immediately. "You should take action before someone gets away," he said, because "if someone gets out it might be your negligence" and that could bring an accusation you are unable to fight.

But what do you do when you know you are unable to adequately respond to the threat in the immediacy of the moment? Guards regularly depend on bluffing in response to the constraints of their work and the potentially fatal outcome of an encounter. With the proliferation of private security companies many have been unable to acquire or maintain the equipment guards require on their assignments. As we saw above, that may mean still having only one uniform after many years of work or paying out of pocket to maintain the image of respectability in the community. Guards cannot, however, solve for themselves what is for many an enduring and almost paradoxical challenge: the non-working gun. I first began hearing about guns that don't work during preliminary interviews in 2015 as part of exploratory fieldwork for this project. Young men and women were frequently being sent to assignments with guns missing triggers,

guns that jammed regularly, and guns without any ammunition at all. Long established and firmly funded companies with offices throughout the region and the continent at large had fewer issues, but every *acikari* I spoke with over the years acknowledged the situation was a common struggle if not for them, then for their peers at other companies. The gun, in these instances, is still a tool of securitization, but one of a very different sort.

When a gun does not work, a guard has two primary options during a confrontation: convince the intruder that they have the means to defend themselves and their assignment, or run. Yet both responses speak to the larger bluff inherent in the practice of security in the region. In the first, the guard themselves takes on the bluff as a strategy to secure the assignment they have been tasked to defend. A significant part of a guard's job is looking the part. This has been described to me in many ways over the years, but almost always ends up as a combination of the uniform, knowledge, and comportment. Okwir, a young guard who years later would go on to join the UPDF, spoke to me about a term used colloquially among *acikari* to emphasize the importance of quick thinking on the job.

There is a word we use now: "security 99." You use your wisdom now. You use now your 99, your IQ to arrest that person. 99 simply means if you want to get now someone, you don't want to get problems you yourself also. You don't want to create more problems somewhere else. You use now your 99. When I use this one, 99 simply means trick. You just now think of something if you do it like this the outcome will be like this. That is how we use it... Security is the hardest work in the world, that's why it needs brain. If you do not have brain you cannot

manage. You might find that someone has been taken to the bush to fight and you'll be in war, and you still come back home [because of your 99].

“Security 99” is being able to make a snap decision that will protect your life at all costs. It's the ability to improvise to make the best possible solution under scenes of intense pressure. And the ultimate 99 is the bluff of the gun. He went on, “I would try with my level best to make sure they understand I am also not easy. Like now that gun I will not show you that it is not working. Even if it is having no bullets. If he comes, I may cock [the gun]. If I cock [the gun] he may not know it has no bullets. That one is 99, you apply that 99. And if you are lucky then you will survive. You just apply and you should be very contented with what you're doing.” The relationship between training, the gun itself, and the bodily comportment of the guard becomes evident here. How you stand, the way you hold your gun, and the positions you take are all linked in *appearing* like a threat, like a true *acikari*.

Security is a corporeal practice as much as it is a discursive or ideological one (Higate 2012). While in the LRA young rebels (*kadogos*) were often assigned the role of guard within camps as way of giving them a position that requires training but may not necessarily see as much action as those on the frontlines (Rabwoni 2002, 157). When Ugandan journalists reached the remote camps of the LRA as the various peace processes developed and ultimately collapsed, they frequently remarked on the young age of those in charge of protection there. Former combatants themselves have described

their own experiences as young boys pretending to be soldiers, performing a similar bluff of strength, capability, and power despite their intense vulnerability to the whims of commanders (Cakaj 2016, 97). Much of this is recognizable in the figure of the young *acikari*, desperately grasping their incapacitated gun in the hopes that an intruder will surrender or flee, lest they call their bluff and discover the truth of their stance.

In the second scenario, however, guards flee. This happens more than security companies would like to admit, for it reflects the contingencies of securitization when prefaced on the underpaid and undervalued labor of their personnel. Many *acikari* are blunt about how they will respond if they see a gun entering their assignment: "I will strive to protect my life and the property of the client but if not then I will save my life. Life is more precious." Okwir concurred, and argued that "Many guards, when something happens, they just end up running. They don't want now to be jailed. If something happens the company will pay, but you will now be the one in prison." He is making a clear connection between the value of property and the value of an *acikari* life within a context of persistent accusation. If you stay and defend, you may die or even if you survive, you may still end up in prison when an armed thief overpowers you and leaves with the property under your watch. Yet, the property will be insured by the company. The *acikari* has no such insurance, and so it is better to run than risk your life on behalf of such a company. The bluff in this second instance is not the bluff of the individual guard: s/he is, without question, showing his/her cards by fleeing the scene.

The bluff revealed in the flight of the *acikari* is the bluff of the larger security industry. The deployment of young men and women across the country, the walls that materialize property lines, and the guns – whether working or not – that each guard carries create a visage of security. But when a guard flees, that visage is quickly broken and the cracks of security, in practice, are revealed. As Carolyn Nordstrom has written in the words which opened the chapter: security, in practice, does not exist (Nordstrom 2007, 181).

### **3.6 Conclusion**

When the central police station in Gulu was attacked in the summer of 2016, many guards panicked and jokes about them became a way to comment on the attack itself. As people shared stories of “where they were” when the attacks took place, they also shared comical stories which presented the *acikari* the town relies on to protect private property as bumbling accessories to the inefficiencies of the state itself. The CPS is right on the edge of the main town center, next to the large public hospital and near a number of government and NGO offices. Some guards had already been tipped off to the possibility of an impending attack, but others were not. I heard one story of a guard working alone on a nearby compound firing aimlessly into the air in the hopes of scaring away any possible intruders from heading his way. Nearby, another guard had a more complicated problem. On the night of the attack, an *acikari* working on an NGO staff member’s home compound had been drinking. By the time of the attack he had

passed out, his gun leaning against the wall next to him as he dozed. This was not the “strategic rest” I had heard about earlier. When the NGO worker arrived home after being out that night he found the guard passed out at the gate, unresponsive to the shaking he hoped would wake him. He smelled the liquor and was frustrated but ready to settle in for the night – he would settle the issue with the company in the morning. Out of precaution, the homeowner took the gun and brought it inside with him before retiring for the night. When the guard woke up, he was startled to find his gun missing, perhaps the most serious case of negligence an *acikari* can find themselves facing. He fled, and no one has been able to trace him since.

*Acikari* depend on the security bluff to make due in a constricted terrain of life chances. It is not just security guards who bluff. Offices, residences, security companies, and even the state itself rely on the thin veneer of the securiscape where the security of the state is predicated on the insecurity of its outsourced laborers. Rather than take the entire security apparatus as therefore “fake” I suggest we understand the bluff as a collection of adept practices undertaken at multiple scales. Security here is spectral, morphing and eluding capture by everyone who encounters it, including, for the guard him or herself, their bound futures. For young men and women working as guards, the good life feels out of reach. One young man working as a guard, lamented for his future, shared, “The fear that I have in this work is that I have worked for long and I feel that with the work that I have done there is no great change in my life (*aloka loka pe tye madit i*

*kwona*). The salary I receive but the ones for *acikari*, they take them as if they have no future (*ki tero acikari calo anyim gi peke*).” The life of an *acikari* tells us much about the space of “post-conflict,” where unknown futures and unmitigated risk condense in the figure of youth.

## 4. Arbitrary Assistance: Incarceration and Making Life after Prison

“I want to dance  
And forget my smallness,  
Let me dance and forget  
For a small while  
That I am a wretch,  
The reject of my Country,  
A broken branch of a Tree  
Torn down by the whirlwind  
Of Uhuru.”

(Okot p’Bitek, *Song of Prisoner*, 1971b, 118)

### 4.1 Introduction: The Threat of Tomorrow

The proliferation of security in northern Uganda has, among other things, led to a sharp rise in incarceration rates. It has also led to a growing sense that young people – especially young men – are always at risk of arrest and imprisonment. One *acikari* once told me, reflecting on his fear of making any wrong moves, “We all have one leg in security, one leg in prison.”

There is a recurring statement shared among inmates and Uganda Prisons Service (UPS) staff alike: “Prison is a place for everyone.” It doesn’t take long spending time in and around carceral communities to hear the widely circulating notion that anybody in Uganda may one day end up behind bars, and that it won’t take much for them to get there. For many (ex-)inmates, it’s a way of articulating feeling torn out of an everyday and into a space of confinement that feels other-worldly, especially for those arriving in prison for the first-time. If prison is for everyone, then their incarceration can

be grounded in the potential that their vulnerability to the law is distributed across the wider population. “Today it is me, but tomorrow it could be you,” as it is often said.

I first encountered the phrase traveling to a small town center north of Pabbo with a team conducting a post-release visit. UPS, in partnership with a local NGO, began conducting visits with families and community members in 2010 in hopes of easing the reintegration process after release. Funding was limited and depended on the NGO’s ability to acquire and maintain hefty grants to cover transport and per diems for the NGO staff and UPS social workers that jointly mediated the sessions. For particularly difficult cases, there would sometimes be pre-release visits which were meant to “sensitize” the community to the individual’s return and evaluate whether they would be welcomed back. These visits varied from mundane check-ins with heaps of praise for the NGO to intense interfamilial confrontations that had the possibility of exacerbating—rather than alleviating—the potential blowback of a scorned family member’s return, a harsh but not infrequent occurrence when someone attempted to regain a foothold in a community that felt that justice had not yet been done. In the dozens of these visits I’ve taken part in, the team rarely knew in advance which type of visit they would encounter when they arrive.

Sitting in the back of a speeding land cruiser an NGO staff member and a UPS social worker concurred: inmates are students, and the life lessons of prison are applicable to everyone. Bernard, the social worker, elaborated further: “Prison is like a

hospital, anyone can go there. Anyone can commit an offense, even by mistake.” The prison as hospital metaphor was meant to normalize the possibility of confinement, such that an arrest and sentencing might be as simple as being rushed to a hospital unexpectedly. It was about carceral chance. Sitting in the land cruiser was a young man who would soon sit down with the team and his mother and discuss how his time back home has been going. It was certainly said for him to hear, but it became a common script throughout the day. I heard this comparison of prison to a hospital on each of our home visits that day – irrespective of the details of the case or the demeanor of the individual – as a way to convince reticent family members and skeptical community members that like an accident that demands emergency care, crime can happen when you least expect it, and prison is meant to solve that emergency. Importantly, it’s not that you may be the victim of crime at any unexpected moment – although that, too, is widely felt – but rather that you yourself may take part in crime without warning. Everyone is a potential inmate.

The work of prison over the long term – the transformative capacity that is so often invoked – took on a slightly altered and much more widely circulated metaphor. Prison in Uganda is colloquially referred to as the “University of Understanding.” As Bernard and the NGO employee insisted, prisoners are students. And this is taken quite literally. During an annual performing arts event at Gulu Main where wards performed a series of poems, short dramas, and musical pieces, nearly every performance

circulated around this notion. “Prison, a Teacher,” “Prison, a University,” and, most forcefully, “*Lapwony Madit*” (big teacher). In the latter, the message was clear: *buc lapwony madit madwong / lapwony madit eni buc Mandela* (prison is the most important teacher / the biggest teacher is this Mandela prison [of ours]).

The language of prison as hospital, as the “University of Understanding,” I suggest, points us to the manner in which both current and formerly incarcerated individuals as well as the state understand the role of the prison in contemporary Uganda. While the Ugandan state sees its role in transforming wayward youth into productive citizens through the metaphor of the university, young people experience this transformation as a form of consumption, where they are literally subsumed by the state and its apparatuses in violent and profoundly disorienting ways. As we will see below, what for youth is the recognition of a distributed vulnerability is for the state a thinly veiled threat.

Coupled with this threat is the promise of (post-)carceral care. Life after release is difficult, though that comes as no surprise. What ex-inmates seek upon their release is a sense of stability, a path – as both prison and NGOs have laid forth – for transformed futures if they “do the right thing” and, importantly, don’t remain idle. But they often return to spaces that are anything but stable, and often hear that others assume they will return. For those trained in prison in entrepreneurialism, the one resource they hope most to be stable – NGO support packages and start up kits – ends up often feeling the

most arbitrary. The perception that NGO support is inadequately responding to one's material needs is nothing new (Beck 2017; Schuller 2012), including in Uganda (Marshall 2018; Scherz 2014). But this mismatch is also the product of a significant transformation that has taken place within the field of humanitarianism. In line with the sense that the region has transformed from warscape to securiscape (Chapter Three), I argue that so too has the NGO landscape transformed from an ideology of protection and development to one of productivity and security (O'Neill 2013; Ramsay 2019) with heightened consequence for formerly incarcerated youth.

Humanitarian care, here, takes the form of entrepreneurial revival in ways that fail to address the livable needs of its beneficiaries. Importantly, this is not about NGO failure, short-sightedness, or otherwise an indictment of organizational action or even intention. Rather, as the life pathways of the young people featured throughout this chapter will show, the proliferation of challenges outside of prison are impossible to reign in under a rubric of individual intervention. Vulnerability to and from incarceration is shared and when young people return home from prison they encounter a changed social space at the scale of the family, the community, their peer groups, and much more. Life after release feels uncertain, support arbitrary, and often not at all conducive to starting a business such as they've been trained to do (not to mention the lack of resources to do so). When the assistance itself is arbitrary, young ex-inmates are discouraged and often strung along, but also carve out spaces for opportunity. This

chapter therefore takes the lifeworlds (Jackson 2017) of young men and women returning from prison as its starting point to consider how youth actively pursue a chance to live free (*abedo* 'free') after incarceration. NGO support is but one potential resource – as insufficient as any other on its own, but powerful in its promise of total transformation. What young people learn very quickly outside of prison – if they didn't already know it before – however, is that entrepreneurship alone will not save them from the social demands of their lifeworlds.

The chapter begins by introducing the Ugandan prison system and the role the state sees itself playing in transforming “idle” (and thus criminal) young people into productive community members and the kind of futures that circulate after release. It then follows young people as they navigate life after incarceration, including the intervention landscape that pervades post-conflict northern Uganda even as it has shrunk dramatically since the formal end of the war. If prison is to be a “university of understanding,” what kind of “understanding” does it impart? And how does that understanding manifest itself after release? Based primarily on my work as a music teacher in Gulu Main and Gulu Women's prison as well as regular visits to other facilities across the region, it tacks back and forth between ethnographic portraits of a number of young inmates and the institutional structures that provide the scaffolding for their experience in and, significantly, out of prison. Taken together, it highlights the lived experiences of current and formerly incarcerated young people as they navigate

transitions into and out of prison. There is a sharp disjuncture between their encounters with post-war institutions (often abrupt, uneven, and quickly escalating) and the slowing down of time – and the sense of a future out of grasp – while incarcerated. Leading with the sensation of incarceration as a form of consumption – of being consumed by a state from which most inmates otherwise feel profoundly disconnected – I outline the ways in which the prison operates as both a site and cultural category, delineating how young people (and by extension, others) encounter post-war legal authority and care in order to rethink the relationship between the state and its young citizens in contemporary Uganda.

## **4.2 The (Post-)Colonial Prison**

Prisons in sub-Saharan Africa are almost without exception vestiges of a colonial heritage. The architecture of facilities and the categorization of inmates – particularly the durable designation of debtor – betray any pretense of otherwise. But contemporary institutions are rarely mere mirrors of global trends or historical underpinnings. While global incarceration trends are overwhelmingly skewing upward, for example, prisons are not equatable forms easily supplanted across borders (Dikötter and Brown 2007). It is essential to note the important global economic ties involved in the prison industry (citation) – from circulating capital to highly mobile forms of expertise and trainings that move in and out of prisons around the world – but not at the expense of flattening

difference in the favor of a generalizable carceral condition. The prison, Dikötter reminds us, “was never simply imposed or copied, but was reinvented and transformed by a host of local factors, its success being dependent on its flexibility” (Dikötter 2007, 1). And so while the British colonial prison was in many ways an attempt at a uniform carceral facility in design, reproducible across its empire, the specificity of place always brought important distinctions. In India, for example, caste and religious hierarchies were permitted and replicated inside its prisons (7). Uganda is no different in this regard. The prison of contemporary Uganda is a messy product of British Empire, attempts at reinvention after independence, the notorious (and most widely studied) period of Idi Amin, and enduring global discourses about good governance and human rights that frequently map onto funding streams, among others. Before moving onto the lived experience of contemporary inmates, then, it’s important to briefly sketch this history to better situate the Ugandan prison of today.

The colonial prison was a central tool in the coercion of imperial subjects towards particular forms of labor, movement, and social organization. Building on a deep heritage of enslavement and capture, it centralized captivity across a much longer time period than had typically been practiced in Africa before the formal colonial period. Captivity then was typically “temporary and preventative, holding the accused before trial and sentence, or keeping war captives before they could be exchanged among victorious parties, then killed, enslaved, or integrated into a household as a dependent”

(Bernault 2007, 57). Importantly, the temporary nature of legal detention was a reflection of its role in a larger social structure based upon the status of individuals (85) and typically resolved through compensation or exchange. The colonial prison took on a very different role: “taming political, economic, and cultural resistance to white domination” (65), particularly those who resisted forced labor regimes (69). In a cruel irony, then, incarcerated colonial subjects were, by their imprisonment and at the threat of significant corporal punishment, forced into the very forms of unfree labor they resisted.

Colonial carceral practices thereby undermined the neat distinction that mark our understanding of modern penal discipline. What Foucault famously laid out as the transition from an old sovereignty over death to one over life through the focused modification of bodies and minds<sup>1</sup> is complicated in colonial Africa by the encouragement of violent corporal discipline amidst new forms of discipline. Florence Bernault writes (83),

As a result a particular disciplinary project emerged in the colonial context, drawing back together what Western penal ideologues had sought to separate since the eighteenth century: the confluence of physical pain, punishment and individual reform. Hence colonial punishments and disciplinary tactics mobilised a double level of sentence and purpose in symmetrical opposition to the European reform model: well-ordered prison architectures served primarily to organize violent coercion (forced labour and racial segregation), while physical punishment was promoted to effect discipline and reformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Note also the connections between prison and education facilities in this shift in terms of the university metaphor that opened the chapter.

The prison has of course had the transformation and disciplining of the body at its center for long (Foucault 1995). But under colonialism it takes on a particular form of disciplining the social body, and disciplining one native body is in one way a form of disciplining colonial subjects more broadly.

By the time of independence in 1962 the prison was a durable institution tucked within the larger bureaucratic fashioning of the liberated state, with this duality of modern discipline and corporal punishment intact. Leading up to the reign of Idi Amin (1971-1979), and indeed during this period, the prison was one of many signifiers of modern state power and the visions of modernity it attempted to project. The Prisons Act of 1964 formally replaced the colonial prison system and instituted the Ugandan Prisons Service (UPS). While important changes did take place in prison practice across the colonial-postcolonial divide, the role of the prison in forced labor regimes endured into the independence era. There is very little work on the post-colonial prison in Africa, particularly in Uganda, though Katherine Bruce-Lockhart's work is a notable recent attempt to change that (2017, 2018, 2019). Bruce-Lockhart writes, "During the 1960s, the Service built on the colonial policy of prison industrial and agricultural production. In 1965 there were a total of twenty-three prison farms covering an area of 5,000 acres. By 1969, the number of farms had not expanded significantly, but the total acreage had risen to 70,000— a remarkable fourteen-fold increase" (2017, 120) that has grown

unabated into the present day. Obote<sup>2</sup> himself remarked on the capacity of the prison to be a source of wealth for the nation while also indicating loftier images of reform for the first time: “The goal was to ‘train prisoners in the modern methods of agriculture so that after discharge they could return to their homes and earn an honest living’. This meant working in rural agriculture, not ‘running about in urban areas and creating artificial unemployment’ where one could face ‘the danger of lapsing into a life of crime’” (Bruce-Lockhart 2017, 122).

The 1970s brought the most widely commented on period of penal politics in the country. Regular news coming out of the country and circulating within it reported on the proliferation of now infamous dungeons and torture chambers, including in the Bugandan palace. “Fascist violence in Uganda was reactionary terror” that personalized violence and incarceration in a way that hadn’t previously been seen in Uganda (Mamdani 1984, 53). Though much of the detention and torture during this period was typically undertaken outside of formal prison institutions (Bruce-Lockhart 2018), it nevertheless had a profound effect on how citizens viewed the carceral power of the state as well as how bureaucrats handled the intrusion of a particular kind of personalized power. At times, prisons and their staff were “tasked with holding a wide range of criminal and political prisoners, coping with wartime insecurity, and dealing

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<sup>2</sup> The prime minister and then president of Uganda throughout the 1960s and again in the early 1980s.

with an influx of paramilitary agents” (Bruce-Lockhart 2019). The prison also expanded its industrial operations during this period by acquiring a number of facilities forcibly taken from Indian business owners both during and after their expulsion (2017, 127).

The post-Amin era of incarceration in Uganda is marked by the introduction of good governance (Chalfin and Adunbi 2018) and human rights discourses under neoliberal reform, particularly under Museveni. Neoliberalism descended on Uganda unevenly but brought with it the Structural Adjustment Programs that would transform African political and economic organization for the foreseeable future. In 2000 a number of years of ongoing reform resulted in the Open Door Policy which allowed outside observers into prisons for the first time. Then further, in 2006, Uganda banned all forms of corporal punishment in prison. However, as Tomas Max Martin’s work has shown, the introduction of “human rights” into a carceral space with important local dimensions is rarely so clear. Martin demonstrates how “the legal, moral, and technical dimensions of human rights are malleable enough for staff and managers” in prison “to cobble together a take on human rights that is locally meaningful and potent” (2014, 70). He reads this “take on human rights” through the idiom of “reasonable caning” where, despite the now clear ban on any form of corporal punishment including caning, the practice remains “reasonable” when undertaken by fellow prisoners or for offenses ranging from insubordination to assault or escape (76).

Whether sitting in police stations or socializing with prison guards, it rarely took longer than a few minutes of conversation with a new officer for the topic of torture to come up unprompted. When bailing out a young man who was wrongfully accused of stealing a television set in a distant village, I was greeted at the police station by a stout and firm police officer who took me privately into his office. “You know, we don’t torture here,” he declared without instigation to open up the conversation. “You can even check your boy’s body, you won’t find a mark.” The intactness of my young friend’s body here was presented as a stand-in for fair and just treatment despite the coercive power of his unjust capture. Prisons too announce their commitment to human rights immediately upon entry. Written in bold red letters on the faded beige paint just above Gulu Main Prison’s entry gate reads the vision enacted in 2006: “To be a center of excellence in providing human rights–based correctional service in Africa.” Circulars denouncing torture are posted on the interior walls of almost every entryway and are impossible to miss. It is one part of a larger aesthetics of captivity (O’Neill 2019).

Not all staff are so welcoming of the discourse, however. Martin shares that one of his prison guard interlocutors shared, “Human rights is really making it difficult for us now. Those human rights people should come and see it with their naked eyes. How we keep criminals here. Let them do the work” (2014, 73). After more than two years working in a number of prisons throughout the north, I often heard similar remarks about the unwillingness of foreign donors and outside observers to consider the

difficulty human rights protections have brought to their ability to effectively discipline inmates. For them, the work of transformation requires a form of discipline that targets the mind *and* the body, itself carrying deep resonances with the endurance of corporal punishment in the public and private school system (itself a product of colonial educational norms).

By the 2010s, the period during which the research for this dissertation was completed, human rights discourses had permeated nearly every aspect of carceral discourse. Developmentalist programs were a central component of incarceration. Most larger prison units have introduced performing arts including music, dance, and poetry, for example. It is in fact precisely because of the existence of these programs that I was given such wide-ranging access and able to build relationships with UPS staff and conduct this research in the first place. Despite the moments of relief that many of these programs provide – and they do provide some relief – it does not detract from the deep pain of staying behind bars. As these supplemental programs were growing, prison populations also expanded dramatically, more than doubling the total prison population from 2000-2014 (from ~21,700 to ~42,330) (World Prison Brief 2018). Over the course of this research,<sup>3</sup> Ugandan Prisons Service held 51,198 individuals in their custody across more than two hundred facilities (Foundation for Human Rights Initiative and Prison

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<sup>3</sup> The following data comes from February 2018, the halfway point of my formal fieldwork period (2017-2018). Status of Prisoners' Population and Staffing Position document.

Insider 2017). Of this, women make up just under 5% of the total prison population (World Prison Brief 2018), and young people make up the vast majority. As one local journalist told me, “When you go to prison you see all youth, a whole generation.” Half of all those incarcerated are pre-trial, falling into the “remand” category that many remain in for years. It was not uncommon, in the northern prisons where I worked, for inmates to have been waiting for trial for two, three, even five years. Some, having already stayed in prison on remand longer than their prospective sentence would have required, took plea deals to get immediate release in exchange for an admission of guilt. Prisons were at more than 300% occupancy during this time period, with these 51,198 individuals staying in facilities approved to house only 16,895, and overcrowding continues to be a major issue for both inmates and prison staff. In 2021, after the election solidified another five years for Museveni in the Presidential office, an image purportedly smuggled out of a prison began circulating. It showed more than a dozen men piled on top of one another in a tiny room wearing the iconic bright yellow prison uniforms. This was their sleeping space, the caption read. It was an indictment against the progress Museveni had just ran on having achieved over his thirty-five years in office. This is what it was like to be captured by the state, by the President himself.

### **4.3 Feeling Captive**

At the center of the discourses of distributed vulnerability that opened this chapter is the notion that, “Tomorrow, it might be you.” Carolyn Nordstrom, in her piece “The Tomorrow of Violence” (2004a), argues that “violence is not only enacted in the present – the immediacy of an act of harm – but violence has a tomorrow” (224). This aspect of violence – or of war more generally – is much less commented upon than the immediacy of a violent act or even the trauma it might produce. The social aftermath(s) of violence are, however, an essential aspect of what it means to live in a postwar context. Violence may be instrumental in a variety of circumstances but its instrumentality is located on its ability to “[reconfigure] its victims and social milieu that hosts them” (226). Much of Nordstrom’s discussion extrapolates work on the trauma left on the individual body from wartime violence to “cultural trauma on the body politic” (227). While she doesn’t attend to it in there, we might draw from her general attention to the “tomorrow” to think about the many other ways that violence – or war – reconfigures the future social body that are not tied to an experience of trauma or devastation.

In post-conflict Uganda, youth articulate their vulnerability across multiple axes. An essential actor here is the state itself, along with an enduring vulnerability to the multiple forms of constraint experienced through the unpredictability of the law and its enforcement. Post-war institutions, whether as arms of the state, forms of traditional

authority, or non-governmental organizations, are met with a great deal of skepticism by a young population that has had few positive interactions with them. Encountering the law is a multi-step process that takes future inmates across multiple and overlapping spheres of influence and social standing. From the LC1 to the police to court and finally to prison – often with a number of additional actors involved in between – incarceration is layered on top of a series of institutions which all operate according to sometimes distinct and often contradictory jurisdictions and practices. It is little wonder, then, why incarceration is experienced as a disorienting, labyrinthian process with few resources to guide you through. Many inmates describe this complicated series of encounters as almost instantaneous. One young man, for example, first described his arrest and conviction as happening overnight, even though the process actually took place over several days. It felt, to him, as if he had been swarmed, taken captive, and incarcerated in one fell swoop, plucked from his everyday into a space that was completely foreign.<sup>4</sup>

The site of the prison – its affective architecture (Desjarlais 1997) as well as the social space it creates – is intimately tied to the encounter with the law. *Tweyo*, the act of jailing or imprisoning someone, means to tie, bind, or, in its most literal form in the context of prison, to chain. And so the process and circumstance by which one comes to

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<sup>4</sup> I'm also reminded of something one of Rebecca Tapscott's interlocutors told her: "The future is invisible. That is why I said it is difficult to ascertain what is before the courts of law. I do not know what the court is thinking and what they will write and which ones they will use. As a human being, it is impossible to reverse the decision of the court; one just has to accept the court ruling the way it comes. Whether someone has been sentenced to jail rightly or falsely, one has to serve the sentence" (Tapscott 2017b, 56).

prison is embedded within the space itself. Kevin O'Neill and Jatin Dua (2018) have argued that captivity is best understood "as a mode of living that constitutes practices and affects," and that those practices and affects are "about being literally tied up, but [are] also about feeling tethered" (6). The pairing of physical constraint and feeling constrained reveal the dual arenas by which incarceration is experienced. Incarcerated youth speak about being "squeezed" which references the tight quarters which become a reluctant home as well as the larger structural forces that laid the grounds for their imprisonment. Space itself *feels* constricting as inmates are squeezed into cells.

In Acoli, *buc* (n. prison), carries multiple meanings which speak to a sensorial and phenomenological experience with which many inmates relate. *Buc*, as a verb, is used to describe plucking feathers from a chicken before cooking. When a chicken's feathers are overgrown, especially the tail, some are removed while the bird is still alive under the assumption that doing so will allow it to grow larger. When discussing my interest in the linguistic symbolism of *buc* with an Acoli colleague, she compared *buc* to the idea of pruning, as a technique of making a tree grow in a certain shape. She highlighted the ways in which the process of reformation in prison is a continuation of *bucu* in the prisoner, such that the state tries to form them into desirable citizens of a nation free from crime.

Turned intransitive, *buc* again takes on a different meaning. Now it refers to slipping, falling, or escaping, usually from an otherwise established act or path.

Someone may say *mak kikopone maber koni buc woko ki cingi* (hold the cup carefully, it could slip off from your hand) (Odonga 2012, 67) or, commonly among parents, *latina obuc ki cinga* (my child has slipped or derailed from the right path [literally my child slipped from my hand]). Prisoners are regularly discussed in terms of falling or escape, again with reference to *buc*. *Obuc ki i jela* declares that a prisoner has escaped from the law, *buc* here serving as an alternative *lwii*, the more direct translation for escape. In each of these examples *buc* is about someone taking an alternative route from an established right path, either in terms of break or escaping from the law. In some cases, this can also refer to a miscarriage, itself a commentary on losing (and no longer being able to care for) one's kin. Like *gwokko*, then, *buc* also carries with it an element of care.

The normative state that is implied is a state of lawfulness, but this is far from agreed upon. Take, for example, the experience of the many *boda-boda* drivers<sup>5</sup> working in towns and centers across the region. Ojok was a *boda* rider in my neighborhood and over the years we became quite close. We became regular staples in each others' lives after many long trips on the back of his *boda-boda* to meet dispersed friends or follow up on a lead I had heard about a young man or woman newly navigating the justice system but based an hour or two away. One day, when riding across town, he declared "I will never carry a policeman." It came slightly out of nowhere, so I asked if he meant he was carrying a policeman earlier that day. "No, I just mean I can never carry a policeman, or

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<sup>5</sup> Motorcycle taxis.

a traffic [officer]. They'll ride with you and then when you get to their destination, they'll stop you and take your motorbike and you'll ride home on a *boda* yourself." At the time it took me a while to take count of the multiple layers of meaning being expressed in this simple and direct statement. It seemed to be both a matter of not affording his services to a police officer because of how they treat *boda* drivers in general – a sort of snub, conscious (if silent) show of disrespect in an arena where you otherwise could never show disrespect without serious personal and financial consequence – but also a real concern that *bodas* are most vulnerable, or at least increasingly vulnerable, in the presence of police. It also ended on a joke, a comment on the comedy in the reversal that you are a *boda* driver and yet reduced to take a *boda* to find your way home. But most importantly what remains is a broken bond between customer and *boda* driver, where you, as a youth trying to make ends meet, complete your end of the bargain, bringing your customer (the police officer) to where he needs to go, and then you both don't receive payment and take a serious blow to your livelihood.

He was wearing one of his stand's new uniforms. A few months earlier they initiated a rotating uniform schedule, a source of pride for many *boda* stands. They now had a uniform to wear every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Each day is a different shirt and you could now easily recognize them around town, which allowed you to know where the *boda* "belongs" in just a quick glance. As we made the turn onto Acholi

Lane<sup>6</sup> to enter town he immediately picked up his helmet which was resting between the handlebars of his motorcycle. "I better put this on now." Over the past few months police had been hassling *boda* drivers in town for not wearing a helmet, including one operation when dozens of traffic officers descended on Gulu Town and taped off roads. These impromptu road blocks pinched what had to be dozens of *boda* drivers for failing to wear the required helmet (an unenforced law in the north during normal days). I was told that police officers made a substantial amount of money during those few days of roadblocks, especially on the first day when no one expected such a crackdown was imminent. I recalled another incident when a different friend and I traveled to Paicho when a traffic officer stopped us under the sparse shade offered by the trees in the momentary forest of the newly constructed Kitgum road. They showed me the law on the books then – a driver must wear a helmet at all times (she made clear the passenger is not required to do so). A simple exchange of money ended that case after some negotiation.

Ojok saw the police ahead just before putting on his helmet, and just a moment later I saw a man holding an AK-47 wearing blue camouflage walk across the street. He was clearly not traffic police (which are easily recognizable by their all-white uniforms), but must have been enough to Ojok to signal authority and the potential retribution that could follow, especially around holiday season, so he wasn't taking any chances. The

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<sup>6</sup> Here I use the anglicized "Acholi" rather than Acoli because it is the official road name.

previous Friday an officer waved him down when he was riding with a passenger and told him to park there in front of him. He obeyed, and as soon as Ojok stood up from his bike to talk to the officer the officer snatched the keys from the ignition and told him his bike was being confiscated for breaking the law. Ojok was confused: he was wearing a helmet, only had one passenger (he emphasized this strongly: “only one passenger, only ONE person riding”), and had not broken any traffic laws – he was driving straight at the time. He asked the officer why he was taking the bike. The officer responded that he was not wearing his helmet, despite having it on his head at the time. “I said that’s fine, you go ahead and take the motorcycle.” I’m surprised when Ojok tells me this, as I would think it would bear some fruit to point out that he so clearly was wearing his helmet – this isn’t even a debatable point of perception, it is merely fact. But Ojok knows better. Debating with this officer will only cause more problems. So he took the ticket for 180,000 Ugandan shillings (roughly 50 USD at the time), the cost the officer assesses to his bike should he want to retrieve it from the central police station, and he takes a *boda* back home.

This was Friday morning, and he received a call later that afternoon telling him that he could come pick his bike with that 180,000 Ugandan shillings. He agreed and ends the call, but did not go. Then on Monday – by then he had sat at home for 3-4 days without work – the officer in charge for traffic police called him: “Why are you not serious? You were told your motorbike is ready to be picked up and you refuse to come,

why?" Ojok agreed to go to the police station. There, the OC traffic police asked again. Ojok explained, now to the original officer's superior, that he was in fact wearing a helmet and strategically gave it to the original officer with the bike so that it would stay confiscated together, proving he had a helmet with him when it was taken. "I could not return with a helmet – it would show them that I did not have a helmet at the time and I had my helmet at home" (the implication being that a *boda* driver would only own one helmet) "so I left my helmet with them intentionally... I told the OC, 'If I was not wearing a helmet how is it that you have my helmet there with my motorbike?'" This, by Ojok's account, convinced the OC to take a second look. He calls the original officer and asks him what happened. He tells him that this man (Ojok) was pulled over for not wearing a helmet but the OC pushes back and mentions what Ojok says. "You people need to be serious in your work" the OC tells the traffic officer. The OC says, "OK, let me look at the bike." He says the front tire isn't up to code and that the horn doesn't work (that part is true). He says OK, you can pay 80k and you can have your bike back. Ojok agrees, pays, and then rides home. I ask Ojok how long it takes to make 80k – "It might take some four days, but even it can take you a week to make that much, depending. It's Christmas time, they're hungry. They're looking to eat some money for the holidays."

While Ojok was not arrested, his livelihood had been confiscated in an abrupt seizure. He was clever enough to escape the larger fine assessed to his means of income,

but could not escape the 80,000 that the law – deftly applied – demanded. The whole interaction, as drawn out as it was, played like theater. In many ways Ojok called the officers bluff – an extremely risky endeavor but one that paid off in this case.

Nevertheless, he too described his time and money as being squeezed (in addition to being eaten). There is an enduring sense that the law will get you one way or another. “Today it is me, tomorrow it could be you.”

This came to the fore explicitly while working in Gulu prison. One of the youth enrolled in the music program penned a song aptly called *Cik pe Koyo*, or The Law Does Not Discriminate. The chorus stays close to the refrain: “*Kadi icwe onyo ijony (cik pe koyo) / Kadi iryek onyo iming (cik pe koyo) / Kadi ibor onyo icek (cik pe koyo)*,” “Even if you are fat or thin (the law does not discriminate) / Even if you are smart or stupid (the law does not discriminate) / Even if you are tall or short (the law does not discriminate).” The song speaks forcefully to the feeling of powerlessness average citizens – particularly young people who are likely to be read as idle and thus criminal – experience on a daily basis. Like the young man who narrated his arrest and incarceration as if it happened in one brief fleeting moment, the song describes what the artist portrays as the ruthlessness of the law. “*Kong item wiye wek inen ka ojali / cut weko itamo ngo ma oweko meni onywali / Idoko twon laming mo ma bango ugali* (Try him [the law] and see if he will spare you / immediately, you will wonder why your mother gave birth to you / You become some

fool, eating ugali),”<sup>7</sup> they write in the first verse, and later, “*Cik tek ma pe wace, taki opoto ikomi ni tap, komi wang ma owace* (The law is strict, if it grabs you, you are finished!).” The law, they write, will “tie you, without release” (*Tweyo cwinye ikomi mape gonyo*). The song serves as a warning to people outside of prison and was written with precisely that audience in mind. It’s also again a way of insulating oneself from reproach. Anyone can cross the law without warning, even you. This is particularly vital as inmates attempt pre-empt the effects of prying eyes upon release.

#### **4.4 Making Life Outside**

Sitting at a community event organized by a Ugandan NGO and UPS in early 2018, I listened as a wide array of officials and community members discussed their experiences with and feelings about formerly incarcerated residents. The gathering was in the open field of a local school and the audience was clumped together in groups under the intermittent shade that each adjacent tree afforded us. At the center, across from the largest tree on the property, was a small tent, large enough to fit about ten chairs organized into two rows behind two enjoined tables. As was the case in any such meeting, these tables would be populated by the more senior officials of both government and community. A banner hung behind them: “Community Dialogue on Increased Receptiveness of Communities and Reintegration of Ex-prison Inmates,” it

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<sup>7</sup> Ugali, or posho, is boiled cornmeal, a staple, cheap food that makes up every prison meal.

read, along with the logos for the NGO, its donors, and UPS. The NGO had brought a sound system so that everyone could hear each point well despite the modest crowd and also to encourage others who passed nearby to join, as some did as the day continued on. Perhaps because they were interested, or perhaps to get some respite from the blistering sun.

In a format that has become common – the community dialogue – and draws from dispute resolution forums and church testimonials, around two dozen residents shared the experiences of spouses, children, neighbors, and friends going into and out of prison, while others shared stories of their own. Each stepped up to the front next to the tent and stood as they spoke, with the exception of the officials who remained under the tent when they made their contributions. It was clear who UPS had trained under the NGO's program as a contingent of young people – all young men – wore branded t-shirts and spoke convincingly about having been changed in prison, leaving their old ways of life behind.<sup>8</sup> After many moving declarations of both self-transformation and ongoing challenge, one older man was handed the microphone, and declared forcefully: *Atamo ni jo mogo tye i kin wa kany, ma gu bedo i buc ma mito dok i buc.* "I think there are people among us here who have been in prison and want to go back to prison."

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<sup>8</sup> As one man said, "Prison especially teaches people how to be respectful (*buc pwonyo wooro*). When you are released from prison and you are not respectful it means you really have a stone heart. Anyone who has been released from prison has to have respect."

I have attended many of these events and they often sway decisively one of two ways: either they begin and end with praise for the NGO and UPS with little deviation from this script or they elicit tense confrontations and frustrations that the organizers then do their best to settle. As a participant – and even the NGO itself – the latter, while difficult and messy, was in some ways the better outcome. It allowed a thorough and honest discussion to take place. In a dialogue that was otherwise leaning towards the purely celebratory tone of the former, however, this man’s remark stood out, and spoke a central truth that many had avoided in their remarks: that prison, for many young men and women who have just returned, may be more desirable than the world outside it. This is not to glamorize any sense of ease in prison, nor to feed the enduring trope of (ex-)inmates as belonging in a permanent state of incarceration. Rather, it should mark our response: what social space do young people return to such that the violence of state capture is comparable even to its supposed escape? The remark was met with some chuckles, and surely some took it as a lighthearted poke at the young men in t-shirts who had spoken some time before him. But it also points us to a more serious, lingering anxiety both for the young men and women who return from prison and for those who knowingly share time, space, and kin with them.

In late July 2018 a young man I had become close with inside Gulu Main prison sent me an SMS: “I’m home but have nothing to do. I do not know how to begin. Things are not easy. I am just here in town but it’s not easy outside.” He had been released just

a few days earlier and already feeling unsure of his life back at home. I told him it would be great to meet in the next few days, either over the weekend or the beginning of the following week. “Yes, please. I really need to keep busy,” he replied. We spent that evening on the verandah of a local restaurant enjoying two plates of roasted pork with cassava as we discussed his release and his situation at home. He stammered briefly while stating how important being busy was to his well-being – and success – outside of prison. His greatest fear was remaining idle, particularly given that this was the cause of his arrest in the first place.

Prison social workers often say that the two days an inmate fears most are the day they arrive and the day they are released. Despite their seemingly disparate contexts, the first and last day of a sentence haunt most inmates, especially those who have been incarcerated for more than a year. The first day of a sentence is for many the moment they fully come to terms with the outcome of the court’s judgment and the specified amount of time they will now spend behind bars. While they may get lucky and find a former classmate, village-mate, or even kin inside to help ease the transition into this new stage of their lives, finding one’s way in carceral sociality wears on a newly admitted inmate. The often-violent hazing that takes place in almost every unit in Uganda only escalates the sense of isolation and dread of that first day, compounding the overarching fears and stereotypes one carries upon their arrival.

The last day of a sentence, on the other hand, is the moment they fully come to terms with the uncertainty of life after prison. Cases vary significantly and while many eagerly await the moment they can be free from the rules, regulations, and force of the state the occasion nevertheless carries with it a great deal of anxiety. Even for those who receive regular visitors, it's never certain what dynamics will await them at home. This is exacerbated by the fact that the date of release is a reference point that is recalled regularly throughout their stay. Three numbers dominate your time in prison: your identification number, your date of arrest (DOA), and your date of release (DOR). These dates are documented and announced multiple times a day and come to frame one's understanding of how to mark time in this new environment. Every person behind bars memorizes both dates as bookends that carry a plethora of judgments and identities that are difficult to escape with each recitation. The space between them notes the gravity of their charge and the seriousness of the case. Quick math can result in quick judgment. While the manner and moments of disclosure between inmates varies depending on a number of factors, DORs circulate regularly as bookkeeping measurements and measurements of time spent and therefore the trajectory of one's experience. As your DOR approaches, the kind of work you'll be sent to do might change and you will have more interactions with the social workers to prepare for your release. Social workers begin asking what for many are difficult questions: "Where will you go?" "How will you get there?" "Is anyone waiting for you outside?"

But perhaps the biggest question for an inmate just before release is “What will you *do*?” The question of whether the community will receive someone on their release is often tied up in the judgment of whether they will find productive work after resettling. There are very few commonalities across educational and work background in a prison like Gulu Main which draws together more serious convictions from across the region. As discussed in the previous chapter, the social hierarchy in prison is rigid and often maps onto educational and class status quite cleanly. But within that hierarchy – and the larger social world of prison – are young men who have never left their birth village as well as ones who have spent time in Dubai, ones who never finished primary school as well as ones who have multiple diplomas and degrees. What one might “do” after prison, then, is far from a one-size-fits-all approach, and something NGOs and prison social workers struggle with as a result.

Furthermore, there is a great deal of stigma for formerly incarcerated youth in the communities in which they return, particularly those who do not come from privileged backgrounds. This is why, for example, the community dialogue that opened this chapter was organized. While one goal was to encourage young people trying to rebuild their lives, the more explicit one is to push the community to support their efforts. As the older man quoted earlier makes clear, most young people – especially young men – return to a community that sees recidivism as a foregone conclusion.

“Youth are getting addicted to prison,” I often heard in both casual conversations and focused meetings across the region.

One young woman in prison emphasized to me how much recently returned inmates like her will need support so that the change she described as having undergone in prison – a personal reclamation of purpose through individualized reform – can be translated into practical change in the community when they come back. Even though it was only her first sentence, she was very aware of the stigma that would be waiting for her outside. “If you continue treating the person ashy, the other previous actions can return,” she explained. Ashy here is a colloquialism but the metaphor is instructive. In the aftermath of a conviction, she describes stigma as the fragile aftermath of a fire, a destructive event whose material remains become part of your identity. Her words also describe a potential loss of control over her actions. The potential for crime, as discussed in the following section, is understood as distributed and depends as much on the individual as it does on the community that receives him/her.<sup>9</sup> Stigma is often read as the cause of re-offence as much as the individual themselves. After being released from prison, former inmates often avoid that label as much as possible, although such anonymity can be difficult to come by depending on the community you return to. In rural villages far from town – the most common destination for inmates upon their

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<sup>9</sup> It’s important to note, as will be described later in this chapter, the ways in which many of the interventions struggle reconciling this understanding with the discussion of entrepreneurialism as singular success.

release – it can be impossible to take on a new identity that doesn't acknowledge their incarceration. This is even more so the case when trying to find work upon their return.

It's for these reasons and many more that the day of release carries a deep ambivalence and unease. It is not uncommon to hear stories of inmates attempting an escape with just a few days left on their sentence. The carceral condition is not at all a desirable or advantageous space. Few are willing to exchange the regularity of meals for a life of confinement. But for some, the uncertainty that awaits them is overwhelming. The conflicts that led to imprisonment are almost never solved by the justice system that put them there, and to return home is to return to a community that is often seeking its own form of justice. Incarceration often does little to compensate a community in pain, and even less to resolve a community's discontent.

#### ***4.5 The Distribution of Incarceration***

The vulnerability to prison, as well as the vulnerability experienced by the prisoner, is almost never individual. Families, friends, and communities sacrifice a great deal by losing a young person from their lifeworld. A household may now have to sell a portion of their already limited property to make up for lost income, labor, childcare, or household management. The precarity of the young inmate to the state, then, is not solely a "problem of the youth," as it is so often portrayed as, but rather a problem for families, for communities, and for society. Losing a family member for an extended

period of time is no easy sacrifice, particularly in rural communities where planting and harvesting seasons demand many hands and long hours.

Hayder al-Mohammad, in his article “A Kidnapping in Basra: The Struggles and Precariousness of Life in Post-Invasion Iraq” (2012), uses a single event (the kidnapping of an acquaintance of his) to demonstrate the ways that precarity, far from being confined in a single life (‘so-and-so lives a precarious life’), is instead “dispersed” (600) across a wide variety of actors (family, friends, debtors, etc...). “The struggle of and for life,” he writes, “is not contained within one life alone but is distributed across persons” making life, “in a much broader sense,” precarious (611). This notion of many lives making life aptly describes how most communities operate. When a young member precariously ends up in the hands of the state that precarity, too, is shared. Neighbors pitch in their limited resources to make up for lost labor, family members take on new tasks, and spouses and children recalibrate their daily lives to reflect an overbearing absence. While al-Mohammad is not writing about young people specifically in his work, I would contend that in the case of northern Uganda this is particularly true in a social context where the population is overwhelmingly young, unemployed, and struggling to keep up with the social obligations placed upon them.

Consider this interchange between the Uncle of a recently returned inmate (referred to as Okot here) and the NGO visiting him in his rural home in Acoliland:

NGO representative: Tell us, what do you think, when Okot was not here at home when he was arrested, when he was in jail – what effects do you think his

absence caused here at home or on you as someone very close to him, on his home and on your home here?

Uncle: What I have seen when Okot was arrested and jailed, it made many things disappear because before that there were some birds that he was rearing, the wife was also pregnant and so it was very difficult for us to take care of this woman. And we struggled so hard to make sure that this woman remains here until when he comes back and so those birds would be sold by this woman for buying soap and what to eat.

NGO: How many were these birds?

U: These birds were twenty plus some chickens.

NGO: But when he came back were there some remaining?

U: No, they were no longer there. This woman had used them.

NGO: I don't know, when this issue arose, was there some sitting to dialog to see that reconciliation and forgiveness was done before the case went forward?

U: When Okot was arrested and in police, I went alone and I asked the police that I would like to see the suspect who was arrested yesterday. Then the police kept referring me here and there, then I had a thought that I should go and check the court and I found Okot in him in court but the police did not give me any words, I went on my own account and I found him already in court and how could enter defeated me and I just surrendered but I stayed around and attended his court session until he was jailed. Then I came back home and told the people that Okot has been sentenced to seven months imprisonment and so we have to stay, endure and wait.

NGO: But before the police came to arrest him, was there any plan of sitting and discussing this so that if possible, reconciliation would be done did this not happen?

U: He and his elder brother tried discussing but I did not understand well and the other party was not interested. Those ones from the side of those who arrested him were not consenting. Even me I thought a dialog should have been there but those people were not agreeing. Because those people had so much energy, they were using money. And so their energy was far greater than ours.

Okot's Uncle makes clear that it was not Okot alone who had suffered; his family, too, "endured" his sentence. Families regular refer to things "disappearing" upon incarceration. Sometimes there is clear communication that resources will have to be sold to make up for the losses they will have to endure, but often young people return home to find that all of their possessions and home are suddenly gone, with no one admitting involvement. Sometimes it is not the family selling the goods to make ends meet at all, and instead other community members who confiscate the accused's possessions as payment for their bad behavior, with little space left for the family which is facing potential ostracization to object.

Note also the ways in which the circumstances of Okot's arrest, the labyrinthian arrest and court appearance, and the community conflict that led to it are all wrapped up in his Uncle's narration of what happened *after* his release. When the NGO representative asks whether reconciliation was possible before involving the police, he describes the "energy" of the other party as overbearing their own. He went on to say, "Their interest was, they were asking for money so big the amount that Okot could not get. And so they hid under that umbrella that it is better for Okot to be taken to court and jailed." The feeling of unjust return is made affinity to the feeling of unjust arrest, trial, and incarceration, as well as the offended party's relative strength in both financial position and bargaining power.

Another ex-inmate related a similar story. Just before leaving prison for the second time, he reported his biggest challenge to be starting his life over again. Spoken through the language of renewal, many describe such difficulties in terms of “starting from zero.” Like Okot above, this young man had a modest number of assets at home that were gone by the time of his return home. “For now, there is nothing. I will start from zero,” he told me as we sat in a rural prison farm, just one week before his release. He owned a number of animals but was informed that his mother sold them shortly after his sentencing to cover his brother’s PTC school fees. Without his presence at home, and the limited income he provided to the homestead, sibling school fees would go unpaid, and so his mother had no choice but to sell.

The liquidation of assets into cash is an emergency measure. Cattle provide a sense of long-term financial security for those who still have them, a rainy-day fund of great value in a context where few have access to cash sums. As James Ferguson (1994b, 179) wrote in regards to Lesotho, “Although cash can always be converted into livestock through purchase,” converting cattle through cash sale is often a response to immediate need and ultimately puts a family in a less advantageous position. In the case of Lesotho, Ferguson places this calculation as the result of gendered migrant labor patterns and the re-making past traditions to respond to current demands. In the case here, cattle hold their value not only because of their community value or their relative resistance to currency devaluation and coercive economic policy, but also because of

their marked scarcity brought on by the war. It is estimated that from 1983, three years before Museveni came to power, to 2001, cattle numbers in Acoli dropped from 123,375 to just 3,000 (Finnström 2008a, 73). Cattle were frequently looted by armed Karamojong to the East, taking advantage of wartime vulnerabilities and the proliferation of small arms in the region (Mkutu 2008), as well as the Ugandan army, which often confiscated cattle from “suspected rebel collaborators,” a title that could never be successfully refuted to have the cattle returned (Finnström 2008, 72). Starting from zero, here, carries with it overlapping historical continuities that are not lost on those at the receiving end.

This young man’s conviction was grievous harm which he tied directly to his alcoholism. He had been in prison once before but that time on remand, waiting for trial for ten months before the case was ultimately dropped for lack of evidence. He may not have been convicted during that stay, but it brought on a year behind bars, a common sentence for low-level convictions – in the grand scheme of things, it made little difference that he was a remand by name. He had a foresight for his return that many others who were about to return home after prison for the first time did not. “Us being in prison, people outside believe you are the great offender. If anything happens outside, they just say ‘That person is too used to prison.’ And this is why people return, you see them come back not because they did anything but because of the community. I want to prove to them that I am not a bad person. In our country we are getting a lot of problems in our police, our court, if you are taken – even if not for committing a crime –

if you are taken they take that chance to fleece you. From high court to district court, if you don't have anything you will find a case against you." This young man had confirmed that the act for which he was convicted – a quarrel in which he pushed a family member into a door – did in fact happen, but that the crime of grievous harm, adjudicated by the state, was unjust and the result of his lack of capital, rather than the act on trial. "When things were settled in the court of the LCs things were different," he contended throughout our discussion. A nostalgia for a different kind of adjudication, one he found more just, more local, and more responsive and thus appropriate to the community dynamics that led to his arrest in the first place, was his way of articulating his frustration with the arbitrariness of the state (Tapscott 2017) and its intrusion into domestic affairs. Like Okot's Uncle, then, this young man relates his second stay in prison – his first conviction – to the differentiated community relations that he will now return to as a result.

His nostalgia for more localized forms of arbitration are not shared by everyone, but they are widespread. It's quite common to hear people – especially elders – decry contemporary carceral forms of punishment in favor of dealing with issues locally, in the community. However this varied significantly based on someone's social and economic position, as well as how tethered they were to various forms of customary authority. Women and youth, for example, were often sidelined in these processes that favored the

voices of older men. And, of course, it depended on who your LC1<sup>10</sup> was. One ex-inmate, for example, was given a small start-up fund to purchase three pigs to begin a pork roasting business in a town center in Kitgum district. When I met with him and his brother at their homestead all of the pigs were gone, and they were in the process of a prolonged legal battle to recover the pigs which had been stolen from him some months before. As it turned out, the theft was not the result of a jealous neighbor or a petty thief looking for quick money – the typical assumptions most begin with – but of competing LC1s. Despite his home being within the boundaries of one given village, the neighboring LC1 claimed otherwise and, in response to an ongoing dispute between the two LC1s, the pigs had been taken as ransom. While this case might stand out as exceptional, it emphasizes the ways in which LC1s are imbricated in harmful local political rivalries just as the judicial system is imbricated in harmful local and national politics, with young people stuck with little recourse from either.

#### ***4.6 Humanitarian Histories***

The social landscape of humanitarianism in northern Uganda marks how young people understand their place in the body politic, the resources and relations made (un)available to them, and the practices of governance they encounter and navigate. This

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<sup>10</sup> An LC1, or Local Councilman 1, is the most local position of governance and serves at the village level. They are at the head of moderating any local disputes.

is partly a matter of fact for residents in general: the place of the NGO in both social service delivery and economic activity is difficult to escape. But for young people this is amplified by their central place in the discursive framing of humanitarian assistance throughout the war. As laid out in Chapter Two, youth and children have been *the* central figure through and against which the war was defined. The image of the night commuter, the loss of young family members and friends – these marked the urgency of resolution and the intense and irreparable loss within families. While life certainly takes place outside of the bounds of humanitarianism – I am by no means arguing that life is bounded by the humanitarian world in any total sense – NGOs have an inordinately central place in the politics and materiality of the distribution of resources in northern Uganda.

Despite the significant amount of literature on humanitarianism in anthropology and elsewhere, very little work has addressed how individuals and communities build upon these histories in their present engagements with NGOs, another example of the humanitarian excess I write about in Chapter Two. One notable exception is Ramah McKay, who has written about the ways in which Mozambican residents in the district of Morrumbala “draw on a rendering of humanitarian pasts to critically engage with the charitable economies and humanitarian services on which they now rely” (2012, 288). In McKay’s fieldsite, many residents previously lived as refugees in neighboring Malawi. She finds that many of her informants speak nostalgically about a Malawian past that,

despite its traumatic source, was a time of relative abundance compared to their contemporary lives now that they have returned home to Mozambique. Claims for improved access to resources are made based on the substance of memory rather than a discourse of rights, where the “nostalgic complaint articulates desires—including desires for a more substantive assistance—through a remembered past in which humanitarian claims, rather than rights, were the basis of belonging” (294). She develops the notion of “humanitarian nostalgia” to interrogate how “the historicity of humanitarian experience” produces “the afterlives of intervention” (288). For her informants, there is little dilemma between the state and the NGO world in this context, and the humanitarian presence is not considered the source of critique. Rather, residents “[contrast] a humanitarian past with the inadequacies of the present” in order to pursue more robust “social relations and support,” which McKay argues “give rise to new possibilities of claims-making and critique in the present” (289).

McKay is careful not to allow her argument to fall into the narrative that such histories do little but enable a dependence on international organizations and produce “lazy” recipients, as is often repeated by the NGOs in the region (302), and not unfamiliar to cultural commentary in post-war northern Uganda. Rather, she proposes, following Foucault, that residents “size up” and rework humanitarian “arts of governance” by drawing on a “historical humanitarian lexicon” in order to “critically

imagine how things might be otherwise in the future” (293). In this way, McKay takes residents seriously as historical subjects.

NGO encounters are not perpetually novel across time, and most individuals, including (ex-)inmates, are coming into contact with organizations with years of experience making sense and making do with comparable interventions. Just as development should be understood as an unequal but nevertheless multidirectional cultural encounter (Li 1999), humanitarianism – despite its aura of emergency – should be understood as an encounter that is made sense of over time. Over dozens of ethnographic focus groups in five districts across Acoliland, young people frequently discussed their multifaceted engagements with the NGO world in relation to their own historical experiences. These details often emerged while responding to much broader questions about their earlier years. Many recalled the long lines as humanitarian organizations distributed basic goods in the camps: food, bed nets, and more. People often joke about the ways they would try to game the system to ensure they would receive what they saw as the appropriate portion of the distribution. The IDP camp was home, for many, as they came of age. And so the social landscape of the camp was in many ways normalized despite the regular disjuncture between their parents’ lessons on topics such as agriculture and *wang oo* and the environment in which they were raised. Home was a site of resource distribution on a regular basis.

But the most frequently remarked experience, by far, was sponsorship. Sponsorship takes on many forms, and others have written about both the discourses and sometimes catastrophic consequences of its prevalence, most notably the inequity and jealousies that it produces within families and communities (Bornstein 2005). Many young people I spent time with in these focus groups pointed to experiences of inequity, but less in terms of distribution of resources than as barriers to relationships. The most prominent form of sponsorship was educational support which often carried with it financial disbursements to cover a child's living costs (distributed to the family). Many praised the NGOs for supporting programs they saw the government unwilling to commit to. One young woman explained that NGOs were better than the government because while the government let children just stay home (despite promises for universal education) the NGOs would provide funds directly to needy families (*An anongo ni NGO ber loyo Gamente pien gin gikonyo dano ma kerogi peke ento Gamente romo konyo latin moni kateki otimo peny ma ber keken*). At the same time, they were frustrated by the refusal to allow long-term relationships to build with their sponsors. Letter writing is a central component of this transnational humanitarian technology, where young beneficiaries are tasked with writing to affluent Americans and Europeans about their lives and sponsors reply in turn. While very much about the affective meaning making of humanitarian motivation among sponsors (Malkki 2015), letters also have a profound effect on the young people who write them. Many I spoke with blamed the

organizations for cutting off contact with their sponsors once they grew out of the educational arrangement that first put them in touch. The NGOs in charge of letter writing frequently intervened in the process of writing itself, censoring what could and could not be shared by the young students (Piot 2010, 140-3). But they were also the brokers of the contact, and unless sponsors went out of their way to share their information many lost communication. David Lewis once wrote about NGO engagements with regards to “abandoned pasts” and “disappearing futures” (2016), a title that aptly describes how many young people understand their relationships to NGOs. As time continues to move away from the war, opportunities have become fewer and fewer. The resources coming from the outside seem to be evaporating.

Young men and women often carry extremely complex – sometimes nostalgic and other times coarse – memories about their past relationships with NGOs and their programs and draw on their historical interactions with projects and their contemporary lives, including the potential benefit of having support to construct a more perfect future. Despite the now more than twenty years of precedence that organizations are building upon, programs often present themselves as novel in order to secure funding (Lewis 2016). This conviction of novelty erases the social lives of their beneficiaries. Most programs fail to acknowledge that most of their beneficiaries carry with them long histories of (dis)engagement with the humanitarian world. The idea that a young person may have already received a similar training or benefits package goes unremarked not

because it is irrelevant but rather because it might otherwise disqualify them. For an NGO partner or program, a beneficiary – especially when that beneficiary is a young person – is a programmatic blank slate that can be transformed. The very notion of intervention depends upon this (Shivji 2007). While staff themselves often have much more nuanced understandings of social transformation, programs rarely have that luxury in a grant economy that relies upon the novelty of potential change. Rather than acknowledging their full personhood, then – a not insignificant part of which includes histories of humanitarian presence and absence in their lives – beneficiaries are stand-ins for an emergent society yet to be transformed.

#### ***4.7 Entrepreneurial Futures***

I sat in the conference room of a local hotel with a team of NGO staff and UPS officials. This was “boot camp,” a way to seclude ourselves outside of the normal office environment to put the finishing touches on an important grant application. With the two largest grants soon coming to a close, the stakes were high to find a new source of revenue, even if it would expand the organization to start new work in a region the current sources of funding had not supported. “These proposals just need concentration,” one staff member remarked as we began brainstorming in the morning, “There’s no magic, no magic. Just concentration.” The plan was to sort out the content of the grant through a mind map and then an outline and leave the detailed writing for

later. The meeting opened with a TED talk – a familiar beginning once I learned of the CEO's affinity for doing so. It was Susan Pinker speaking about the correlation between strong social integration (a fruitful and supportive social life) and living longer. When it was over, he described how he noticed that prisoners who had received life sentences were living long and he guessed it was because they were always socializing in such close quarters. It wasn't clear how this connection would factor into a brainstorming session for a grant application for funding the NGOs latest initiative in prison, but I nodded along with the others.

There was a large white sheet of paper taped to a wall behind us, and everyone was handed a marker and a small stack of yellow post-it notes. The sheet was titled "Parking Lot" and participants were encouraged to write down any thoughts as they came to them and sticking them to the sheet to avoid sidetracking the conversation. The interventions varied. One staff member suggested we come up with a nice abbreviation for "empowering local communities to prevent violence against women and children," a key term for the day. Another chimed in to suggest that we use the word "enhance" rather than "improve." A senior staff member emphasizes that Ugandan Prisons Service uses "dynamic security" – a form of securitization that involves regular socialization and free interactions with inmates – and that this should be highlighted in the document since this means that prison staff have a significant value to add to psychosocial support. The prison staff present refer to themselves as counselors who are with their clients all

day “in the field.” The NGO staff member goes on, “Many prisons have no fence, yet there are few escapes. You can even see a picture – I know you all have seen this before – of an inmate shaving the head of a staff with an open razor. This could never happen in the US or Europe, and yet it is here because of success of this dynamic security.”

As the day went on, and we continued to brainstorm how the various pieces of the proposal would fit within the genre of the grant application, a recurring theme was how to define and discuss entrepreneurship for the donors. It appeared dozens and dozens of times, but everyone wasn’t satisfied with the definitions laid forth. The CEO crystallized a distinction that he found problematic in the document: “The word entrepreneurship was ‘displaced’ for economic skills and was lost in the process, but you don’t empower with economic skills. You empower with entrepreneurship.” This distinction between entrepreneurialism and economic skills bears repeating in the context of young ex-inmates who have gone through their training.

Entrepreneurialism was a difficult concept to describe in prison trainings because it often was asked to do a significant amount of work, standing in for everything from starting a business, to having motivation, to training others, and to remaining productive even when you feel like you’re treading water. The CEO took issue with conflating entrepreneurialism with economic skills because, for him and the organization, entrepreneurialism is about much more than skills: it’s about a way of thinking and, more specifically, a way of thinking about the future. The NGO’s trainings

in prison presented a teleological vision that carried an (ex-)inmate from idleness to productivity, incarceration to financial and personal success measured by wealth, reputation, and eventually having the capacity to stand in as the proverbial “big man” in his or her community. NGO staff often modeled this aspiration as a type of pedagogy (Watanabe 2017) by starting their own ventures and sometimes including them in their projects.

NGOs and prisons were not always obvious bedfellows, but NGOs emerged as central actors during this same period that prisons began reframing their role in Ugandan society. As Issa Shivji (2007) has argued so clearly, NGOs flourished in a space where the state was increasingly decentralized and growing economic inequalities brought on by neoliberal reform opened new needs for social support. These new spaces for intervention grew immensely over the 90s but this was also the period when the war was most active. In northern Uganda, then, you have the intersection of humanitarian emergency care and a narrative of a weakened state despite, in this case, the state being at the helm of a great deal of that violence. Chris Dolan (2011), Adam Branch (2011a), and others have written about the co-dependence that emerged between the Ugandan state and the humanitarian organizations during the war. These are the humanitarian histories that young people carry forward as they attempt to cross the threshold into adulthood and it is in this intersection that entrepreneurialism, for the NGO and for

Uganda Prisons Service, became a form of “dynamic security” where socialization around business ventures would lead to a secure nation.

#### ***4.8 The NGO as a (Costly) Opportunity***

By the time I arrived at the NGO compound, Otim and his friend Okello were already waiting for me. This was a compound I knew well – I had been following the NGO’s work in and out of prison for over a year by that point and spent many days sharing meals with its staff around the small conference table in its main building. It was, after all, where Otim and I first met.

When the NGO’s biggest donor flew in from Europe to visit their projects and discuss their impact, they called Otim and asked him to give a short testimonial of his entrepreneurial success in the cell phone repair business. I was with the group that day as they toured both the male and female wing of the prison, met my students in the band I was training, and had long discussions about the direction their program might take: how to use funds more efficiently, how to situate their partnership with UPS, and how to improve and, importantly, measure engagement across time. As part of that visit, the organization reached out to some of their colleagues and partners in UPS, mentors they hired to support ex-inmates, and three ex-inmates, one of which was Otim.

I had never met Otim or the other ex-inmate, but knew the NGO and UPS staff well, the former from months of shadowing and the UPS staff from my by-then daily

visits to Gulu Main and Gulu Women's prisons to teach drums. Otim was in many ways a model beneficiary to give testimonial to his entrepreneurial success. His phone sale and repair business was booming, maintaining a trusting and loyal customer base well beyond the size of his shop. While larger shops in Gulu town certainly did more business, Otim maintained a small, half-room storefront about forty minutes away by *boda*. His customer base was different and inevitably smaller, though the ambitions we often discussed would leave one to believe otherwise. Nevertheless, he had a revenue stream that most ex-inmates would never be able to match and, importantly, a standing in the community where he worked as a reliable phone technician.

But when it was Otim's turn to speak to the group, he did more than just share his successes as a budding businessman. He focused his attention squarely at what he saw as the injustice of both his arrest and incarceration. Like the older man in the community dialog above, Otim raised an issue that the audience was not prepared to acknowledge. "I thank you for inviting me and I want to raise an important issue. For me, I was in prison unjustly. The police and the courts pushed me to listen to a paralegal who lied to me. I was sentenced after pleading guilty to something I did not do because I was told the charge would be dropped to only community service, and I paid for that. I spent one year locked up for nothing." The UPS staff let out an audible sigh and laughed, perhaps out of surprise. But their laughter agitated Otim. He would tell me this later, but I didn't need to wait to hear that from him: his reaction in that moment made

that clear. He immediately objected and doubled down, calling on the NGO and the donor to remedy this injustice which affected not just his case but the cases of many others. In doing so, he made a political claim on the inequity of the justice system – something that the programmatic body of the NGO often shied away from for fear of being precisely that: political. It is not uncommon for the Government of Uganda to penalize and, in some cases, shut the doors of organizations that are rendered political in nature. One such incident that happened during my fieldwork closed some of the most prominent and well-regarded organizations in the country: Refugee Law Project and Action Aid. And so the NGO has always been reticent to enter the world of public activism or advocacy that challenges governmental structures that they depend upon for their access, especially within prison.

But here we were back on the same compound almost one year later, after I had developed a relationship with Otim and began spending many days with him at his shop. He had called me some hours earlier requesting that I join him for his meeting with someone in management at the organization. They wanted to invest in his next venture and had offered additional start-up money for his cell phone business. I didn't think it was necessary for me to join, but Otim frequently requested my presence for important meetings perhaps because he believed I was an interlocuter who could have his best interests in mind as he navigated what were unfamiliar professional spaces for him. They had planned to meet yesterday, but Otim waited without being granted a

meeting. Since I was already coming to the office to run a music training later in the evening, I came early at his request. We sat together for hours, chatting and walking around the green compound. I would regularly pop into the office and ask if someone was going to come meet with him and they assured us both they would. Still more time passed. It became clear that no one was coming. And eventually the office emptied, with Otim and me sitting outside.

In the moment I was frustrated not only with the NGO, but also with Otim. Why would he waste his already precious resources –finding a motorcycle to borrow, paying for fuel, spending hours for a second day with nothing to show for it – when it seemed all but obvious to me by thirty minutes or so into the first period of waiting that this would all be for naught? Otim was sharp and should have seen this coming, I thought. But what I missed in this reaction was that despite being dragged along, it often takes only the narrowest of openings for one’s luck to suddenly change. It really was little more than a chance moment. I didn’t appreciate the value and cunning of this move until a few months later when I joined the NGO as they visited a young man at his home a few months after his release. He had settled in and began farming and his output was impressive. He was growing large amounts of beans, rice, and cassava which he supported through a small garden – innovatively fenced to prevent the disturbance by local animals – that grew boo, malakwang, and other greens that he could turn around for sale quickly.

On this occasion the NGO's CEO was with us, and he rarely had the opportunity to join post-release visits like these. Likeable as ever, the young man asked him directly a question I had heard dozens of others ask NGO staff only to be rebuffed: "I am doing great work here and things are going well, but there is so much land. If the organization could only provide a small bull to help with the farming I know I could do so much better." His father then echoed the sentiment, adding that the bull could not only benefit his son's success in agriculture, but also become income generating by lending it out to neighbors of this deeply rural village. This is the kind of request that comes up frequently and is always passively declined, but the CEO responded immediately, promising them the bull and asking the other staff to get working on it right away. In any other situation, it would have been another rebuffed request but because of the chance presence of the CEO, the bull would be delivered.

It was in that instant that I understood why Otim would spend what little money he had to keep traveling to the office just to wait for hours hoping for an exception to be made: he was drawing on past experiences and arrangements that rely on the arbitrary outcome of organizational commitment. He recognized that his many challenges at home – the most important of which was the fallout after being bewitched by a renter who stayed near his shop, and had all but paralyzed his business – would not be the route to secure the support he needed. The NGO could not intervene in a case of witchcraft despite it being his central challenge in finding entrepreneurial success.

Rather, it was paradoxically the work of waiting and the possibility of a chance that he could most rely on. He needed to demonstrate his need by articulating a commitment to building a future through economic gain, rather than support to weather his most pressing challenges.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

The young man who sent me the SMS concerned about sitting home with nothing to do was eventually arrested again. The land conflict that sent him to prison for the first time was reignited and his Uncle called the police with a false accusation to take him out of the negotiations. He was back in the hands of the state, this time almost 200km away on a prison farm where he was engaged in difficult agricultural work from morning to evening. He had been involved in many activities after his release including performing drums and continued to attend the music trainings for as long as he was free. But he never did find a regular income, and his worst fears came true shortly thereafter.

Young people are actively navigating the intervention landscape that pervades post-conflict northern Uganda even as it has shrunk dramatically since the formal end of the war. How folks try to make NGO assistance “work” for them, despite the disconnect between programmatics and lifeworlds of ex-inmates, is part of the *doing* of making a life after prison (Bolten 2014). Just as NGOs engage in speculative projects, meant to

transform social outcomes, so too do the targets of those interventions engage in speculative projects, to mold and shape the programmatic agenda to match their lived reality and provide necessary but otherwise absent resources. When those projects transform, however, from service and support to securitization, it becomes increasingly difficult to do so. Where one who lived in an IDP camp may send an extra relative to acquire the needed second bed net, or portion of food, a securitized agenda closes itself off to the (re-)distribution of wealth, status, or material gain. Nevertheless, the entrepreneurial spark that the NGO provides does have its benefits, and was mobilized to the extent possible.

Some beneficiaries developed relationships with staff that bled well over the edge of programming and became embedded in their everyday realities, while others found thick barriers being put between themselves and staff. The former category sometimes resembled a patronage relationship, where one lobbied for support that exceeds the parameters of the NGO and yet, with the right relationship in place, was sometimes given serious consideration and even granted, while other times they were dragged along with promises to look into it, brought for meetings that never occur, and paid significantly from their pockets to pursue a possibility that never was there in the first place. Assistance in contemporary northern Uganda was increasingly arbitrary, though many continued their pursuit.

## **5. Choosing War: Trading (In)securities Across the Uganda-South Sudan Border**

### **5.1 Introduction**

“Do you hear what we’re saying? We’re saying we wish the war would come back. At least there were jobs then. When the war left, so did our jobs.” It was 2013 and the war had officially ended some seven years earlier. I was sitting in a small patch of grass outside student housing in Kansanga at Kampala International University (KIU) where a friend had given me a free place to stay before making the journey north to Gulu two days later. I had known Atim for some years and she was always generous with her time and often offered me housing in Kampala whenever I needed it. The other student – a young man – I had just met. The block of student housing I was sleeping in was occupied primarily by Acoli university students studying at KIU, an area of campus where one frequently hears more Acoli than Luganda in daily conversations (a rarity in Kampala). Waking up late after trying to sleep off my journey, I awoke to a contentious discussion happening outside my door. Still jetlagged and just out of bed, I struggled to keep up with the Acoli Atim and her neighbor were exchanging in the small grassy area outside of the doorway. Atim must have noticed the increasingly uncertain expression on my face when she turned to me to summarize what she had just put forward.

When she asked if I heard what they were saying, she was asking both if I was following the Acoli being spoken as well as whether I was fully grasping the stakes of the conversation: here were two young university students – 330km away from the north, reaching a level of education far beyond the reach of the vast majority of their peers – hoping that war might return in the face of the constricting job prospects that await them after completing their degrees. The gnawing sense that a degree would only keep you “just at home,” no better than you were before enrolling, was pervasive. Within six months after her graduation, Atim left for Juba.

This chapter traces an essential pathway young men and women pursued in the aftermath of the war that engulfed the region for over twenty years: returning to active conflict across the border in South Sudan. It asks: what do young people do when the opportunities afforded to them through the expansive humanitarian network that once surrounded them withers away? I argue that, drawing on deep histories of trade and other networks that traverse this borderland, Acoli youth from diverse educational and economic backgrounds are exchanging their physical security for economic security, often at significant personal costs. The war took place in the long term: while the humanitarian and war economy has shrunk significantly in northern Uganda since the late 2000s, it has flourished across the border. For many of those who were able to acquire university-level papers and yet remain without work for years after graduation, the risk feels far greater to stay in Uganda than it does to re-enter a warscape despite the

many life-threatening incidents they experience. The stakes are high and many have lost their lives or nearly done so in their effort to attain the social mobility that they seek. Nevertheless, going to Juba (or elsewhere in South Sudan) is, paradoxically, a survival strategy (Bolten 2012) in peacetime Uganda.

## **5.2 Choosing War**

Scholarship on African migration has seemingly reached an apex in the past ten years. From the development of biometrics to the ever-expanding global security regimes which profit from the militarization of crossings, the contemporary moment is paradoxically marked by the persistent move of both bodies and goods and the constant threat of restriction, stoppage, and control. African migration is, it has been stated frequently over the past decade, “*the political issue of our time*” (Piot 2019, 7). Much of this literature has focused on the urgency of trans-Mediterranean journeys (Asserate 2016; Cole and Groes 2016; Lucht 2011) by tracing the motivations and consequences of cross-continental movement in an era of securitized borders (Besteman 2020; Frowd 2018; Ticktin 2005). Anthropologists, in particular, have written compelling accounts of long-standing postcolonial trade and travel networks stretching from the African continent across Europe, the Middle East, and the US (Abusharaf 2002; Besteman 2016; Coe 2019; Kleinman 2019; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Piot 2019). There is no shortage of writing about Africans on the move.

Amidst the current boom in African migration studies, it's important to note that Africa has always been a continent in motion through both regional and global connection (Bennett 2020; Buggenhagen 2012; Fauvelle 2018; Gomez 2019; Green 2019; Manning 2018). Achille Mbembe has made this a center point of his latest work, foregrounding the malleable history of borders on the continent not only in the precarious present but also throughout pre-colonial African history when identity, labor, and obligation could rarely be contained within a single polity (2019). Colonial borders ran roughshod across these earlier formations, and nomadic routes that predate them depend on regularized mobility and reject the solidification of territory, colonial or otherwise. *The ethics of the passerby* (2019, 188), Mbembe writes, is not just our future but also our past.

Borders today still often fail to carry the distinctive edges of sovereign rule (Cormack 2016; Weitzberg 2017). And while much of the above literature makes clear the centrality of mobility in the daily and exceptional lives of people across the continent, there is much less writing on intra-African migration, especially given that it reflects the realities of the majority of African migrants. Some cases have received notable attention: refugees who remain in camps in Kenya (Jansen 2019), Tanzania (Malkki 1995), or elsewhere; the robust trade networks that border communities depend upon on a daily basis; and Zimbabwean and other workers migrating into South Africa and the xenophobia they encounter (Crush, Tawodzera, Chikanda, and Tevera 2017;

Takabvirwa 2010), to name just a few. In each of these, we are presented with a narrative of an attempt to seek greener pastures for safety or commerce, though frequently with less than desirable consequences. In the case of young Ugandans traveling to South Sudan, however, this isn't quite the case.

Uganda and South Sudan share what has been a historically porous border. The young Ugandans crossing the border today are building on this legacy, but doing so within the explicit context of ongoing conflict, not as combatants seeking wartime recruitment but as civilians attempting to find a salary or stopgap pay that feels out of reach at home. Like youth elsewhere on the continent, contracting opportunities, the flexibilization and often evaporation of steady work, and the inability to acquire the status and financial position of adulthood have all marked their life experiences (Honwana 2012). However, unlike many of their peers on the continent, Ugandans are not, by and large, crossing borders with the hopes of reaching Europe. There are very few East Africans arriving on European shores. Rather, their final destination is South Sudan – Juba and elsewhere – in hopes of finding employment in the still robust wartime economy.

This employment takes a wide variety of forms. Sometimes it is waged employment with a national or international NGO while other times it is contract labor to provide the material infrastructure of their interventions: the offices, walls, and hotels that wartime economies put in high demand (Smirl 2015). Still others find temporary

positions as undocumented labor for small businesses that cater to a changing population in Juba. Many years before we met, a close friend once took a small minibus north to the border with little more than fifty thousand shillings (approximately \$13) to his name and no connections across the border. He ultimately spent more than two years working in Juba first as a casual laborer building offices, churches, and schools throughout the city and then as a barber. Many of his colleagues found occasional work as mechanics and even security guards. The range of work that young migrants have undertaken in South Sudan is vast, and while many made more money than they ever could have doing comparable work back home, they did so at significant risk. It is the risk, they often told me, that pays. In each of these cases, whether direct employment in the humanitarian sector or ancillary jobs tied to the war economy, war was a migration magnet.

Young people are also drawing on their own wartime experiences back home during the LRA insurgency to make sense of the risks they are taking across the border. Nostalgia for wartime opportunity is not unheard of, either in Uganda or elsewhere. Following Carolyn Nordstrom (2004b, 2007), I understand warscapes as complex sites of both indeterminate violence and capital accumulation for a diffuse field of actors. While there exists some literature on youth, especially young men, wishing war would come back (Vigh 2015) – including in northern Uganda (Dubal 2018) – this is relegated almost exclusively to the experience of ex-combatants. Very little has been said about civilians

who never gained position in relation to rebel or state militias. Assuming that only combatants return to war as a strategic choice ignores a significant form of migration that unsettles many of our assumptions about where and why young Africans migrate. The war in northern Uganda was a disruptive, brutal conflict with significant civilian casualties. It upended families and communities in ways that can never be fully restored, and this was the experience for the vast majority of ordinary Acoli men and women. However, for some, the war was time of accumulation and prosperity and youth came of age acutely aware of the money circulating between international organizations, military leadership, and state officials. In post-conflict northern Uganda, where unemployment is upwards of 80% and includes many trained to work in a humanitarian economy that has shrunk significantly, the risk of war has become palatable. The calculations young people make about their security and well-being is often read as misguided or poorly considered, and many family members who stay behind in Uganda insist on this. But for those who travel, war is a pull factor for imagining a better, more attainable future. Here the risky journeys undertaken by young African migrants do not follow the path to Europe, but to Juba.

### ***5.3 Making a Life, Building a Future from Juba***

“We planned to be in Juba for four days, then I would go back home to Gulu [using my leave to finish the rest of the contract]. At 9pm I was watching BBC at the

hotel, relaxing after being out with friends driving around all day. By 11pm I heard the first gunshots. I asked myself "Could those really be gunshots?" and as they continued I had to take security measures. I slept on the floor that night, with the lights off, and water off. I was staying in the Isora neighborhood of Juba. It wasn't a great area, but it was next to the main road near Juba University. The Ethiopian Restaurant [where I stayed] bought food fresh each day, so by the day after the night of gunshots there was no more food available. By the next day I told myself I had to get out, so I went to a local bakery at 4pm for some bread. The queue was very long and I waited for two hours, only for the bread to run out by the time I reached the front. Luckily I had bought some biscuits before that I was surviving on. I spent two days indoors, and I would wait and get bread whenever the shots stopped. There was no water. Everyone was calling me to check on me when they heard of what was happening in Juba. It turned out I had a cousin who was a pilot who had been informed that a plane was being sent to evacuate Ugandans. He told me the only requirement is a passport, which I had, so I planned on that. Wednesday morning I would go to the airport to board the plane sent from Entebbe, but the plane had a problem on the runway and all the news were reporting that it had even crashed. It left me stuck in Juba. I felt very insecure. I tried booking another flight but all flights to Entebbe were two weeks booked. I told myself I can't wait that long so I bought a bus ticket instead. It was to leave at 6:30am the next day. I left my things at the park and had only my passport, work ID, phone, of course a pair of

trousers, and some Ugandan shillings. The organization organized to have a driver come pick me in the morning to take me to the bus park because it was not safe otherwise, but I knew they would be late so I went off on foot by myself. I woke up at 5:30 and put a Kenyan passport cover over my Ugandan passport to help avoid any problems I might find. UPDF was the first to intervene and so there were a lot of risks being associated with Uganda.<sup>1</sup> The walk to the bus park was about thirty minutes. I didn't trust that driver to be on time so I set off. I went through six checkpoints, all manned by different SPLA groups. I could never tell who was who. They would ask questions but I just kept quiet and told them I'm going to Custom [the name for the bus park/transit hub]. I was very lucky that day. Others were taken to the side and likely killed. The Ugandans were treated like Dinka. When I got on the bus I was relieved, but someone was in my seat. Luckily the tickets are time stamped and mine was from before his so he had to give me his seat. He stood for the entire journey back to Gulu.”

In December 2013 new fighting broke out in the two-year old nation of South Sudan, and Akot was stuck in the middle of it.<sup>2</sup> While the discord between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar – President and Vice President at the time of independence, respectively – was well documented, the speed with which the government collapsed

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<sup>1</sup> Given the heavy presence of Ugandans in South Sudan and the history of proxy support offered by the Government of Uganda to competing rebel groups in South Sudan a Ugandan passport was seen as an additional liability – a Kenyan passport was seen as more neutral.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of this period, see Martell 2019.

and clashes began in the capital caught many off guard. In report after report, the swiftness with which the “youngest nation in the world” broke down led every piece of news coverage, perhaps best encapsulated in The Guardian whose headline simply read: “South Sudan: The State That Fell Apart in a Week” (Howden 2013). For many, including the thousands of Ugandans residing in the city, the force of this latest iteration of civil war felt sudden, even if it has clear roots.

Akot came to South Sudan to work for a local NGO in Bahr el-Ghazal in August 2013, just four months before the violence she describes during her harrowing attempt to flee Juba to re-enter Uganda. After having worked for five different CBOs<sup>3</sup> and NGOs in Uganda, Akot had again found herself unemployed. The work was fulfilling but rarely covered her living costs. Aside from a three-year contract with the Norwegian Refugee Council, her positions offered only overbearing labor for stop-gap pay. She worked as a community researcher on topics ranging from HIV to WASH to behavioral change, and also as a psychologist assisting ex-combatant women navigate traumatic returns and tracing their families. Despite her degree from Makerere University – East Africa’s premier university – she was making no more than 130,000 Ugandan shillings a month (~35 USD), often on short contracts that offered no job security, health insurance, or professional support network. Payments were frequently delayed, if they came at all,

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<sup>3</sup> Community based organizations

and, with at least one project, were only guaranteed on a day-to-day basis (the terms of the contract made it so each subsequent day of work was not guaranteed).

Over the past ten years thousands of young Ugandans have made the journey to South Sudan seeking employment. While a large proportion of them are unemployed university graduates like Akot, there are also sizeable representations in security, ex-inmates, small business, and day labor (most notably building the roads, hospitals, and other infrastructure funded by humanitarian and government agencies). It was not uncommon for *acikari* or (ex-)inmates I was working with in Gulu to have spent months or even years in South Sudan trying their hand at various trades, including participating in the intertwining economies of crime and security. In Kitgum these numbers are even higher – nearly everyone has some connection to South Sudan in their family or community: so and so's brother once worked as a driver making weekly trips across the border, so and so's sister was once a nurse at an international hospital, etc....

Juba, for many young Ugandans, elicits two contrasting images: an opportunity for generating wealth far beyond what is possible in Uganda and a significant personal risk that promises almost certain danger. These two imagined realities, however, link together in ways that produce the very object of their desire. The place of "the north" in discourses about war and conflict in Uganda – that the region is "backwards," its people "war-prone," and its culture "irredeemable" (Finnström 2008a, 107) – roughly maps onto the place of "South Sudan" in discourses circulating in northern Uganda. South

Sudan is frequently cited as the source of insecurity in Gulu, Kitgum, and other towns and centers throughout the region. Acoli traveling across the border are warned not to trust community members and stereotypes often dominate family advice given to young people before their journeys north. Akot relays: "Before going, I heard a lot of myths about South Sudanese and they instilled fear on me. For some time the work was much and I didn't really go anywhere but the home and the office. Eventually I started cooking for myself so now I added another destination: the market." Akot would socialize with the landlord who was Acoli and the few people she met now going to the market. On Uganda's Independence Day there were celebrations in town, around 50 Ugandans attended. "Right away all the Buganda began speaking only in Luganda so us from the north (Acoli, Langi, Iteso, etc...) split off and became friends. Overall though, it was risky to go out. We would visit the canteen at the UNMISS compound but otherwise it was dangerous. We often heard stories of people sitting on a verandah at a restaurant and just being killed. And you might go with a male friend and if a South Sudanese man picks interest in you they can just pull a gun and take you away."

But it is presumed that these are the risks one takes to strike at the sort of flexible capital being pursued. It is not lost on young Ugandans who have grown up during the war the vast sums of money that exchanged hands at their expense. The hotels built by prominent military men, the surreptitious trade of arms, and the land grabs that left many without a home to return to after returning from displacement camps were all

marks of the increasingly lucrative wartime opportunism that built up Gulu into what it is today. They know very well that it is often the spaces of the greatest insecurity that offer the greatest opportunity for capital extraction and accumulation (Nordstrom 2004b; Ferguson 2006, 196). Many see it as their surest chance for acquiring the funds necessary to build a stable, middle class life back in Uganda by purchasing land, building a house, investing in cultivation networks, or starting a business back home.

Akot's first position in South Sudan garnered her more than fourteen times her salary in Uganda in addition to a number of other financial benefits. They paid her 500 USD per month, as well as a 100 USD housing allowance and 100 USD meals allowance. Receiving her salary in US dollars – as is the norm in South Sudan – insulates her from the declining value of the shilling or the pound. But the salary also came at a cost. "My biggest challenge was nature of the work," she would say. "We would visit Dinka cattle herders and I was once put at gunpoint, they tried to raid our car and an old man came out and thankfully talked to them and convinced we are there to help them, and saved us. A lot of security risks are in South Sudan, and I would only wish to go back with an international NGO that can provide me with security. I saw as international organizations all evacuated their ex-pats in 2013. I thought to myself 'If I die here, who will come for me?' That's not right, taking on so much risk despite the pay. Even if the pay is high the risk is not worth it. The national NGOs also had other issues. With a proposal we might write that the social worker will be paid 200USD. But then the boss

says no, we will pay them 100USD. The donor then wants to see where the 200USD was spent, and you can't show them. So there is a lot of forgery we have to do. Also, you can't push the South Sudanese. They do things at their own pace.”

Akot understood her experiences as being marked by risk but insisted that the possibility of harm was something she could handle. Importantly, this wasn't the first time Akot had heard gunshots. She and her family stayed behind in Gulu town during the war even as many others – with the means – fled as far as they were able. They had borne the brunt of the war, eluding rebel activity and state violence when they could and often finding themselves caught in between the two. “I know how to take care when you hear gunfire,” she told me whenever we spoke about her time in South Sudan. It wasn't long before more recent events in Uganda wove themselves into our conversation as we began marking the past ten years by the sharp noise of unidentifiable gunfire. Again the attack on the central police station in Gulu that opened this dissertation was a vivid memory linking together a war that never quite ended and an unease that was never quite undone. She laughed while describing the way she and others rushed out of their doors, stumbling with an ear to the sky as they sought the origin of the sound of bullets. What was now comical – the image of her and other young men and women pacing aloof, focused off to the distance as they eagerly waited for their next auditory clue – had at the time been a strategic and informed position,

even though they all would have been safer inside, of course. “War has made us strong,” she ended the discussion with a laugh.

Even as she asserted that she would only return under certain conditions in the context of her 2013 experience, she returned many times over the years without any of the protection she insisted upon. As of 2018 she was finishing a post-graduate course in Gulu and planned to return, again, after it was done, in search of a more lucrative position.

#### ***5.4 Uganda and South Sudan at a Crossroads***

The more recent stream of young Ugandans into South Sudan is a stark reflection of shifting ecologies of war and humanitarianism as well as current unemployment trends.

At the same time, those who are pursuing work across the border are drawing on deep histories and networks that have always made this borderland porous and lucrative<sup>4</sup> for those on its southern edge. Much like other borderlands of South Sudan (Vaughan et al 2013), demarcations marking the territory of Uganda or South Sudan have always been contentious with many sections still under regular adjudication (Leonardi and Santschi 2016). There have been regular exoduses across the border in

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<sup>4</sup> See also Lombard 2020 for a detailed description of how such borderlands also produce a plurality of authorities and political relations that residents and passersby must navigate.

both directions across the last forty years. Political unrest on each side of the border have led to Ugandans fleeing to (what was then) Sudan during Obote II (Harrell-Bond 1986, 32-3, 42-63) and (South) Sudanese fleeing to Uganda throughout its twenty-year civil war (Johnson 2016). Some entrepreneurial Ugandans took the risk of establishing their businesses in Sudan during the late civil war period (1990s) leading into the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). These businesses tended to be focused on import/export, construction, or the back end of transportation industries. Part of what made Gulu such a quickly growing town was its place along the Kampala-Juba road network. It offered a natural stopping point at the half-way mark for truck drivers and others on the long journey.

And so when a young person travels to South Sudan today it is rarely the product of their initiative alone. Akot was only able to try her luck in South Sudan because a distant relative made the recommendation and connections. As she tells it: "In August 2013 I had no job and happened to visit my cousin in Kampala. They said they have a family friend with friends in South Sudan – they said this in passing. When they asked me if I might be interested I said 'why not, let me try.'" At the time, she emphasized, there was no war in South Sudan, so while she was nervous she didn't fear the worst. After making it through her phone interview, she began packing her bags. She had never been to South Sudan or anywhere else outside of Uganda before and, while a bit scared, was eager to join the work. "I went to South Sudan for a job only. I

didn't care how much pay I would receive, I just needed to work. It's not good to sit home, and, you know, I always wanted to be a foreign ex-pat, and I thought this might [help] get me there." Here, again, the specter of idleness as social rot becomes the major motivating factor for taking the risk.

By 2003 Gulu had a university – Gulu University. Its first programs were direct responses to the then-booming humanitarian economy: social work, peace/conflict studies, and others. While the access to this new “home” university was still only available to a minority of young men and women in the region (Finnström 2008a, 103), the proximity of the university to residents in and around Gulu did open new doors. No longer was being able to pay expensive lodging fees in Kampala, Mbarara, or other cities and towns throughout the country a prerequisite for enrollment. By this point many had networks in and around Gulu Town, now massively expanded from the influx of Acoli seeking safe haven at a time when their home villages offered anything but. A new class of students now had access to university level education and enrollment numbers made this clear.

With that being said, university in Uganda *is* prohibitively expensive and few can afford to attend. After students graduate, they often are expected to begin “paying back” the investment their networks paid into them in the form of university tuition and fees. When young men and women attend post-secondary, it is often at a great sacrifice to those around them. This was often *the* primary struggle for young men and women I

spoke with in the region. Most students come from families with limited formal educational backgrounds. Despite education holding a cherished role in Acoli (Ocitti 1973), their parents frequently did not attend secondary school and there is a significant generational shift that has taken place across the conflict period, in education as elsewhere. A job is not merely a job, for many youth. It is at the same time an entry-point into a web of obligations that most will fail to fulfill. For this reason and others, it was sometimes more financially and socially advantageous to remain unemployed rather than take a position in Uganda for fear of the knocks on your door that would follow calling for the redistribution of your earnings (Mains 2007; Newell 2012, 84-5). Working in South Sudan, while recognized as a sign of having a more sizeable money flow and therefore making one a target of more outsized demands, did allow some to eschew certain kin obligations due to the physical distance at play between them.

### ***5.5 Papers, Identity, and Being Acoli in South Sudan***

In November 2017 South Sudan's Ministry of Labor and Public Service issued an ultimatum: Ugandans had one month to attain the proper paperwork to work in South Sudan or they would be deported en masse. A work permit at the time was between \$500-\$4,000 per year depending on how the state categorized your labor (unskilled, skilled, technician, professional, consultant, etc...). For most Ugandans, this was an impossible fee. While many were taking home significantly more money than they ever

would back home such a cost would quickly diminish any gains made on short term contracts, especially for those working as day laborers, security guards, or any other position not directly subsidized by an NGO or international organization.

This, however, was only the latest government regulation affecting Ugandans working in South Sudan. One year earlier, after a contentious back and forth between Parliament, President Kiir, and the NGO sector, the NGO Act was passed. Meant to replace the outdated 2003 regulatory framework that was passed even before the CPA, the Act renewed a number of commitments and proposed what would be its most controversial: that no more than 20% of all NGO staff could be foreigners (Akol 2016). When the Act was first proposed in 2015 there was significant outcry among the humanitarian community in the form of a repeating alarm: this provision would “cost lives” and NGOs are already overburdened by state involvement. NGOs have repeatedly claimed that there simply are not enough qualified South Sudanese for them to employ. As one news report stated flatly: “Given that South Sudan has a shortage of skilled workers, and a literacy rate of only 27%, there are fears that basic humanitarian operations could be severely undermined by the legislation” (Jones 2015). Ugandans working in South Sudan, whether being paid under the table or not, felt personally targeted by these two developments that they felt would create new barriers to their ability to make a life in South Sudan. Or rather, they would, if their paperwork said they were foreigners.

I met Okello through a mutual friend. I had heard that he worked in South Sudan for some time both before and after independence and had built a certain reputation as someone who is well versed in politics on both sides of the border with extensive experience as a journalist in each. Here in Kitgum he rented a home for himself but owned property in Kampala, where his wife and children lived, and had a modest level of cash flow that was uncommon for most journalists. Even writers at the *Monitor* or *New Vision*,<sup>5</sup> unless working at a corporate or administrative level, often couldn't match Okello's financial success. We agreed to meet at a popular bar near town. It is largely empty in the afternoon: a few young men playing pool under the overhang across from the restaurant seating area, a few small groups of Ugandans – mostly men – sitting around talking. I find Okello quickly because he's calling me as I walk in – I'm ten minutes late and he keeps time.

Okello is wearing a black t-shirt donning the logo of a popular brand of beer and is much older than I expected. I imagine he is in his 40s, possibly 50s, but expected to meet someone in their early 30s. Okello is warm and talkative, clearly well-educated and well-traveled and very clearly a journalist once you begin speaking with him. He follows politics closely and his analyses are always measured. His delivery is strategic and thoughtful: rather than make some point – any point – he takes time to read the situation well and give a clearly articulated analysis of the issue at hand.

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<sup>5</sup> The two leading national dailies.

He arrived in Juba in 2008 through an assignment with a South Sudanese news company (print and online). He stayed with them for one year, then joined another South Sudanese news company that is only working online. He still does some work with them today, although mostly editing since he's not currently in-country to do any reporting/writing on the ground. Before his time in Juba he worked for the *Daily Monitor* which is, next to the state-owned *New Vision*, Uganda's top newspaper. I asked him why he ventured to Juba for work in the first place, and the answer was singular: money. "Those guys were paying much more than anyone would ever pay me here. They offered me 10x my salary at the *Monitor*, so I went." At the time, he was trying to launch a new online news source. It was live, but he was trying to grow it and could only do that with additional funding. He was paying \$100USD/month for a few guys who were in the field for him. It was little money, he says, but that's 360,000 Ugandan shillings a month<sup>6</sup> – while not a ton of money, for someone who is unemployed that would already be respectable, especially in a news organization that may grow and be able to pay much more in the near future.

After he shares a bit of his background with me, and I do the same with him, I ask him to give me a general read on Ugandans (especially Acoli) in South Sudan from 2008-2013, the main period when he was there. These were pivotal years marking the

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<sup>6</sup> Note that his conversion is to shillings because the young men he's hired are all Ugandans reporting on South Sudanese politics.

pre- and post-independence era of South Sudan and I thought he would have a rich perspective as both an Acoli in the region and someone there during this tumultuous period leading up to the outbreak of the civil war in 2013. I mentioned that I presume fewer Acoli were in Juba before independence and that it boomed after, especially for NGOs, and asked him if my read is correct.

He abruptly began telling me about the illicit means Acoli use to gain employment in NGOs in Juba. I had previously been aware of the legal barriers that were erected a few years after independence under the NGO Act, but assumed (perhaps naively) that this led to Ugandans being laid off and returning home, or working illegally either for companies who didn't mind ignoring the law or by working under the table for people who didn't ask questions.

But Okello went into the details of a different story. His voice immediately grew much quieter, wary of the other customers overhearing a discussion of illegal activities. Many Ugandans, Okello insisted, were not at all Ugandan to the South Sudanese state. They were, in fact, locals, and thus exempt from the law. While the majority of Acoli live in Uganda, the arbitrary colonial border that roughly separates Uganda from (now South) Sudan actually split the community, with some Acoli finding themselves in the British protectorate of Uganda and others in the southern province in the condominium system of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. By the time of independence, each had been managed separately (though each marginalized from their collection colonial center). With the

important exception of Ugandan Acoli who live along the border, these communities are largely distinct but still share a common ethnolinguistic lineage.<sup>7</sup> There are approximately 40,000 South Sudanese who identify as Acoli, less than half of one percent of the South Sudanese population (compared to over two million in Uganda). Nevertheless, belonging to this small enclave of Acoli offers an opportunity: an entry point into the South Sudan job market.

Okello narrated how the first thing Acoli do when looking for work is find a chief who comes from an area of South Sudan that is populated by South Sudanese Acoli. They then come to the *rwot*<sup>8</sup> explaining that they need citizenship to secure an NGO job, and the *rwot* asks “and what have you brought for me?” The aspirant usually gave the *rwot* 2,000 pounds at the time, Okello says (he says equivalent of \$500-600USD), and the *rwot* then agrees to accompany them to the immigration offices. The *rwot* then vouches for the aspirant by telling them “yes, this son/daughter of ours comes from our village.” But there is a problem: their university degree transcripts are of course permanently bound to Uganda – this cannot be changed, and they are often what gives them the proverbial leg up on their competition. The *rwot* therefore explains that they left South Sudan during the war for their studies which is why they have Ugandan

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that calls to a unitary or shared Acoli identity has never existed, but the decentralized nature of Acoli social organization led each group to establish political control within their own immediate communities rather than necessarily across or between them.

<sup>8</sup> Chief. *Payim* in South Sudan.

transcripts and why they don't have any Sudanese documentation. After enough sureties are provided the individual is, after a period of waiting, granted South Sudanese citizenship and takes the job at the NGO. "They then have their new identity, the identity that they need," Okello says. Ugandan Acoli are drawing on a proximity to ethnolinguistic sameness that would not be possible for others coming from elsewhere aspiring for this work.

This is made all the more ironic given South Sudan's heavy investment in biometric identity management systems directly after independence. Ferenc David Markó (2016, 113) argues that this system was built to project a certain kind of high-modernist competency where "identity documents act as a new kind of evidence of a successful negotiation between them and state agents," thus legitimizing the South Sudanese state on the world stage. It was in fact the same German company that developed the Ugandan biometric system in 2010 that designed the one in South Sudan two years later (Markó 2015, 2016, 117). Each of the national IDs in their pockets emerged from the same state-sponsored identification program from the same German tech giant.

I'm reminded here of Danny Hoffman's point that in the context of the Mano River War in West Africa, flexible national identities provided essential access to employment (including armed labor) and resources that might otherwise be out of reach with an exclusive claim to just one or the other. He argues that "It is the postcolonial

condition, in which one learns to productively deploy identities that are not only contingent but also frequently contradictory or patently absurd” (Hoffman 2011, 40). But no matter how absurd the excuse the *rwot* gives the immigration office – made all the more so by its repetition – it works. An older man who ventured to South Sudan as a construction worker in the late 90s, when the independence war was still acute, shared a similar story. But this time, it was not a South Sudanese *rwot* who brokered his papers through a call towards a shared identity, but rather his brother, who himself had joined the SPLA (independence movement) and registered as a Sudanese citizen in the process. War is work (Hoffman 2011), and that work also opens up new pathways not only for the young men or women who undertake it but also for their kin networks who claim many of its benefits, material and otherwise.

When I came back to Akot with the proposition that obtaining South Sudanese citizenship through surreptitious means was a regular strategy for those seeking work across the border, she agreed, but doubled down with a story of her own. “Even me, my landlord was an Acoli from South Sudan and she wanted to get me papers. There was one Luo tribe in Western Bahr el-Ghazal called Jocol.” I asked what kind of prospects that would have opened up, had she pursued the opportunity to get South Sudanese nationality, given that she was already in South Sudan with a respectable position. I expected her to speak about higher-placed NGO positions and a higher probability of filling vacancies reserved for Sudanese, but instead she added, “I could have even taken

a municipal position.” One of her best friends was able to attain South Sudanese citizenship like the others, but tried something new. After working for a number of NGOs, he made a transition: he applied for a government position in Juba and now holds a prominent managerial position in the South Sudanese state, all thanks to his papers.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

Young Acoli men and women are making a coordinated decision to exchange their physical security for the chance at building the futures they believe were promised. The active war and humanitarian economy in South Sudan offers opportunities that have been foreclosed in Uganda and youth consistently recognize that making the journey across the border is one means of making due in an uncertain post-conflict moment under overwhelming political and economic constraint.

The future of economic opportunity, however, is never certain. Shortly after the war broke out in South Sudan, refugees began fleeing into neighboring countries. The geography of humanitarian action once again relocated to northern Uganda. The number of refugees in Uganda has skyrocketed since 2016, reaching nearly one million in total. Bidi Bidi, the largest of the camps, houses over a quarter of a million South Sudanese refugees and has become, by all measures, a town of its own, albeit one built on the humanitarian infrastructure of emergency relief. Uganda was quickly lauded as

“the best place to be a refugee” due in large part to the sheer number of forced migrants it hosted and the state’s willingness to allow refugees to cross the border.<sup>9</sup>

As refugees sought safe haven in northern Uganda, job opportunities that were once the staple of wartime began to return. Job postings went up for drivers, administrators, data collectors, nutrition specialists, and field workers. Yumbe, Moyo, and Palabek – all small towns in Uganda – became new magnets for young people with university degrees looking for reliable employment. While the sorts of opportunities described in this chapter still exist in South Sudan, and many Ugandan youth continue to pursue them, it is far less risky to do so within the country, and many who declined to take on the risk of migration have entered the pool of applicants for these new positions.

Atim, like Akot, entered South Sudan the very year that fresh conflict began. She hid in a freezer as bullets grazed the building in which she worked as an accountant for a local beverage transport company. She recalled how the injury she sustained while fleeing another ambush, this time in Uganda some fifteen years ago as a child, made it difficult to run away with her colleagues when the fighting began on the streets of Juba. After escaping back to Uganda, she insisted that she barely made it out alive, and refused to ever consider returning despite having few job prospects at home. After some time working in mobile money and other relatively low-wage positions, she began

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<sup>9</sup> A willingness, it should be noted, that stems directly from the lucrative contracts it would soon receive from the international community.

thinking about how to put her degree back to work. She was in the process of starting a small business when the camps began growing at breakneck speed. It wasn't long before she began putting together a new application.

## 6. Conclusion: *Anyim pa Nga?*

He clings onto breasts  
of the Republic,  
squeezing,  
biting them with 70-year-old teeth,  
blind to the queue of infants behind him.  
(Harriet Anena, *Un-weanable*, 2015, 27)

In late August 2020 a widely-followed local journalist who shares reporting through Facebook posted his latest: “11 houses torched in Gulu City inferno.” The post read, in full:

The fire whose source is still unclear, burnt 11 thatched grass huts, 7 to ashes and 4 were rescued. It happened at around 3:00am last night in the cells of Kanyagoga A and Kasubi in Layibi-Bar dege division – in Gulu west. It almost happened at the same time, something seems to have been well coordinated.

With the arsonists still unknown, but the name of *Aguu* boys are on top with Police saying nobody has been arrested but they highly suspect the *Aguu* is responsible for last night incidence.

*Aguu* is the group of bad-mannered idle youth who are thriving on robbery, attacks and breaking into people's houses.

Before the country covid-19 lockdown, the insecurity in the city was attributed to the action of the *Aguu* who were giving sleepless nights to people and waylaying people to their homes. In December 2019, police tightened the notches for them and many went to prison.

Unfortunately, five days ago, many of these boys were released, and immediately the news of *Aguu* is back, could the CCTV camera installed in the city being of any help?

Sometimes back, I wrote that fighting urban crimes is more than just carrying guns; it needs a security algorithm manned by intelligent people. With the

excitement of the new cities in Uganda still closed to our chests, more needs to be done to avert the increasing urban crimes in the country."

Alongside the post were two pictures. The first, the burnt-out remains of the interior of a decimated grass-thatched home, cooking pots lying in piles of white ash with the sun freely entering the now unroofed structure. The second, a much larger building with some ceiling beams still intact though badly burnt. Grass from the roof hung down and covered the floor below. Black marks on each wall from the fire damage.

The journalist's choice of words here – Gulu City – was not incidental. Gulu had, after all, just officially become a city one month prior. The years-long battle for city status may have taken place largely through political and bureaucratic maneuvering but it had also become a source of pride for its residents, young people chief among them. Many frequently posted comparisons to other African cities on their social media with the promise – even parity – of global connection. At the same time, security talk dominated public discourse with the coming of this new title. City status, urbanization, development – these were good things but, I was warned, they also brought unemployment, crime, and uncertainty. That same journalist had written elsewhere: "Please [be] vigilant and aware that the *Aguu* have changed their tactics – and the next to fall a prey might be you – we need to strengthen on the community watch before our City can be turned disarray."

Though it went unremarked it was, ironically, international youth day when this report was posted, a day when politicians and citizens fill their timelines with salutes to the power and promise of being a young person in Uganda (and the world) today. For young citizens, it's a gentle reminder to those in power to take them seriously (Bolten 2019). It's a claim rooted in the mantra that youth are the future of the nation. But which youth are the future? And whose future? (*Anyim pa nga?*)

*Aguu* are the latest figuration of the threat that young people pose to the future of Gulu. The term is a reference to youth who "would do anything to get by" and has characterized those who fall into the category as homeless young people, or "street children" (Divon and Owor 2021). That *Aguu* have become such a regular topic points us to the security affect that percolates between homes and businesses across town and the very real threat that residents regularly face in maintaining their well-being. That it so readily conflated with youth making a life outside of the home (*gang*) tells us something more. In a context where young people face unprecedented challenges, the response continues to focus on securitization and incarceration rather than addressing the difficult, multilayered causes of crime and combatting the stereotype of youth idleness as its bedfellow. As one youth activist responded poignantly to the post: "As always, the unsubstantiated blame continues."

How, then, do we account for the multiple and overlapping discourses about the perils and promise of youth in Uganda today? Speaking about African youth through

the dichotomies of chaos and conformity is not at all new, and still continues to permeate many academic renderings. But what would it mean to break past this juxtaposition and instead take young people on their own terms? Not as agents of forthcoming failure or promise, but as living, breathing people who are navigating delicate environments in a national context that feels unsupportive and a political elite that is increasingly hostile to their growing numbers?

This dissertation has put forward four overarching arguments. First, the securitization of young people has produced more – not less – insecurity. This includes both the unemployed, “idle” youth who have become a source of great anxiety in Uganda and in the north in particular as well as those hired as *acikari* to secure the land and property of NGOs, businesses, and individuals with the means to do so. Second, young people are not “untouched” or “unknowing” historical subjects: they actively draw on their own histories and those that came before them in their attempts to build better futures. In so doing, they are themselves constructing futures that are rooted in both historical precedent and generational change. Third, humanitarian interventions have futures, effects that linger on well after the time of “emergency.” The temporal foreclosing of humanitarianism – and of interventions more broadly – obscure the deep crevices of material distribution (and its refusal), reconfigured social relations, and affective change that residents must then navigate for years and even decades thereafter. And, fourth, “post-conflict” is an unclear temporal space that impacts how people make

sense of life after war – and the durability of that “after.” Heightened in cases like northern Uganda that have no formal resolution of conflict, the post-conflict space is seemingly unending. The interventions that follow – many of them with timelines matched not to life on the ground but to funding cycles – become a new social reality to navigate in order to cultivate a better future.

These arguments were developed through a number of seeming contradictions – youth/adulthood, security/vulnerability, threat/promise, war/peace – because these are the terms and ideas spoken locally to account for feelings of unease and uncertainty. Chapter Four, on incarceration, for example, focused on both capture and care because this is another place where the either/or debate about youth shows its face, and the subsequent forms of governance – humanitarian and otherwise – that emerge in response.

Each of the three ethnographic chapters also carried their own arguments: (1) That private security guards are essential actors in postwar security regimes and those regimes depend on their disposability, which is premised on the bluff of both the guard and the larger system (the transformation from warscape to securiscape); that incarceration is distributed across communities and the introduction of developmentalist programs in prisons is indicative of a larger transformation of NGOs from an ideology of protection and development to one of productivity and security; (3) and that postwar mobility is not just about escaping conflict or its aftermaths but

sometimes to actively seek them out when opportunities feel unattainable at home and building a good life seems only possible through the accumulation of significant risk. While every year that passes brings new developments in the challenges and opportunities for young people in northern Uganda, these three themes – security, incarceration, and mobility – have remained at the fore.

In 2021 President Yoweri Museveni again ran for office and was declared the winner despite significant accusations of fraud and intimidation. The manifesto he ran under – his 2021-2026 vision for Uganda – was titled “Securing Your Future.” Museveni and his party, the NRM, made the phrase a recurring theme in nearly every public appearance he has made since, including well after the election. Young people have since taken it up on their own terms, repurposing a political proclamation as a recurring jab in youth discourse both online and off. When a young man posts something a peer wants to give him a hard time about, they might ask “You keep worrying about that, for me I’m securing my future.” Or, when the Security Minister, Gen. Elly Tumwine, was reported to have said that the internet and *boda bodas* were new age luxuries that the country can live without in order to avoid what he described as security threats to the nation, many young men and women began asking: “Is this the future we are securing?” More than fifteen years after the end of active conflict in northern Uganda and the question continues to hold water as young people make do in an increasingly constrained political and economic space. *Anyim pa nga?* Whose future are we securing?

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## **Biography**

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