

JSRP Paper 24

# **The Government has Long Hands: Community Security Groups and Arbitrary Governance in Uganda's Acholiland**

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**June 2015**

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper uses qualitative field research from 2014 to examine community security initiatives as providers of security and insecurity in Gulu District, Northern Uganda, where state control is believed to be weak or absent after a two-decades long conflict. Community security initiatives are a type of “boundary institution” (Lund 2006)—non-state organisations that adopt responsibilities and symbols of the state. I use four months of ethnographic research on community security initiatives to explore the phenomenon of local security groups and what these tell us about the state-society relationship and the nature of public authority. I examine how the central state shapes the local legal and political environment, while also engaging directly with local security issues to produce what I term “institutionalised arbitrariness” as an efficient mode of governance. This study puts into relief what is understood as legitimate use of violence and what this says about the nature of the state-society relationship.*

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# **The Government Has Long Hands: Community Security Groups and Arbitrary Governance in Uganda's Acholiland**

Rebecca Tapscott<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

On February 25, 2014, a few hours before dawn, a community security group patrolled the dusty streets outside Gulu Town in Northern Uganda. They had been busy: the night began by breaking up an after-hours dance party, beating the palms and emptying the pockets of the attendees, and caning a girl and her brothers in the family compound for the girl's indecent dress. The group was escorting a suspected thief to a nearby police post when they stopped a driver in an NGO vehicle. The driver reported to the police that the security group assaulted and robbed him, and damaged the vehicle. The next day, four members of the security group, as well as an elected sub-county official who was instrumental in its creation, were arrested.

A week earlier, the village leader had discussed the group in a community meeting, "I would like to say clearly that these boys of ours have made us proud because they do their patrol right from here to [the neighboring villages]...To me if I'm to compare the good and bad of these boys then I would give them on the good aspect 80 per cent."<sup>2</sup> Other community members reported sleeping more easily at night owing to the patrol. One woman explained: "People are glad that there is a security group—stealing was a big problem before—but they are not happy with some of the behavior."

This paper examines such community security initiatives as a lens to explore the state-society relationship and the nature of public authority in Gulu District, Northern Uganda. Based on approximately 150 interviews conducted between February and December 2014, it appears that there is a high level of discretion about when and how the state intervenes in matters of security. Thus, I argue that from the perspective of Acholi citizens, a defining characteristic of the state's security and justice systems is inconsistent and selective presence. Coupled with a long memory of violent conflict, unpredictable state intervention renders the government ever-present in civilian imaginations despite being generally materially absent. This "institutionalised arbitrariness" creates and reinforces the power of the central state as hegemon, thereby functioning as a low-cost mode of governing.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I present my argument in relation to existing scholarship on vigilantism, boundary institutions, and public authority. Next, I discuss the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the government of the National Resistance Movement (NRM), and some of the government's policing initiatives, to explore how this context might shape imaginations of violence. Third, I describe the

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<sup>2</sup> After learning of the arrests, the village leader reduced his evaluation to 70 per cent.

current role of community security groups in Acholiland, examining how such groups operate to constitute and undermine public authority at local and central levels. Fourth, I elaborate how “institutionalised arbitrariness” might function as a mode of governance in Acholiland. Finally, I conclude with reflections on what this mode of governance might mean in practice.

## **Community Security Initiatives and Arbitrary Governance**

Community security initiatives are a type of “boundary institution” that defy traditional categories of state and non-state (Lund 2006b, 673). Such initiatives exist globally, and take a variety of forms, from organisations that extract communal resources for private benefit to more bureaucratic organisations that intervene in a range of governance issues and uphold commonly agreed-upon community rules. Some are highly institutionalised with procedures for detention, trial, and judgment; others are chaotic mob justice, compared in my interviews to “natural disasters” in their degree of unpredictability. Their role is pronounced at the physical and symbolic borders of the state, as they define and challenge the boundaries between public and private, legitimate and illegitimate, legal and illegal, formal and informal, and so on (Lund 2006a).

In a plural security sector governance environment, local initiatives utilise a host of strategies to gain public acceptance, particularly retaining flexibility in form (Buur 2006; Lund 2006c). At times, such initiatives take the form of bureaucratic or administrative institutions to gain the authority to govern, and at other times they use those of violence—mobs, vigilantes, or warlords (Pratten 2006; Rodgers 2007). Indeed, community security initiatives shift dynamically between these constructed poles, as state authorities and their own communities alternately define them as “crime preventers” or “crime promoters”. Other groups strategically manipulate their boundary status to appeal to a wider base and collude with other institutions, appearing formal enough to wield authority and informal enough to avoid punishment or sanction by more powerful governance actors (Debos 2011; Gopfert 2012).

While the phenomenon of non-state security providers in plural institutional environments is well documented (Abrahams 1998; Pratten and Sen 2007; Grätz and Kirsch 2010), why they arise and what they mean for a state’s monopoly on violence is less clear. Decades of research on the Ugandan state have produced theories that could explain the presence of multiple, diverse, and incoherent security actors. These studies, conducted throughout the developing conflict with the LRA, including at its height (2002-2005) and its decline (2005 to today), describe the Ugandan state as pathologically weak (Reinikka and Svensson 2005), willfully absent (Jones 2009; Buckley-Zistel 2008), overrun or marginalised by international intervention and aid (Branch 2011; Allen 2006), early in the process of state consolidation (Björkman and Svensson 2009; Batley and McLoughlin 2010), maintaining a system of corrupt neo-patrimonialism (Mwenda and Tangri 2005; Freeland 2015), or employing indirect rule (Mamdani 1996; Finnström 2008; Dolan 2009). In contrast, my research suggests that the current situation reflects an efficient mode of governance in this conflict affected frontier zone.

While the boundary institutions literature examines production of public authority at a local level, this study explores the role that local security initiatives in Gulu District

might play in the governance strategies of the Ugandan government. I suggest that central state actors continually redefine “the boundary” between state and non-state—and concomitantly, between legal and illegal. This argument is similar to that presented by Dennis Rodgers (2006) on gangs in Nicaragua. Rodgers suggests the state uses a “state of exception” to arbitrarily move civilians into “valid” and “invalid” populations; I suggest that state actors continually redefine the categories of valid and invalid. As a result, residents can never be confident of their status. They are promised the benefits that accrue to citizens; at the same time, through repeated observation of arbitrary and violent intervention they are constantly reminded that they could be thrust “outside” at the whim of state actors—thus producing quiescent subjects in a historically volatile region. Continually redefining these boundaries enables a mode of governance in which state actors can strategically shape and limit civilian attempts to claim legitimacy or call for accountability. For example, the state can frame criminal behavior of a parasitic “security group”—one that intimidates and steals from its own community—as either (1) an insignificant local problem that requires a local solution; or (2) a threat to national security that merits a heavy-handed intervention by police or military. As such, any behavior or institution can be defined *post hoc* as illegal or illegitimate, invoking broad and undefined rules, such as those against “being idle,” “corrupt,” or “disrespectful.”<sup>3</sup>

Ben Jones opens his book on governance in the rural Teso region of Uganda with an analogy: “The government was likened to the dry season rains—something occasional and potentially destructive...” (Jones 2009, 3). My research suggests the sporadic, unpredictable, and dangerous nature of state intervention—particularly in the security and justice sectors—looms large in the minds of citizens, thereby functioning as a mode of controlling and governing distant populations.

## **Historical Framing: War, Government, and Policing**

Gulu District has a long history as a militarised frontier zone. It was the epicenter of the two-decades-long rebel conflict, during which the LRA abducted an estimated one-third of male adolescents and one-sixth of female adolescents, and approximately 90-95 per cent of the population in the sub-region of Acholi was displaced (Gelsdorf, Maxwell, and Mazurana 2012). During the conflict, police were virtually absent from the north. To help handle matters of security, the central government enrolled civilians, mostly unpaid and poorly equipped, to protect their communities, often with disastrous results.<sup>4</sup> Internationally, the conflict is framed as the terrible work of a radical cult and guerilla army (critiqued by authors including Branch 2011; Dolan 2009; Schomerus 2010). Nationally, interpretations of the war are mired in ethnic tensions between North and South. In Kampala, Ugandans blame the bellicose Acholi people who could not make peace among themselves; in Gulu, lay and educated alike recite a powerful narrative of abandonment and marginalisation by President Yoweri

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<sup>3</sup> In just three months, a daily local security report documented the arrest of over 125 youths for idling in police “crack downs” and “sweeps” (UNDSS Gulu Radio Room, n.d. November 11, 2014-February 24 2015).

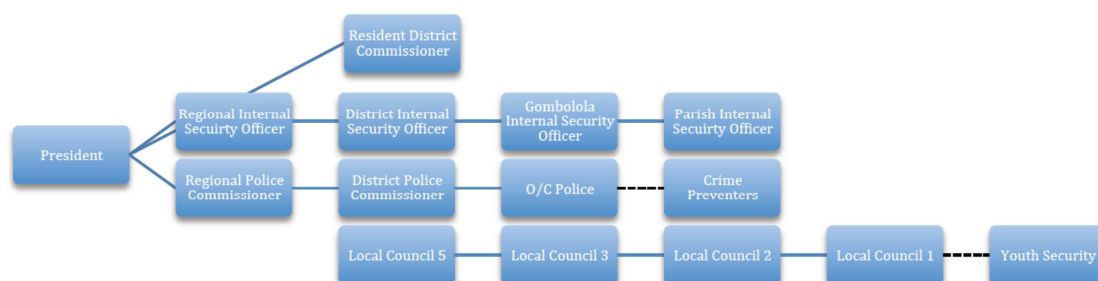
<sup>4</sup> In response to these citizen brigades—called “Arrow Boys” or “Local Defense Units”—the LRA mounted aggressive attacks on civilians. Kony is famously quoted: “If you pick up an arrow against us and we ended up cutting off the hand you used, who is to blame? You report us with your mouth, and we cut off your lips? Who is to blame? It is you!” See also Human Rights Focus (2003).

Museveni and his party, the NRM.

The NRM started as a vanguardist liberation group that used a system of local “Resistance Councils” (RCs) to provide supplies to its troops. After Museveni forcibly installed himself as president in 1986, RCs were established across the country. The RCs facilitated the NRM’s counterinsurgency against the LRA through surveillance and control in remote and rural areas of the country. In 1996, elections were held for RCs, and they were renamed “Local Councils” (LCs), transforming an intrinsically partisan and martial institution into the foundational unit of local administration (Francis and James 2003). While the military and police continue to be highly centralised under autocratic rule, almost every other aspect of governance is managed at the district level, primarily by the Resident District Commissioner (RDC)—a direct appointee of the President. Arguably, this donor-lauded process of decentralisation has been co-opted to reinforce the central government’s power (Green 2008; Freeland 2015).

The institutional structure of security and governance organs has remained largely the same throughout Museveni’s presidency. The following organogram depicts the current structure. The top three rows link directly to the Office of the President and are Presidentially appointed positions, including the RDC, who—along with other district-level appointees—is tasked with security issues in the district. The bottom row is accountable to the community in a “pyramidal structure,” which is elected from the grassroots up. The Local Council 1 (LCI) is the most foundational unit of governance at the village level (Francis and James 2003, 327):

*Figure 1. Organogram of Ugandan Government*



The LC structure does not connect directly to the presidentially appointed positions, although frequently those at the same administrative level will share office space. The LC structure in Gulu is dominated by resistance parties, while presidential appointees are ubiquitously NRM.

In 1989, as conflict plagued the North, the Uganda Police Force (UPF) introduced community policing in Kampala.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the programme has been rolled out across the country, only recently arriving in the North. Today, trainings for “crime preventers” take a variety of forms, some training schoolchildren, others engaging lay

<sup>5</sup> Community policing is broadly defined, and looks different in different contexts. In practice, the term frequently includes activities that engage citizens in active policing, including establishing a structure of reporting between civilians and police.



citizens, for anywhere from three days to three months. Reportedly, UPF has trained over 20,000 Crime Preventers to date (Otto 2014b). Below is a description from the UPF website of a recent training held in Kampala:

The course was aimed at empowering students with self defense skills, ideological orientation, crime prevention and patriotism. All the passed out crime preventers are students of Makerere University, Kampala. During the pass out ceremony students exhibited martial arts, self defense skills, parade drills, football, gun stripping and assembling skills. (“Gen. Kale Kayihura Passes out 700 Makerere Students’ Crime Preventers” 2014)

*Figure 2: Gulu Crime Preventers “parade” at a ceremony commemorating community policing in Kampala.*



*Source: On file with author from Uganda Police Force website (November 2, 2014)*

Crime prevention training uses numerous military motifs. The physical drills are conducted in Swahili, the language of the Ugandan armed forces, which is hardly spoken in the North (Lanken Verma 2012).<sup>6</sup> After training, recruits are “passed out”: “the military term for the completion of training...the recruits or cadres are made to utter the final oath, declare their willingness to sacrifice themselves, and swear their loyalty to the nation” (Lanken Verma 2012, 111). Respondents noted that trainings increased around election time, and in some cases, participants were given the opportunity to work during the elections in roles such as election monitoring and dispersing crowds or rioters. Others explicitly stated that the crime preventers

<sup>6</sup> When I asked my respondents what surprised them about the training, a number of them exclaimed “The language barrier!” They could not understand the trainings that were given by military officers in Swahili.

programme is a government tool to influence elections. A sub-county official said: “People claim that [crime preventers] were brought on board to favor the government in [the 2011] election... they get in groups and stand by the roadside and ask, ‘Who are you voting for?’ During elections, they were being facilitated [paid] by the government.” On one occasion, a group interview ended when the respondents changed into new NRM T-shirts in preparation for a security meeting at the sub-county police post. In the past, a select number of crime preventers have been absorbed into the UPF; this possibility motivates many to participate in this entirely voluntary and unpaid process.

The provision of local security is thus materially and symbolically intertwined with and enabled by different levels of the state. According to Bruce Baker, “The NRM government has never insisted that policing must be a state monopoly. Instead, it has sought security partners who will work *within the law and under its supervision*” (Baker 2005, 30 italics added). Yet, in practice, security partners that fit this designation—as well as the meaning of “law” and “supervision”—are fluid, and at times, ambiguous. This has profound implications for the way Ugandan citizens experience day-to-day security, and asks us to question approaches that prize “hybrid” security arrangements, and “going with the grain” (Baker and Scheye 2007).

## **Local Security in the Post-Conflict Setting**

In Acholiland, many villages have local security arrangements, usually comprised of a handful of young men responsible for enforcing local by-laws, arresting suspects who do not comply voluntarily, and patrolling at night to deter crime. There is no name for such initiatives—they are often referred to descriptively as “the able bodied youth who provide security in the village.” Other times, they are called “peace keepers,” “local security,” “youth security,” or sometimes simply “youth.” Here, I refer to them as community security groups or initiatives.

Many people date the formation of community security groups to 2008-2009, when civilians began leaving internally displaced people’s (IDP) camps and returning home. Respondents narrated a new generation that had learned only immorality and idleness from upbringing in IDP camps (see also Mergelsberg 2012). They argue that these youth are unwilling to work, and instead spend their days causing trouble and stealing to support themselves. One 63-year-old woman reflected: “Cultural practices went into limbo. They were the only way we, the elders had to discipline the children...children do not listen to us, the elders. If they did, some of the situation [crime and moral decay] would have been contained by today.” Another respondent, a 28-year-old male, explained the motivation for forming their group, highlighting immoral and rowdy behavior: “Near the barracks there were prostitutes, looking for money, soldiers who were murdered when people hit them on the head with bottles... The LCI [Chairman] said, ‘what can we do?’” In these and other conversations civilians portray the conflict as having devastated moral order. Moreover, they highlight the perceived need to manage, discipline, and control behavior to establish a good living environment.

Such groups may have been in existence long before people returned home from IDP camps. However, the fact that people understand local security as a part of post-war reconstruction is significant—the groups are framed as necessary to reinstate the

correct social or moral order that existed “before” (e.g. Porter 2012 on social harmony, Finnström 2008 on *piny maber*). Hence, one dimension of the groups’ role is to enforce local by-laws created at a village level. These laws are written by the local council and approved at a community meeting. They generally reinforce gender, age, and other social orders, that is often anathema to development interventions that promote a new liberalism of rights. During interviews and in community meetings, many citizens expressed enthusiasm about imposing high costs on those who violate moral codes, arguing that human rights are nothing more than an excuse to protect criminals.

A few examples of local by-laws are listed below, selected from various villages in Gulu District. The by-laws included here were created by the local government, reviewed at the sub-county for accordance with the Constitution, and formally approved:

- Any *boda boda* [motorcycle taxi] found to be carrying properties as a result of family separation/divorce and reside in Oding village shall pay a fine of fifty thousand shillings.<sup>7</sup>
- If found playing card, growing or taking [opium], he/she will be arrested immediately and taken to police.
- Anybody who shall be idle and disorder shall be given punishment to do community work to be designed by security Committee. Such work may include [Brick molding, Digging, Digging and building latrine].
- Indecent dressing for girls and boys is not allowed. The victim shall be punished with canes.

These examples illustrate how security groups view their role as enforcing a moral order and environment that is appropriate and Acholi, rather than a set of formal laws. In line with the concept of boundary institutions, the groups intervene interchangeably in what are traditionally considered both public and private spaces.

We patrol also to enforce other laws related to health, sanitation, education...If children are brought up in an environment that is dirty, where people are fighting, where they do not have to attend school, they will think this is the way things are. (28-year-old male security group member)

Local sanctions typically include beatings, fines, and signing a letter with the LCI promising to reform. Beatings are typically conducted in a public forum, and frequently citizens have emphasised that it is necessary that punishments be conducted “in the light” when others can see, to ensure that no foul play occurs on either the side of the offender or the enforcer. An Acholi saying “*Itii tye idudi*” translates to “The ears are in the buttocks”. As my research assistant explained, “this means you can talk all you want, but they won’t really hear unless they are caned.”

The legality of such initiatives is ambiguous. Corporal punishment is illegal (Ministry of Education 2008, 21–23), and police spokespeople stress that citizens, even those trained as crime preventers, do not have the right to arrest or detain (Bindhe 2014;

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<sup>7</sup> This by-law effectively means that motorcycle taxis cannot help a woman leave her marriage.

Otto 2014b and personal interviews). On the other hand, officials in the administration, as well as police authorities and appointed sub-county security officer (Gombolola Internal Security Officers or GISO) have repeatedly advocated for the formation of community security groups at community meetings, fully expecting that the groups will use physical punishment and make arrests, saying as much in village meetings. Uganda also has a tradition of “citizen’s arrest,” adopted from colonial times and now understood to mean any citizen has the right, sometimes framed as an obligation, to arrest a suspect and deliver him or her to the police. Male respondents commented on this during interviews with me, “Of course the law allows for citizen’s arrest. You [as a woman] can actually arrest me...I cannot arrest you. I can call a lady to arrest you. But you can arrest me. Which is also not fair [laughter].” Local security actors are not provided for in any legislation, although the Constitution requires citizens to help keep law and order (Ugandan Constitution 1995). As one sub-county administrator said, “The government of Uganda leaves space for such things [local security initiatives] to exist.”

While many suggest that the state supports such initiatives because they don’t have the capacity to regulate the population, the frequency of arrests calls this into question. The state does intervene in security concerns, at times arresting those it once tasked with keeping the peace (for example, see the following select news reports Bindhe 2014; Jjingo 2013; Otto 2014b; Owich 2014; Tumusiime 2014). One minibus driver compared arrest to falling ill: “It’s like going to the hospital, you can’t say it will never happen. One day you fall sick and you just go...Even when you’re a good person and did nothing wrong. You just pray hard that it doesn’t happen to you.”

Notably, the police arrest civilians for impersonating police or military (UNDSS Gulu Radio Room, January 22, 2015). Indeed, people place value on a military or police uniform—and the right to wear it. One former crime preventer was given a police uniform to wear during the 2011 elections. He reflected, “I was so comfortable wearing that, I was feeling so nice. After the voting, they collected the uniforms and the batons from us.” His colleague interjected, “You were naked!” Another day, after an interview with a recently trained crime preventer, my driver exclaimed: “Did you see his boots? Boots like that have a meaning here—he is affiliated [with the NRM and military]!” Local security groups ubiquitously lament lack of uniforms, and request raincoats with reflectors, gumboots, and identity cards to establish their credentials and prevent community members, the police, or other security groups from mistaking them as wrongdoers. Lack of formal identification is one of the main reasons given for why the groups must patrol with the police or military. Some groups have made their own laminated identification cards to counter this issue. Their titles reflect those given to police or military, including “scout,” “corporal,” and “sergeant.”

Flexibility in form and status is integral to the boundary nature of such groups; it leads to a vast interpretation of the appropriate roles of such initiatives. While some security groups believe they have the right—even the responsibility—to arrest, detain, investigate, judge, and punish, others feel they are meant to do none of these things. Most frequently, I have found a combination of some subset of the former. Further, the groups have widely varying levels of institutionalisation. For example, one group had a designated role for a member tasked with giving beatings (called the “whip master”), while others had rotating savings and loan associations and small business enterprises. Many of the groups conducted informal taxation of the community or surrounding businesses to “motivate” the group members. On the other hand, every

group had problems with members taking law into their own hands, or acting in their own interests. An extremely common refrain amongst residents, locally elected representatives, appointed administrators, and security group members themselves was, “Crime preventers? It would be better if they were called crime promoters!”

Although security groups aim to place themselves under some formal body, their position in security organs is inconsistent. Some mid-tier local administrators pointedly expressed that the issue of local security is “too local” and “informal” to come to their attention. One sub-county official explained that the activities of crime preventers are handled at the village level and news of them doesn’t reach his office, while another said they were too informal to discuss in an interview setting. What happens in the village is not of concern, so long as it is not organised violent crime or rebellion. Thus, while such groups are framed as local responses to local problems, the government retains the right to intervene.

This inconsistency is further exacerbated as the government encourages the formation of non-formal security arrangements on the one hand, and disowns them on the other. Lack of formal recognition and regulation further enables this dual framing. Those nominally tasked with vetting members of local security groups range from the LCI to the District Police Chief; however, the process lacks consistency, and relies primarily on personal references. While some administrators emphasise the need to exclude criminals, others argue that it is the criminals who know their kind and can really help target “black spots” where crime is rife. A number of sub-county officials spoke about how and why they believe this happens:

Yes, certainly [local security could be arrested as wrongdoers]! [Those working in our area] said, “what if this happened in our place, we have no appointment letter”—they will be disowned if there is a problem. This annoyed me so much. These people were mandated by the office of the RDC to be vigilant to protect their area.

*[Why didn’t you provide them with a letter, then?]* If something goes wrong, I would be liable—! It would be as if I was responsible for everything they do. So the groups are still functioning under silent right now.

Another said:

The groups should volunteer at their own level. The government fears they may do something wrong, so they approve the groups informally, but don’t give them formal recognition. The groups need guidance on what they should do.

A journalist described the training of crime preventers in Lira:

During the crime preventers training, they [the police] even said that the crime preventers have the right to arrest. But then, someone asked, “If a suspect dies during an arrest, who will stand for it [be responsible]? The police or the crime preventer? The institution or the individual?” At that point, they changed their mind and said that crime preventers do not have the right to arrest.

A GISO further highlighted the vulnerability of local security:

The police allow citizens to raise complaints against the groups to the police. The police hold all the power—if there are complaints against you, as a security group member, you will be held responsible.

This unpredictability structures how people act in relation to justice and security. If the government is informed about “everything” but doesn’t intervene in most cases, then there is little to do but handle the matter from home while holding out hope that it might be dealt with elsewhere. That is, there is little reason to believe that bringing the case to the attention of the higher authorities will result in positive movement. Low expectations from civilians reinforce the state’s freedom to intervene when and how it wants to, while neglecting other cases. Recently, at the high court in Gulu, the Magistrates counseled a room full of complainants to withdraw their cases and solve their matters from home:

Be honest citizens. Reflect on your accusations. Are they true? If they are not true, we can still withdraw your case. I tell everyone, God is there, and we will all stand before him at some point for account...Jesus said, “Forgive them, for they don’t know what they do.” Why can’t you just forgive? People of Acholi are so vainful. Why? [...] Then we have those of you who are used to prison life. You are released, you come back, you are released and you come back again. You’re now used to eating free food from the government. And you’re congesting court and people are tired of you. That’s why there is poverty in Acholiland. People don’t work except for crowding court.

The Magistrate’s berating of civilians for attempting to use the court as it is designed to be used further illustrates the uncertainty inherent in the system of security and justice. Moreover, in many cases, returning the matter to the community prolongs conflict—or in more severe cases, results in mob violence or revenge murder. The government and police are aware of this; thus, such recommendations implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—support mob violence. One particularly poignant example relates to a man accused of using witchcraft to conduct a series of murders outside of Gulu Town. At the funeral of the fifth victim, the community stormed the suspect’s shop and home. This is an account of one of the witnesses:

As the house was burning, policemen came and everyone took off thinking that they would be arrested. I also ran away, but later people started coming back since there was no sign of arrest by the police. The police called their fire brigade team but it came a bit late and put the fire out after most of the things had already been burnt down. The police were asking the two ladies who were selling in the burnt house but I was not close to them and they later went with these girls to police with other things which were not burnt and two police took a bottle of soda and beer respectively from the scene.

In this anecdote, the police implicitly make it clear that they view this problem as a community issue to be addressed locally through mob violence, rather than a public issue to be handled by state authorities. Two residents further elaborated the views of the police:

The police wanted the community to kill him [the suspect]...[One police officer] said that “we can shoot up into the air, we can cover.

Why don't you just finish him?"

[*Nodding in agreement*] The police said, "You know he is the one who is responsible, why didn't you get him? The police are very tired of him, too."

Thus, in a plural governance environment, "handling the matter from home" takes a host of different forms, including investigations, judgments, and penalties levied by community security groups, crime preventers, local administrative and cultural leaders, and the family. Each institution has unclear spheres of authority and legitimacy. This keeps local security in an undefined state between enforcer of laws or moral order, and perpetrator of "atrocities". There are, for example, wildly differing interpretations of the responsibilities of community security groups. This paradoxical situation fosters an optimal level of indeterminacy at the local level, affording the central government ample discretion to intervene in security events.

In Table One I present a stylised dichotomy using quotes from the interviews I conducted to bring out this ambiguity.

*Table 1. Quotes about the roles and responsibilities of community security groups*

	Security Groups Can Do	Security Groups Can't Do
Arrest	<p>"They arrest people and keep them until morning and then take them to the police...After someone is detained, the boys will guard them until morning." (Vice LCI)</p> <p>"[T]here is a plan by the LCI to at least give them identification cards that they will move with during night patrol in case they want to make any arrest." (Community Member)</p> <p>"We were six in number we lurked in the outskirt of the compound as if we had gone away. He came out of the house empty-handed and we leapt on him and arrested him and he bit me with his teeth and I still have the scars on my hands here [<i>showing the scars</i>]. We arrested him and took him to the police." (Defense Secretary and CSG Member)</p>	<p>"We often do not get involved in arrests. If we are to conduct arrests, it would be in collaboration and presence of the police." (Crime Preventer)</p> <p>"Only police are allowed to arrest. Citizens should help produce evidence and serve as witnesses." (Police Public Relations Officer)</p> <p>"At times, some [crime preventers] go to the extent of arresting, which is not in their mandate." (LCIII)</p>
Corporal Punishment	<p>"...there are certain kinds of offenses committed and the suspects do not want to admit unless they are beaten. And when they are beaten, they quickly admit honestly that they actually committed those crimes." (LCI)</p> <p>"If we get one who is...resistant, we keep him the whole night and in the morning, we cane him ten strokes just to teach him." (CSG Member)</p> <p>"Later we beat them each five five five five strokes. Be it that you are big or young." (CSG Member)</p>	<p>"[W]e do not beat suspects because according to the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, beating is a form of torture to the suspects...I have never done it or seen anyone beat anyone before the LCI." (CSG Member)</p> <p>"Here there is no beating...It used to happen. It was before Human Rights came in to play to sensitise people on their rights." (CSG Member)</p> <p>"[W]e do not even beat up suspects...We do not want to cause anybody any physical harm; that is why we refer tough cases and tough people to police for further redress." (Defense Secretary and CSG Member)</p>
Carry Arms	<p>"These people used bow and arrow and cudgels." (LCI)</p> <p>"The boys move with ropes, knives and sticks. They need to at least to show that they have something (weapons) so that a wrongdoer can be humbled." (Vice LCI)</p>	<p>"The youth groups are not all that common to walk at night—for them, they are bare handed and that puts them at risk when patrolling." (Parish Internal Security Officer)</p>
Patrol	<p>"The police might not take long—they come at 8 or 9pm and then by midnight they complain that they want to go back. Because they are senior to the group members, we have to concede. Then the police leave and we usually continue patrolling." (CSG Member)</p> <p>"[T]here are no schedules for the night patrols, [be they] with the police and/or the military, [or] the ones we do alone...For the local security group, they are mandated to do very regular night patrols in the area where they are working." (LCI)</p> <p>"We might patrol six nights without the police and then one night with the police." (LCI)</p>	<p>"The patrol is meant to happen with instruction from the police. There must be two police in every team. This is important because if the group comes across a thief, they need support for what they should do and to protect themselves." (CSG Member)</p> <p>"Actually with patrol it is quite difficult. We normally do it together with area army or policemen. We don't do it alone because for us we don't have proper ammunition, like the guns, the arrows, we don't have that kind of thing. We are moving together with the policemen." (CSG Member)</p> <p>"Crime preventers are concerned citizens. They are allowed to patrol with the guidance or accompaniment of the police." (Police Public Relations Officer)</p>



A number of these quotations come from members of the same community security group, or indeed, the same individual. Together, they highlight the uncertainty about the rights and duties of these organisations. Moreover, they show that the same behavior by the same individuals can be variously determined legitimate or illegitimate. Corporal punishment is an excellent example: while most members of local security initiatives do not “beat people,” many openly discuss caning as a necessary component of investigation and, at times, punishment.

Much of the work of local security groups occurs at night, when petty crimes and immoralities are most likely to occur. Shrouded in darkness, it is very difficult to know what actually transpires—the only people who would be exposed to or know about the actions of these groups are the “wrong doers.” Quickly, any allegation devolves into “he said, she said” conjectures and claims. Even the group members’ own identities as upstanding citizens are cast into doubt, as some people say the security group is comprised of bad boys or friends of bad boys so they are abreast of possible malfeasance. Nonetheless, most people interviewed felt that these groups are a least-worst option.

I argue that this flexibility and multiplicity of actors fosters a degree of uncertainty at a local level that functions to make the government present in people’s imaginations while it remains largely absent in terms of providing day-to-day services. This implies that recent enthusiasm for hybrid governance and justice providers may actually reinforce a sense of arbitrariness in process and outcome that strengthens and legitimates the central state’s ability to intervene or ignore conflicts as it chooses. This, in turn, bolsters the power of the central state even in its absence.

## **The Government’s Long Hands**

Despite the ambiguities associated with these groups, they are not operating in the absence of the central government. In Acholiland, the central government is present in people’s imaginations particularly in relation to security and intelligence. For example, after a long day of poll monitoring for an opposition party, a friend crowed, “They [the NRM] are probably tapping my phone, but I don’t care...Everyone in Uganda is a spy.” At the end of many of my interviews, respondents asked how the data would be used, “because matters of security are quite sensitive.”

Many people also discuss the role of “secret operatives” in their communities as the eyes and ears of the state (see also Zeller 2013, 210). While many deny specific knowledge of secret operatives and their activities, some respondents present a stronger opinion:

In most cases [secret operatives] are not identifiable...[But] the one who is informed finds it very easy to identify [them]...Now that the time of election is nearing, those people will be deployed to monitor campaigns and people...The unfortunate thing is that the presence of the secret operatives [makes people] fear to speak in public because they are afraid that there are spies in the crowd who would take the information back to their sender. (CSG member)

Crime preventers, too, are meant to inform the government about events in the most remote corners of the country (Lanken Verma 2012 and my own interviews). Still others refer to the LC structure as informers for the state, writing about the village chairman as “*akonye nukapugan*” or “the eye of the government” (Jones 2009, 65, 85; see also Finnström 2008, 94–97; Mamdani 1995).

There is circumstantial evidence that LCs function at the will of the central government: elections for the local council system last occurred in 2001, when the no-party system was still in effect, and have been subsequently delayed each election cycle, nominally due to lack of resources to hold elections. More cynical respondents noted that the cessation of local elections occurred just before official multiparty elections began, such that no elected council members have had the opportunity to run for an opposition party. Moreover, “political interference in council affairs by RDCs (district-level presidential appointees) across the country is common”, including unilateral decisions to replace ineffective council members in lieu of local elections (Lambright 2011, 26).<sup>8</sup>

Sporadic state interventions in local issues reify the possibility of government assistance or condemnation, reinforcing the power of the government in civilian imaginations, and subsequent feelings of purposeful neglect or abandonment when pleas for assistance are ignored. For example, in the well-publicised murder of a Gulu University lecturer in June 2014, the police tapped phones, analysed bullets, and pursued suspects to South Sudan, finally arresting a handful of individuals (Otto 2014a). A member of a community security group, whose colleague was injured badly during a night patrol, reflected, “That is how our issue should be taken. I feel among us, all our phones should have been tapped because there could be someone wrong among us.” In a different discussion, a respondent lamented that when his brother, also a well-known personality in Gulu, was poisoned and died, the police sent blood samples to Kampala, proclaimed no foul play, and closed the case. More recently, in January 2015, in the neighbouring district of Nwoya, a fugitive accused of armed robberies, murder, rape/defilement and assault, requested and was granted pardon from Nwoya’s RDC (UNDSS Gulu Radio Room, January 25, 2015). In each of these cases, central government employees interjected to narrate the event, and establish grounds for moving the case forward, or closing it. In this way, state actors continually interject to define what is licit and what is illicit, making assistance contingent on his or her whim—and thus extremely unpredictable.

While police reject the notion that bribery or politics influence which cases they pursue, the public blames discrepancies on corruption. Respondents young and old, male and female, educated and lay agreed that one could not go to the police and leave without paying for it. Transparency International’s East African Bribery Index ranked the UPF the “most bribery prone institution” two years running, with almost 50 per cent of respondents reporting paying a bribe during interactions with the police, and 55 per cent reporting that the bribe was necessary to receive services.<sup>9</sup> Corruption is a logical explanation for inconsistencies and apparent unpredictability of state

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<sup>8</sup> This echoes how the precursor to the LCs—the RCs—were aggressively stacked with pro-NRM members, such that in 1987, one critic declared that RCs “are almost entirely organs of the NRM’s/state’s local expression and not of the people” (Branch 2011, 69).

<sup>9</sup> This may be reinforced from local practice—when receiving justice or security services from the local council or local security group, complainants and offenders are frequently asked to pay for using (or less generously, “wasting”) the time of administrators and local security actors.

intervention. However, corruption focuses critique on individual behavior, thereby distracting from the overall effect of unpredictability in the security and justice sectors and precluding an interpretation of arbitrary state interventions as a systemic exercise of power. I argue that countless discrete and seemingly random interventions produce a continually shifting boundary that functions to destabilise and fragment local security provision. In turn, this (1) denies critique of the system, and (2) makes the possibility of state intervention always present in people's imaginations. There is a saying in Acholi that emphasises the power of the government to appear at any moment and impose its will: "*Gamente cinge bor*" or, "The government has long hands."<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

The resultant picture is one of uncertainty—a world in which one's identity as a "crime preventer" or as a criminal hinges on the institutional environment, personal relationships, the nature of the offence in this particular institutional context, and luck. While local institutions are tasked with the responsibility of providing justice and security, they have limited authority, particularly when appeals are made to the central state. In an environment where the state always holds the trump card, a diversity of justice and security actors can function to reinforce the power of the state.

The security and justice sectors in these environments can function in deeply unpredictable ways due to the complex and overlapping roles and responsibilities of security providers, as well as to a host of more specific factors such as poor information about legal processes, low or non-existent evidentiary standards for arrest and detention, and an overwhelmed court system that at times actively discourages those seeking to use it. With little consistency to this process, people are kept in a state of uncertainty about who will decide their disputes, and what rubric they will use to do so. By positioning community security initiatives in relation to the central state, their role in a broader system of governance becomes apparent.

Over the past two decades in Acholi, state organs (police, military, administrative structures) have fostered local security initiatives, allowing them sufficient symbolic legitimacy to operate, while continually denying them formal legal status. This places community security initiatives "at the boundary," such that state actors can arbitrarily choose to frame them as part of the problem or part of the solution. Moreover, the population has a reverberating memory of war—a war that is largely believed to have been a creation of the central government. As a result, the government can justify intervention as necessary to keep the peace. This thereby reinforces the image of the state as hegemon—an institution that, while generally absent, has potential for overwhelming force. The resultant picture suggests a state that uses local security initiatives as a governance strategy, using them to reinforce or undermine particular power-holders, while framing them as locally-rooted responses that appeal to community values.

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<sup>10</sup> *Gamente* in Acholi translates literally to "government". In Uganda, the government has worked hard to make government, state, and NRM synonymous—while this conflation does not hold in all contexts, my argument assumes that it does hold in contemporary Uganda.

This research sees the Ugandan state as neither an absent ruler, nor an indirect ruler. By making the prospect of intervention always uncertain, the possibility remains ever-present. Thus, the state uses arbitrary intervention—both in terms of whether it will intervene, and if so, which rules it will apply—to secure a position as hegemon in the imaginations of the population. As such, the government is divested of any strategic need to provide day-to-day security for the population, as well as the logic of physical occupation to control territory. Instead, “institutionalised arbitrariness” prevails as a mode of governance, producing subjects and undermining threats.

This argument suggests that cumulative experience of disorganisation, ineptitude and corruption create more than the sum of their parts—and that this outcome, whether intentional or unintentional on the part of the government, functions to reinforce the power of the centre without improving service delivery nor requiring significant physical presence on the ground. The argument requires that donors think critically about interventions that support “local” or “hybrid” solutions to justice and security as these may simply contribute to uncertainty in a context of arbitrary intervention on the part of the state.

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This publication is an output of a research programme funded by UK aid from the UK Government. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies



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The Justice and Security Research Programme is an international consortium of research partners, undertaking work on end-user experiences of justice and security in conflict-affected areas. The London School of Economics and Political Science is the lead organisation and is working in partnership with:

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