

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I.1 INTRODUCTION

That children get caught up in wars is a fact not only in Africa but worldwide. In the contemporary world, children and young people have been part of wars in Angola, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Colombia, Liberia, Afghanistan, Former Yugoslavia, among others (Van Gog, 2008; Krijn, 2007; Honwana, 2006; MacIntyre & Angela, 2005; Sendabo, 2004; Richards, 1996; Machel, 1996; Skinner, 1999). History bears testimony to the German and French children's crusade of 1212 and more recently Hitler's Germany whereby droves of young people who were induced to join youth organisations perished at the end of the Third Reich (Skinner, 1999).

While African cultures are known to cherish the birth and raising of children and often have special ceremonies surrounding birth and its celebration, the brutal use of children by the contemporary African political-military class in conflicts confusingly tells a different story. The 'values' of this military-political class in regard to use of under-privileged children and young people in wars do not reflect the general 'African' attitude about children and the need for their safety and security among Africans (see for instance, Honwana, 2006; MacIntyre and Angela, 2005). But unfortunately because this political-military class is a highly 'visible' group especially due to the role of the media, the use of children by the ruling class in war and conflict conditions is often portrayed to be something acceptable in Africa and or by Africans. This could be the reason why the story of 'child soldiers' in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Angola is well known while the daily struggles, pains, anxiety and successes of ordinary parents and families of war children are not as well known or simply neglected. It is not true that Africans in general do not care about the well-being and safety of their children. Africans do what is right for their children within the limits of their way of life and circumstances, like parents all over the world. It is disconcerting to come across statements such as the one made by Skinner (1999: 8) that 'Why African societies mistreat their children raises troubling questions for the contemporary world.' Growing up as an African child and as an adult watching other children grow, I find Skinner's position high-handed. True, Africa's socio-economic conditions are unfavourable, even distressing in many parts; there are strifes and conflicts of different nature but these anomalies should not and cannot be simply reduced to the mistreatment of children. Our point here is that the use of children in wars is not just an African problem and that in some case

this might be due to socio-economic pressures and not necessarily due to the African culture.

For instance, Uganda's political-military class in the organisational form of Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) of the 1980s and the present-day Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), but more brutally, the latter have used children in their wars. But this is not because of a Ugandan culture that promotes the use of children in wars. Nonetheless, the use of children in Ugandan wars needs to be confronted. This research is about the war experiences of the children of Acholi land that were abducted by the LRA. The research further explores the attempts by formal institutions and the Acholi community to socially reintegrate them as citizens of their own communities to which they return.

At the time we initiated the undertaking of this research, the Acholi community was so ravaged by war (since the 2006 Juba Peace Process, the conflict has de-escalated) and thousands of children were being abducted with only hundreds returning home. It was therefore baffling for an outsider to understand how the Acholi community dealt with the loss through abduction and then for some to deal with the return of their children considering that the children would have experienced extreme violence. We wanted to contribute to the understanding of the children's experiences of war and how the Acholi community was receiving them back home.

1.1.1 The Acholi and the epicentre of the conflict

This research was largely carried out among the Acholi people. According to Atkinson (1994) the Acholi are a Nilotic group of people living in the north of Uganda in Eastern Africa. They belong to a wider group of the Nilotics called the Luo. Besides the Acholi, the Luo in Uganda include the Alur, Langi and Jopadhola peoples. Collectively, their language is referred to as Luo but they have their respective dialects. According to the 2002 Uganda Population and Housing Census, the Acholi constitute 4.8 per cent of the Ugandan population (UBOS, 2002).

The conflict in the north has mainly taken place among the Acholi people although what has come to be referred to as the conflict area of northern Uganda is quite large. It covers the whole of the northern part, extending to the north-east and east of the country. The conflict-affected region covers the Acholi, Lango, Karamoja and Teso regions. However, the epicentre of the war was always the Acholi region encompassing the former districts of Gulu, Pader and Kitgum - new districts have since been carved out of these original ones. Our research area includes the old Acholi districts of Gulu, Kitgum and the neighbouring Apac district of the Lango people (see map and chapter 4).

1.1.2 Reintegration, citizenship and community

In our focus on the social reintegration of formerly abducted children in northern Uganda drawing on the understanding of reintegration by Kingma (2001) and Sendabo (2004), *social reintegration is understood as the process by which formerly abducted children begin a new life with their families and in their community after the bitter experiences of war by creating positive economic and social relationships.* The need for the (re)creation of positive relationships between the children and the community arises as a result of what we call the broken citizenship status of these children due to the war conditions they have had to endure. This study would consider the formerly abducted children reintegrated when and if they can rebuild, recreate or restore their citizenship. Therefore, *this citizenship has to be positive and is defined as the ability of the formerly abducted children to positively engage in daily activities over a long period of time to sustain their day-to-day lives.* A number of war-related compounding factors such as the general prevailing conditions of the war, but specifically for the children, the abductions of and by them, the long walks in the bush and the killings witnessed and committed corroded their citizenship status. Other factors such as the atrocities visited on their own families and communities and the generally difficult life in captivity could only result in further broken relationships and a crumbled citizenship status within their own survival niche. Clearly, this is a double brokenness of broken children and broken community where belonging and acceptance are compromised. The children's return home and reintegration, therefore, became problematic because of these related experiences.

For a proper social reintegration, it is important that the children's status as members of a community, being accepted and feeling one with the community be established. During the conflict, the community membership and citizenship status of the children were negatively affected. As is basic for all relationships, the (re)-creation of the broken citizenships of the formerly abducted children is a two-way phenomenon based on and rooted in the experiences of the children with the communities to which they return. In a generic sense the community includes the formal (NGOs and government institutions) and the informal (families, immediate groups of neighbours, relatives and friends) entities. Nevertheless, in the narrow sense, the sense in which the word is used in this study, we draw from Laar (1996) and Bujo (2006) and *refer to community as the basic, natural and informal set up of a group of people. It contains families, relations, neighbours, friends and relationships, norms, values and rules. This community exists in space and time, and caters for its members that are also its citizens and the members have a responsibility to ensure its continuity while adjusting to changes caused by new ideas but also violent shocks such as conflict. But such a community*

would also have some structure(s) in order to deal with the different aspects of its life.

Conflict and war and especially its involvement of children in northern Uganda as victims and perpetrators have broken and disrupted the coherence and embeddedness of the community as described in northern Uganda. The community has become wounded in various ways and experienced guilt, trauma, distrust and hopelessness and what Dolan (2005) refers to as debilitation. Re-creating positive relationships for the common good of the formerly abducted children and the wounded community is thus justification for the social reintegration of the children. This ties in with the idea of positive peace (Galtung, 1969), where peace is not just the silence of the guns as is now the case in northern Uganda but positive experiences as members of a community and positive contributions towards the existence and sustenance of the community in which one is a member.

1.1.3 Involvement of institutions

Due to the woundedness of the Acholi community as already described, there is an influx of NGOs and humanitarian organizations in the region (see chapter 2). Most of them, however, are foreign international organizations including UN agencies. Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO), Kitgum Concerned Women's Association (KICWA) and Concerned Parents Association (CPA), on the other hand started as community-based organizations specifically to address the problems related to abduction and return of children by the LRA. They therefore had 'local' touch. This research studies the pivotal role they played at the reception centres (chapter 6). We refer to the three organizations interchangeably as reception centres or NGOs. Other institutions that equally got involved in the reintegration of formerly abducted children are the Child Protection Unit (CPU) of the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) and the Amnesty Commission (AC). We also study their reintegration practices for the formerly abducted children (chapter 6). Collectively, we refer to the reception centres, the CPU and the AC, as formal institutions and their practices are institutional reintegration practices.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Thus this study builds on the general research question:

What are the experiences of formerly abducted children and how could they be successfully reintegrated in their communities?

The research also asked specific questions:

1. What are the war experiences of formerly abducted children from the moment of abduction by the LRA, captivity, and return home in northern Uganda?
2. How are formal institutions (CPU, NGOs and the Amnesty Commission) reintegrating the formerly abducted children in northern Uganda?
3. How are endogenous methods being used by the Acholi community for reintegrating the formerly abducted children?
4. How does citizenship interface with the war experiences of formerly abducted children and practices for their social reintegration in northern Uganda?
5. What best intervention practices for reintegration can be identified based on reintegration activities taking place at institutions and communities for rebuilding citizenship?

These research questions aim at understanding the complexities of reintegration that come with the traumatizing effects of abduction, violations and general war conditions of which children become a part. The relevance of the basic and subsequent research questions is that the questions allow for the exploration of the reintegration experiences of not only the formerly abducted children at the reception centres, in the community including schools but also of NGO workers at the reception centres, parents, members of the entire community and teachers as well. In other words, this research is relevant in understanding a wide range of actors, methodologies and issues in a collaborative manner, in terms of reintegration. The central thesis/issue that runs through this research is that reintegration is fraught with difficulties and long-term in nature. All the actors and methodologies used add on to and are part of the long-term attention and efforts needed to re-establish citizenships of formerly abducted children after many years of conflict and general disintegration of society in northern Uganda.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

To gain insights into the mentioned issues, an action research methodology was employed as an aspect of qualitative research. The use of a qualitative research approach was important in creating conversational space to understand the children's experiences of war. Similarly, action research was important to understand the different levels of participation for reintegration practices. Furthermore, the choice of an action research methodology aimed at the need to contribute suggestions that could improve reintegration practices. The life histories, focus group discussions and interviews we used are in the

tradition of qualitative research. The cyclical nature of analysis and meaning making, participative involvement of the feedback team and the researched, the collaborative and experiential learning between the researcher and the other participants (chapter 4) defined the action research character of the study. Employing an action-oriented methodology is important because of the real time relevance of the issue of reintegration of formerly abducted children in northern Uganda. Conducting the fieldwork in an ongoing and difficult conflict situation and interviewing the returned children some of whom still had not only emotional scars but also the easier-to-heal physical scars gave a sense of agency and urgency for this research. Furthermore, the action research methodology allows for a participative, collaborative inquiry into children's war experiences (chapter 5) including multiple abductions, military training, mothering under stress and experiences of death. The methodology further allows for an understanding of reintegration (chapters 6 & 7) and citizenship issues (chapter 8) in addition to contributing to a bottom-up, collaborative set of suggestions to improve social reintegration practices (chapter 9). This was possible by the use of what we refer to as the needs-competencies-problems-opportunities (NCPO) analysis that we developed due to the participatory action research approach employed.

By telling their own episodic life story about their abduction, the children related not only the conflict but also reintegration both at institutional and community levels and their difficulties and fears about reintegration. In this sense, the children's own voices in letting us in on their experiences allow for a deeper understanding of their predicament. Through focus group discussions with the personnel at institutions, staff were engaged in explaining and assessing their own reintegration methodology. Further, focus group discussions and interviews with adults in the communities also helped to throw light on the contributions and challenges that the community faces in reintegrating its formerly abducted children into community citizenship. The research process and cycles of analysis drew heavily from the feedback team – a group of professionals (some of whom were research assistants) that I had formed for subjecting my reflections to scrutiny and thus gain feedback (see chapter 4). My earlier personal experiences of the war also added value to this research. Both the field and personal experiences were supplemented by secondary data.

The contribution that this research makes also lies in its interdisciplinary nature. For instance, loosely, the context of the conflict, the children's war experiences, and the institutional reintegration practices lean towards political science and human rights while the community-based reintegration practices closely relate to cultural anthropological research. Furthermore, the methodology resulting in the bottom-up, collaborative set of suggestions for improving reintegration practices can be placed in intervention studies.

Overall, peace and conflict issues run through the different themes. Related to this interdisciplinarity, the research brings together two concepts – reintegration and citizenship – through the war experiences of formerly abducted children and their social reintegration.

I.4 CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

This book is organized in ten chapters.

Chapter 2 gives a historical foundation for this research. It highlights some of the major historical events in the lead-up to the northern war. The highlights of the northern conflict itself and the lived experiences remembered as individuals and members of a community are presented. The chapter ends with a discussion in which the historical and lived war experiences are put in perspective in relation to the main concerns of this research.

Chapter 3 addresses three themes that build up the theoretical framework. First, we discuss the theory on children in war. It draws from what war has done to children and the children's experience of war across countries especially in Africa. The second theme discussed is on reintegration, its meaning, and approaches and elements. Thirdly, the theoretical framework explores the meaning of citizenship and its relationship with the community. Lastly, the interface between citizenship and reintegration is discussed.

Chapter 4 discusses the details of how this research was done using the action research methodology, the appropriateness of the methodology for the issues under study and the intellectual foundations of two strands of action research are presented. The chapter further shows how elements of action research evolved and were used in the field. Underlying issues about research ethics, power relations, participation and validity are discussed before we finally look at the challenges of doing action research in a fluid conflict situation.

In chapter 5, we begin the presentation of the empirical findings of the research. It details children's war experience in northern Uganda. The actual experiences undergone by the children such as their abduction, captivity and escape or return home are shown. The chapter also depicts a complete life story and related excerpts of similar, yet, different personal experiences of formerly abducted children in captivity. Experiences depicting personal suffering, atrocities committed and watched, courage and heroism, among others make up parts of this chapter.

When the formerly abducted children returned home in their different ways, and as the dilemma of receiving them back grips the Acholi society, out of that necessity, and unplanned initially, some distinct institutions emerged

to facilitate these children's reception and reintegration. On the basis of our findings chapter 6 discusses the humanitarian, military and political institutional reintegration responses that emerged. The analyses of the findings also show challenges that the institutions face in reintegrating the formerly abducted children.

In chapter 7 our findings show that most of the formerly abducted children stay in the care of institutions for a maximum of three months and others return directly home. Subsequently, there is reunification with family and the children eventually became part of the communities they once terrorized. The mutual fear and distrust between the children and the community notwithstanding, there are different reintegration initiatives in the community. Traditional rituals, accepted marriages, acceptance but also fear, stigmatization and difficult social adjustment problems become part of the community-based reintegration experiences.

Chapter 8 presents two levels of analysis of the interface between children's war experiences (chapter 5), and practices for their reintegration discussed in chapters 6 and 7 in light of citizenship. In general it sees children's war experiences as broken or negative citizenship status and practice while reintegration practices are considered as citizenship re-creation and rebuilding. The second level of analysis takes up the issues that the first level of analysis does not address, i.e., the persisting problems facing reintegration in spite of the available practices. This results in the NCPO analysis which provides a basis for understanding the overall scenario for reintegration.

In chapter 9, drawing from the NCPO analysis, we explain the bottom-up collaborative process towards improving reintegration practices for citizenship. A set of suggestions with three elements for improving reintegration practices is presented. It is hoped that this set of suggestions can have an exemplary value for similar circumstances for reintegrating children of war as well as other ex-combatants into society.

Lastly, chapter 10 presents the conclusions to our research. The conclusions answer our basic and specific research questions that guided this research. Our conclusions ending with the way forward mainly show how this research can be put to use. Possible collaborations and projects for the long-term reintegration of the formerly abducted children are also discussed.



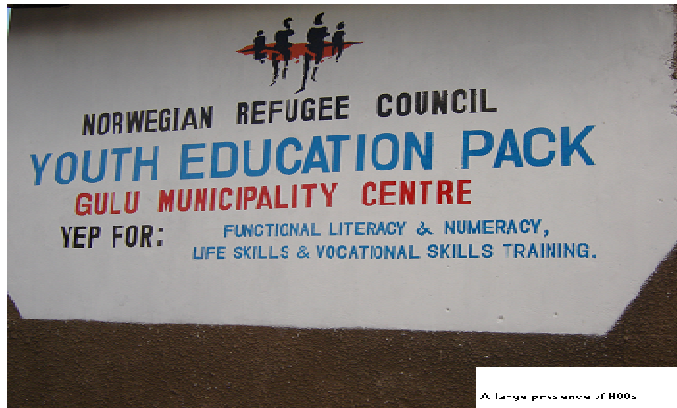
Anaka IDP camp

© Author (2007)



**People receiving relief
at Anaka**

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A large presence of NGOs

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