

WORKING PAPERS

Working Paper 36
- *Cities and Fragile States* -

GULU TOWN IN WAR... AND PEACE? DISPLACEMENT, HUMANITARIANISM AND POST- WAR CRISIS

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April 2008

Crisis States Working Papers Series No.2

ISSN 1749-1797 (print)
ISSN 1749-1800 (online)

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Gulu Town in War... and Peace? Displacement, Humanitarianism and Post-War Crisis

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Abstract

This paper explores the unique place of Gulu town within the 21-year civil war in northern Uganda. It explores the conditions faced by the large internally displaced population of Gulu, and explains why it has remained relatively stable despite the significant level of displacement. The paper explores the social changes that have occurred among the displaced population in Gulu's tenuous urban environment, focusing on the breakdown of male, lineage-based authority and on the impact of town life on women and ex-rebels. Finally, the paper argues that Gulu town, despite its present stability, may become a destabilising force in the region after the war ends, when internal conflict within post-war Acholi society could lead to a new phase of displacement; and Gulu town could become a haven for large numbers of the dispossessed, excluded and victimised. The paper concludes by asking how to manage this possible scenario through specific interventions into Gulu's urban economy and society, and how Gulu might become a catalyst of peace and stability, and not of further violence and instability, in the post-war period.

Introduction¹

Throughout most of the 21-year civil war in northern Uganda, Gulu town has been a relative oasis of calm and security in the midst of the violence and upheaval that have wracked the rest of Acholiland. Although it has been a centre of internal displacement since 1996, holding over 130,000 people in a space meant for fewer than 40,000, those living there mostly see it as a temporary time of trial that will be left behind once the war ends and people move back to their villages and homesteads in the countryside. The population level has remained constant since 1996, even as the particular people living in Gulu town have changed over time. This is because those who cannot find employment at the margins of Gulu's growing

¹ This paper is based upon a number of sources, including academic works, newspaper reports, policy reports and extensive interviews conducted by myself and research assistants. The material on 1986-1996 is based partly on the secondary academic literature, but mostly upon a study of Ugandan newspaper accounts from that time. The material on displacement (1996 onwards) is drawn from newspaper accounts, human rights reports, UN documents and the academic literature. The material on the displacement camps is based upon fieldwork I conducted for my PhD dissertation and for a Ford Foundation-funded research project for which I was lead researcher at Human Rights Focus, Gulu. Some of the sections in this working paper that concern the social changes introduced in Acholiland by displacement draw upon the final report of this research project (Branch 2007). All the material on Gulu town since displacement, which comprises the bulk of this paper, has been assembled specifically for this project by myself and two research assistants during two months of interviews and group discussions in Gulu town, amounting to 66 individual interviews and 17 group discussions. Of the group discussions, four were with groups of women (amounting to a total of 36 women), four were with male elders (31 total), and nine were with LRA returnees (94 total). In total, we spoke with 227 people in all four of the divisions that make up Gulu town: Layibi, Pece, Bar Dege, and Laroo. I do not reference individual interviews in the text of this article.

humanitarian economy move back to the archipelago of camps throughout Acholiland where they receive food rations, and those who can or need to leave the camps move to town.

Part I describes the conditions this large population of displaced people experience in Gulu town, and draws particular attention to their economic situation. It asks why Gulu has remained relatively calm and stable despite the significant level of displacement it has seen and the lack of relief aid. Part II explores the social changes that have occurred among the displaced population in Gulu town, and examines the place of Gulu within Acholi sub-region generally. It focuses on the breakdown of male, lineage-based authority and on the impact of town life on two groups: first women, and second those who have returned from the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Both of these groups have found a certain freedom – and for women, empowerment – within Gulu's tenuous urban environment.

Part III argues that if Gulu town is to become destabilised internally or if its population is to become a destabilising influence in the region, this would only occur, perhaps counter-intuitively, *after* the war ends and the majority of the displaced population has left the camps. For the first time in ten years, the end of displacement is a genuine possibility in northern Uganda thanks to the ongoing peace talks in Juba between the LRA and the Ugandan government. While the inception of return is a cause for optimism, return could also be accompanied by serious internal conflict within Acholi society that could leave a significant number of currently displaced people unable or unwilling to return to their pre-displacement homes in the villages. In this situation, Gulu town could become a haven for large numbers of the dispossessed, excluded and victimised, and the population of Gulu town could remain high as a second round of internal displacement, comprising those displaced by conflict *within* post-war Acholi society, replaces the first round, which has comprised those forcibly displaced by the government in the course of the war. The paper concludes by asking how to manage this possible scenario through specific interventions into Gulu town's urban economy and society, and how Gulu town might become a catalyst of peace and stability, and not of further violence and instability, in the post-war period.

Part I. Displacement and the Urban Humanitarian Economy

Displacement in Acholiland

Civil war between the Ugandan government and a series of rebel movements has ravaged Acholiland since 1986 (Behrend 1999; Finnström 2003; Dolan 2005; Branch 2005). During this time, Gulu town has been a base for the government's counterinsurgency and, since 1996, the humanitarian industry. Over the course of the war Gulu town has changed from a small provincial and district capital, one in which the local economy was based almost entirely upon access to state resources, to a centre for war and humanitarian economy, in which the local economy is based almost entirely on access to foreign aid, and to a lesser extent war profits. It has also been a centre for forced displacement and as a place of voluntary flight by the peasantry during peak times of violence because of the relative security it has enjoyed: in the first years of war, Gulu was attacked on occasion by the rebel groups, but from 1990 onwards it has remained for the most part immune from the violence of the war in the countryside; and even if the edges of town or specific government buildings were attacked, the centre of town itself was generally considered safe.

Although large-scale forced displacement by the government had occurred at several points from 1986-1996, it had always been temporary. There was a small amount of permanent

movement of peasants to town for safety, but for the most part, except for those under personal threat from rebels or government, there was little incentive for Acholi to move to town since food aid was only distributed during critical periods and people still had the option to stay on their land and provide for themselves. Thus it appears from what data there are that the population of Gulu town, outside of temporary spikes, had increased only slowly and was still below 40,000 by the early 1990s (Republic of Uganda 2007).

All this changed in 1996, when the government put into effect a policy of what turned out to be the long-term forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Acholi peasants throughout Gulu District, the western half of Acholiland, which would lead Gulu town's population to more than triple.² Forced displacement in 1996 was sudden and violent. The government gave peasants 48 hours to leave their homes and assemble around designated trading centres and in Gulu town. A few days after the order (in some places, an even shorter time), the Ugandan People's Defence Forces (UPDF, as the NRA was renamed in 1995) began indiscriminately bombing homesteads and villages, burning down homes and granaries, and launching a violent campaign involving arbitrary arrest, torture and murder against those civilians who did not comply (Human Rights Focus 2002; Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative 2001). Once concentrated in camps, the Acholi peasantry were left to fend for themselves and told that those found outside the camps would be treated as rebels. Within a couple weeks of issuing the order, the entire rural population of Gulu District had been evacuated.

Some 30,000 people were displaced into Gulu town, taking over sports fields and assembly grounds, or finding shelter with relatives (UNDHA 1996). There was a rapid response among relief agencies to the displacement into Gulu town and some of the nearby camps. As a United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs report from 1996 explains:

The World Food Programme is trying to supply emergency relief food to Gulu, and is currently planning a programme for 100,000 people in Gulu town and Kilak, Nyowa, Omoro and Aswa counties (as and when they can be accessed) as well as in the Masindi - Karuma area. In Gulu town the organizations distributing the food are World Vision, Oxfam/Acord, the Church of Uganda and the Catholic diocese....MSF-Holland is helping the health authorities to monitor the health situation, as well as assessing and assisting the water situation in Gulu town. UNICEF is funding vaccination activities in accessible areas and has provided tented schools for Gulu town, while the ICRC and ACF also have teams on the spot. (UNDHP 1996)³

The relief operation in Gulu town – effectively the largest displacement camp in the region – started quickly and helped provide basic services for the urban displaced. But it soon tapered off, as aid was focused increasingly on the camps. By mid-1997, as food aid to Gulu town was dwindling while food aid to the camps outside of town was becoming more regular, the urban displaced faced a hard choice: either find sufficient income in Gulu town to pay for food and shelter, which depended upon being able to make a living in the devastated economic environment of Gulu town, or leave town – not back to the village this time, but to the archipelago of hastily formed, unprotected and wretched internally displaced people's

² In 2002, Gulu municipality's population was 119,430 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2002). Division and ward leadership in Gulu municipality had higher figures than those shown in the Census: of the four divisions (Laroo, Layibi, Pece and Bar Dege), according to leadership, had approximately 20,000, 29,000, 41,000 and 42,000 people respectively. This amounts to approximately 132,000 people in Gulu municipality.

³ See also WFP 1997a. WFP had established a sub-office in Gulu town by March 1997 (WFP 1997b).

camps. As a result, thousands of displaced people – mostly those without the skills, resources or family or social connections needed to survive in Gulu – had to leave town and move to the camps. Many left for the camps that were created very close to town, such as Unyama, five kilometres away, where they could receive food aid and survive. There was even some effort on the part of local NGOs to help those stranded in town move out to the surrounding camps; for example, in Unyama, the head of the National Teachers' College allowed people to settle on the college's expansive land (thinking it was temporary), and a local aid organisation helped lay out huts, creating a tiny island of planned straight rows of huts and adequately spaced latrines within the camp, in stark contrast with the chaotic sprawl that characterises camps elsewhere.

Although there was significant exit from Gulu town, tens of thousands of displaced, those who could eke out enough of a living to feed themselves and pay for shelter, remained. At that point a cycle began that continues until today, of a constant flow of people moving into Gulu for security, economic or social reasons, and a constant flow of people moving out of Gulu town, mostly for economic reasons. Indeed, most people interviewed in town could name relatives, friends or neighbours who tried to live in Gulu but failed because of the cost of living. Those people who could not or would not live in the camps and could not make a living in Gulu had the option of joining the armed forces, moving to small towns further south such as Bweyale or Masindi, or trying to make it in Kampala, the capital.

Before displacement, Gulu had been characterised by a small urban core of a few streets surrounded by widely spaced buildings and houses in the surrounding area, mostly near the main roads. This changed dramatically in 1996-1997, as those empty spaces that the owners would agree to rent out became filled with grass-thatched mud huts built by the displaced. A large number of mini-camps sprang up in the open spaces around the municipality: small dense clusters of huts, microcosms of the massive camps that had sprung up around trading centres throughout the district. New neighbourhoods were created, as people from the same home areas would often stick together and create new urban settlements of their own. From 1996 until 2006, the government's policy of forced displacement expanded to encompass the entire rural Acholi population, over a million people, most of whom moved to camps, but many of whom moved to Gulu town (WFP 2004).⁴ As the people of Kitgum and Pader districts were displaced in 2002 and 2003, many of them moved dozens of miles to the relative safety and economic opportunity of Gulu town, and it became a centre for the displaced from throughout Acholiland.

Conditions in Gulu Town under Displacement

Since 1996, Gulu town has been subject to a few attacks by the rebels on its margins, but there has been no attack intended to wrest the town from government control or to do substantial damage. Those living within it have also been immune from violence by the UPDF's mobile units, considered the most violent towards civilians. As a result, the town has been a haven of relative safety, as opposed to the camps where protection has been minimal or non-existent and people feel at the mercy of the rebels and government troops (Human Rights Focus 2002). Indeed, interviewees consistently cited security as the main reason they chose to remain in town and did not want to move to the camps. Most expressed a general fear of living in the camps, but many had been specifically targeted by the LRA or UPDF.

⁴ A recent estimate of the number of displaced in Acholi sub-region is 1.1 million (OCHA 2006).

Along with security, aid delivery is another significant difference between town and the camps. As noted, the urban displaced in Gulu town do not receive emergency relief aid, that is, food rations or non-food items such as jerry cans, tarps and blankets. This is a cause for significant resentment among the urban displaced – in the words of a 71-year old man in Layibi Central, ‘we are the biggest IDP [internally displaced persons] camp, but NGOs provide us with nothing. They should give us food also, we are suffering the same as those in the camps.’ Many of the urban displaced argued that NGOs should help everyone affected by the war, and not discriminate against those in town. However, despite this resentment, people in town also unanimously insisted on the superiority of town life to camp life, a major aspect of the latter being dependence on food aid. When asked to compare the two, people drew attention to the bad conditions and uncertainty of life in the camps: as a 37-year old man in Cubu Aywee sub-ward put it, ‘everything in the camp is left to luck and come what may.’ The capacity of urban inhabitants to fend for themselves without significant aid was a source of pride for many, and points to the fact that the urban displaced are clearly not in the same situation as those in the camps – those in the camps would be unable to survive without food aid, whereas those in town continue to manage at a level above that of the camps even without food aid. Furthermore, if aid had been provided to the town as it was to the camps, the town population would probably be unsustainably high, filled with all those wishing to escape the insecurity and uncertainty of the camps.

While the sudden incursion of tens of thousands of displaced people into a small, poor, rural town without relief aid might have been thought to necessarily provoke a crisis in service provision and local administration, this turned out not to be the case in Gulu. This seems to have been mostly because of the very minimal level of service provision and administration expected by the displaced and because of the minimal assistance provided by relief agencies at the beginning of displacement. What little infrastructure and services are provided for people in town are mostly paid for in part by the users. The LC (local council) system is paid little or nothing, there is no real regulation or planning except in sudden binges, and NGOs have played an important role in filling in the minimal service provision needed by the urban displaced where the government could not provide. However, there are more fundamental reasons for Gulu’s stability throughout the war and displacement, which I discuss at the end of the next section.

The Humanitarian Economy in Gulu Town

Given that the urban displaced in Gulu have received no food aid since the early days of forced displacement, it appears that the surplus population of around 90,000 people has been sustained largely through their own formal and informal economic activity. Fortunately for the urban displaced, the expansion of Gulu’s economy has advanced in step with displacement, precisely because of the economic opportunities created in town by the humanitarian industry, which was established to sustain the displacement camps since 1996, and especially since 2000. From its modest beginnings in 1996, the humanitarian industry in Acholiland has grown tremendously: by 2003, the consolidated appeal by humanitarian relief agencies working in northern Uganda amounted to US\$148.1 million, of which US\$123.6 million were received, and over half of which went to buy and distribute food to the displaced; over one hundred organisations participated in the appeal process (UNOCHA 2005). By 2007, according to the International Development Committee of the British Parliament, running the camps was costing donors US\$200 million per year.

Gulu town itself has seen the primary economic benefit of this expansion of the humanitarian industry. The majority of aid organisations in Acholiland have established offices and based

their programmes in Gulu town, which serves as the central supply and management hub for the camp network, in particular within Gulu and Amuru Districts. This massive financial inflow into an area with minimal agricultural production and no industry has led to the development of a significant urban economy almost entirely determined by emergency humanitarian funding, offering a dramatic increase in economic opportunities for the urban displaced. Aid agencies have directly employed a number of people as guards, office runners, cleaners, or drivers, but the most significant expansion has taken place in the service sector that grew up around the humanitarian industry (waitstaff in bars and restaurants, cooks, cleaners, attendants, bargirls, motorcycle taxi drivers) and in the small-scale formal and informal petty vending sector around that (selling produce, charcoal, newspapers, household items, or snack foods at the edge of the street, or in kiosks or the market).

As economic opportunity increased, so did the population of Gulu town continue to swell as more people could settle in town permanently. Due to the widespread desire among many camp dwellers to move to town, the supply of labour in town has far outstripped the demand, leading to chronic unemployment and underemployment among the urban displaced. This swollen population provides a large, easily accessible labour reserve for the formal and informal economy, which, along with the effectively bottomless reservoir for labour in the nearby camps, has led to a ruthless job market, abysmally low pay, bad working conditions, high turnover, and the impossibility of organisation in the service sector. In the village before displacement, the urban displaced often explained, they always had enough to eat, but in town, no matter how much they work, they can barely feed their family and pay for housing. In the service industry, the level of payment is very low, mostly around 30,000 to 80,000 shillings per month.⁵ For petty vendors, the consequences are market saturation and a significant informal economy. Many people have multiple jobs across different sectors in order to survive: a hotel clerk may also sell charcoal from her home at night, or a bakery worker may also braid hair on Sundays. Additionally, those who can gain access to land nearby engage in small-scale farming to supplement their income or diet. Individuals drift between temporary formal employment, informal employment and unemployment, and those that remain in the last category for too long eventually return to the camps, to be replaced by others seeking the security and opportunities of town life. Those young men who fall out of the bottom end of employment in Gulu town and refuse to return to the camps may join the armed forces, government paramilitaries or the new, minimally trained and minimally paid supplementary police force, the Special Police Constables.

Despite these harsh conditions, there has been no significant attempt by the urban displaced to improve their conditions through collective organisation or action. This is due in part to job insecurity and fear of reprisals by employers, but is also more fundamentally rooted in the way the urban displaced think about their lives in town. Almost no one, when asked about possible solutions to worker exploitation and abuse, cited the need for better worker organisation and more government regulation. Instead, interviewees most often cited peace and return home as the solution to the problems with employment in town. This points to the fact that for most of the urban displaced, town life is only a temporary time of testing and hardship which will be abandoned as soon as possible for their real lives back in the village. The urban displaced simply do not have an interest in trying to make things better for themselves in town through the major effort and risk that organisation would entail; instead, they look forward to the future return home as the time that their conditions will permanently improve.

⁵ One US dollar is worth around 1,700 Ugandan shillings.

This helps shed light on the larger question of why Gulu town has been stable internally and why its population has not been a destabilising force in the region since displacement began. First, as just discussed, most displaced people in Gulu see their time there as temporary, and are willing to endure significant deprivation for the present while waiting to return home. Second, there has been a significant military presence in town, which has been used to intimidate or suppress potential political or social dissent. Third, economic opportunities have been sufficient to sustain most people in town, and the camps and the armed forces provide safety valves for the most marginalised. Fourth, the only other option for most people at present to life in town is life in the camps, which is generally regarded as vastly inferior, and so many in town see themselves as comparatively fortunate. Finally, despite the changes introduced into Acholi society as a result of displacement, those living in town are often tightly connected to, and in close proximity of, their families and those they lived with before displacement, so there is considerable internal social regulation among the urban displaced. Together, these have prevented open conflict or crisis from erupting among the urban displaced. As I will argue in Part III, these conditions would be largely absent from a post-war phase of internal displacement.

In sum, the economy of Gulu town, dominated by the humanitarian industry, is large enough to support a surplus population of around 90,000 displaced people even without food aid distribution. However, the conditions in town are bad enough for the displaced so that the majority of those we spoke to stated their intention to move out of town and back to the village once conditions allow. In order to approach the question of what will happen to the population of Gulu town and what the role of Gulu town will be regionally once the war ends, it is necessary to explore the social changes that have been introduced among the urban displaced, which is the topic of Part II.

Part II. Kwo Town: Social Change among the Urban Displaced

It is widely recognised that periods of war or disaster can produce ruptures or crises within societies from which new orders can emerge. Acholi society is no exception. Although there is not enough space here to enter into the controversies over what Acholi society was like before displacement, the actual changes that have occurred are, especially now, twenty-one years since the beginning of the war, of minor importance relative to the *perceived* changes that have occurred in the eyes of the displaced population itself. The differences between different perceptions of pre-war, pre-displacement Acholi culture and of its current changes are all-important, for these different perceptions will guide and legitimate the different projects put into place after the end of displacement (Atkinson 1999; Allen 1991; Behrend 1999; Finnström 2003).

War, urban displacement, inter-tribal and international presence, a monetary economy, NGO interventions, government development projects, women's and children's rights promotion – all these are recognised as having had a dramatic impact on Acholi society in Gulu town, and being definitive of what is known generally among Acholi as *kwo town*, or 'town life.' While the catalysts of this transformation might be agreed upon, there is ambivalence and controversy over the meaning of the social changes they have introduced. For example, for some, especially women and young men, town life, despite its material hardships, is the foundation for a world that is modern and global, instead of traditional and local, that offers a degree of freedom, independence and opportunity that was impossible in the village.

However, for others, especially many older men, town life is a world turned upside-down, a fundamental corruption of Acholi society and its values.

I begin by introducing this ambivalence of *kwo town* as imbued with both freedom and corruption by briefly examining the symbolism of money among the displaced Acholi in Gulu town. Then I consider contrasting views on changing gender roles in town. Finally, I will consider town life for ex-LRA returnees, a group dependent upon the security they are offered in town from rebels, government and the Acholi community itself. This sets the stage for Part III, which asks about the changes that might be predicted to occur as displacement ends and people return to the countryside, and the changing place of Gulu town within this process. It should be noted that many of the urban processes discussed here in the context of Gulu town have also occurred to a lesser extent in the camps as well (Branch 2007). Although the changes in town are the focus here, the fact that these changes have also occurred among the displaced population in the camps is important since, as I argue in Part III, the future of Gulu will be determined by a possible general crisis within post-war Acholi society, the contributing factors to which can be clearly discerned within the urban context of Gulu town.

Money, Foreignness, and Corruption

Money plays a dominant but ambivalent role among the displaced in Gulu town. In comparing life in the villages with life in Gulu town, money's determining impact upon all aspects of economic, social, and cultural life was widely remarked upon by interviewees. For many, Gulu town was simply the physical embodiment of money itself – 'town life is all about money,' in the words of a 21-year old woman in Laroo Division, which many perceived as having a significantly detrimental impact upon their lives. The response by a 42-year old woman in Kirombe, Layibi represented a widespread sentiment: 'Village life is better than town life. Life in town needs money at all times and everyday which is not the case in the village. In the village you can just dig and eat well even if there is no money there.' People invoked the self-sufficiency, independence and plenty of village life, where they could provide for themselves from their land and cows, customary land tenure was secure, grass huts for the entire family could be easily constructed, and they did not live at the mercy of employers or the market.

However, the need to engage in wage-labour or petty vending so as to earn money needed for town life was also seen to have had some positive effects. As a 25-year old hotel worker in Library Sub-Ward explained, after expressing her preference for village life, 'people have learned to be more innovative in making money, and people do not despise work now as long as it pays.' Thus, although people face economic difficulties in town and most plan to move back to the village as soon as conditions allow, there was a recognition by many of benefits from employment and business experience they were gaining as a result of living in town. Younger Acholi in particular tended to see their engagement in business to be a positive change: in the words of a female local gin brewer, 'the rigid thinking of the Acholi has changed. All are ready to take on any work that can bring money. In the past the Acholi saw business as the work of only the Baganda tribe.' This idea of development was often tied to education available in town, both formal and vocational.

For many older Acholi, however, this dominance of money in town was an unmitigated evil, a corruption of Acholi society and its cultural values. Older Acholi explained that before the war, wealth was not held in money, but in cattle. As a result, money itself was widely perceived as a symptom and agent of the destruction of Acholi society, as it replaced tangible, rooted resources. All money-oriented economic activity was seen by some elders we spoke to

as a betrayal of the values of Acholi culture, the proper roles that young men and women are supposed to have, and the respect and subordination they are supposed to show to elders. For some Acholi elders, Gulu town had given birth to a lost generation of Acholi, addicted to money, disconnected from their roots in the land and without even basic cultural knowledge. These elders seemed to see petty vending, boda-boda driving or unskilled labour as only different in degree, not in kind, from other methods of making money that have emerged in the context of town life, and which they constantly drew attention to, specifically prostitution for women and thievery for men. Indeed, prostitutes and thieves were widely cited as a negative consequence of the predominance of money in town; however it was only elders who tended to frame all methods of making money as fundamentally equivalent and corrupt.

While there is a significant temptation to place this process within the context of the opposition between, or even the transition from, tradition to modernity, or as a step on the road to 'development', I would avoid such a characterisation. There is nothing essentially 'traditional' – that is, long-standing, widely accepted and generally unchanging – about the set of practices, values, beliefs and institutions that are ranked under the name 'Acholi tradition' today, and 'Acholi tradition' is in many ways a very 'modern' development. Furthermore, the 'tradition versus modernity' label naturalises what is in fact an often intentional and politically charged process, and neutralises the exploitative, socially disruptive form of crisis capitalism that has emerged in Gulu town as the norm. Thus, while I recognise that certain kinds of social relations have been ruptured as a result of town life, and as a result of war and displacement more generally, and that those relations are indeed being replaced by the cash nexus, I would draw attention to the historically contingent and specific political, social, and cultural projects that are accompanying this monetisation of social life in Acholiland, and not let those who are profiting at the expense of the urban displaced be absolved through the invocation of a supposedly necessary developmental teleology.

The corrupting influence of money is entwined with the idea of the corrupting influence of non-Acholi in town. Gulu town has long been seen by many Acholi as a place of foreigners and business – for example, older Acholi sometimes referred to Gulu in the 1950s and 1960s as an 'Indian town', in reference to the perceived dominance of Indians within Gulu's small commercial economy. The perceived corrupting influence of non-Acholi foreigners and money has been brought into relief with the war and the recent incursion of foreigners engaged in business and NGO work. When a spate of robberies took place in Gulu town recently, it was blamed widely on southern Ugandans who are coming to Gulu in response to the improved security and business opportunities. The increasing numbers of Southern Sudanese are seen in this light as well. Flush with American dollars distributed as part of the massive reconstruction effort currently underway there, southern Sudanese are seen as new business-oriented interlopers and are widely blamed for the rapidly rising commodity prices in town and the rising prices in hotels and restaurants. Along with their US dollars, Sudanese are also rumoured to carry guns and are often blamed for increased insecurity in town. Along with southern Ugandans and Sudanese, Congolese women bear the brunt of this anti-foreign sentiment. Congolese women in town are often accused of being prostitutes and of breaking up marriages, of undermining Acholi family life for their own monetary gain. This idea has also made its way into the realm of spiritual belief, as traditional healing practices are seen as having been corrupted by money and by foreign healers or witchdoctors. Often southern Ugandan tribes (Baganda or Bagisu) are cited at the origins of these business-oriented healers and witchdoctors, and sometimes their origin is located even further away, such as in Kenya or Tanzania. Acholi explain that these foreigners bring powerful, but destructive, magic and put it at the service of those with money, as opposed to 'genuine' Acholi *ajwaka*, whose

powers may not be as strong, but who put themselves at the service of the Acholi community for free.

Finally, whites are also seen by many as corrupting Acholi society by bringing money in through NGOs. Some Acholi describe how whites and their money are promoting dependency among the Acholi in the camps, turning Acholi against each other within the NGO job market, and corrupting the Acholi practice of coming together to resolve problems collectively by paying people to come to NGO ‘workshops’ and ‘sensitisations’. In short, money and foreign presence are seen by many, especially older male Acholi, as having led to corruption and therefore as standing in need of fundamental correction in post-war Acholiland. But, as is discussed next, despite these negative connotations, money and foreign presence are also seen by many Acholi as having helped to make Gulu town a realm of freedom: money offers women and youth the opportunity for independence from older male authorities and for personal advancement, and a foreign presence is a benefit for many ex-LRA returnees, who tend to see the tight-knit Acholi social structure as responsible for their exclusion or stigmatisation.

Freedom and Corruption in Gulu Town: Gender Roles

In pre-war Acholi society, significant authority was held by a lineage- and clan-based structure of patriarchal, generally gerontocratic, leadership, comprising the more centralised authority of *rwodi* or ‘chiefs’ and the more decentralised authority of elders – *ludito kaka* – individually and in councils. This structure, always subject to contestation, has been thrown into crisis by the war and displacement (Branch forthcoming). Many elders have died, and the war has presented problems beyond the capacity of ‘traditional’ leadership to resolve. The authority of this lineage-based structure has also been undermined by the creation of the Resistance Council/Local Council system, which has taken over many of the conflict-resolution roles previously held by ‘traditional’ authorities. Their disempowerment has been further intensified by NGO initiatives which tend to favour women and youth. Finally, displacement itself has had a significantly negative impact on lineage-based leaders, as clans have been dispersed, restrictions on movement have made clan meetings difficult and land could not be accessed. Even when meetings are held in the camps or in town, elders and clan leaders have little way of enforcing their decisions. In short, Acholi elders and chiefs have largely lost their power of social regulation, their role of mediating conflicts, and their political leadership role.

While men, and especially male elders, have seen their authority and status within Acholi society wane, women, and to a lesser extent youth, have seen their authority and status rise precipitously in town. Displacement to town has had an impact nothing short of historic on the lives of many women, as women themselves recognise. To begin, the use of the term ‘village’ to refer to pre-displacement settlement patterns, although ubiquitous, is somewhat misleading, for there were few ‘villages’ as they are commonly understood in Acholiland for most of the twentieth century. Instead, the Acholi lived in relatively isolated family homesteads, spaced far enough apart so that the male ideal of being ‘chief in one’s own house’ could be realised. As a 43-year old woman in Pece explained, ‘we [women] were very far apart in the village. We did not have groups or come together like we do now.’ Women had a specific assigned role in the home and the field, which was controlled at the family level by the husband or father, and at the village and clan level by male elders and male clan chiefs. But with displacement into town, in the context of the death and disruption already caused by the war, women’s roles changed significantly, for worse and for better, they explained.

Many women recognised that town life has had a significantly negative impact on their quality of life. Because many men have died, joined armed organisations or abandoned their wives, women in large part are left with the primary responsibility for providing for their families, which have often expanded to include a number of dependents in addition to their own children. Water, firewood and grass for roofing are hard to come by, money must be earned, land and houses must be rented, school fees must be paid and medical facilities are either expensive or inadequate.

At the same time, however, many women recognised that town life had led to certain positive changes in their lives and opportunities. Economically, women have gained access to loans, both individually and through groups. They own property in town, such as buildings, vehicles, and land, and own their own businesses. Women also expressed satisfaction at having learned to sell agricultural produce and save the money. Socially and politically, women pointed out the number of women who are now in positions of authority in prominent NGOs and in the local government system. Women are achieving higher levels of education and undergoing training by NGOs and government on health and other issues.

Perhaps most notably, women recognised the importance of women's organisations. Most of these organisations are oriented around small income-generating activities or loans, but women also described how these organisations had provided them with a space in which to come together and discuss their problems; many women who were not in a group expressed their intention to form one in the future. As one group of women in Layibi Go Down sub-ward explained, women's voices are now heard in public, whereas before 'women are not supposed to have a voice.' The LC I Chairperson in Centre A/B sub-ward, Teegwana, a woman, explained how it would have been impossible for her to achieve that position before the war and displacement; she talked of the vocational trainings she had undergone on juvenile justice from Save the Children and on human rights from Human Rights Focus, and how those courses helped her in her work as an LC I and also to rise to a position of leadership in a local organisation.

Women acknowledged that these changes are unusual, not only in Acholiland but nationally. As a woman in a group discussion in Layibi Go-Down explained, the war has advantages and disadvantages, and in 'Hoima, Fort Portal, and Mbarara everything has remained the same because there was no war there.' In short, Gulu town, as a small, but intensely concentrated, urban environment, provides the public space in which women have been able to come together in the context of the massive social disruption caused by the war. Through the material and educational resources provided by government and NGOs, they have come up with ways of addressing not only the immediate practical pressures they experience as heads of families, but also the lack of power, authority, voice and opportunity they experienced before displacement.

Many men, however, expressed disapproval in no uncertain terms for the changes introduced in women's roles in Gulu town. While some openly recognised that women were engaging in business and forming groups out of necessity to care for their families, many also saw the changes as negative. For example, when men brought up the issue of women's groups, they sometimes dismissed them as opportunities for women to get together and drink or gamble. Women's ability to take out loans and start businesses were seen by some men as a direct challenge, since financial dependence upon husbands is diminished through access to credit. On the level of day-to-day affairs, men complained that women are marrying without being

given permission by their families, staying out past 6pm, wearing trousers instead of skirts and dresses, and going to discos. Women had even forgotten how to grind sesame and do other basic household chores, men stated. Most fundamentally, women had lost the respect they used to show men and elders, and men explained that this had led to an increase in domestic violence in the camps and in town. Men apparently had made these sentiments clear to women as well, and as a result women tended to see men as jealous of their newfound power and freedom. As a 28-year old woman in Pece Vanguard explained, men are jealous 'because we earn money and do not go asking for money from them all the time. We can also plan our earnings and acquire assets which men do not like,' whereas before 'at home girls were seen as assets or a source of wealth when they would marry.'

For some men, therefore, women's economic and social activities represented an illegitimate attempt by women, encouraged by government and NGOs and backed up by LCs and police, to usurp male authority and impose themselves as equal to, or superior than, men. As a group of male elders in Limo Sub-ward explained, 'Women have been so spoiled because of women's rights.' According to them, the very idea of women's rights is anathema to Acholi culture, because women are paid for by husbands, brought to the husband's home, and thereby become essentially the property of the husband. As such, women cannot possibly have a claim to authority over men, and women's property or earnings are, from a man's perspective (as a group of women from Kirombe Custom sub-ward explained), in fact the earnings of her husband. This conflict between women's perceptions and men's perceptions of the changes introduced by town life will become a major issue with return, as I address in Part III.

Ex-LRA Returnees in Town

The rebel groups operating in Acholiland before the Lord's Resistance Army came into being had practiced some forced recruitment. However, it was not until the early 1990s, and especially since 1994, that the LRA made abduction the mainstay of their recruitment strategy, focusing increasingly on youths. There is an intense controversy among government, aid agencies and academics over the number of children and adults that have been forcibly recruited by the LRA since the beginning of their rebellion. Nevertheless, it is safe to state that thousands of Acholi have, over the years, spent significant amounts of time with the rebels, and that a few thousand more remain in the bush. While representing a small proportion of the total Acholi population, it is still a sizeable enough group to be a major presence in Acholi society now and in the future (Allen and Schomerus 2006; Annan and Blattmann 2006).

Of those ex-LRA who have returned, the majority are living in the camps, but a significant number have remained in or moved to town for a variety of reasons (Allen and Schomerus 2006: 13-14). From our interviews, it seems that those ex-LRA returnees who have ended up in Gulu town are often those who have stayed with the rebels for longer periods. Their lengthier stays with the rebels tend to make them more fearful of being targets of violence in the camps, either by the community for their perceived guilt, by the government for being perceived rebel collaborators, or by the rebels for having escaped. The LRA often will target the area where returnees stay, so camp inhabitants can be reluctant to have returnees who spent significant time with the rebels living near them. Many of the women we spoke to still had husbands in the bush, which would also make living in the camps extremely risky for them. As a result, many ex-LRA who were with the rebels for a considerable amount of time or who are seen as responsible for atrocities seek the relative protection and anonymity of town over the camps where, as one ex-LRA returnee put it, 'everybody knows who you are

and what you have done.’ The multi-ethnic character of Gulu town contributes further to this anonymity, as several ex-LRA pointed out. Furthermore, the legal protection in town is more robust than in the camps, and ex-LRA reported LC I chairpersons as providing significant assistance. In this sense, Gulu town is a place of urban mixture and anonymity for ex-rebels, where they can avoid the repressive aspects of Acholi society and can potentially have recourse to governmental regulation and protection when needed.

This is not to say that ex-LRA do not face problems in town. Many reported being subject to stigmatisation, in particular verbal insults and employment discrimination. Some described being treated well at first, but then having things worsen. Accusations that ex-LRA returnees are possessed by evil spirits appear to be common, and returnees reported being subject to resentment as a result of receiving NGO aid when the rest of the community receives nothing. For the returnees, this mistreatment by the community can be very frustrating, since they see themselves as victims who were first made to suffer in the bush against their will and now are made to suffer back in town for crimes they did not, or were forced to, commit.

Furthermore, ex-LRA returnees, like the rest of the town population, need to make ends meet economically, and the hardships of employment in Gulu town can be magnified for the ex-LRA returnees because of stigmatisation and their often lower levels of education. Returnees explained that jobs are hard to come by – many had the experience of getting a job only to be fired once it was discovered they had been with the LRA. Many returnees, especially those without vocational training, are at the lowest end of the economic scale, some earning as little as 15-25,000 shillings per month selling in the market or working in the service industry. Those who had found skilled or semi-skilled work as a result of vocational training appeared to be significantly better off, making 40,000 up to over 100,000 per month. However, vocational training is not a guarantee of better earnings: many returnees complained that NGOs had provided training but no materials or tools, or that they were having problems with community members who were unwilling to patronise their businesses on account of their past. Many ex-LRA returnees who cannot or fear to live in camps and cannot find employment in Gulu town end up joining the Ugandan military or paramilitaries. A few, it was reported, had even gone back to the bush to re-join the rebels, and some expressed their wish to return, but their inability to do so because the LRA would kill them if they tried to return without their guns.

There are a number of international and internationally-funded NGOs in Gulu that are providing assistance to ex-LRA, and if ex-LRA returnees are going to be productively incorporated into the society and economy of northern Uganda, it will have to depend to a large part on the efforts made by NGOs and government to assist in that process (Allen and Schomerus 2006: 55-61). However, ex-LRA themselves often expressed resentment and frustration with NGOs and their work, sometimes with startling vehemence. Many returnees would only agree to be interviewed once they were convinced that we were not with an NGO: in the words of the ad-hoc spokesperson of a group in Iriaga Central, ‘had it been that you introduced yourself as working for an NGO, we were not going to give you an audience. We are fed up with them, they are eating out of our blood.’ Indeed, it is ex-LRA, the very category of people that many NGOs use to justify their fundraising, who often feel the most abused and exploited by their supposed saviours: as a female member of the Iriaga Central group said, ‘The help NGOs do give is just a cover-up for their interest in making personal fortunes out of our suffering.’ Many ex-LRA returnees were eager to relate detailed stories about how they felt they have been exploited or cheated by NGOs. Returnees described how, in their view, NGOs received large sums of money from donors, of which they would only

pass a small fraction to ex-LRA, while they would pocket the rest. Many spoke of having been made to sign for goods they never received, of having received nothing since leaving reception centres, and of having been photographed repeatedly by whites without getting anything in return. They expressed significant frustration at the fact that child-sponsorship NGOs refuse to give them the addresses of the sponsors so that they could write to them themselves and report the mistreatment they were experiencing at the hands of NGOs. One group of male ex-LRA combatants described feeling so betrayed that they were considering going back to the bush, getting their weapons and taking revenge upon the NGO that had exploited them.

This is not to deny that NGOs are indeed providing essential assistance to many ex-LRA returnees. Nevertheless, the extremely bad perceptions that most ex-LRA we spoke to have of NGOs signals that there are significant problems with the way NGOs are dealing with ex-LRA right now. The key it seems would be for NGOs dealing with ex-LRA returnees to coordinate more closely with respected local leaders and to put a premium on institutionalising their accountability to their beneficiaries. This requires increased transparency, better information flow and engagement in public meetings with ex-LRA with the participation of local government and human rights groups. Otherwise, the frustration and resentment felt by many ex-LRA living in town now and in the future will only be intensified by the work of NGOs, instead of ameliorated.

As a result of its monetary economy, its multi-ethnic character, NGO and government interventions, increased proximity and ease of association, and relatively significant governmental regulation, Gulu town has been the cutting edge of the changes introduced into Acholi society as a result of war and displacement, and as such has served as a haven for many of those for whom those changes are beneficial. As displacement comes to an end and the camps close, Gulu town may come to represent even more of a haven – or perhaps the only haven – for those who wish to retain the beneficial aspects of displacement and for those who, because of the backlash led by men and elders against those changes, cannot or will not return to the village. This is addressed next in Part III.

Part III. Gulu Town and The End of Displacement: Towards Crisis?

Displacement may finally be coming to an end in Acholiland. As people move out of Gulu town and out of the camps, some are returning to pre-displacement homes, while most are shifting to return sites or commuting to their land from town or camp, awaiting the next dry season to move home permanently. Given the intense desire expressed by Acholi to go home, and given the fact that the economic basis for the camps will disappear as food distribution is ended, it is probable that the camps' population will reduce precipitously and will generally revert back to the trading centres they were before mass displacement.⁶ Gulu town, however, may see a different trajectory. Although the displaced are at present moving out of Gulu in significant numbers, this does not mean that it will return to its pre-displacement size. Indeed, unlike the camps, whose economic basis will dissolve, it is probable that the economic basis for a relatively large population in Gulu town will remain as the economy continues to be dominated by international aid through a shift from emergency humanitarian aid to reconstruction and development aid.

⁶ This is a subject of intense controversy. UNOCHA projects a relatively large proportion of displaced people remaining in the camps. See Sacco 2007; Refugee Law Project 2007; Branch 2007; and the documents available at the Gulu Contact Group website (<http://groups.google.com/group/gulu-contact-group/topics>).

I argue that this urban economy may come to provide the basis for a new kind of internally displaced population. As increasing numbers of those people who had been displaced by the war leave Gulu town, they may be replaced by those who come to be displaced not because of civil war and government orders, but because of conflict within Acholi society during the process of return. Those who had been living in the camps or in town who cannot or will not return to the village may make up this new internally displaced population, and if this occurs, the composition of the population of Gulu may be expected to change significantly. What was a representative cross-section of the Acholi peasantry would be replaced by the marginalised and excluded, and Gulu town could become the principal refuge for those Acholi unable or unwilling for various reasons to return home, a kind of free city for an anomic, frustrated, and economically and socially desperate population. As a result, Gulu could become an index of the failure of post-conflict reconciliation in the villages, and because many of the factors that had prevented conflict in Gulu town over the last decade would be absent from a post-war phase of displacement, Gulu could become subject to internal conflict or become a destabilising force within the region, as the urban displaced provide a fertile recruiting ground for criminals, paramilitaries or future rebel groups. I conclude by considering how the urban processes that were set into motion with mass displacement might be taken advantage of so that Gulu town may become an engine of reconciliation and peace instead of a potential cause of further instability.

The Attempt to Reconstitute Male Authority

This potential dramatic change in the demography of Gulu town would be a prominent symptom of three distinct types of internal social conflict that might predictably emerge in post-war Acholiland. First, internal authority may be insufficient to prevent Acholi society from being rent from the inside, as the vulnerable and marginalised are dispossessed by the more wealthy or powerful. Problems of this type are already being seen among returning Acholi, in particular around land claims, and it is often those without strong family or clan relations that have found themselves vulnerable to such abuse (Adoko and Levine 2004). Many of these people could end up in Gulu town as their only option. Second, conflict could emerge from the attempt by male Acholi, individually and through family and clan-based structures, to re-establish their authority in the post-war period. This would have two dimensions: first, an attempt by men to impose their authority upon those groups (primarily women and youth) who have seen a degree of economic, social and political empowerment as a result of the upheaval caused by the war, displacement and humanitarian intervention; and second, an effort to exclude those Acholi seen as undesirable, or those who are most vulnerable, from the process of return, in particular from access to land. Thus, those displaced people who refuse to submit to this male authority, or who are rejected by it, may find moving to Gulu town to be their best, or only, alternative. I address this issue in this section. The third potential conflict could come about as a result of the return of thousands of demobilised LRA to Acholiland in the wake of a peace agreement, who could be subject to revenge or exclusion at the hands of the community, or might refuse to submit to male authority. As a result, those ex-LRA who are the most marginalised or vulnerable to community retaliation, or most unwilling to conform to reconstituted older male authorities, could end up taking refuge in Gulu town as well. I discuss this in Section B.

This loss of authority among male elders and lineage-based authorities described above will probably be reversed to some extent as people return home. However, while some revival of 'traditional authority' seems to be widely supported among Acholi, there is controversy over just what their authority will comprise, and its domain will be, in the post-war period. Among

women and youth, especially those in town, a return to the pre-war order, or the idealisations of the pre-war order advocated by many male elders, would neither be practical nor just. For their part, however, elders and many men tend to project a comparatively vast increase in their authority once back in the village in a bid to correct the corruption introduced into Acholi society during displacement. In the most extreme versions, elders explained how they saw themselves as taking a dominant and all-encompassing role in social regulation in the post-conflict period by dealing with everyone from ex-rebels, thieves, government informers, prostitutes, Congolese women, to troublemakers generally. This revival of their 'traditional authority', men and elders explained, would take place through imposing discipline at the family and clan levels through warnings, fines, corporal punishment, and, if all else fails, expulsion from the clan and curses.

Therefore, there is a significant possibility that post-war Acholi society may be characterised by an intensive disciplinary project carried out by men, especially men with family or clan authority, designed to eliminate what they see as the corruption that had infected Acholi society during the war and displacement. This could amount to another kind of 'transitional justice' project, the consequences of whose potential violence and tenuous legitimacy cannot be overlooked. Although men generally explained that they would not punish people for what they had done in the camps, and that it would only be those who continued to misbehave in the village who would be disciplined, strict rules were already being imposed to keep certain people out of the village. For example, in one camp the clan elders had assembled and told men that if they brought Congolese women back to the village, they (the men) would be refused land and expelled from the clan. A wide range of those seeking to return to the village could be subject to this kind of harsh discipline, or even excluded from clan affiliation and land access through revived family and clan meetings. Independent or assertive women or youth, those with unclear ancestry, those with foreign connections or relations, or simply those deemed undesirable or vulnerable could be disciplined or excluded through accusations of contravening 'Acholi tradition' or 'Acholi laws'. Ex-LRA may face even more acute problems, as will be addressed below. There is the potential for a serious rupture to emerge within Acholi society around this kind of systematic exclusion of certain categories of people from clan membership and land possession. Many of these excluded, dispossessed and victimised people could end up taking refuge in Gulu town as their only option. Of course, this kind of dispossession could also be carried out by those with non-traditional forms of power or influence in Acholi society, but this would be less of a systematic project of exclusion and more of a victimisation of the vulnerable by those who had gained political clout or monetary wealth during displacement. It remains to be seen if male elders and authorities will have the capacity or will to deal with such problems, or whether they might even be complicit with such injustices for their own ends.

The potential for tough discipline or exclusion by male authorities has a prominent gender dimension as well, since women lack a strong claim on authority within the family or clan and are generally dependent on husbands, fathers, brothers or male clan elders in resolving disputes or in accessing land. Although firm adherence to patrilineal and patrilocal norms has been disrupted at present as a result of the war and displacement, this only increases the potential negative impact of their purposeful re-imposition by male authorities upon women and youth. Indeed, among men, the re-establishment of 'traditional authority' was often framed explicitly in terms of undoing the power gained by women and youth in the camps and imposing the power of men and elders over these putatively formerly subservient groups.

Many women in town expressed reservations about leaving town for the village for precisely these reasons, and some declared that they would not move back at all. As one woman explained, she is afraid that men on return to the village will try to make women their 'property under their full control' again. Men's predictions and plans for post-conflict life vary, ranging from the militant demand to abolish women's rights to resignation that things are going to be different when they go back, since women's rights are to some extent irrevocable. However, most men interviewed shared a perception that, in the words of the Limo sub-ward group of elders, 'the rules in the village are different from those in town.' Thus, because women have 'forgotten' the rules and even how to do their basic duties, these men argue, women will have to be 'trained' again in their proper roles and duties, 'reminded' of village life. Men admit that women might not be ready to accept these roles, being used to town life as they are, and so it will take a concerted effort, a group of men from Kirombe Custom sub-ward explained, on the part of men in their homes, and then by elders and chiefs at the village and clan level, to make sure women conform to the rules of the village. Much of this will probably involve physical violence – 'caning' as it is commonly referred to. Elder men explained how women could be caned for refusing to work or to cook, for refusing to have sex with their husbands, or for breaking other social norms. Caning and other punishments can take place within the family or else at the clan level, administered by the husband or by clan enforcers. That is, women's public space and the social and economic opportunities they enjoy with it may be violently erased as women are confined to the private world of the home, while the public space of men will re-open through social interaction within the lineage and clan.

For their part, women were expecting men to try to re-impose their authority; as a group of women in Kirombe Custom sub-ward said, 'men are always telling women that, you wait, you are feeling good in town because you are protected.' But, as men correctly intuit, women are by no means ready to resign themselves to this imposition of male authority. As a Layibi Go-Down sub-ward women's group explained, women with significant investments in town and others with the capacity to maintain a home in town will probably not return to the village permanently, but will prefer to build a second home in the village so as to have one foot there and one in town. For those that lack the resources needed to remain in town, as a women's group in Layibi Centre put it, 'some women will take back their town life to the village.' Many women explained that they plan to bring the benefits of *kwo town* back to the village by maintaining the groups they had formed in town as they move back, or by frequently returning to town for business or social purposes. They would thereby retain some of the power that association gives them and preserve some of the public space they have in town. Many of those who were in positions of authority planned to continue in those positions as well.

Some women explained that they hoped their husbands would accept their new economic, social and political roles, but they also recognised that this might not be the case. Women predicted that divorce rates would rise significantly in those marriages where men refuse to recognise their wives' rights, and that some women may have to come back to town if all else fails in the village. Thus, Gulu town may become home to two distinct groups of women: those who have gained social or economic power in town, do not want to give up that power and subject themselves to male authority, and have the resources needed to stay in town; and those who have been excluded from Acholi society in the villages because of being seen as undesirable by male Acholi authorities or being particularly vulnerable to dispossession by those authorities or others within the community.

Ex-LRA and the End of Displacement

It is unclear whether revenge attacks will be carried out against ex-LRA once back in the village, but in town, opinion seems to be that some attacks will be inevitable. As a 42-year old woman in Kirombe Layibi explained, ‘people in the village do not hide anger and are not afraid to tell these people [ex-LRA] the things they did while in the bush.’ ‘People in town look at the ex-Lakwena as their enemies, it is just that there is tight security in town and so ex-Lakwena are protected,’ said a 26-year old in Awere sub-ward. One 32-year old farmer in Lukung predicts that once people are back in the villages, ‘space would have been found to revenge on them, and this would be the beginning of a new mad era in the villages.’ That is, a new war, a real war within Acholi society will begin upon return, this man predicted, a sentiment expressed by others as well. Since many ex-LRA combatants know where guns are hidden in the countryside, any such conflict would have the potential to escalate significantly. People’s predictions for extensive revenge against ex-LRA returnees were belied somewhat by their own expressed sentiments about ex-LRA. Most people we spoke to in town said that they themselves were willing to live with ex-LRA and that they should be forgiven. The urban displaced often attributed future revenge attacks to people in the village, who are more ‘local’, less forgiving and harsher than people in town. Nevertheless, revenge attacks seem to be generally expected.

Ex-LRA returnees themselves were very conscious of the potential for revenge attacks in the village and expressed significant fear of being away from the protection they receive in town. As a young man said in Iriaga Central sub-ward, ‘Well, at least we are treated fairly here in town, but we expect all this fair treatment to end out in the village. Here in town, we are close together, but in the village, people are far apart and anyone can come for payback. That is why most of us will not go back to the villages.’ There was also fear of exclusion and rejection within the village, of being made a scapegoat for anything that goes wrong, and thus that punishment by the clan was only a matter of time. Both of these were tied to the feeling that people in town were only forgiving the ex-LRA ‘with their mouths’, with words, while ‘in their hearts’ the anger remained.

Beyond revenge attacks, many ex-LRA expressed their fear of exclusion, especially from access to land, or mistreatment at the hands of the community, including clan and family authorities. Some ex-LRA reported already having been dispossessed of their land by other members of the community, sometimes with the collusion of clan authorities. Those who were with the rebels for a long time, those who were born with the rebels and are unsure of their father’s family, and women whose husbands are in the bush or died in the bush will probably face particular problems. Some ex-LRA returnees simply stated that they ‘have no relatives left,’ as a 27-year old woman who had been with the LRA for eight years living in Limu sub-ward put it. Or some returnees had found, as a young man in Pabbo Quarters sub-ward did, that people would take their land with impunity because they were ex-rebels, and that clan leaders would be unwilling to help; he was told, ‘if you have not had enough from the bush, if you mess with this land I will slaughter you.’

Because of the particular profile of returnees who are in town at present, along with the treatment that this group expects to receive in the village, many ex-LRA interviewed in town stated that they had no intention to go back to the village. As one young man put it, ‘I am going to die in town here.’ As importantly, many ex-LRA in the camps expressed their intention to move to Gulu town for safety once the camps were closed. It might be expected that those who match the profile of those already in Gulu town – those who have been in the

bush for long periods, who are seen as bearing significant guilt, and are without strong family and clan connections – will be more likely to move to town after the camps close.

Other ex-LRA in town and in the camps expressed their intention to go to the village, but said that staying there would be contingent upon how they are treated and what happens once back in the village. Thus, even a few isolated violent incidents against ex-LRA returnees could have a significant impact on people's perception of the level of threat and could lead many ex-LRA to remain in or move to town. Many returnees also explained that they would only return if the government passed a by-law that could provide them with safety in the village: as a boda-boda driver in Pece put it, he wanted the 'government to follow them back home so that their security is guaranteed.' That is, like many women in town, the ex-LRA returnees want to bring some *kwo town* back with them to the village. But whereas for women this is an aspiration, for ex-LRA it is often a necessary precondition.

At present, the most commonly proposed solution to the problem of reintegrating ex-LRA is 'traditional reconciliation' under the guidance of male elders and authorities (Caritas 2006; Liu Institute for Global Issues, 2005). This proposal suffers from three problems, however. First, it is not clear that elders or clan authorities will have sufficient power to negotiate community acceptance for ex-LRA. Second, many ex-LRA may be unwilling to subject themselves to the discipline and authority of older male authorities. A guarantee of community acceptance mediated by male elders may be enough to convince many ex-LRA returnees to accept that authority, but this is by no means certain. Indeed, tensions between male lineage-based authorities and armed young men have been one of the roots of the wars that have plagued northern Uganda for over two decades, so there is no historical precedent that would imply that ex-LRA will necessarily submit to this authority. Moreover, if the peace talks succeed, many of the ex-LRA who return will see themselves as having emerged victorious, or at least undefeated, from a justified fight against the government, and these young men would probably be even more difficult to bring under the control of elders (Schomerus 2007: 47). Third, there is no guarantee that 'traditional' authorities will not use that authority *against* ex-LRA whom they see as undesirable or who are without firm family or clan connections. Indeed, many ex-LRA expressed their desire for government protection and regulation of land issues in the village since they did not trust the capacity or intention of clan authorities to ensure their protection or fair access to land. In short, fear of revenge, the refusal of ex-LRA to submit to male authority, and the possibility that those male authorities may exclude certain ex-LRA from clan membership and access to land means that a large number of ex-LRA, especially those who had been in the bush the longest and those without strong family relations, may end up taking refuge in Gulu town as the camps close.

A Coming Crisis for Gulu Town?

If the process of return does lead to the creation of a new internally displaced population concentrated in Gulu town, this population could become a major catalyst of instability within the city itself and the region as a whole. Indeed, the factors that have helped prevent this kind of crisis from erupting in Gulu town during the current phase of displacement would be largely absent from this potential new phase of displacement. First, this new internally displaced population would not see their residence in town as a temporary sojourn, but rather would face the possibility of living in town permanently. If their hope of return is withdrawn, this new population might be unwilling to endure the same levels of deprivation the current internally displaced population has been willing to endure. Second, the military presence in town is likely to be reduced, removing that impediment to violence or open conflict. Third, while it is probable that a significant presence of foreign aid agencies would remain, there is

no guarantee that the available economic opportunities would match the number of people seeking refuge in Gulu town by necessity. For these future displaced, the option of returning to the camps if unable to find employment in town would be gone, and they would be stuck in town, increasingly frustrated and desperate. Fourth, instead of seeing town life as a superior alternative to life in camps, as the currently displaced population does, for many of the future urban displaced, town life would be seen as an inferior alternative to life in the village, and a greater degree of dissatisfaction might arise. Finally, whereas the current displaced population in town retains tight social bonds, the future displaced would be anomic: those who had lost their family and social ties and were excluded from return as a result. Together, these factors could mean that the tensions in Gulu town, which have been moderated given the particular circumstances of this phase of internal displacement, would be largely absent from a future period of displacement. These tensions could explode into open urban conflict or could lead the displaced population to provoke significant instability in Acholiland.

Therefore, if there is a failure of post-war reintegration and reconciliation in Acholi society that leads to a swollen population of urban displaced, careful steps need to be taken to ensure that the economic and social integration of these displaced people can be promoted within Gulu town (Branch 2007). Economically, the new business opportunities and energies that have been released in the urban context should be promoted. Sustainable, inclusive economic activities that can bring in the most marginalised of the urban displaced will be key. Also, a strong effort to improve working conditions, especially in the service sector, in Gulu town needs to be undertaken. Socially, an effort should be made to sustain and expand the associations that have blossomed during displacement. In this way, even if people are not integrated back into Acholi society in the village, they will become productive, willing participants in a dynamic, new urban Acholi society. This urban society can also have significant political importance, as the possibilities for open deliberation and discussion within the public sphere that are inherent to urban life can be capitalised upon in order to promote an inclusive, democratic process. This process, and the development of an Acholi civil society more generally, can be institutionalised through the creation of public forums where the urban displaced can come together, identify their problems and concerns, and act collectively. This will require an improved effort by NGOs, the church and community-based organisations. It will also require clear political leadership from the municipal and district governments, which need to comprehend the dramatic changes that Acholi society is undergoing and respond to those changes in a responsible and inclusive manner. If all this can happen, then sustainable peace and justice in Acholiland may end up being built upon the very changes that were brought into being by war and displacement, instead of being precluded by them.

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