LIFE BEYOND THE CAMP:

Rethinking return, reconstruction and women's expression of lived experiences in Northern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

The conflict in Northern Uganda is recognized as having come to an end with the signing of a cessation of hostilities agreement between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Government of Uganda in August 2006, which resulted in improved security. Estimates suggest that the majority of the displaced populations have left their camps and moved either to transit sites near farms or to their village of origin. Much research has been done on the living conditions of women in the Ugandan IDP camps yet very little has been written on the situation for women who return home or resettle after the camp.

This study aims at understanding the gender specific challenges of formerly conflict-displaced women returnees in the Gulu province of the Acholi district, as a first step towards reconstruction in the region. The paper seeks to explore the various paths these women take to establish stability in their daily lives and overcome these challenges and how they cope with trauma, gender-based violence and the experience of returning 'home' after living in displacement camps. It seeks to describe an ethnographical, phenomenological and sociopolitical background to women's experience of return. Moreover, the paper explores the idea of transition between life in the IDP camps and life at home as well as how this transition affects women.

Drawing on visual ethnography methods (Pink, 2001) and the photo voice approach (Wang, 1997), women's lived experience of the difficult process and complex transition will be documented through illustrations and photography and their stories will be reported in a participatory way to explore the challenges and spatial boundaries between different surroundings. One of the main objectives of the photo voice approach is to provide women with cameras and have them photograph what represents their struggles and daily life as well as what defines 'home' and the memory of 'home' to them.

Ideally, success stories from women will be collected which can then serve as an encouragement to other women still living in the camps to return home as well as illustrate the role of women in development and post-conflict peace building. Sharing life stories through photography and video may promote critical dialogue within the community and help reach policy makers in an advocacy effort.

Key words: internally displaced people, returnees, resettlement, women, Uganda, visual ethnography, advocacy, life stories, gender-based violence

"Dusty and bumpy roads, bucket showers, endless evenings without power, intense heat, dry air, beautiful sunsets, starlit sky, incredible coworkers, welcoming NGO staff, supportive interpreters, inspiring and resilient conflict displaced women returnees and survivors of gender based violence, strength of the human spirit, disgust at human cruelty, at times frustrating language barrier, hundreds of pages scribbled with notes, doubts, learning, questioning, sleeping in the field, ceremonies and traditions, faith, frustration with corruption, politics and laws that demean women, innumerable laughters sitting under mango trees, pictures, tears shedded and stories shared, drawings, boda incidents, fearing snakes, running away from cockroaches, Acholi music and dancing, children's smiles that light up my world, hugs, generosity, amazing friends and neighbors and the best roommate/sister in the world! What an intense and amazing experience. Goodbye Gulu, I will miss you." - Notes scribbled on my last day in Northern Uganda

Acronyms & Abbreviations

GBV   Gender-based violence

SGBV   Sexual and Gender-based violence

IDP   Internally displaced person

IRC   International Rescue Committee

UNHCR   Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

VIVO   Victims Voices Counseling

ARC   American Refugee Committee

NRA   National Resistance Army

NRC   Norwegian Refugee Council

HIV   Human immunodeficiency virus

AIDS   Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

LRA   Lord's Resistance Army

UPDF   Uganda People's Defense Forces

VAW   Violence against women

MDG   Millennium Development Goal

EVI   Extremely Vulnerable Individual

DRC   Danish Refugee Council

NGO   Non-governmental organization

ICC   International Criminal Court

WFP   World Food Programme

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In 2002, the World Bank asked 60,000 people living on less than a dollar a day to identify the single greatest hurdle to their advancement. Above even food, shelter or education, the number one need identified was access to a voice (Video Volunteers).

THESIS

This thesis is written for academic purposes and not officially for the organization being referred to. All names have been changed to respect the respondents' safety and privacy.

1. Introduction:

1.1 Introduction to Northern Uganda, Gulu and Anaka

Personal interest in Uganda

This thesis is about displacement, return, gender-based violence and storytelling in the post-conflict region of Northern Uganda. It seeks to explore the various paths conflict-displaced women returnees in northern Uganda take to establish stability in their daily lives and to cope with trauma, gender-based violence and the experience of returning 'home' after living in displacement camps. It seeks to describe an ethnographical, phenomenological and sociopolitical background to women's experience of return.

This paper has a particular personal relevance and it is the outcome of a long thought-out endeavor. I am originally from France but I grew up in Uganda. Spending my childhood in Kampala, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was exposed to a country in transition and to complex political and humanitarian instabilities. With my father working in the humanitarian field, I grew up with an intrinsic yet sheltered understanding of people's suffering and of palpable inequalities and injustices. I was never exposed to the realities of the war in Northern Uganda but I was told many stories, often accompanied by pictures drawn by children living in the camps. These stories and pictures told and drawn by children my own age made me aware of the senseless atrocities that were happening in the Northern regions. I held on to these stories and while I was never able to visit Northern Uganda due to security concerns, I continued to avidly follow the political and humanitarian developments in the region.

Years later, pursuing a Master's degree in Development and International Cooperation at the University of Jyväskylä represented an opportunity for me to travel to the region, to conduct research and seek to understand the lived realities of those who had suffered during the war, had been placed in camps and were finally returning home.

Being particularly concerned with gender-based violence and women's issues it seemed natural for me to focus on the lived experiences of conflict-displaced women returnees.

Violence against women (VAW) is a major problem around the world and too often undocumented. It is the "world's most pervasive human rights violation. It's the violation most often ignored. Every minute of every day, women and girls around the world are assaulted, threatened, raped, mutilated, killed." (Amnesty International) Impunity and silence help to perpetuate VAW. As a result, women are often denied access to a voice. The problem is even greater in situations of war and post-conflict where gender-based violence is used as a weapon. Its effects are severe and long lasting for both victims and their communities. Thus, as a vital part of society, it is essential to ensure that women are able to exercise their rights to the fullest extent possible, so they no longer have to live in fear whenever they do try to access their voice.

In the outcome report for the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) summit, all states reaffirmed the importance of gender equality. Particularly concerned with the slow progress made on reducing maternal mortality, additional commitments were made to improving women's health. The summit also recognized women as agents of development, while gender equality and empowerment is acknowledged as vital to achieving the MDGs.

The third MDG specifically focuses on promoting gender equality and empowering women. Therefore, a first step towards achieving this goal must include eradicating violence against women. This would positively impact not only women's health but also help combat poverty, as violence poses a significant barrier to accessing education and work. In fact, VAW undermines women and girls' full enjoyment of all human rights. Thus, gender-based violence reveals and reproduces inequities between men and women in all societies. It is an

intersectional issue that cuts across related issues of education, poverty, maternal health, and HIV/AIDS, and requires multi-sector responses.

Due to their extreme vulnerability, female refugees and internally displaced women are even more at risk of experiencing gender-based violence. Very often, they have been forced to flee their homes because of armed conflicts and human rights abuses. When the United Nations is involved, these women's protection, security, comfort and health largely depend on how UN staff responds to their needs.

Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) is a public health matter. It may lead to grave physical, psychological and social outcomes and has implications for almost all aspects of health policy and programming (USAID, 2006). At the physical level, women might suffer from death or injuries, reproductive dysfunction, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, complications from high-risk pregnancies and lack of follow-up care as well as fistulas. Many unsafe abortions are also a consequence of unwanted pregnancies. These lead to severe medical complications. At the psychological level, SGBV often leads to nervousness, anxiety, fear, sleep disturbances, substance abuse, depression, phobias, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide. Finally, at the social level, women who have been raped often face social exclusion, secondary victimization, social stigmatization and most often lack financial support or income-generating activities. The children of rape victims also face rejection and stigmatization (World Health Organization).

Interning with the Norwegian Refugee Council

Going to Northern Uganda to do research with conflict-displaced returnees meant that it would be crucial to have an organization I could depend upon, both in terms of security and accessibility.

I also had a strong desire to volunteer my time and contribute to an organization's work in the region. I therefore chose to intern with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in Gulu town. I decided to work with this organization as they had been present in Uganda for fifteen years

and had always worked with IDPs in the region. Additionally, in 2012, NRC was the only International non-governmental organization (NGO) in Uganda with its country office located in the North, particularly in Gulu, where I intended to focus my research.

During my internship, my role was to assist the monitoring and evaluation department, which led me to contribute to the evaluation of field projects and to document NRC programs, such as the distribution of food and non-food relief items, the construction of homes in return villages, the provision of education solutions, legal assistance and counseling; through photography, video, reports and newsletters. I had the chance to follow camp residents as they returned to their villages of origin, in the context of a resettlement program that NRC was conducting for "EVIs", *extremely vulnerable individuals.* Throughout my stay in Gulu, I observed these types of classifications expressed by NGO workers and organizations and how returnees related to and discussed these constructions.[1] I also visited a large amount of returnees to follow-up with their resettlement and to document the construction of their new huts for a project funded by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In addition, I assisted the Food Security department as they were conducting assessments in the field. The particular context of the humanitarian organizations phasing out of Northern Uganda meant that NRC, too, was preparing for a future phase-out and it was essential to focus on people's food security and livelihoods. Most humanitarian actors such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and UNHCR were preparing to phase out from Northern Uganda at the end of 2011. The other humanitarian NGOs such as NRC, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the American Refugee Committee (ARC) were also following the move and planning to gradually leave the region over the following few years. This period is marked by a shift from humanitarian intervention to development intervention and it may affect the situation in Gulu quite profoundly as people have become dependent on much of the humanitarian international aid and some people still remain in the camps, in extremely vulnerable situations.

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[1]   This is something I will develop later on in this thesis as it has an important influence on how people define themselves and construct stories about their experiences.
[2]   Boda-bodas are motorbike taxis which can be seen circulating and stationed all around

These experiences gave me an extremely valuable first-hand experience of both camps and return settlements as well as a first contact with returnees and a better understanding of their living conditions, return conditions, food security and livelihoods. I also gained an enhanced appreciation of the means by which an organization such as NRC seeks to provide assistance, protection and durable solutions to internally displaced persons.

As we traveled to the camps and return villages on a daily basis, the many long road trips often provided me with rich stories told by my coworkers or passer-bys that we would give a lift to, especially women carrying babies and heading to the hospital on foot.

After a few weeks, I started to actively work on my research with conflict displaced women returnees and NRC graciously let me travel to the areas most relevant to my research, accompanied by a driver in one of their vehicles. We had to return to the compound before dusk as the organization still had strict safety and security rules but I was also given the authorization to stay in the camps over periods of several days if I needed to. After having traveled across the region, from Gulu to Kitgum, Kidepo, Anaka, Nwoya and Purongo, I chose to focus my research in Anaka camp and its surrounding villages. Anaka camp is located in Nwoya County, about 56 kilometres west of Gulu town. It had been one of the largest camps in the region and had perhaps hosted up to 50,000 people at its peak. There had been many fires that left thousands of people homeless within the camp as well as several rebel attacks. Most of the displaced persons in the camp came from different villages in Anaka sub-county but also from Purongo in Nwoya County. Anaka resonates in many people's minds as Geoffrey Oryema also beautifully sings about it, as follows:

"We had hopes, we had dreams
Of a clear green land
In place of the family house
Dead sand, dead sand"

Geoffrey Oryema, Land of Anaka

The drivers who would accompany me to Anaka camp and the surrounding return villages

became an unexpected source of information, telling me many stories about the war, about ambushes they had survived and their opinions about politics and traditions. Besides participating in monitoring and evaluation activities and engaging in follow-up work with returnees, during my stays in Anaka camp, I was able to establish rapport with a group of 12 women returnees in surrounding villages who showed willingness to share stories and participate in my study and continued visiting them regularly during my fieldwork. This was a challenging situation that required building trust with the local community. I found that expressing a willingness to learn about the local culture and the basics of Luo language have been two of the more helpful ways of building such trust, confidence and integration as well as an increased responsibility to the community.

Life in Gulu and Northern Uganda

I traveled to Northern Uganda to carry out my qualitative field research and to volunteer with NRC, between November 2011 and February 2012. Traveling to Gulu in itself was quite an experience. After arriving in Kampala and spending two days reconnecting with friends, I decided to head up North via public transportation. After talking to many people in the capital to try and figure out which bus company would be the safest for me to travel with, I decided to opt for the Post Office bus. The Post bus delivers mail all along the main road on the way to Gulu. This means that it stops in most villages and takes a long time to arrive but it was also a great way to appreciate the changing landscape and engage in conversations with fellow passengers. Many commercial bus companies seem to drive up to South Sudan as fast as possible and are known for ending up in bad road accidents. The road having improved a lot compared to the past, it took me less than a day to reach my destination, despite the many road stops. It was interesting to see the number of buses and trucks heading down from South Sudan to do business in Gulu or Kampala. The South Sudanese seem to come with lots of US dollars to buy goods that are less expensive in Uganda. They also buy plots of lands and build houses in the North of the country. I also noticed many Chinese commercial trucks on the road and the traffic up North was rather hectic, Gulu being on the way to South Sudan.

Before heading to Gulu, I talked to a number of Ugandans in Kampala who seemed to be worried about me heading up North by myself and especially worried about the security

situation in the Acholi Region. Some Bagandas (Southern tribe) went as far as mentioning that the Acholis are dangerous people and that they would not hesitate to steal or kill and that I should be very careful there. I wanted to share this anecdote because it illustrates the divide that still exists between the South and the North of the country, which historically explains a lot of the conflict and shows that the country never had a chance to reunify, something I will expand on later.

As I was arriving towards Gulu I noticed a few police checkpoints but mostly I witnessed a landscape that looks peaceful. Upon reaching the main town, we crossed a few villages where I saw new houses being built, children playing outside or sitting under a tree during a school lecture, a testament to peace, reconstruction and development in the region.

I was in Gulu town from November to February, right during the dry season and the red dusty roads made a lasting impression on my mind. The center of Gulu is full of shops, restaurants, hotels, NGO compounds and informal vendors on the streets, as well as banks and a new supermarket. At night, the main street fills up with market dwellers selling food on the side of the road with little paraffin lamps. During the many power outages, the town at night finds itself in utter darkness and the little paraffin lamps form an enchanting scene. I would always walk around with a flashlight in my hand, to distinguish the road, avoid potholes and be seen by the many trucks and *boda-bodas*[2]. I had the chance to be hosted by a young Acholi aid worker, who became a close friend and confidante. She helped me understand many aspects of the Acholi culture and told me innumerable stories. She lived in the centre of town, close to slum settlements and there were always women and children selling boiled maize in front of the house. The traces of war seem to have completely disappeared in Gulu town as it looks like a peaceful and bustling town. At night however, I would sometimes cross paths with people who seemed mentally disturbed or very drunk and who looked completely lost. Little remnants or ghosts of the war are perceptible but peace is palpable. After living in Gulu for several weeks, I started to see patterns of stories, lies, silences and rumors unfolding. I started

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[2]   Boda-bodas are motorbike taxis which can be seen circulating and stationed all around Gulu town

to understand that everything there is very complex and that nothing is certain. There is no one history, no one story and no apparent answers to the atrocity that people have experienced. I realized it would be a difficult task to give structure or find answers to phenomena that have none.

Life beyond the camp

Uganda has long been subjected to armed fighting among various ethnic groups, militias, gangs, rebels (CIA, The world factbook) and ravaged by an insurgency led by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the North. The LRA rebels have killed and mutilated countless civilians and abducted and forced women and children into becoming soldiers or sex slaves. Furthermore, 1.8 million people have been displaced and put into refugee camps (IDMC). The displaced are now facing the daunting process of returning home and building a new future. During the war, everything was destroyed and is yet to be rebuilt, including hospitals, schools, houses, farms, etc. During this reconstruction phase, it is vital to understand the effects that war and displacement have had on women, families and livelihoods and to encourage dialogue within the communities.

Research shows that women living in the camps faced very high risks of sexual harassment, abuse, rape and forced marriage, yet the services for victims of sexual violence remained inadequate. The camps have been overwhelmed with cases of SGBV and the aid staff has not felt confident in counseling victimized women and girls. There has also been a scarcity of medical supplies such as drugs to protect against HIV infection following rape. Moreover, early and forced marriages are a common cause of sexual harassment, rape and abuse of young girls; yet, at this time, international guidelines for SGBV programs in IDP camps focus mainly on rape by strangers. In Northern Uganda, other forms of VAW might be more prevalent, but these narrow guidelines may exclude such forms. Therefore, it is imperative that international guidelines encompass a broader view of SGBV (Henttonen, 2008).

In an attempt to attain peace, the government set up an Amnesty Commission, while the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) leaders. However, most people concerned are unaware of the ICC's actions. Although

past injustices against women have not yet been dealt with, the International Center for Transitional Justice found, in their 2005 study on four Northern Uganda districts, that a majority of their interviewees (81%) want to talk openly to someone about what happened to them.

At this time, the insurgency is recognized as having come to an end following the signing of a cessation of hostilities agreement between the LRA and the Government of Uganda back in August 2006, which resulted in improved security. The majority of the displaced populations have now left the camps and moved either to transit sites near farms or to their village of origin. Although much research has been done on the living conditions of women inside the IDP camps, little has been written about the circumstances for women once they return home or resettle in other locations. Moreover, there have been very few studies that have followed up the process of reintegration of returnees. (Omata, 2011) Particularly concerning is the fact that the forced-return situation often leads to continued alcohol abuse, gender-based violence and powerlessness upon the phasing out of international aid.

The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine conducted a study on the health services in the refugee camps of Northern Uganda, in the Gulu district. A report was issued, which focuses on the services provided to victims of SGBV. Not only do the camps lack proper sanitation or healthcare, register high rates of mortality, illness and mental distress, house inhabitants that are mostly under the age of 15 and orphaned, they are overwhelmed with cases of SGBV for which services are inadequate. The health staff present in the camps does not feel confident in counseling the women and girls; and there is a scarcity of medical supplies such as drugs to avoid HIV infection subsequent to rape. Moreover, early and forced marriages are a common cause for sexual harassment, rape and abuse of young girls yet international guidelines for SGBV programs in refugee camps focus mostly on rape by strangers. In Northern Uganda, other forms of VAW could be more prevalent and these guidelines might exclude certain girls. The study suggests that international guidelines should encompass a broader view of SGBV (Henttonen, 2008).

Should these examples reflect the situation that refugee and IDP women are facing, it seems essential to look at what the situation is for women who are returning home or resettling outside the camp. I believe it is crucial to understand their needs, hopes and aspirations as well as the effects that war and displacement has had on women, families and livelihoods and enhance dialogue within the communities. I am particularly concerned with domestic violence issues in Northern Uganda's post conflict situation, a context in which humanitarian organizations are phasing out and there seems to be a general international dis-involvement. I believe such circumstances may lead to a gap in protection and require close monitoring.

1.2 Research Questions:

The objective of this thesis is to seek understanding of the lived experiences of women who have returned home or resettled after years of living in IDP camps in Acholiland, to illustrate their experience of transition and the ways in which they rebuild their lives, in particular amidst a context of gender-based violence. Assuming that women experience gender-based violence in their return situations and that encampment has impacted gender relations and generated a significant amount of gender-based violence in their life, I wish to depict some of the ways that women narrate their experiences and establish balance in their lives as they are now facing the task of rebuilding their lives and dealing with the realities of post-conflict life. Therefore, my main research question is as follows:

How do conflict-displaced women returnees narrate, create and shape their experience of return 'home' amidst adversity and gender-based violence?

In order to answer the question of home making and return, I will also question the impact of encampment and transition;

How did encampment and transitioning from camp life to return village impact gender relations and gender-based violence?

Beyond this central question of return, I will also use as a guide and a meta-question while analyzing my data the following;

How do women narrate and illustrate their experiences? How do different sets of data reveal aspects of these women's experience and provide a different take on the phenomenology of war, gender-based violence and return? Does such a mixture of 'documents'/perspectives constitute complementary versions of one story, or very different, even contradictory, renditions of a variety of experiences?

While these are complex questions, my intention is not to find one answer to them but rather to illustrate the experiences of a small number of women and how they make sense of these experiences while I also seek to understand the complexities of story-telling. I do not wish to make any generalizations that could be applied otherwise.

With the question of return at the center of my work, I will use the concept as a structure for my text, looking at return amid the ambivalence of tradition, amid the changing gender roles, amid humanitarian disinvolvement, amid a fragile post-conflict context.

1.3.   Limitations and biases:

Positionality

Prior to going to the field and also after returning from Northern Uganda, it was very important for me to understand my position, social location and personal biases. It is relevant to note that many different factors may have affected the framing of my research as well as the interaction I had with my respondents.

While my research was independent, I interned with the Norwegian Refugee Council throughout my entire stay in Gulu. The organization was extremely helpful and supportive and most of my field visits were organized with the help of the NRC, which provided me with a vehicle and a driver. While I always emphasized on the fact that I was an independent researcher and that none of my interviews would have any incidence on NRC's programming or its allocation of funds, I was nevertheless considered to be a part of the wider aid system and sometimes seen as a representative of the organization. Often, village leaders would wrongly describe me as having some form of authority due to my connection to the refugee organization and due to my European origins. Sometimes, assumptions would wrongly be made about the fact that I may be coming from NRC's headquarters in Norway and that I therefore had an important role. To make sure that people did not mistake me for an

organization official, I always introduced myself as a volunteer and as a student. It was of central importance for me to emphasize this fact with my translators and to make sure that my respondents understood my role and purpose.

I believe, nonetheless, that it is significant to mention the fact that my ethnicity may have influenced my respondent's interaction with me as well as the stories they chose to share with me. As I will describe later on, Uganda's complex colonial history as a British protectorate is an element to consider when it comes to power relationships.

Alongside my ethnicity, my gender and age may have had an effect on my research as well. The fact that I was the same age as some of my respondents may have helped me build rapport with them and make them feel comfortable talking to me. However, I also interviewed older women and they may have refrained in sharing some stories with me. The fact that I am female is very important as I was conducting research with women in a context of gender-based violence. This may have made the women more comfortable and willing to share personal stories with me. I believe it also helped me in gaining access to the women. Not only were they more willing to talk with me but the men were also more trusting in letting me talk to the women in the villages.

According to Gadamer (1994), the past is constantly a part of the present as we belong to history. He describes understanding this fact as prejudice. It helps us become conversant with the text but it also excludes us from observing the text's own meaning. In order to interpret texts, one must become aware of these prejudices. Paul Ricoeur (1976) also describes texts as having multiple potential meanings.

Research limitations

Qualitative data has certain inherent limitations. The prevalence or scope of the experiences described in this thesis cannot be determined and cannot be generalized to the population of Northern Uganda as a whole. It is one story or a patchwork of *several stories* about women in Northern Uganda.

Rather, this project aims to provide insight into experiences of women who have returned to villages after living in camps and witnessing and surviving war. Much effort was made to include various experiences and perspectives however the focus rested on the voices of women who wanted to be heard.

The short timeline of my research; less than four months spent in the field, only provides a snapshot into the experiences of these women. I would hope to be able to return to the region and undertake a longer-term project in order to help understand and further support the conclusions presented in this thesis.

1.4.   Structuring the thesis (chapter breakdown)

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the research. The second chapter presents the theoretical and conceptual framework as well as the research design and methodology for this study. With the question of return at the center of my work, I will use the concept as a structure for my text, basing myself on a phenomenological and ethnographical approach. The third chapter focuses on the data collection process, methods and analysis. Particularly interested in story-telling and the production of multi-layered stories, I focus on the study of narratives. The narratives in this story are both spoken and expressed through images. The use of visual ethnography through picture taking and mapping of memories will be explained. The fourth chapter provides a glimpse into the historical and media context of Northern Uganda. This allows bringing forward the different narratives that emerge through mediatization of the conflict. Different moral and political narratives in Acholiland and people use these to interpret each other and give meaning to their experiences. The fifth chapter presents the findings resulting from the analysis of the research materials in a form of stories and images of women's experiences. The last chapter presents conclusions.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework, Research Design and Methodology

2.1. Theoretical framework

Starting from a constructivist approach within which individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and develop subjective meanings of their experiences, I go on to basing myself on a phenomenology and narrative inquiry framework.

In constructivism, the individuals' meanings are multiple and wide-ranging. The researcher relies as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied and looks for the complexity of the views. Because these views are influenced by social realities and history, it will be important to address this context and the "processes" of interaction among individuals in order to understand the historical and cultural backgrounds of the participants (Creswell, 2003). Constructivism appeals to me as it looks both at context and at the complexity of participants' views.

Phenomenology of experience

Merleau Ponty affirms that "because we are in the world, *we are condemned to meaning,* and we cannot do or say anything without its' acquiring a name in history." (1962, xix) According to Finnström, when the word "meaningful" is applied to people's experience of the world, it signifies that a phenomenon is situational and may be understood and compared with other phenomena as well as the fact that people explain and negotiate experiences and stories with each other in a systematic way. (Finnström, 2008, p. 7)

Phenomenology can be explained as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness; the way we experience events, thus the meanings events have in our experience. It studies various types of experiences including perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, self-awareness and social activities. In my research, I am particularly interested in the relationship between memory of home and perception of home. Does the return village correspond to my respondents' memory or expectation of home, whether their memory is lived, constructed or collective? According to Husserl, these forms of experience imply "intentionality", the way an experience is directed through its content or meaning toward a

certain entity in this world. The meaning of the given experience through thoughts, ideas or images is different from the things they present. Phenomenology is interested in first-person experiences as well as the relevant conditions of experience. Studying an experience such as that of return is unique in the sense that it is a conscious experience; it is lived and *experienced*. The fact that a person experiences an event from the first-person point of view is a central phenomenological and ontological aspect of experience. In addition, phenomenology focuses on experiences that one can reflect upon or that have been lived. Under a state of anger or fear, one's psychic focus is usually lessened. The experience of returning home after living in the camp is a lived experience. However, as Heidegger suggests some experiences or activities are not explicitly conscious and psychoanalysts have also emphasized the fact that one may become conscious of his feelings or thoughts about something through a process of therapy or interview. In that sense, phenomenology may include conscious experiences as well as semi-conscious and unconscious feelings although many have questioned this rationalization (Wheeler, 2013).

Jackson argues that phenomenology is an attempt to explain "human consciousness in its lived immediacy" (1996, p.2) Dilthey (1976, p. 161) explains: "reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience." (as cited by Bruner, 1986, p.4) The anthropology of experience focuses on how individuals experience events and how they are received by consciousness. Dilthey does not just refer to cognition when writing about experience but also to feelings and expectations. Fernandez adds that experience does not only come to us through words, but also in images and impressions. (as cited by Bruner, p.4) Through my use of different sets of data, which will be explained later on, I seek to capture these images and impressions of experience. According to Bruner (p.5), social scientists have focused on "verbalizations at the expense of visualizations". Lived experience is then understood as both word and image. An experience is personal and one cannot observe it from the outside. Bruner adds that human beings do not only engage in but also structure an action. Telling about experiences includes events and feelings as well as reflections about these events and feelings. (Bruner, 1986)

One limitation to studying experience is that we can never fully understand someone else's experiences. People may be disposed to share their experiences however there is a possibility

that they are not fully conscious of or able to express certain facets of their experiences. People may also censor or repress certain aspects of their experience. (Bruner, 1986)

Dilthey suggests that a way of overcoming the limitations to the understanding of individual experience is to "transcend the narrow sphere of experience by interpreting expressions". Bruner explains that "interpreting" refers to understanding and hermeneutics and that "expressions" refer to representations, performances or texts. (Bruner, 1986) In that way, I will seek to interpret the representations and texts describing my respondents' experiences that I collected from the field. However, their own descriptions having constructed a new meaning of their experiences; they will be further interpreted by my own understanding of them. In addition, Jackson (1996, p.9) underlines the idea that it is illusory to pretend being able to absent oneself from the limitations of history and the particularities of one's situation. Merleau-Ponty explains the phenomenological method as a way "human beings actively make the world over to themselves and remake it over to others". (1964, p.71-82)

Inspired by Sartre's words, "man is characterized above all by his going beyond a situation, and by what he succeeds in making of what he has been made – even if he never recognizes himself in his objectification" (1968:91, as cited by Jackson p.11); I am interested in how women in Northern Uganda move forward with their lives beyond their experiences of displacement and return and how they interpret and narrate these experiences.

Hermeneutical foundations and Being-in-the-World

According to Schuster (2006), hermeneutics is a way of being in the world as well as a method for the interpretation of empirical data. In this study, I have based myself on the philosophical discussions of Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur in order to attempt gaining better understanding of the phenomenon of return experienced by women in Northern Uganda. I seek to understand the meaning of their lived experience, thus focusing on human experience and subjectivity. Uncovering the meaning of being is at the center of Heidegger's philosophical work (Röing et al., 2009). In his book *Being and Time,* he discusses his concept of *Dasein,* "the being-in-the-world of a person or the general being-there of human existence." (Röing et al. 2009) According to him, a person is aware of his own being and mortality and of his relation to others. Alongside others, the experience of everyday existence generates for Dasein

a sense of ease of being in the world, or sense of being at home and an opportunity to escape from death's inexorableness. Heidegger further develops three existential aspects of being in the world: understanding, attunement, and discourse. Understanding may refer to finding meaning and place for one's existence and becoming conscious of the prospects one has in the world. Attunement is a way of explaining one's state of mind or mood [*Stimmung*]. Heidegger infers that one's mood contributes significantly to the sense that one has of belonging to the world. Moods illustrate the variety of ways, in which things matter to a person, which suggests that they are essential in identifying one's opportunities in the world. (Ratcliffe, 2013, p.3) Moods impact our comprehension of being in the world. Discourse is the expression of Dasein through language, thus enabling the sharing of being and meaning between people and the making sense of existence with others

Another fundamental aspect of Heidegger's work is the notion of *Being-with* [*Mitsein*]. In his words, "so far as Dasein is at all, it has Being-with-one-another as its kind of Being" (Being and Time, 26:163). In addition, Heidegger's philosophy is interested in 'dwelling' as a form of Being. In this sense, is it interesting to look at how Being unfolds. In his *Contributions,* Heidegger is concerned with how one appropriates an event [*Ereignis*]. Being thus unfolds through a series of appropriating events and making sense of them. In *Building, Dwelling Thinking* (1954), the idea of dwelling is of central importance, bringing forward the idea that one dwells where one is *at home* or where one *has a place*. This sense of place is also an introduction to Heidegger's existential concept of spatiality. According to Wheeler, "in dwelling, then, Dasein is located within a set of sense-making practices and structures with which it is familiar." (Wheeler, 2013) Based on Zimmerman's understanding, Heidegger explains our need to "dwell" on earth suitably by "sparing and preserving" beings, by "letting beings be" (1986, p.247).

It is also interesting to explore Heidegger's concept of safeguarding as it may apply to Northern Uganda's post-conflict situation. Wheeler presents Heidegger's idea that for humankind to enter into safeguarding, it requires the understanding and thinking of Being as a gift given to us in history. Here, the term gift does not have theological foundations but rather expresses a sense of 'secularized sacredness' (Wheeler, 2013). As previously discussed, the idea of being-in-the-world infers an understanding that existence is a being-towards-death.

This recognition may lead to insight into the meaning of existence, placing value and caring about living in the present.

According to Heidegger, the essence of dwelling is in *safeguarding.* It is "a way of Being in which human beings save the earth, receive the sky as sky, await the divinities as divinities, and initiate their own essential being as mortals." (Wheeler, 2013) Heidegger describes this as "the fourfold in its essential unfolding" (*Building Dwelling Thinking*, p. 352)

This concept, although belonging to European philosophy, is extremely interesting to look at when observing women's experiences in Northern Uganda. Heidegger writes about an existential malaise that modern Western humans experience due to their failure to safeguard in his *Letter on Humanism.* (Wheeler, 2013) In Northern Uganda, however, it seems that people dwell in *safeguarding*. The cultural aspect of accepting what happens in everyday life and the decisions made by the spiritual world or divinities is very palpable in Uganda. It relates to Finnström's description of existential realism in Uganda, whereby people seem to conclude that "everything is up to God". (Finnström, 2008, p.6) People reflect upon their lives, which they view as always tied to the wider world, earth, sky, and divinities. In the unstable context of war, displacement and violence, which are impossible to make sense of, it is meaningful "to keep the relationship with the spiritual and greater world active." (Finnström, 2008, p.6)

An embodied Being-in-the-world

For Merleau-Ponty, Being-in-the-world is a bodily being. He describes consciousness as a "being towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body" (1962, p. 137). The subject of a world is therefore always an embodied subject. Young (2005) explains that the lived body is always entwined with historical and social meaning and that there is no situation "without embodied location and interaction." She adds that Simone de Beauvoir emphasized this idea by bringing forward sexual difference as an essential aspect of the situated being-in-the-world. (2005, p.7) This may be an important take on Being-in-the-world when doing research with women in Northern Uganda. These women have often experienced forms of physical violence affecting who they are as an embodied subject. Young's words that the lived body is always entwined with historical and social meaning may have an even greater meaning for women whose bodies were exploited in the war. Their bodies become even more entwined with

historical and political meaning. It would be interesting to find out whether that is the case and how women live with embodiment of the war and of the transition to peace.

"Euro-Centrist" Limitations

It seems of utmost importance to address the question of how European philosophy might address a non-European world. (Jackson, 1996, p.18) Adorno criticized the intuitional and essentializing aspects of Heidegger's work. Feyerabend (1987, p.274) added that it is a "phenomenal conceit" to write about "the true being of humanity" (qtd. In Jackson, 1996).

When using phenomenological theories in ethnography, it is essential to resist generalizing concepts based on one's own self-comprehension. Edward Said argues that generalizing allows researchers to distance themselves from their own societies and identify with and lend their voices to "all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug" (qtd. In Jackson, 1996, p.19). In this sense, generalizing is a way of creating solidarity but not scientific knowledge.

According to Michael Jackson, the vital concern for anthropologists is "the social reality of the lifeworld and forms of social consciousness" (1996, p.19) It is important for me to keep in mind when using phenomenological theories in ethnography that I am not trying to essentialize the women's experiences but rather to give a voice to them regarding the reality they describe and how they make sense of these experiences.

2.2. Concepts

Displacement, return, transition, homecoming?

The idea of returning home or moving back to a return village is something I seek to explore in my research. Does return mean homecoming for those who have lived in the camps? How did they transition from the camp to the village? Does it correspond to their memory of home or does it meet their expectations? Is return homecoming? According to Warmer, voluntary repatriation designates a return to a home or community that the returnee was associated with before being displaced. (Warmer, 1994, p.162) Often, humanitarian organizations present repatriation as a form of 'homecoming' to a previous familiar life and a simple solution to

restore life the way it was before people were forced into displacement. (Stefansson, 2004, 171)

Homecoming, when defined as a return to a former 'home' or housing situation may be misleading as most returnees have had their houses, gardens and shrines destroyed during the war. (Omata, 2011) In fact, in Northern Uganda, many of the displaced were first resettled in a transit camp before returning to their villages. In addition, the issue of land conflicts means that many are unable to *return* to their former *home*, especially women, as will be described later on. As former displaced populations do not necessarily return to the same specific place they had left prior to being displaced, there may be a duality between *resettlement* and *return home*.

One of my women participants described her experience resettling to a transit camp and later dealing with a land dispute. 'From Anaka, I first came to a satellite camp on my compound. There used to be soldiers all around here. Slowly, people started moving out until the government said that everyone had to leave. That was last year. Everyone had to leave except those to whom this land belonged. Some displaced people are still here. I gave part of my land to the school to help them and now they want all of the land and they want to displace me. I am now in a land dispute with the school after the government decision for people to move to a smaller camp.'

In addition, most of the youth do not have lived memories of home or they have faint and perhaps constructed memories. The conflict having lasted over 20 years and the population of Northern Uganda having been forced into camps starting in 1996, many youth were born during the war and amidst displacement. Their idea of home is therefore a construction based on stories they were told and their experience of return may not meet their expectations or hopes. (Hammond 2004, Lubkemann 2008, Zieck 2004)

Previous researchers seem to demonstrate that returning refugees often meet challenges when going through processes of reintegration (Eastmond & Ojendal 1999). These challenges may ruin the positive expectations or dreams of home that displaced people construct in their imagination. (Cornish et al. 1999, p. 282)

Another interesting factor to consider when studying the experience of return is that people who have lived in displacement camps have built new networks and friendships in that setting, which Marx (1990) refers to as "social world" (as cited in Omata, 2011). Unless they move back to the same places together, these relations might be lost upon resettlement or return. Also, the setting of return villages is very different from the way people lived in camps. In the rural return areas, villages are further apart and people live with much larger distances to travel and may not be able to rely on the "mutual assistance" they had in the camps where they were living in confined space. (Omata, 2011)

According to Omata (2011), based on his research findings from interviews he conducted with returnees in Liberia, the success of return and reintegration is very much dependent on good social networks. As opposed to the idea of returning to a familiar home, people often experience a new beginning, a life to be rebuilt in an environment that can be both difficult and unfamiliar. Return may be considered as the end of displacement but it can also be seen as a new beginning, which may lead to new, continued or aggravated vulnerabilities. (Black & Koser, 1999, p.3)

According to Stein's (1986) model of refugee experience, refugees face widespread distress and aggressiveness. This is due to displacing their survivor's guilt onto others. They often battle anxiety, depression and apathy. They sometimes feel that their existence is alienated after that they have experienced.

The case of Northern Uganda is one of mass return in a context that remains fragile. This type of setting creates further challenges as everything has been destroyed during the war and there is a lack of services in the return areas. This can lead to major obstacles for the returnees to rebuild their lives sustainably. (Long 2010, p.6)

Displaced populations should not be considered as a homogenous group and generalizations should not be made about their experience of return. In fact, as people within this category are very different, they also have different coping mechanisms or ways of adjusting. (Allen & Turton, 1996, p.17). This is a caution I consider to be very important when analyzing the stories of return that I collected in the field. They are an assemblage of stories, which offer a

snapshot of conflict-displaced women returnees' experience and in no way a set of conclusions as to how women cope in such circumstances.

Gender-based violence and gender relations

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines gender-based violence as 'an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will, and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between male and females.' (2005) This definition was also adopted in UNICEF's Guidelines for Gender-based Violence for Camps in Northern and Eastern Uganda, launched in Northern Uganda on 13 and 14 February 2007. (Okello et al., 2007, p. 433)

This definition incorporates legal, physical and psychological dimensions of GBV, broader than previous definitions, which assumed that GBV affects only women; such as the definition used by the UN in 1993. (Okello et al., 2007, p.433) When I refer to the gender-based violence that women experience in Uganda, I am thus approaching the concept with its wider understanding of harmful legal, physical or psychological acts that are perpetrated against women on the basis of their socially ascribed gender, without nonetheless assuming that such acts affect only women.

According to a 2010 Amnesty International report, gender-based violence is widespread throughout Uganda and often justified by "traditional values". This violence manifests through rape, domestic abuse, and forced and early marriages. The report also states that an estimated two-thirds of Ugandan households experience domestic violence. However, there are no across-the-board statistics on situations of gender-based violence in the country, which may signify a lack of concern towards this issue.

Despite the prevalence of GBV in Uganda, regulatory framework include Uganda's 1995 Constitution, the Penal Code Act, the Trial on Indictment Act, the Succession Act, the Divorce Act and the Children's Statute, which collectively criminalize early and forced marriage, defilement, forced prostitution, rape, indecent assault and female genital mutilation, among other violations. However, Amnesty International strongly condemns the Ugandan justice

system for begin inaccessible and unaffordable (Amnesty, 2010). Changes made to laws relating to GBV to broaden and clarify the elements of offenses like defilement and to allow for more severe punishment of male and female offenders may be a sign of progress. On the other hand, GBV is still very much hidden and stigmatized.

When Chris Dolan conducted workshops in Northern Uganda, he found that his participants held a general assumption that women are different from men and that they are weaker, less capable and should abide by their husband's culture. In addition, they would often be blamed for domestic disputes or unfortunate events in the family. (Dolan, 2009, p. 192)

Traditionally, once a woman gets married and 'brides wealth' has been paid, she is expected to move to her husband's village. Her status there is akin to an asset owned by the husband and she loses her own clan identity. While she now belongs to her husband's clan she will generally not obtain full rights and will be considered as an outsider to the clan. (Dolan, 2009, p. 193) This leads to much mistrust from the clan towards her and her being blamed for any misfortune that arises. Her role is to bare children, which in turn belong to her husband's family and clan. If she were to divorce from her husband, she would have to leave her children behind.

The World Food Programme (WFP) explains that women and girls in Uganda are 'prone to malnutrition as a result of household food allocation patterns favoring males' (WFP, 1999, p.17). In fact, historically, women were not allowed to eat specific foods like chicken for example. (Dolan, 2009, p.193)

Women's voices are also silenced. For instance, women are not invited to participate in clan meetings and do not hold any traditional leadership, which is male dominated. (Dolan, 2009, p. 1993)

From coping to world-making

Sverker Finnström suggests that people in Northern Uganda "experience a lessened control over ontological security in everyday life." (Finnström, 2008, p.5) He explains that faced with

adversity, people seem to conclude that "everything is up to God". Arguably, this could be a form of coping mechanism, in fact interpreting these kinds of remarks as fatalistic fail to take into consideration an important point. Finnström understands their position in terms of lived and existential realism, which might imply that as people reflect upon their lives, they are always tied to the wider world and to history. (Finnström, 2008, p.6) In the unstable context of war, displacement and violence, which are impossible to make sense of, it is meaningful "to keep the relationship with the spiritual and greater world active." According to him, this is an example of people's existential effort to cope with the complex situation in order to maintain some form of control over it.

Finnström also explains the idea that people seek to establish control and balance in their life (2008, p.14), despite their experience of war and displacement. He refers to Jackson's phenomenological anthropology where "control" suggests "governance and adjustment between self and other", inferring dialogue and self-reflection.   (Jackson, 1998, p.18) According to Jackson, "control" supposes a pursuit of balance in daily life, in an existential way. When using the term "balance" he refers to an "ongoing dialectic in which persons vie and strategize in order to avoid nullification as well as to achieve some sense of governing their own fate" (Jackson, 1998, p 18-19). In my research I use these concepts of control, balance and existential pursuit as some of the ways that women cope with the transition and experience of return and overcome the challenges of gender-based violence.

Story-telling: the production of multi-layered stories, different kinds of truths, words and silences

Stories were fluid and multilayered (Utas 2004, p. 230). At times, the stories I collected in Northern Uganda would contradict each other and different actors would present their own versions of the story as the truth, *adaa* in Luo, about a particular experience. Some of the women I interviewed also seemed to change details from their stories of lived experience during different interviews. This led me to understand that there are different kinds of truth and ways to relate an event. According to Jackson, phenomenology starts with a strong understanding that there are relative truths within the world (1998, p.180). Arguably, the inconsistencies within stories and the disagreements over a particular event between my informants may have revealed elements that were at stake in their lives and in their processes

of returning home. It may also be a result of the highly politicized environment of a post-conflict society leading to different versions of history. Bruner wrote that the pragmatics of storytelling are most significant. In particular, it is interesting to understand how people handle different truths in their lives and how they make sense of their experiences and how they choose to transform this understanding into storytelling. Bruner used the term storymaking most adequately. (Bruner, 2002) [Lanken, 2007, p.23]

One important concept, which I had not identified prior to engaging in my field research, was that of silence. The fact that no sense can be made of what has happened in Northern Uganda and that it is very difficult for people to talk about the worst things they have experienced led to my respondents' alternating between stories and silences. I believe these silences have a lot more importance than I was initially seeing and may be an indicator of the ultimate powerlessness people experience over their past experiences. As I will further develop in a later chapter, dominant narratives such as those of the media, aid organizations or the government also silence people.

Whether to speak or not to speak still remains a way of expressing or revealing the unrepeatable. When something is said, something may also be left non-verbalized. There is a word in Luo, *akwiila,* which means both whispered and secret. The women I worked with would alternate between whispering to me their truths or keeping secret their experiences, both of which can be described as *akwiila*.

3.Data Collection and Methods

In this chapter, I will detail the research processes of my fieldwork as well as describe the data collection methods I used.

3.1. Narrative Inquiry

According to Paul Ricoeur, there are three modalities to the permanence of self which correspond to three aspects of personal identity: "identité-idem"; the character traits one has acquired, "identité-ipse"; defined in ethical terms as the maintenance of self, and "identité narrative"; the capacity of a person to construct narratives about his lived experience. (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 149) The construction of this third narrative identity is only possible through revisiting oral histories or fictional stories. (Johann, 2013)

Narrative inquiry is the study of experience comprehended narratively. It is a form of qualitative methodology, which allows the researcher to think narratively about experience through a reflexive process of moving from field research to field data to a final research text. The conceptual framework is created through commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place, allowing different kinds of data and analyses to be used and highlighting ethical issues. Narrative inquiry helps shape new theoretical understandings of people's experiences. The experience of living and telling stories about lived experiences is omnipresent and very ancient as well as the practice of recounting stories we were told. These stories are a way for human beings to fill our world with meaning and to solicit one another's help in constructing communities. Narrative methodologies, however, are relatively new in the field of social science research. (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p.35).

Narrative inquiry is interested in details of a life as narrated by a person and is a mix of interdisciplinary analysis, approaches and methods. Life stories can describe a narrative about a facet of a person's life or a turning point.

According to Denzin and Lincoln, narratives are a distinct form of discourse that enables the understanding and organizing of experiences. They are verbal actions and constructions and they are facilitated and limited by social resources and situations leading to potential similarities and differences across narratives. "A central tenet of the narrative turn is that speakers *construct* events through narrative rather than simply refer to events." (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, p. 656) Narratives are interactive and socially located, which infers that stories are variable and situational. In addition, researchers may also be viewed as narrators as they go through their own process of interpretation.

An important aspect of the narrative inquiry approach is the questioning of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. Interviewees must be addressed as narrators who have voices of their own and stories to tell rather than answers to specific questions (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 660).

While collecting data, it is important for the researcher to invite new stories. In order to achieve that, it is critical for the narrative inquirer to question what makes a story worthy, to understand the ways that the context influences the narrator's voice and to accept the uncertainty of what the broader research question might be. Despite this, the researcher should organize good questions without expectations of a resulting story. When interpreting the data, the narrative inquirer should listen to the voices *within* a narrative instead of *across* them. Narrative inquiry also emphasizes the idea that particular stories must not be generalized and that they have value without generalizability (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 665). Narrative inquiry is a phenomenology that denies the claim to any intrinsic truth.

For the narrator, narrative inquiry can be related to social change. Storytelling may facilitate social change, may arise from an urgent need to express one's voice or may challenge dominant assumptions or narratives. In particular, interpretive strategies which "reveal the stranglehold of oppressive metanarratives (…) open up possibilities for social change." (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 668).

Basing myself on anthropologist Bruner's words: "expressions are constitutive and shaping, not as abstract texts but in the activity that actualizes the text" (1986, p.7), I understand that storytelling is a skill, a necessity and something that may be observed in the form of

expressions. According to Bruner, narratives surround us and stories are an essential part of human existence. Narratives can help us alleviate conflicts and help us make sense of events as well as ease suffering. They also contribute to constructing self-identities. (Bruner, 2003)

When presenting results from my data I will seek to take an analytical approach to the production of multilayered stories, which may convey different kinds of truths. (Lanken, 2007) There are different truths within the world, relative to where we situate ourselves (Jackson 1998, p.180). Northern Uganda's post conflict context creates a highly politicized environment for the production of narratives. (Lanken, 2007) I am particularly interested in the pragmatics of storytelling, how that particular context creates meaning in women's lives, how they make sense of their lived experiences of war and return and how they express this through storytelling and visual narratives. (Lanken 2007, Bruner 2002) Stories are seen as part of a 'domain of actions' in the present rather than only in a 'notional domain' focusing on the content in the past. (Holy & Stuchlik, 1984) According to Widdershoven (1993), people only become aware of the importance of their experiences by telling stories about them and by 'fusing them with other stories'. "It is through our stories that we construct ourselves as part of our world." (Brockmeier, 2001, p.54)

3.2. Participant observation

I used this method in order to understand people's daily struggles and coping strategies as well as to become better acquainted with their culture, traditions and living conditions. I lived in Gulu town over a period of four months and shared a small apartment with a young Acholi aid worker. Living with her allowed me to become much better familiarized with local customs and stories. She helped me find my way around town and became my guide and confidante. She had grown up in a village nearby and was a teenager at the height of the Northern Uganda insurgency. On several occasions she had to flee her home or boarding school and join the youth child commuters to avoid being kidnapped. She recalled having to hide in the bush when armed men came to her school or sleeping in courtyards in Gulu town with hundreds of other children as a survival strategy. Sometimes she would be tempted to run back to her parents' house for protection but did not want to put them in danger. However, her story did not summarize itself as one of coping with war and surviving. She embodied the perfect

example of a young woman who turned her experiences around and was rebuilding a world of her own. Wanting to help others, her experiences led her to work with refugees in neighboring countries and with IDPs in Uganda. During my stay, she introduced me to many other Ugandan aid workers and to her friends and family members. She taught me that everyone has a story about the war but that it does not define the Acholi people. Her own understanding of being an Acholi woman was one of strength, stubbornness and capability. Observing Acholi women, in Gulu town, in return villages and in remaining camps strongly confirmed this idea that women had an incredible inner strength and amazing capacity for rebuilding their homes and communities.

During my fieldwork, I took every opportunity I had to meet different people and hear their stories. While I visited Anaka camp, I befriended a few women who still lived in the camp. They were very warm and welcoming. One of these women invited me to her house and we played with her children. Because she ran out of candles to light up her hut, we sat in the dark chatting. These encounters were strong bonding moments. The next day I brought her some candles.

In the return villages, I was able to interview women returnees thanks to the help of the organization Straight Talk. While I was not interning with them, they found my research interesting and offered to help me out. They had to conduct gender-based violence trainings and assessments in several of the return villages around Anaka and offered to have me follow them, attend the trainings and select women participants. When they explained my research to the women in the villages, I was overwhelmed with a large number of women who wanted to tell me their stories.

Men were also approaching me, asking me why I would not interview them. Although my research focused on the experience of women, these men challenged my reasoning and I sat down to talk with several of them. This proved to be very insightful and I learned a lot about their feeling of hopelessness. By focusing my research on women, I was recreating what many aid agencies had been doing during and after the conflict. During my time in Northern Uganda, I found that very few programs focused on men's specific needs. Spending time in the villages and informally conversing with people offered me a much wider perspective on the issues I intended to study.

I was lucky to be accompanied by an organization that many viewed as trustworthy and that had a strong relationship with the community. Them providing me with translators was also immensely helpful.

While being in the villages, I accompanied some of my informants to their homes, fields, burial sites, markets and learned a lot about the distances they had to travel and the geographic spaces they encountered. Two of the most striking things I observed were that women seemed to be working in all aspects of the community and carrying out very difficult tasks and that the communities were plagued with an alcoholism problem. While I mostly saw men sipping on liquors from plastic bags at all hours of the day, I also met quite a few women who appeared as drunk.

3.3. Semi-structured interviews, conversations & storytelling

As my concern was to collect life stories and seek to understand the lived experience of conflict displaced women returnees, I decided that the most appropriate type of interview would be semi-structured, thus allowing me to use questions as a frame towards conversation while also giving my respondents the flexibility to share information they considered relevant.

During the November 2011 to February 2012 period, I was able to conduct in-depth semi structured qualitative interviews with 12 women in two different return villages, surrounding Anaka IDP camp. The women belonged to different age groups, ranging from 20 years old to 65 years old. The aim was to collect varied stories, experiences and perspectives but mostly to give a voice to women who expressed interest in sharing it. Of the 12 women respondents, 7 of them were between 20 and 28 years old. The other 5 women were between 46 and 65 years old. The names of the women will not be mentioned in this thesis, to preserve their anonymity. The names of the two villages where I conducted my interviews will also not be mentioned for security concerns.

As described by Ogora (2013), high-level government and military authorities as well as local and community leaders are very important in contributing to the success of a research project as they provide entry to camps and access to respondents. When I first tried entering a camp located close to Gulu, I was confronted with this reality and had to explain my work to the

local authorities and military. Once I gained their trust and understanding, I was able to approach residents of the camp. Local administrative community leaders were also instrumental in giving me access to certain communities.

The Acholi people are very hospitable and welcoming and I was lucky to be able to talk to both women and men easily. One of the difficulties was to make fixed appointments with my interpretors, drivers and informants. It was very difficult to plan meetings ahead of time as each had their own interpretation of time. I found that the easiest way to plan for my interviews was to let villagers know I would visit them in the morning or the afternoon. At times, this would require having to wait for a long time, waiting for them to come back from the fields.

My interview process was guided by questions and themes to encourage story telling but the women were encouraged to discuss any other theme they found relevant. All my interviews were conducted in English with the help of a translator as most of my respondents spoke too little English to answer my questions in detail. Therefore, they would tell detailed stories in their native language, Luo, while my interpreters would try to translate what was being said as accurately as possible.

One of the key elements to conducting such interviews successfully was the building of rapport with my respondents. It was important to create a trusting and safe environment for such conversations to take place. One way for me to build rapport with my respondents was through the time I spent volunteering with the Norwegian Refugee Council as well as the time I spent visiting them.

It was very important for me to take part in the community life in any way possible. While my respondents treated me as a visitor, they also shared with me their local produce, showed me around their villages and invited me to ceremonies. One of my respondents' mother, whom I had met, passed away during the time I was in Northern Uganda. When I returned to the village, my respondent asked me to visit her again so we could go to her mother's burial site together. Thus, I planned for another visit and accompanied her to the grave. These kinds of anecdotal interactions, I believe, contributed to my acceptance into the community.

According to Århem (1994), as anthropologists it is important to take part in the community life, interrogations, enjoyments and distresses of our respondents' daily experiences.

Storytelling as healing

Storytelling is often a form of healing and coping. According to Betancourt, it is a way of distancing oneself from your own story. She also writes about the pain that comes with remembering.

"When you live through the trauma of having your most basic rights violated, the experience becomes ingrained in your genetic makeup. What you lived, and how you lived it becomes your new identity. Remembering is painful. And telling your story involves submerging yourself deeply and intensely in your own past, bringing forth a flood of uncontrolled emotion. You become conscious of your most glaring vulnerabilities. But sharing is also your way out. Every time you tell your story, you can distance yourself from it, take a step back. You learn to remember without reliving, and begin to recover." (Betancourt)

During my interviews with women, I was always accompanied by a trained psychologist or therapist, being aware of the trauma some of these women had experienced and the painful task of remembering.

As Betancourt mentions, every time you tell your story, you begin to recover. Some of the women I interviewed told me that they felt a huge sense of relief following our conversations. They felt as though no one had ever listened to their stories. One of my informants told me: "after talking with you, I have a new found hope in life."

In addition, I conducted key information interviews in order to better understand the context of the women's lived experience, this study involved interviewing many different aid workers from the following organizations: the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), NRC, Straight Talk, ARC, FIDA, War Child Canada and Victims Voices Counseling (VIVO). It seemed also relevant to interview local and cultural leaders, including a traditional leader from Ker Kal Kwaro and a local camp leader in Anaka (LC1). In order to also include an academic voice, an interview was organized with an IPSS Gulu University Professor and Researcher. The names of my informants will also be concealed to protect their anonymity.

3.5. Visual ethnography

As Margaret Mead proposes, visual methods in anthropology are instruments, which can "refine and expand the areas of accurate observation" (Margaret Mead, 2003). She describes and explains the field's attachment to verbal descriptions, in particular in the context of research where the fieldworker has to rely on the memory of the informants rather than upon observation of actual events. The informant has only words to describe past events. This explains why anthropology has become a science of words where visual methods are still somewhat contested.

Photo-voice approach & ethnographic photography

In order to give a chance to my respondents' to express their lived experience through images, I chose to employ the photo-voice method. Photography is a process that has the potential of reflecting the communities back upon themselves and revealing the daily social and political realities that have an impact on people's lives.

With a background in documentary filmmaking, I decided to put visual media at the center of my work with displaced women in Northern Uganda. I trained my main respondents in how to use cameras and then offered them an opportunity to use the cameras to illustrate how they were rebuilding a sense of home in their communities, what defined 'home' and the memory of 'home' to them. What they revealed was how they are being powerful agents of change, as they reconstruct their communities. Those involved in the project were excited to share their view on the process and to be given a voice.

Can one photograph memory? It is a challenging question that I seek to explore through my work. By allowing women to photograph elements that make them feel at home and resonate as memories of home, we get a visual glimpse of the past and the present.

For the purpose of my research, I asked each woman participant to take five photographs of five places (or elements) in their new home or village that make them feel at home, at peace or that reminded them of home. They were free to interpret the task as they wished. Afterwards, we reviewed the photographs together which triggered many stories being told about these places and helped me identify common themes of living with peace again.

Photographs to document change in particular elements of culture

As sharing life stories through photography and video may promote critical dialogue within the community, I was delighted to collect success stories from women which can serve as an encouragement to other women still living in the camps and also to show policy makers the role of women in development and post-conflict peace building. In particular, I worked with a group of traditional dancers from Anaka camp, who had started a savings and loans association through which they were able to better their lives, support each other in dealing with violence and send their children to school.

Photography can be an extremely powerful tool in giving a voice to women but also to share this voice with the communities, on the local level, national level and international level. It is especially relevant in communities where literacy is very low.

Mapping memories

In addition to using photography as a visual method in my research, I also asked women to map their journey back home on a piece of paper. I asked them to map out the whole experience of returning home and include obstacles they faced but also details they remembered about the journey such as sounds, smells, visual details to make the journey come alive for someone who wasn't there, based on the mapping memories method used by Miller (2011).

I provided them with paper and colored markers. I had not expected that this mapping activity would end up being such an astounding icebreaker as women laughed so much while drawing and while describing their drawings. Some of them who had never gone to school were holding a marker for the first time. Some were very shy with the endless possibilities of color on paper while others were so excited they wanted to draw more maps. Many more women who had not initially been identified as participants in my study gathered around us and wanted to draw maps too.

The maps themselves ended up being less detailed visually than I would have thought them to be. Someone looking at them out of context without any information would probably not guess what they represent. However, they lead to the women telling me many life stories that they did not include in their life story interviews. It also helped me build rapport, trust and closeness with them.

I had expected that some participants might feel uncomfortable drawing and told them they could share a story instead. However, all my participants were very much willing to try mapping their story and journey.

After drawing the maps, we discussed the significance of what they had drawn and identified commonalities in their stories. The stories and maps had many common elements. All the participants represented their homes at the end of the journey and described it as a place where they experienced peace. In many of the maps, nature and animals had a strong significance, both as obstacles and opportunities. River crossings, forests, snakes were some of the challenges the women faced during their journey home, as shown on their maps. At the same time, the women also drew water, trees, plants, livestock as examples of their new opportunities and life in peace. Some women focused on the positive elements they encountered during their journeys such as access to boreholes or churches while others also included unpleasant memories such as facing the threat of armed men on the way home.

3.6. The analysis of the research material / Reading the experiences

Qualitative data analysis

The analysis process of my qualitative research notes began in the field. While observing and interviewing, I started making notes of concepts that appeared likely to help me understand the women's experiences. The first step I took was to read my notes and transcripts of interviews while adding notes or themes in the margins. This helped me identify important issues that the women were bringing up as well as issues they seemed to avoid talking about. These were an initial way of coding the data. Some of these themes included words such as "coping", "gender-based violence", "changing gender relations", "traditions", etc.

Because my research material was solely qualitative and included various forms of expressions, observations and narratives, the core of my data was formed by my notes and interpretations. As best expressed by Diamond, "the basic data are these observations and conversations, the actual words of people reproduced to the best of my ability from the field notes" (Diamond 1992:7).

At first, the task seemed daunting. The amount of notes I had taken, added with the many pictures and maps, made it look like a never-ending project. I wondered what to do with all this information. As noted by Kvale, one hour of interviewing someone can result in 20 to 25 pages of notes. (Kvale, 1996:169) I did not let myself count the number of pages I had accumulated, to avoid being overwhelmed, however I made copies of every single page I had in order not to lose any of this wealth of information. One copy would go in my luggage and another copy would go in my hand baggage when travelling back to Europe, out of caution.

After each conversation, interview or encounter, I wrote notes immediately or when coming home in the evening each day. Writing these notes were helpful in already becoming aware of some of the challenges the women were facing and how they were overcoming these challenges as they returned home after living in the camp.

The next step I took was to document all of the data I had. I made a list of all the interviews, stories, pictures, conversations and maps I had. According to Adams, documentation is essential to qualitative research. It serves as a method to keep track of a high volume of notes and helps with outlining the analytic method and supports the process of conceptualizing the data. (Adams, 2007: 326)

Conceptualizing and coding

Through interacting with my data again once back in Europe and in consulting with professors, I realized that one of the concepts I had defined as 'coping' was misrepresentative of the women's experience of moving back home. Through revisiting their narratives I realized that what they had described had a more empowering connotation. They were actively rebuilding their homes and seeking peace, despite all of the challenges they also mentioned. I progressively refined my concept of 'coping' to 'home-making'. The concept I was first alerted to through observations in the field changed as I investigated its meaning. (Adams, 2007: 329)

Once I had identified major concepts, I also looked at how these concepts may influence each other. The challenging idea I dealt with was that of silence and of truth. I struggled to decide whether silence itself constituted a concept. I decided that it was rather a transversal reality in my encounters with women of Northern Uganda. It was not something they chose to talk about actively, though mentions were made of choosing silence under certain circumstances. It was something that was present in their narratives, in a non-verbalized way.

I was also confronted with the issue of truth and lies. In my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to visit another camp in Unyama that had hosted about 24,000 people and was being phased out. There were regular reports of armed violence in the camp and its surroundings and my colleagues were very wary about letting me visit the area. This camp was much closer to Gulu town. My colleagues and I met women who were still living in the camp despite the fact that most camp residents had already returned home and that the landowner of the site was fighting to have his land back. They reported to us that they experienced violent threats to leave their homes. Some huts were attacked and destroyed at night. Some women spoke of sexual violence as a means to scare them away. When asked why they were staying in the camp, they responded that they had nowhere else to go. These women all explained that they were widows, or separated from their husbands or without families. When we confronted the local authorities about this, they responded to us that these women were prostitutes and that it was the reason why they were staying in the camp, as it was a place of livelihood for them.

'Why don't they go back to their homes? They have to be prostitutes since they stay here. Look at what they painted on the door of their hut.' (Man points to 'Home of Love' inscription on a door)

The women told us that this was not true and that the authorities were using this narrative to discredit them, including their children in school who were now being stigmatized, as prostitution is extremely taboo in Northern Uganda.

An HIV positive single mother of seven children expressed her dismay: 'how could I be a prostitute? People know my HIV status. There is no prostitution here, only negative attitudes and bad talking about us.'

One of my colleagues who was also trying to make sense of these different stories told me: 'because they are not from here, they are accused of being prostitutes. It's more of a land issue in reality.'

'The issue was taken to the police and they came to monitor at night. They would knock at your door at anytime. After a while they stopped when they realized there was nothing in the homes. If they wanted to get prostitutes they could find them in a bar or in town.' (woman in Unyama camp)

These two opposing sides to the story reflected the fact that some stories may be true, while others may not. However, I realized that what mattered in this case was not whether one of the narratives was true but rather the fact that these women were being evicted from their homes against their will. I also learned that the women's stories were the truths that they chose to tell. Whether or not it reflected the reality, it was interesting in the sense that it taught us something about their culture and their choices of narrative. Also, as Jackson explains, there are different truths within the world, relative to where we situate ourselves (1998, p.180).

While life stories are mostly linear, I wanted to avoid discussing the data in a linear way, as it would not do justice to the many sets of data I collected. After dividing the stories into four main periods of the women's lives (life before the war, fleeing the war, living in the camp, returning home), I instead decided to analyze the initial concepts I had noted in the field and researched links between the concepts I had categorized.

A qualitative data analysis method I found very interesting and tried to draw ideas from is that of ethnomethodology, which focuses on the social world in which people live in and how they 'create reality' rather than describing the reality itself. (Adams, 2007: 336) As described by Gubrium and Holstein (1997), 'the focus shifts from the scenic features of everyday life onto the ways through which the world comes to be experienced as real, concrete, factual and "out there" (as cited by Adams, 2007: 336). The focus is on how reality is constructed and not on what it is.

I used color-coding when reviewing all of my data, to visually bring forward the most important concepts I had already pre-identified. The photo-voice images I collected helped me learn how the women 'see' the social world they live in and how they create images. It helped me categorize non-verbal expressions as well by identifying both commonalities in the images but also in the stories that accompanied the photographs. Through creating images, women were also constructing the reality they chose to present, which was an important data set when reviewing all the material through an ethnomethodology lens.

Through the photographs, I learned more about the women's social worlds as they saw it and reacted to it than I did through interviews. The photo voice method also engaged the women participants as part of the research process and discussing the pictures together also involved them in the coding and categorizing process. (Adams, 2007: 346)

3.7. Ethics

Throughout my entire research process, it was very important for me not to further marginalize or disempower participants. It was also crucial to consider the security of participants and not put them further at risk. I tried to make sure that the individuals participating understood the purpose of the research, understood their right to withdraw at any time, and their rights to privacy.

Miller (2011) argues that telling a personal story can be an empowering experience but that it can also be an experience that increases a participant's isolation.

In terms of the use of photography and video, the researcher might impose his own view of the culture and people that are presented in his use of media. Margaret Mead argues that this can never entirely be prevented but should not forbid the use of filmmaking in ethnographic research. On the contrary, she argues that in some cases visual representations might convey a stronger meaning than words.

Vulnerabilities and ethics

Ogora (2013) reminds us that researchers in post-conflict settings must be cognizant of the vulnerability of victims in the communities where they work. He argues that participants in research often still expect a benefit in return for their participation and may directly ask for assistance before agreeing on being interviewed. Furthermore, Ogora warns of the fatigue felt by the people who were previously living in the displacement camps and the fact that they are focusing on trying to rebuild their lives again. Despite these ethical concerns, he acknowledges the fact that research in this context is most important as it provides information that may support the post-conflict reconstruction process.

When it came to photography, I made sure to emphasize the participants' responsibilities when taking pictures such as respecting other people's privacy as well as their own. All participants were informed from the beginning of the aims and methods of the research. Because the interviews and mapping exercises involved recounting personal and emotional stories, I ended each one with questions to the participants about how they experienced the interview and gave them some time to reflect on the experience. The feedback I received was positive for all of my participants and indicated no need for further support but a counselor always accompanied me in case they needed it.

4. Historical and Media Context

In this chapter, I seek to briefly explain the history and background to the conflict in Northern Uganda as a basis for understanding the current politics of post conflict reconstruction in Acholiland. The illustrations seen in this chapter are photographs I took of drawings as seen on the walls of an abandoned school in Acholiland. These images are testimonies to the violence people experienced. They also represent political expressions as they portray government forces from the National Resistance Army (NRA) as perpetrators.

The war in Northern Uganda has been described as "one of the most violent and persistent complex humanitarian emergencies in the world." It is estimated that over 1.8 million people have been displaced during the 20 years of conflict in Northern Uganda. (Bolton et al, 2007) Many historians have argued that tensions between the north and the south of Uganda already existed during the British Protectorate period and possibly even before that. (cf. Finnström 2003, Allen 2006, Dolan 2009).

4.1. History of conflict/insurgency

Northern Uganda has experienced a recent significant improvement in terms of security. The majority of the displaced have left the camps and resettled or returned to their villages of origin. In fact, many camps have now phased out or closed down. Ogora (2013) contends that the present transition from conflict to peace has brought about both positive and negative dimensions.

He argues that transportation has greatly improved, that corruption has reduced, that the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF)[3] committed abuses have declined and that the police and security forces are gradually moving away from intimidation and moving towards law-keeping. He also reminds us of the population's vulnerabilities and general fatigue. In addition, the two decades of conflict have had a devastating impact on the lives of thousands of civilians. Okello and Hovi write: "like so many of today's 'dirty wars', gender-related crimes have been pervasive." Breakdown of law and order exposes women to untold discrimination and violence, which is often committed with impunity. In Uganda, sexual violence and rape have been used as weapons of war and as a means of destroying the very fabric of communities. (Ward, 2005)

A 21-year-old woman I interviewed remembered how scared she felt when she moved to the camp: 'I feared moving to Anaka. There were a lot of houses and fires. I feared that every house around would burn. Rape cases were also happening within the camp.'

Another 22-year-old woman who participated in my study also told me that she witnessed rape cases happening very often. 'We were young girls and the

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[3] The Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) previously the National Resistance Army, is the armed forces of Uganda.

water source was far. You would get raped on the way and the perpetrators were not healthy, they would get you infected or pregnant. I myself suffered from defilement. There were so many cases. NGOs in the camp came to sensitize people on GBV, defilement and rape. They gave me a lot of information. Those were the ones who gave me hope for living.'

Okello and Hovi argue that the war in Northern Uganda between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government forces began in 1986 with a rebellion against President Museveni that grew increasingly violent over the years. According to the authors, the war lost support of civilians who had been targeted by both parties to the conflict. People suffered from unthinkable violence, rapes, abductions, deaths and displacement. They were forced into camps that were labeled as 'protected villages' during the government's counterinsurgency. Most LRA members were kidnapped as children and then forced to commit grave atrocities.

Previous research has shown that people living in the north of Uganda have deep-rooted criticisms against the current government however the LRA insurgency received very little support (Hovil, 2004).

Through a chance encounter, I was able to meet with a former LRA child soldier. The 16-year-old boy told me his story. 'I was abducted by the LRA when I was seven. I still have scars from the bullet wounds I received at the time (shows the scars). I was originally from Pader. My whole family was taken and killed. I may look nice and with a good dress code on the outside but inside I am bad. My dad was also enrolled into the LRA with me but I don't know if he is dead or if maybe he is still alive with the rebels. In the bush, all we ate was sorghum, sometimes boiled, sometimes raw.

One Christmas day, Kony asked for 40 men. I was taken with them but when he saw me he said "no that one is too small" so they put me aside. All the other men were shot dead. People were killed on Christmas day. It's not easy to talk about the very bad things. I want to go back to school some day. I only studied up to Primary 5.'

Mediatization of the conflict and the different narratives that emerge

Many different discursive constructs of the war in Northern Uganda seem to coexist (Lanken, 2007) and these surely provide a frame for the stories of the women I collected. It is important to understand how the government, the media, the aid organizations and the people of Northern Uganda describe and construct stories about the war and the experiences of rebuilding lives after conflict. The official discourse about the conflict is often challenged in Acholiland.

Through the high mediatization of the conflict, a dominant narrative of terror and cult seems to arise when attempts are made at describing the conflict in Northern Uganda. Most articles refer to similar descriptions such as the following:

> *For more than two decades about 30,000 children abducted from*
> *northern Uganda provided the fuel for Kony's cult-like LRA. A self-styled mystic who*
> *claimed to channel a host of spirits, his hazy aims of seizing power and ruling*
> *Uganda according to the biblical 10 commandments collapsed after his forces were*
> *chased across the Nile and out of the country in 2006. Since then he has roamed east*
> *central Africa's forests with a band of a few hundred children kidnapped from*
> *neighboring countries (Mark, 2013).*

In fact, the LRA's insurgency is almost always presented as a cult-like movement, which is not driven by any political agenda. Stories about brutality and child abuse, alongside those of ghosts, evil spirit possessions, magical ointments and psychological manipulations exerted by a cult leader; are repeatedly used by the media. (Lanken 2007, Finnström 2008)

As much as the sickening and counterproductive violence committed by the rebels is undeniable, the story of the conflict in Northern Uganda seems a lot more complex when seeking a deeper understanding.

According to Finnström, the war in Uganda is rooted in the marginalization of the north of the country from the rest of Uganda's developments (2008, p. 101) as much as it may be the case of intensifying ethnic divides. He adds that the official discourse emphasizes the incoherence of the LRA rebellion with official documents such as a UN report concluding that the movement lacks any clearly formulated political objective. (Finnström, 2008, p.115) Despite this Finnström writes that he was struck by the way young people publically questioned the government's failure to put an end to the war and argues that the violence committed by the LRA tends to take the focus away from 'the lived frustrations of the noncombatant populations'. (2008, p. 105) During my own fieldwork, I witnessed the same frustrations that I thought of as a form of collective fatigue with the war and the government.

As mentioned previously, drivers provided me with a wealth of information through the stories that they shared with me. Because his story was captivating, I interviewed one of my drivers who was arrested by the LRA multiple times. This is the story he shared with me: 'I had two brothers who were abducted by the LRA. The army killed one of them in an ambush shortly after he was abducted and I never heard from the other one. I assume he is dead by now. I was also arrested by the LRA three times but managed to escape. The first time, I was let go because my father gave the LRA five cows for my release. The second time, I ran into them on the road while I was on my bike. They thought I was a spy and ran after me for miles. I ran back to the camp without even realizing that I had lost my shoe. When death runs after you, it

makes you run fast. I heard lots of bullets and I was the only survivor. My father passed away after he was forcefully taken by the army to help lead them to where the rebels were. He stayed in the bush with the army for three weeks and caught an infection and died. I found out about my father's death through a dream. The time I was riding my bike, I wanted to see what my village looked like after all this time. I never went back again until the end of the insurgency following the incident. The LRA did terrible things such as cut off ears and noses. They would also ask you if you liked short sleeves or long sleeves better and would then chop off your hand or your arm. People who knew village life were eager to go back home and find peace. The traumatic experience about going back home was finding dead bodies around the house or when digging the land. In our Acholi culture, seeing a dead body can lead to madness of bad occurrences. Someone who sees a dead body needs a special ceremony where an animal is sacrificed and needs to talk to the spirits of elders to tell them he is not the one who killed the dead person.'

Finnström also argues that the political dimensions of the war in Uganda should be acknowledged and that discourses about the war often picture it as humanitarian rather than political by default (p.116). Dolan goes even further in his political analysis, arguing that the conflict is better described as a form of *social torture* (Dolan, 2009). According to him, the main instrument of social torture has been to force people into camps or 'protected villages' to allegedly protect people as the name suggests. In fact, he writes that many Northern Ugandans described their experiences of the war as *torture*: "in the name of protection, the populations experienced on a mass scale the key elements of torture, most notably violation, debilitation and humiliation."

One of my participants, a 65-year-old widow, recounts her experience of moving to the camp: 'I moved to the camp in 2001, from Alokolum Pabali. I had to leave because either the rebels or the soldiers would kill us. People were dying everyday and we had to leave. The soldiers were also abducting our children. The soldiers set a bomb from the barracks, several bombs, so that we would leave immediately. We had to run to Anaka and decided to settle in the camp.'

Another of my participants, a 46-year-old widow and mother of nine children who was also raising four orphans, spoke about the violence encountered in the camp. 'Soldiers were very harsh. By 8pm all lights had to be turned off. If you were caught with your light on, they would beat you up.'

People experienced huge levels of uncertainty and lack of control, which according to Dolan, fed into other kinds of violence. He gives as an example the fact that encamped men felt like they lost their role and ability to protect and provide for their families which lead to them embracing more violent definitions of masculinity and an increase in domestic violence.

When asked about the violence she had experienced during the war one woman stated: 'in the process of going to the camp, the soldiers raped my daughter.'

According to Dolan, the LRA could have been controlled with a logical military strategy that would not have resulted in the large-scale alienation of the Acholi people. He also argues that while people suffered from the violence perpetrated by the Uganda's People Defense Force (UPDF), it was not evident that the LRA truly was the main protagonist. In fact, he writes that people in protected villages claimed that government soldiers dressed up as rebels attacked them. (Dolan, p.147)
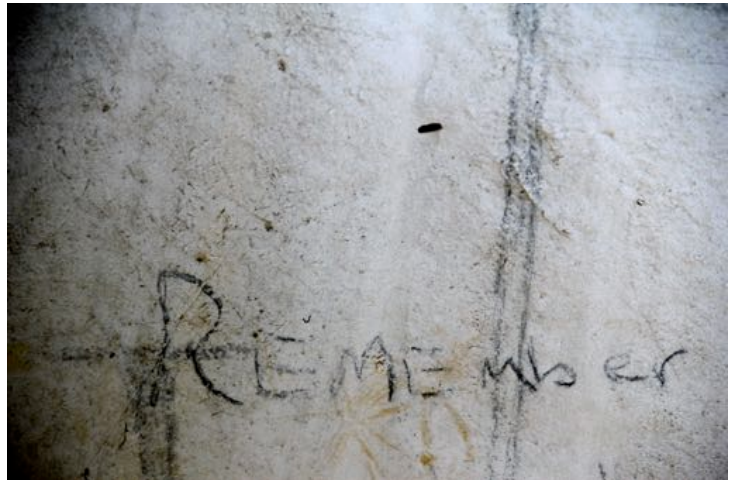
One of my informants shared stories about the war with me. As we were driving through a large plain he pointed to the side of the road and said: 'here, before the war we would be driving through a very big forest. Now all of the trees have gone. During the war, Karamajong warriors were given weapons to fight alongside the army against the LRA. They were brought to Acholiland to raid the cattle. Culturally, they are nomadic herders. The government stole all the cattle from this land under a policy that LRA soldiers could otherwise feed on them. They

also destroyed all the trees and crops. They burnt villages. Even today, the soldiers are still cutting down trees and selling them.' He also told me about how the LRA turned violent: 'at the beginning, they were not killing or abducting people nor were they stealing forcefully. They would go around the villages, asking for some help or some food. They also needed places to hide their ammunitions. When some people started denouncing them, telling the government where they were hiding, the LRA could no longer trust the community and started killing people as revenge and to show people what would happen if they denounced them. Kony claimed to be possessed by spirits. People viewed him as a mad man. Some even thought he died when he disappeared for one week in the mountains. He is an uneducated man from a village. If they wanted to arrest him, they could have done so long ago.'

The conflict in Northern Uganda is recognized as having come to an end however Spinoza (1677) wrote that 'peace is not an absence of war; it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice.' Arguably, Uganda still has a long way to go before it reaches full peace. The women I interviewed showed me that while they were still haunted by the past, they were active agents of change and participating in rebuilding a peaceful Northern Uganda.

Uganda has been experiencing a very particular context, which explains some of the political and economic fragility and possible instabilities. First of all, the horn of Africa was hit by a severe famine. While Uganda is less affected than Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti or Eritrea, part of the country has suffered from climate change and ongoing food insecurity, particularly in the North Eastern Karamoja region. The situation has intensified land conflicts, cattle lootings and fighting with the Ugandan army. Additionally, there is war in Somalia and Ugandan peacekeepers are highly involved, alongside Burundian troops. The intervention has been stepped up as Kenya also intervened militarily. In 2010, there were terrorist attacks in Kampala due to Uganda's involvement in Somalia with the African Union. The country is therefore not immune to other attacks, although Kenya has been the main target.

In terms of Uganda's neighboring countries, the Democratic Republic of Congo is fragile and Uganda is a key underground player there. The relations between Uganda and Sudan are tense

as well. It is also important to take into consideration the fact that the political instabilities, elections and referendums in bordering countries have and may continue to bring in an influx of refugees. In fact, there has been an important increase in the number of urban refugees and asylum seekers from DRC, Rwanda, Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia now living in Kampala. In 2011, there has been up to 150,000 new inflows of refugees and asylum seekers.

During my first two days in Kampala, there were some important riots, while others were happening in Lira. The police severely repressed them. In fact, one of my first observations in Kampala was that there is a much higher police presence everywhere. People are protesting in the country due to the inflation and sharp increase in prices of commodities, which threatens food security among many households. Not only have prices increased but there is also an important issue regarding electricity. While it is very expensive, it seems to have gone backwards in terms of service. Since I have arrived in Uganda, the days where we actually had power were very few. People are getting tired with the situation but they are also afraid of government repression. Internally, the Buganda King is also asking for power sharing with the Central Government, which has been a long source of conflict.

Beyond the possible internal tensions and political instabilities in bordering countries, there are also new developments in the country that may have important impacts. One of them is the fact that Obama recently sent troops to Uganda to stop Kony and the LRA rebels. Many say that the timing is wrong and that the US should have offered help over a decade ago. Moreover, many see the American move as a clear mark of interest in Uganda's newfound oil. Most of the rebels are now hiding in DRC and the Central African Republic and the US military has only been instructed to advise and train the Ugandan military operations. Most people I have talked to are very skeptical about this foreign intervention but they do hope, nonetheless, that it might lead to Kony's arrest. While there is peace in Northern Uganda, many of my informants consider it to be temporary and still fear the return of the rebels.

While in Gulu, I met a young man called Tony. He shared with me his thoughts about peace.: 'there is peace in Northern Uganda but it could change. The rebels and Kony are still hiding in the bush and they could very well come back. Fighting this guerrilla war is very difficult. It is

hard to locate a gunman walking back from Congo through the bush. Who would even know if they came back? It is their country after all. Perhaps after their exile, they shall return. We appreciate the peace but we anticipate that it could change at any moment.'

5. Findings: The lived experiences of women

From the following section onwards, I will present my research findings based upon the analysis of my interviews with the 12 women I was fortunate to work with in two return villages near Anaka IDP camp as well as based on their drawings of maps and photographs.

'In 1996, at the beginning of the year when I was about to go to school, the LRA came and killed my uncle and six other people. My mother decided we had to leave. We first went to Gulu and stayed in Alokolum for a week. On our way to Gulu, the soldiers stole everything from us, including our food. After Alokolum, with my mother's little money, we took off in a vehicle to Masindi Bweyale. We stayed there from 1996 to 2010. We had many water problems and had to rent a small piece of land for digging. When I was 19, I got married and later had a child. He fell sick so I had to go back to Gulu to take him to Lacor hospital. He died from his sickness and I fell sick too. When I recovered I decided I wanted to go back home but someone told me that my house had been burnt with all of my things. I came home and witnessed the disaster. I don't understand why this happened and if someone burnt my house intentionally. Because of this, I moved to my husband's home village on his family's land. His family escaped a lot of violence. Now my husband drinks a lot and quarrels and the only thing I can do is to keep quiet so that it doesn't intensify. I prefer not to respond.' (28-year-old woman who lost three children and had four miscarriages in her life. She is raising her only child, who is now 11 years old).

5.1. Gender-based violence and gender relations

 In regard to VAW, my 12 in-depth qualitative interviews indicated a high prevalence both in camps and in return areas.[4] Women suffer from physical and psychological forms of abuse and are often denied a right to property or land, which becomes a very serious issue with the phasing out of camps and populations returning to their villages of origin. I met women who

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[4]   All twelve interviewees also participated in taking pictures and illustrating their process of return through maps and drawings. I also interviewed numerous NGO representatives and other women still living in the camps during the course of my fieldwork.

were accused of witchcraft or prostitution, both of which are considered to be very shameful practices in Acholi land. One woman was threatened to death by her own brothers for returning to their father's land after being abandoned by her husband.

Living in camps during a period of almost twenty years destroyed many traditional values and it could be argued that the camp settings negatively impacted gender relations. The remaining camp housing that has not yet been phased out is inadequate, which leads children to venture outside the camps and sleep in neighbor's houses. Such unstable living conditions present precarious living situations for these children, which can result in unwanted teenage pregnancies, rape cases, as well as the spread of HIV/AIDS.

'I saw most of the young girls having their lives changed, getting married so early, becoming interested in men so early, having sex at a very young age.' (21-year-old woman returnee)

'Due to congestion, infections and diseases were so high. Boys and girls were so close and could have sex anytime they wanted so infections were really high and spreading.' (28-year-old woman returnee)

The NGO programs for empowering women may also have contributed to creating a gender imbalance, fueling domestic disputes and violence. For instance, when organizations would distribute food to women or offer skills trainings to empower women, this resulted in men losing their traditional role of providing for the family, creating tensions within households and increasing the rate of alcoholism.

'The camp made women in charge of the household and of feeding the family. Men were only drinking and fighting when there was no food. Most of the violence I witnessed during camp life was domestic.' (25-year-old woman returnee)

One of my women participants, a mother of five children, also described the challenges she faced due to alcoholism and hunger within her household. 'Sometimes men would steal the food. My husband would steal the aid food I received. He would sell it and use it for drinking. It caused a lot of chaos in the house.' I asked her when she got married and she told me: 'It was in 1999. I don't remember how old I was.'

I believe many of these problems could have been avoided with better planning and efficient gender programming. Thus, it is very important to assess the work that organizations have been doing with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Uganda, as the lessons learned could be useful in other contexts and to avoid repeating the same errors.

A 28-year-old participant described the chaos of living in the camp: 'I first experienced and witnessed all the health problems and spread of diseases. I witnessed the education problems and the children missing school. There was a lack of information regarding where the schools had been transferred. I was still in school when we joined the camp. I was 18 years old. But there was no proper school in the camp so I had to drop out and work in the gardens, there was nothing to eat otherwise. When I arrived in the camp, both my parents had passed away and I was living with an uncle. First, we stayed in the big camp and then the satellite camp. We stayed in the camp for 10 years.'

The transitioning from camp to village has also been very abrupt and many problems from the camp continue to manifest in the rural areas. In my fieldwork, I observed problems resulting, in large part, from high rates of alcoholism, such as community breakdown and violence.

'I witnessed men and women fighting because the men would be selling beans to go out drinking. When the women refused, they would get beaten. I met my husband in the camp and I was lucky not to experience domestic violence but I witnessed a lot of it.' (28-year-old woman returnee)

5.2. From coping to reconstruction to collective memory

This section onwards seeks to explain the main themes expressed by the participants through their life stories, mapping and photographs. When I started doing my research, my initial focus was on the challenges faced by women returnees and the ways in which they cope with these issues. While I was in the field, I realized that these women were not merely coping and that the term 'coping' may even have a disempowering connotation. In fact, the women I interacted with did not wish me to stop at expressing their individual suffering but rather to illustrate both the ways in which they are reconstructing their lives and their communities as well as the challenges that remain. These challenges were often not about private suffering but

rather referred to ideas of "social rupture and injustice", which Christina Zarowsky also evokes in her work with Ethiopian Somali returnees. She describes Somali returnees' "insistence on building a politicized collective memory and a master narrative challenging power and injustice". (Zarowsky, p.200) Collective memory can be defined as a means to create meanings about historical details and the political field. (Jewsiewicki, 1993).

Inspired by Heidegger's philosophy, I will seek to explain how women returnees make new meanings of being in the world and recreate their lives after having lived in the camps. I will divide this section into three main ideas, existing as oneself, existing in the eyes of others and existing with others.

In order to illustrate the meanings of existence for these women, it is relevant to seek to explain the traditional Acholi meanings of existence. Two start with; two prominent features occupy Acholi traditional existence, *wang oo* (the central fireplace) and *myel* (dances). These two elements contributed to Acholi people's resilience traditionally. Many people consider *wang oo* as a gathering of people around the fireplace as the most important Acholi institution. (AVSI, 2002) Fireplaces are particularly relevant to my research as it was where people narrated folk stories or *ododo.* These often conveyed important elements of morals and culture. (Okumu, 2000)

Because of the war, much of the Acholi social fabric has been destroyed and many aspects of tradition have been lost. During the LRA insurgency traditional healers were particularly targeted and persecuted.

A traditional leader for Ker Kal Kwaro[5] explained this to me: 'Kony did not know that the medicine men were useful, he thought they were competing with evil spirits and he had to kill them. But there are still many. Kony's spirit is a spirit that I don't understand. In Acholi culture there is no witchcraft. Witches are not even part of the language. Acholi use diviners,

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[5] Ker Kal Kwaro is the traditional institution that brings together 55 clan chiefs from the entire Acholi region.

those who mediate between the living and God. There is an almighty God: "Jok", he is the God that gives children, rain and harvest. Every clan also has its God. After death, the spirit leaves the person who died and you can pray to those spirits to help you. Those spirits can also haunt you.'

Many of my participants spoke about the loss of tradition with much nostalgia and regret. 'I never attended any traditional gatherings or counseling ceremonies. It is now disappearing… not like in the past' (28-year-old woman returnee). The traditional leader from Ker Kal Kwaro explained that much tradition had been lost and that they were working on rebuilding this source of knowledge. He added: 'the disconnect has been created by 20 years of war. We need to remind people that they should consult elders; they are a very important key in conflict resolution and a key in giving good advice. Every homestead should also build a fireplace and sit around it in the evening and tell stories with elders. The fireplace is the courtyard of every Acholi man. If you do not have this fireplace, you are not an Acholi man.'

Dancing and singing, however, were not as affected by the conflict. According to Dolan, *Larakaraka*, a courtship dance for youth is still very popular even though people were using cardboard instead of traditional costumes. *Dingidingi,* a dance performed by the youth for visitors is still very existent as well. (Dolan, p. 174) Despite these dances remaining a part of the tradition, Dolan writes about the fact that people are afraid of losing the skills that used to be passed on over generations and certain things like ostrich feathers, which are needed for the costumes have become very difficult to find. Dances had an important place in Acholi tradition, especially within the realm of coping and many dances were strongly linked to cosmology and religion. (Harlacher, 2009)

During my fieldwork, I met a group of women who were part of a dance group called Akem Kwee, who had known each other from living together in Anaka camp and had always danced as a coping mechanism during the war. One of the women from the group best explained the role of dancing within the realm of coping:

'Most of us, we lost our friends, our brothers and sisters. Some lost entire families. We felt lonely. If you are singing and dancing, you make songs about what happened, you laugh and you feel happy.'

She also spoke about the importance of teaching the younger generation about their culture through teaching them dances and songs, 'children should know our cultural activities' but also of the lack of traditional attire: 'there is no assistance for that, we do not have proper costumes for our traditional dances.'

According to Okot p' Bitek (1971), Acholi spirituality focuses on understanding the causes of hardship and finding ways to deal with them. Various spiritual forces explain these different misfortunes and offer ways to cope with them. The main spiritual forces in Acholi cosmology are carried by the ancestors and the clan. Elders therefore have a very important role to play, as they are the closest to the ancestors. (Harlacher, 2009) Acholi spirituality is exemplified through the words of one of my interviewees:

'When two people in the same family are sick, injured or in danger and one of them passes away, it saves the other one by taking the bad occurrence away. For example, I once had a bad accident but my grandma died that day and I survived.'

She also explained the importance of dream interpretation to me such as the fact that if you dream of eating meat it is an announcement of someone's death. Beyond interpreting dreams she also talked about the importance of expressing feelings and emotions:

'When I think of something bad about to happen, I have to say it out loud, so it doesn't happen.'

Worthy of noting also, women are often considered as more easily possessed by external spiritual forces than men in Acholi culture (Finnström, p. 184). People experiencing post-traumatic stress, *ajiji,* are also said to be possessed by a spirit that makes them behave strangely. (Mark, 2013)

A traditional leader from Ker Kal Kwaro[6] shared some stories with me. 'We have ceremonies for people who have experienced violence. Traditions have not quite been lost yet. The victim first steps on a raw egg, which breaks under its weight. He or she then passes over some poles and enters the house. While the victim enters the house, water is poured from the roof and dropped on the head of the person to cleanse the person that is entering the house. Men do it three times, women do it four times, before they can finally enter the house and close the door. This ceremony is widespread; it is the elders in the community who organize it. There is also a cleansing ceremony for girls who have been raped; otherwise evil spirits could kill her. The perpetrator should cleanse her by sacrificing a sheep or a ram. The perpetrator has to bring the sheep and the elders sacrifice it. It is both a punishment and humiliation to the offender.' Later on in the interview, he also used a metaphor I wanted to mention. He said: 'alcoholism is as dangerous as a snake. We need to fight and eradicate it.'

As described by Kapferer (1988, p. 79), war creates an environment of stress and insecurity, which is often associated with people's perceptions of their daily lives. This "describes the fundamental principle of a being in the world and the orientation of such a being toward the horizons of its experience" (Kapferer, p.79). Finnström argues that a "cosmology of terror" as described by Taylor (1999) grows as people try to understand the extreme domination they are experiencing. (p. 189) He adds that women in Northern Uganda lived under many years of "enforced domination, lived uncertainty, and extreme collective suffering" (Finnström, p. 189).

One of the women I interviewed and who was familiar with the concept of trauma told me: 'we are all traumatized… some to a lesser degree. The degree of trauma is the only difference. I never saw a rebel, but I heard and saw their bullets, shooting at us. I've had to hide in the bush when the rebels came to my boarding school a couple times. Sometimes I would run to town and sleep outside. It would be dangerous to knock at my parents' home. They could have

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[6] Ker Kal Kwaro is the traditional institution that brings together 55 clan chiefs from the entire Acholi region.

thought it was rebels. I used to have many nightmares about rebels chasing me and not being able to run away. I also have a recurrent dream of being attacked by a python.'

Later, she asked me if I thought people were traumatized after hearing their stories. I answered that I found them to be very resilient. She then told me: 'you know, some do not have the resilience.'

5.3. Existing as oneself

After sharing a collective history of displacement and of living in camps with very little personal freedom and space, most participants brought up ideas of feeling at peace with themselves through their newfound space, access to land and safe havens.

'At least now I have access to a garden and digging. In the camp, you would just sit and wait.' (28-year-old woman returnee)

When interviewed by Refugees International, Ojok mentioned that even if the LRA were to return to Northern Uganda (something that many participants brought up due to the uncertainties about the peace processes) he would still want to be at home. He added that he didn't care about the rebels anymore but just wanted to live on his own land once again.

The following photograph taken by one of my participants was particularly interesting to me because she wanted to photograph shade. She said to me: 'this is my shade. This is where I sleep and rest after coming back from the field because it is cool.' This illustrates the idea of her finding shelter, haven, and peace. She also emphasized the idea of space by saying: 'the challenges are different from the ones in the camp. We used to cover the hut with a tent because there was no grass to use and it would also burn faster when there was a fire. Now we are in a wider place. We used to have only one hut for seven family members. Now we have a lot more space.'

Another woman photographed her garden, as shown below. She explained with much pride in the work she had accomplished: 'this is my banana plantation. I planted it while I was still living in the camp, preparing to move back home.' When the security situation allowed it, some people in the camps would travel on foot back to their village to try to grow some food but also to start transitioning into moving back home. The stories the women were sharing with me were strong testaments of their courage and role in rebuilding their homes. In her case, her husband was worried about going back and about the insecurity but she wanted to have access to her land again and longed for being home.

5.4. Existing in the eyes of others

Most of the women participating in my study, while emphasizing their longing for peace and return also talked about creating change in their new homes. The process of return for them was not necessarily conveying an idea of returning to what life used to be before the war or to memories they had of the past. Many spoke with nostalgia about the erosion of tradition and especially of the role of elders in their communities. They deplored the destruction of their community social fabric and longed for traditions that were lost during the war. They spoke of the need to respect elders and to seek their counseling in rebuilding the community.

One of my participants, a 65-year-old returnee revisited her life in the camp and compared it to her return situation. 'My first impression of the camp was not a welcoming one. Everything seemed so confused and under rule. There was no respect for elders. People had no respect for

me when I would fetch water. It was a different life altogether. (…) Our roles changed a lot in the camp. When they gave us maize, we had to take it to the machine. We lost the tradition of grinding maize. Children became unruly, undisciplined, they would come home late or disappear. I don't like when my children shout at me and accuse me wrongly. I feel disrespected and not wanted in the household. I still face the same challenges as those I faced in the camp. Plus, I am facing the challenge of land dispute. My role as a woman has not changed. As a widow, I have to carry on doing most of the work alone.'

However, they also spoke about their ambivalence towards tradition. When women get married, they no longer belong to their clan but to their husband's clan. Despite this, they are still viewed as outsiders, denied full rights and often accused of any misfortunes arising.

'I want to see more positive things happen in my life. Also, I want to see more positive attitudes from people in the community. They don't like me because I didn't give up all of my land for the school. I want to feel accepted and a part of the community. I don't want to feel unwanted like this. I need prayers.'

The children they bare belong to their husband's family as well as the land they live on. One of the women I interviewed, a 58-year-old mother of 11 children, had lost her husband and therefore moved back to her father's land. Shortly after, she received death threats from her brother who considered she no longer belonged there.

'During the war, one of my sons was abducted but he returned later on. This was a very big challenge. My husband became very violent. He picked a second wife and he would quarrel a lot. I endured his violence for nine years. My friends advised me not to respond violently. I wanted to make sure the children didn't pick up the violence. We decided to separate but after seven years I returned with him. When he fell sick and died, I lost support from my in-laws because he had a new wife. Because my in-laws chased me away, I am now living at my parents' home. My father is the one who brought me here. I make mats and dig the land to help him but my brother doesn't want me to plough this land. He says I should be in the matrimonial house. He threatened to kill me or one of my children. The issue is now in court

but my father is defending me. I am waiting for the court decision. My brother is an ex-soldier. He does not respect anyone. I want to stay here so I can feed my children. I wish to be here.'

A traditional leader from Ker Kal Kwaro[7] helped me understand some Acholi traditions. He explained that traditionally women were providers of food and procreation and that they worked in harmony with their husband's interest and shared in all decision-making as well as worked together in bringing up children. However, 'the wife is from a different clan. Love brought the husband and wife together but she remains from a different clan by birth. Therefore she has very little authority regarding land and wealth. But now the situation is slowly changing. Peace in the household is the source of peace in the community and the country.'

They also acknowledged that while living in the camp was a very difficult experience for them, they also learned from the experience. One theme that emerged from their narratives was a hope for more equality between men and women. One participant described to me how she gradually transitioned back to her home: 'before moving back to the village, I went there every day to dig the land and eventually made a decision with my husband to move back permanently. I cut the grass and trees for building the roof; I collected water to make the mud for the bricks and laid the bricks for the house. In the camp, we had to cover our hut with a tent because there was no grass to use.' Traditionally, men used to be the ones in charge of building the houses for their families but Acholi women are increasingly taking on new gender roles. Another participant told me that some things needed to change: 'Men should be able to cook and bring water and also wash clothes, even for a woman.' I then asked her if she had discussed this with her husband and she smiled back at me and said: 'no, not yet, but some

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[7] Ker Kal Kwaro is the traditional institution that brings together 55 clan chiefs from the entire Acholi region. They edited a book on Acholi gender relations principles in partnership with UN Women. While they are the guardians of tradition they also seem to welcome change as one of their leaders told me : 'our culture is not static. It is dynamic and it changes with time. As a cultural institution we are very flexible. We see the future generations. We also know the past.' He also mentionned to me that they were working with FIDA Uganda on a project for mitigation of domestic violence.

things have changed. I go to the market to sell food and because I don't know how long it is going to take, I tell my husband to start frying beans and *posho*[8] for dinner. He can cook. The biggest change about coming home is that now my husband stays at home. In the camp, he used to not be willing to do things, he would go out at night to the centre of the camp, to play cards and gamble.' Another woman shared a similar story with me: 'In the camp, we used to only buy food but now I work hand in hand with my husband for digging. He used to go dancing all the time in the camp, but now that we are at home, he only goes out for big events. It is important to work hand in hand with your husband. My biggest challenge now is that I have no family planning access.'

Many of my participants spoke openly and in a seemingly empowered way about gender roles and relations.

'There has been a big change in gender relations. I can now work together with my husband, making goals and working hand in hand to fight poverty in the house.' (28-year-old woman returnee)

However, when it came to discussing issues of domestic violence, they were a lot quieter. They explained to me that having safety in the village was more important than what they were experiencing at home. These responses were quite different from what I had expected. It seemed that the women found the violence encountered in the domestic arena to be "normal". For instance, when I asked one woman whether she still experienced any forms of violence, she responded negatively, however, when I asked her whether her husband was aggressive towards her, she responded positively.

The way most women spoke about it was as though it was normal and something very minor compared to the collective violence they suffered during the war. One woman joked that when

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[8] Posho is a traditional dish that accompanies most meals in Northern Uganda. Usually it is prepared by boiling corn flour until one obtains a thick dough. Sometimes cassava or millet is used instead of corn.

her husband was angry she would put a sip of water in her mouth, thus stopping her from arguing back and avoiding being beaten. Several women expressed the fact that they had no voice and preferred to remain quiet as to maintain as much peace in their lives as possible.

'I don't have a voice. I have this traditional thought that the husband owns you and directs you in everything you do and brings you to his home. As a human being, I feel it would be better if we shared ideas but right now it is one-sided and I have nothing to say.' (28-year-old returnee)

'It's important to have a voice,' pauses and smiles, 'but it leads to fighting.' (25-year-old returnee)

Other women spoke of a better relationship and partnership with their husbands, especially as they were rebuilding their homes together.

'This is the tree I planted while I was still living in the camp. Next to it is another building that we are working on. This will be the main room for sleeping.'

5.5 Existing with others

The women's narratives emphasized ideas of togetherness, unity and peace. The stories and maps had many common elements. All of the participants underlined the importance for them to live in peace and unity with others.

'This corresponds to my expectations and memory of home. We need to understand each other in order to truly rebuild a home, respecting each other and bringing all family members together. I feel happy that I have achieved to build peace in my home.'

In order to emphasize this need for peace that they experienced, they often compared it to camp life as being chaotic and dislocating families.

'War should not return anymore. Not even in my thoughts.' (28-year-old woman participant)

On some of the maps, the women chose to include family members as can be seen on the map to the left. In an interview with UNHCR, Amato, who had been living in a camp since 1996 said the following about her new home: 'There is more space here than in the camp. The children have a place to play. I am happy to be here. I keep praying that things remain this way. Camp life has been part of our life for a very long time and I was very tired of it.'

One of my participants involved her children in her process of taking pictures. As she was arguing with them she turned over to me and burst out laughing. 'The kids are telling me to climb on the roof of the hut to take a picture from there.'

Most of my participants focused on the positive in their narratives. They demonstrated pride about rebuilding their homes and seeking a harmonious community life. One of the women said to me: 'I feel good about the transition. I just saw young boys and girls planting sugar cane together.' Her photograph below illustrates 'people having a peaceful moment in the compound under the tree'. This was one of the five places she picked as making her feel at peace and at home, both because of the social cohesion and because of the symbolic representation of the tree.

Another of my participants also expressed her positive feelings about returning home. 'I feel

good about the changes I have seen. I am happy that people are back home. You can walk at night. It's very peaceful. I feel really good about the transition.'

Most photographs taken by the women showed their hens, banana trees, huts and outdoor spaces. When remembering their lives in the camps, they mentioned that it was a toxic and painful environment but that despite it all they had learned from their experiences. One woman mentioned that she was building a latrine for her family, as she had been taught in the camp. 'I also learned to cover my pot for drinking water. Living in the camp taught us some important hygiene rules.'

'This is my home. It is my main hut with the bananas that I picked from the plantation. My child is standing by the door.'

6. Conclusion

In this thesis I have been concerned with the overall question of return and sought to understand the lived experiences of women who returned home or resettled in a different 'return' setting after years of living in displacement camps in Acholiland and the ways in which they experience the transition and rebuild their lives. I set out with three main research questions.

I wished to depict some of the ways that women narrate their experiences and establish balance in their lives as they face the task of rebuilding their lives and dealing with the realities of post-conflict life. Therefore, my main research question was as follows:

How do conflict-displaced women returnees narrate, create and shape their experience of return 'home' amidst adversity and gender-based violence?

In order to answer the question of home making and return, I also questioned the impact of encampment and transition;

How did encampment and transitioning from camp life to return village impact gender relations and gender-based violence?

I also used as a guide and a meta-question while analyzing my data the following;

How do women narrate and illustrate their experiences? How do different sets of data reveal aspects of these women's experience and provide a different take on the phenomenology of war, gender-based violence and return? Does such a mixture of 'documents'/perspectives constitute complementary versions of one story, or very different, even contradictory, renditions of a variety of experiences?

While these are complex questions, my intention was not to find one answer to them but rather to illustrate the experiences of a small number of women and how they make sense of these experiences while I also sought to understand the complexities of story-telling.

With the question of return at the center of my work, I used the concept as a structure for my text. I have thrown light on how return is perceived and constructed through different stories. I pointed to the fact that return is not merely a one-directional movement nor is it necessarily a
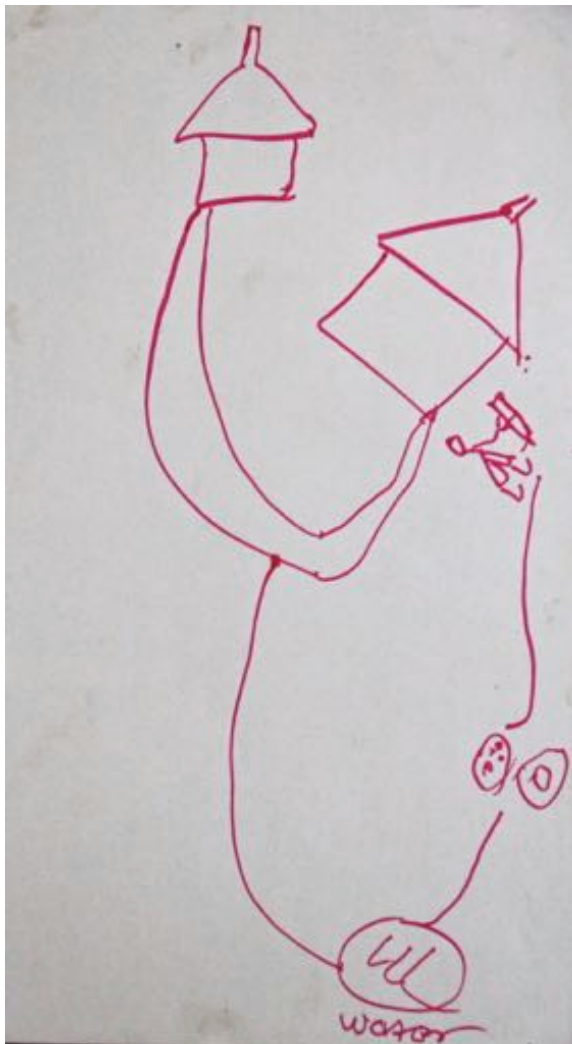
process of homecoming. Many aid organizations view repatriation and return as homecoming and as a solution to people's displacement. In Northern Uganda, people's homes, gardens and shrines were destroyed during the war. For them return may therefore not signify homecoming. Arguably, return is the end of displacement and above all a new beginning. While some people are returning to their home villages others are resettling to other villages, often due to land conflicts. This particularly affects women in Northern Uganda, as they traditionally do not have access to land ownership. If they were married but lost their husbands, they can no longer return to their father's land and may be chased away by their husbands' families. Because the war lasted over twenty years, many people were born in displacement. The youth may only hold an imagined or constructed idea of what home is. This constructed idea may not meet their positive expectations especially when faced with the many challenges of returning home. One of my interviewees told me that people were generally very eager to move back home. According to him, however, the youth was not necessarily happy about moving back, as they never had the experience of digging or growing up while working in the fields. The social networks and community support groups people developed in camps may also be lost as people return to different villages. The transition can also be challenging as they move from different spatial settings. The camp setting forced people into living in confined spaces while their villages in the rural setting are very spread out. In this study I was particularly interested in the memories and expectations of home and in understanding whether the return experience corresponded to the women's memory of home, whether it was lived, collective or constructed.

Memory implies remembering which was not always easy for my participants. One woman tried to remember the year that she moved to the camp and how long she had stayed there. This was how she expressed her thought process. 'Working with memory and figures is not easy.' - Pause. 'I moved to the camp with my whole family, husband, children and in laws." - Silence. "My husband died of tuberculosis the same year we moved to the camp.'

I tried to illustrate their return and memories of home through a diversified set of experiences and data, which question complex narratives about place, time and transition. I was interested in how women narrate their experience of return amid the ambivalence of tradition, amid changing gender roles, amid humanitarian disinvolvement, amid a fragile post-conflict

context. While many narratives exist in Northern Uganda, dominant political ones silencing other ones, women use their own narratives and silences to express their experience, to make sense of their situations and interpret each other's experiences.

Alongside understanding how women narrate, create and shape their experience of return; I was particularly interested in finding out how different sets of data revealed aspects of these women's experience and provided a different take on the phenomenology of war, gender-based violence and return. I found that a mixture of 'documents' and perspectives constitute complementary versions of one story that are essential to the better understanding of these experiences. As Fernandez explains, experiences come to us through words but also through images and impressions. With this in mind, I studied women's narrations but also the images they created. In this study, I provided women with cameras and asked them to photograph elements that made them feel at home or at peace. I also asked them to map their journey home. These illustrations enabled me to collect complementary sets of data illustrating the women's process of return and home-making. Through the pictures the women took of places that reminded them of home, we get a glimpse into the present and the past, posing the question of whether one can photograph memory.

One of the participants in my study drew a river on the map illustrating her journey home, as can be seen on the map to the left. She wrote the word 'water' to make sure I understood the geographical barrier she faced on her way home. She explained to me: 'crossing the river was very difficult, especially while carrying food. The problem was that the army wanted to

see what you were carrying and if you were carrying food they would take it from you just in case you were going to give it to the rebels.' Had she not drawn a river on her map, I would not have heard this story of crossing the river while carrying food and trying not to get caught by the army. This represented a major challenge she faced in her return process but she had not mentioned it during her interview. This is one example of how mapping and photography complemented the data I collected through life interviews.

I sought to explore the various paths taken by formerly conflict-displaced women returnees in the Gulu province of the Acholi district to establish stability in their daily lives. I was particularly interested in hearing their stories of overcoming gender specific challenges and coping with trauma, gender-based violence and the experience of returning 'home' after living in displacement camps. In fact, as I have learned and sought to show, these women are not merely 'coping'. Viewing their experience through a coping lens would not do these women justice and it may even have a disempowering connotation. As I described in this thesis, the women I interacted with did not wish me to stop at expressing their individual suffering but rather to illustrate both the ways in which they are reconstructing their lives and their communities as well as the challenges that remain. These challenges were often not about private suffering but rather referred to ideas of "social rupture and injustice". Rarely did women talk about personal injustices but rather of how their communities had suffered from the war. What matters to them now is how to rebuild these communities and move forward towards peace. Through an ethnographical, phenomenological and sociopolitical lens; I tried to give my women participants a voice to accurately express their experience of return.

I found that the emotional life of the Acholi women with whom I worked did not seem consistent with Stein's (1986) model of refugee experience. Stein argues that refugees experience widespread distress and aggressiveness. This is due to displacing their survivor's guilt onto others. In contrast to the literature on war trauma, I never heard expressions of shame or guilt in the stories that were shared with me. Rather, women expressed feelings of gratitude for being alive and referred to spiritual forces to explain one's fortunes or misfortunes'.

It is important to note that the data collected was qualitative which has certain inherent limitations. The prevalence or scope of the experiences described in this thesis cannot be determined and cannot be generalized to the population of Northern Uganda as a whole. Conflict-displaced women returnees are not a homogenized group of people either nor do they live a homogenized experience. As I have expressed earlier, there is no single history or story about Northern Uganda. My thesis is one story or a patchwork of *several stories* about women in Northern Uganda. The questions that oriented the study were very complex and served as guides. My intention was not to find one answer to them but rather to illustrate a set of experiences while I also sought to understand the complexities of story-telling. This study aimed to provide insight into experiences of women who have returned to villages after living in camps and witnessing and surviving war. Much effort was made to include various experiences and perspectives however the focus rested on the voices of women who wanted to be heard. The 12 women I interviewed provided me with a patchwork of stories providing a glimpse into their lived experiences. In addition, the short timeline of my research; less than four months spent in the field, only provided a snapshot into the experiences of these women. I would hope to be able to return to the region and undertake a longer-term project in order to help understand and further support the conclusions presented in this thesis.

What the previous section points to, is that women returnees make new meanings of being in the world and recreate their lives after having lived in displacement camps. According to Merleau-Ponty, by being in the world we are condemned to meaning. People make sense of their experiences by finding meaning for them. According to Heidegger's philosophy, one dwells where one is at home or where one has a place (1954). The stories of the women confirmed that through their dwelling and home-making they were truly at home. In Northern Uganda, it seems that people dwell in *safeguarding*. The cultural aspect of accepting what happens in everyday life and the decisions made by the spiritual world or divinities is very palpable. It relates to Finnström's description of existential realism in Uganda, whereby people seem to conclude that "everything is up to God". (Finnström, 2008, p.6) People reflect upon their lives, which they view as always tied to the wider world, earth, sky, and divinities. In the unstable context of war, displacement and violence, which are impossible to make sense of, the stories I collected confirmed Finnström's writings on Northern Uganda and the fact that

it is meaningful for women returnees "to keep the relationship with the spiritual and greater world active." (2008)

The women who participated in my study taught me that each of them had a story about the war but that it did not define them. While Young (2005) argues that the lived body is always entwined with historical and social meaning and that there is no situation "without embodied location and interaction" the women I interviewed seemed to embody peace and community building more than the stories of war they carried. This glimpse into their experience of return is a true tribute to the new beginning they are living and to their disposition for benevolence and peace.

A story of hope

Group of Akem Kwee women dancers in Anaka

I would like to end this thesis with my favorite encounter and story. During my fieldwork, I met a group of women dancers who had known each other from living together in Anaka camp and had always danced as a coping mechanism during the war. After returning to their home villages, they have continued meeting together once a week to practice dancing and start a savings and loans association to support each other and save money to be able to send their children to school. After a year, they were able to achieve this goal and prove to their husbands that their empowerment was beneficial to the household. Some of their husbands have now joined the cooperative, and they have been performing in various places.

'At first, the men were not pleased but when they saw the good results, they started supporting us. When men join the group it helps. When they know the pain of getting the food, they don't sell it. Now five men have joined our group. Our husbands give us time to meet and give us a chance to go perform when we are called somewhere. Also, dancers need men to play the drums for them.' (Akem Kwee participant)

They have ambitious small business ideas and are working hard to safeguard Acholi tradition and culture through teaching music and dancing to the younger generation. This is a powerful example of how women working together can overcome many challenges, a first step towards reconstruction in the region.

'We started our savings activity last year, we were happy because we had some little money and with it we were able to send our children to school this year. It has been very good for us to be as a group, joining things together, now every member has food in his house. Now people are requesting to join the group. Those who did not want to join the group at first now are requesting. Anyone is free to join the savings group but there is a registration fee of 1,000 shillings (0,26 €). Rehearsals are open to anyone and children also come to learn the dances on Sundays. On Christmas day, we organize and stay together, we are happy.'

Here is a link to a video I shot of the women of Anaka singing.

Please click on the image below to access the link to the video or copy this link in your browser: https://vimeo.com/143747102

Practical implementations and suggestions for further research

Having access to a voice is a universal human right alongside being the essence to promote women's safety and development. At the same time, as I noted earlier, empowerment programs can be counterproductive and destructive. Thus, it is imperative to fully include men in such programs to ensure a successful outcome. I believe it would be interesting to further research the impact NGO programming has had on women's development in Northern Uganda as well as causing harmful consequences on the social fabric. I hope this thesis can be the beginning of a thoughtful discussion as well as an example of the importance of listening to women's voices to truly understand their needs but also their incredible capacities.

I believe humanitarian actors should support local initiatives and assist in giving a voice to women. Sharing life stories through photography and video may also help promote critical dialogue within the community, while, at the same time, help to reach policy and decision-makers.

This photograph was taken by one of my participants without me noticing.

List of interviews

A) In depth semi-structured interviews in Anaka (12)
- Jackline, 22 years old - Dorothy, 21 years old - Grace, 28 years old - Stella, 28 years old
- Christine, 58 years old - Catherine, 65 years old - Esther, 52 years old - Christine, 46 years old - Scovia, 20 years old - Olga, 48 years old - Conssy, 25 years old - Pauline, 28 years old

B) Short semi-structured interviews in Unyama (9)
- Nighty - Martha - Jacinta – Joyce - Geordina - Vicky - Beatrice - Janet – Lilian

C) Semi-structured interviews with key informants (10)
- UNFPA aid workers (Grace, Dan) - Norwegian Refugee Council aid worker (Charles) - Ker Kal Kwaro traditional leader - Straight Talk aid workers (Alfred, Stephen)
- ARC (Antony) - FIDA aid worker (Vicky & conversation with Jen from NRC) - War Child Canada aid worker (Ojom) - VIVO Victims Voices Counselling (Birke) - Local leader LC1 Anaka Camp - IPSS Gulu University Professor/Researcher (Stella)

D) Conversations (7+)
- Drivers, Norwegian Refugee Council (Moses, Simon, Godfrey) - Former child soldier (Emmy) - Close Acholi friend (Tracy) - NRC Coworkers during field trips
- Street corner conversations with strangers (Tony) - Woman living in Anaka camp (Gladys)

E) Group discussions (2)
- Akem Kwee women group, 14 women and 3 men
- Straight Talk Community Dialogue on Gender Based Violence

F) Illustrative expressions:
a) Women mapping memories of return (15 drawings)
Dorothy, Grace, Stella, Pauline, Scovia, Olga, Christine, Conssy, Christine, Anon, Silver, Jackline, Catherine, Margaret, Ester
b) Women photographing "peace & home" (12 photo projects)
Jackline, Christine, Ester, Catherine, Christine, Scovia, Olga, Conssy, Dorothy, Grace, Stella, Pauline

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