

# A STUDY OF POST-WAR ACHOLI PEOPLE

How to cope with stress in an environment of ongoing conflict?



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## ABSTRACT

As the dust has settled on the battlefield in Northern Uganda, it seems relevant to shift the focus away from the suffering and trauma of the immediate consequences of the war, to the prolonged effects of the conflict on the struggles of everyday life. Upon conducting fieldwork in Gulu, we discovered that the post-conflict has evolved to a place where coping has become a priority due to the multitude of stress stimuli impacting the life of the Acholi.

By looking through the lens of the Acholi people's hardships, this thesis has attempted to grasp the predominant stress stimuli present in Acholi society, and to explore how the people are coping with them in the post-conflict setting. We wish to investigate not only the prolonged effects of war, by studying stress stimuli and coping strategies, but also to question the *post* in post-conflict.

The aim of the study is not to find ways to resolve the hardships and struggles the Acholi encounter everyday, but rather the theoretical concepts are applied within the state, the community, and the household to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the current context the Acholi people find themselves in. Examining the predominant stress stimuli and the coping provokes an interrogation of whether the *post* in post-conflict is accurate, or if instead the Acholi are situated within an ongoing conflict. Overall, we wish to convey the stories, experiences, and perceptions of everyday life that we learned through social interactions with Acholi people.

The thesis will be arranged into four sections of analysis. The first will take its departure from a macro perspective, analyzing the stress stimuli emerging from state level practices. The second will investigate the meso perspective of stress stimuli at community level, and finally the micro perspective at household level. The hierarchical structure not only allows the stress stimuli to become more clear within their allocated spheres but also to better determine if Acholi people are employing active coping, avoidance strategy, or giving up. The fourth section will use the stress stimuli and coping to demonstrate a notion of ongoing conflict.

**Keywords:** Northern Uganda, Acholi, conflict, stress, stress stimuli, coping strategies, corruption, brutality, land disputes, crisis in masculinity, ongoing conflict.

**Cover photo:** Road to Gulu town, Northern Uganda, March 2017 (photo taken by authors)

## Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Research formulation .....	1
Terminology.....	3
Structural overview .....	3
Historical Background of the Conflict.....	4
<b>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>7</b>
The concept of the stress stimuli .....	7
The concept of coping .....	9
The concept of conflict .....	13
Theoretical reflections and limitations.....	16
Theory in context.....	17
<b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>18</b>
Study Area .....	18
Design of Study .....	19
Data collection: qualitative.....	20
Data collection: quantitative .....	22
Data analysis.....	24
Limitations .....	26
<b>ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter one: macro level: the state .....</b>	<b>29</b>
Stress stimuli: Corruption .....	30
Coping with corruption.....	34
Stress stimuli: Brutality.....	35
Coping with brutality .....	38
Revisiting remark: How do people cope when their government relies heavily on corruption and brutality? .....	40
<b>Chapter two: meso level: the community .....</b>	<b>40</b>
Stress stimuli: Boundary disputes .....	43
Coping with blurred boundaries.....	44
Stress stimuli: Land grabbing.....	46
Coping with land grabbing.....	48
Revisiting remarks: How can the Acholi communities face the current challenges regarding land boundary and land grabbing disputes? .....	50
<b>Chapter three: micro level: the household .....</b>	<b>51</b>
Stress stimuli: the crisis in masculinity .....	54
Coping with aid-dependency, unemployment, and the loss of male role models .....	61
Revisiting remarks: How will the Acholi society respond to their struggle with adjusting to new norms? .....	65
<b>Chapter four: Is the conflict truly over or is it ongoing? .....</b>	<b>65</b>
Stress stimuli contributing to the ongoing conflict .....	69
How to cope with an unresolved conflict?.....	73
Revisiting remarks: can the conflict truly be considered in the post-conflict stage once one is aware of the stress experienced within all three levels? .....	76
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>79</b>
Books and Journal articles .....	79
Newspaper articles and TV interviews .....	82

Online publications.....	83
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>87</b>
Appendix 1: Regional map of Uganda .....	87
Appendix 2: Transcribed interviews .....	88
Appendix 3: Table of participants.....	101
Appendix 4: Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey .....	103

## INTRODUCTION

The traumatic memories from the Northern Ugandan conflict have been the emphasis of countless studies, with the bloody images of mutilated civilians and with the use of children as weapons of destruction, driving the international community in their attempt to comprehend the DNA of the conflict (Wessells 2006; Finnström 2003). As the dust has settled on the battlefield in Northern Uganda, it seems relevant to shift the focus away from the suffering and trauma of the immediate consequences of the war, to the prolonged effects of the conflict on the struggles of everyday life (Pells 2009). By looking through the lens of the Acholi people's hardships, it has allowed us to critically review the current situation and further investigate the way the conflict has evolved through time and space.

The thesis is founded upon field research done in Northern Uganda, in the district of Gulu. It is located in the Acholi kingdom, which is one of the five kingdoms in Uganda. The case of Acholiland is relevant considering the Lord's Resistance Army rebel group (LRA) began its upheaval here in 1986 and continued to wreak havoc during the two decades of war on the people. What is more, incumbent President Yoweri Museveni, and his National Resistance Army/Ugandan People's Defense Forces (NRA/UPDF<sup>1</sup>) response to the rebel violence not only hindered but also crippled the Acholi society further (Martin 2009; Interview with Dora 2017). And there it began, the struggle to grasp who was the protector and who was the perpetrator, who was the lesser of two evil, and who would compensate for all the loss experienced by the Acholi people. Hence, the thesis wishes to explore not only the prolonged effects of war but also to draw attention to what constitutes a conflict, and if the Acholi struggle can truly be deemed resolved.

### **Research formulation**

The thesis has attempted to grasp the current stress stimuli present in Acholi society, and how the communities are coping with them in the post-conflict setting<sup>2</sup>. Through numerous conversations with informants, it became clear that the urgent interventions by the international communities and NGOs in regards to the reintegration of abductees, as well as the seeking of punishment for the agents of the conflict, no longer require such high levels of attention (Miller & Rasmussen 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> NRA was the army Museveni used to gain power. The army today is referred to as the UPDF after a constitution enactment in 1995 that changed the name of the army from NRA to UPDF.

<sup>2</sup> The post-conflict label has been given by external actors, such as the international communities and NGOs. The local Acholi community do not consider themselves in a post-conflict stage.

Instead, the needs have evolved and current priorities for Acholi people are in regards to coping with a multitude of stress stimuli impacting their everyday lives.

Therefore, the thesis will answer the following research question:

*What are the most predominant post-conflict stress stimuli currently present in Acholi society and how do the Acholi people cope with them?*

The sub-questions below have inspired the structure of the thesis, as well as serve as a way to respond more holistically to the overarching research question:

1. *What predominant stress stimuli are present at state-level, community-level, and household-level?*

*Macro: How do the Acholi people cope when their government relies heavily on corruption and brutality?*

*Meso: How can the Acholi communities face the current challenges regarding land boundary and land grabbing disputes?*

*Micro: How will the Acholi society respond to their struggle with adjusting to new gender norms?*

And as a result of these questions and the findings they lead to, it is worth questioning the *post* in post-conflict.

- 2) *Do the Acholi people consider themselves in a post-conflict stage?*

*Can the conflict truly be considered in the post-conflict stage once one is aware of the stress experienced within all three levels?*

The aim of the study is not to find ways to resolve the hardships and struggles the Acholi encounter everyday, but rather the theoretical concepts are applied within the state, the community, and the household to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the current context the Acholi people find themselves in. As Finnström further explains, “any secret agent will be disappointed, however, as this [thesis] does not present anything that is not common knowledge among most people in Northern Uganda. Disclosing new information has not been [our] ambition. [It] is about painstakingly investigating and analyzing the common, general, mainstream, and even taken-for-

granted stuff of everyday life in a particular context, rather than the seemingly subversive and revolutionary” (Finnström 2008: 10).

Examining the predominant stress stimuli and the coping provokes an interrogation of whether the *post* in post-conflict is accurate, or if instead the Acholi are situated within an ongoing conflict. Overall, we wish to convey the stories, experiences, and perceptions of everyday life that we learned through social interactions with Acholi people.

## **Terminology**

As stated in the above research question, the thesis wishes to explore the Acholi perception of the current stress stimuli and their coping strategies. Therefore, it is important to define what we understand as *Acholi*. We took our departure from a regional identification of what it means to be Acholi, since we were studying the Acholi region. Upon conducting fieldwork, we further understood that socially, our informants and those we observed, categorize themselves as Acholi because of the paternal clan and its location within Acholiland. We are aware that when we speak for the Acholi, we are generalizing based on our informants’ way of responding using *us*, thereby referring to a collective identity (Atkinson 2015).

The term *post-conflict* must also be explained in the way we apply it throughout the thesis. Although it is a label created by non-Acholi for the current state of Northern Uganda, in this paper it serves to define the timeframe of our analysis. Moreover, the terms war and post-war will also be used to set the timeframe within a time of violence and what comes after. Based on our Acholi informants, we will determine if the post-conflict stage is the current stage the Acholi live in, by critically reflecting on the *post* in post-conflict.

The stress stimuli and the coping will be elaborated upon in the theoretical framework section.

## **Structural overview**

The research question will be answered with the help of data collected through multiple interviews, informal conversations, and participant observations in Gulu. The paper will first provide a background to the context of the conflict. It will then provide the underlying theoretical framework and definitions of stress stimuli and coping drawn from Miller & Rasmussen (2009) and Lazarus & Folkman (1984). The subsequent analysis will be arranged into four sections. The first three include the macro, the meso, and the micro; respectively, the state, the community, and the household. The

analysis intends to guide the reader through the present post-conflict landscape. Thereupon, this structure encompasses all levels of society from the overarching issues faced by all to the individual household struggles. Within each section, we will delve deeper into the different stress stimuli experienced within the three levels, and then elaborate upon the coping strategies applied when handling them. The fourth and final section will use the stress stimuli and coping strategies presented in relation to the notion of ongoing conflict.

It is hoped that this analysis will bring about a deeper and more profound understanding of the environment the Acholi people find themselves in after experiencing war. In doing so, the intent of the thesis is to inspire the removal of the blinders of the international community and NGOs, which are in place because of the post-conflict label, and incite change politically, economically, culturally, and socially.

### **Historical Background of the Conflict**

In order to understand the backdrop of the conflict between the LRA and the Government forces, which also feeds into the current mechanisms in Acholi society, one must have a general grasp of the historical occurrences that created the possibility for such a landscape to develop. Ever since the British colonization of the 19th century, the Acholi people have been stigmatized. This began with the North being labeled as a “problem area” and described as a “a disturbed, hostile territory” (Latigo 2008: 86). In reality, the misrepresentation of the Acholi people was based on prejudice (*Ibid.*). The division into regions by the British contributed to power being grounded in regional affiliation and tribal ties, which has led Uganda to have a turbulent political trajectory. In short, this means that there is a reciprocal relationship between the leader and his ethnic regional ties, where the leader gains unconditional support and the region itself benefits from such ties. This has perpetuated the cycle of one region pitted against another, and one tribe against another (Okuru 2002).

During the period of colonization, the Southerners, especially the Buganda kingdom, were given elite status, while the Northerners were diminished to cheap labor and military manpower. It therefore brought a sense of pride to the Acholi when a Northerner by the name of Dr. Milton Obote became Prime Minister as independence grabbed hold of Uganda in 1962 (Glentworth & Hancock 1973). Obote recognized the need for Uganda to become one unified state, thereby abolishing the kingdoms and declaring himself Executive President in 1966 (Dinwiddy 1981). Obote remained President until 1971, when General Idi Amin took office via a military coup (Glentworth & Hancock 1973). President Amin had a goal of an all-black Uganda and ordered ruthless killings of any person

opposed to him. As such, he was known and feared by the international community as a ruthless dictator (Mamdani 1988). After a failed war against Tanzania, Amin fled the country in 1979, leaving behind “not one but several armies; not one but several intelligence services [each responding] to a different center of power” (*Ibid.*: 1158).

For the next seven years following 1979, the Ugandan political environment experienced a tumultuous chain of wannabe political leaders. As the dust settled, Obote reclaimed his position as President of Uganda. The resurrection of a Northerner’s power also meant that the Acholi soldiers became once again the protectors of the government. During this time several armies were still roaming the country, including Museveni’s NRA, who ultimately contested Obote’s regime and assumed the Presidency from 1986. While Obote could arguably be considered the founding father of a ‘unified’ Uganda, many Ugandans today debate and contest Amin’s brutality in comparison to the current regime of Museveni (Interview with Chris 2017; Interview with Okello 2017; Jacob in Field Notes 2017).

When Museveni took over power in 1986 with his NRA, the country was in disarray, as Obote’s army was fleeing back to the North in fear of retribution. Museveni allowed certain military groups to keep their independence, as long as they maintained loyalty to him, and let them freely and without repercussions rape and plunder the civilian population in the North, which also served as a retaliation (Mamdani 1988).

As a way of healing and strengthening her people from such brutality, an Acholi peasant woman, by the name of Alice Lakwena, mobilized thousands of Northern peasants through the use of spiritual rituals, under the banner of the Holy Spirit Movement (*Ibid.*). As the NRA became more present in the North, searching for Obote’s former soldiers, the Holy Spirit Movement had to take up arms to protect themselves and their people. For this reason, the NRA intensified their violence and proceeded to take over the Acholi region in an attempt to prevent further rebellion. This failed and provoked more rebel groups to rise (Branch 2014). One of the more influential rebel groups rising from the NRA’s repression was the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, who had himself been in Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement (*Ibid.*).

Kony’s objective was to overthrow the government of Uganda and to “rule the country by the Ten Commandments” (Martin 2009: 19). Furthermore, he believed in a free democratic Uganda, with “a separation of military from the judicial and executive arms of government” (Latigo 2008: 92). Kony used guerilla tactics as a way of restoring Acholi pride, while attempting to terminate Museveni’s rule. The conflict slowly escalated until 1987, when it erupted and “Museveni marched his troops into Acholiland” (Davenport 2014: 12). As explained by one of our key informants, Kony’s aggression grew exponentially as he “resorted to coercion, abduction and terror to build his

army,” because he believed that the Acholi people “sided with the great enemy, Museveni” (Martin 2009: 19; Interview with Okello 2017).

Prior to this escalation of violence, the people of the North had supported the LRA’s quest of overthrowing Museveni by supplying them with food and other basic necessities. As Museveni sent his troops to the North, punishments were implemented for anyone accused of helping the LRA (Interview with Okello 2017). This started a violent spiral where the civilians were “oppressed and violated by both sides of the conflict,” experiencing constant retaliation and brutality from the LRA and the NRA (Branch 2011: 68). As a way of controlling people through fear, the LRA began massacring its own people as well as others in the surrounding regions (Davenport 2014). As described by Martin, who conducted research on reintegration processes for child soldiers, “the lips that would betray them were cut off, the ears that would hear their secrets were slashed off and the eyes that could see them were gouged out” (Martin 2009: 19). In order to supply manpower for his army, Kony abducted children and youth from their homes. The advantage of these young innocent lives was that they were “blank slates that could be indoctrinated with the principles of Kony which sought to purify Acholiland” (Davenport 2014: 3).

The constant psychological terror and manipulation from both sides led not only to fear but also uncertainty in regards to who to trust and to who would protect you throughout the war. Our informant Jacob, who was displaced by the war and sent to live with his uncle, while his mother and siblings were also forced to leave their village and go into the internally displaced camps, stated that “they [the UPDF] will be doing that [violence] and saying Kony is doing it,” making it “very hard to tell which party is saying the truth” (Jacob in Field Notes 2017). The above statement helps to exemplify that it was not only Kony who terrorized Northern Uganda but also Museveni, their supposed protector as leader of the state.

The government has been “accused of inflicting such inhuman cruelties as beatings, torture, rape and sexual assault, child recruitment and instant execution during detention” (Martin 2009: 19). Furthermore, they began forcefully placing the Acholi people into international displaced camps (IDP) in 1996, under the pretext that it was for their protection, “by bombing and burning down villages” (*Ibid.*: 20). As a result, an estimated 1.8 million people, “representing 90 percent of the affected population in Acholiland, were forced [by the government] to abandon their often self-sufficient homesteads for a life confined to the squalid internment camps” (Latigo 2008: 94; Harnish 2016). As we learned, IDP camps became a place of terror, far from being the safe havens they should have been (Interview with Dora 2017; Interview with Okello 2017). It was not until 2006 that a slow disbandment of the camps began, which allowed some people to return home (Davenport 2014).

The daily fear of gunshots, mutilations, and land mines may have subsided for the Acholi people. However, the impact persists today. For example, mistrust towards the government and all state agencies, a fear of losing one's homeland, and loss of self-worth. Furthermore, there is an insecurity that comes from the necessity to redefine lives and roles in this post-conflict society.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis has its theoretical foundations in multiple disciplines, drawing from psychology, social science, and conflict studies to build a holistic understanding of stress, stress stimuli, coping, and conflict. In relation to the concepts of stress, stress stimuli, and coping, this thesis will take its theoretical approach from Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Miller and Rasmussen's (2009) will additionally contribute an understanding of stress in a conflict-affected area. While both contributors are from the field of psychology and serve as the theoretical foundation of our thesis, the thesis will nonetheless use psychological theory through the lens of social science.

The first part of this chapter will define our application of stress stimuli and stress within our analysis. The second part will introduce and elaborate on the concept of coping, as well as the different strategies that will be applied throughout the thesis. In connection to the latter, social navigation and stuckness will be defined and linked to the concept of coping, as inspired by Vigh's (2006) notion. We wish to explore what lies within the gray zones of the post-war period, and to navigate an understanding of the coping mechanisms the Acholi people are relying on. Finally, this theoretical section will provide an overview of the concept of conflict, its application within the thesis, and will outline the foundation for our understanding of what constitutes a conflict.

### **The concept of the stress stimuli**

Miller and Rasmussen, who study community and applied psychology in conflict-affected areas, state that the material and social conditions of everyday life evidently worsen during war and post-war situations (Miller & Rasmussen 2009). Previous studies have emphasized the impacts of direct war exposure during conflicts on mental health, but there has been limited study on the impacts of social and material stress in post-conflict settings (*Ibid.*). Therefore it must be noted that "survivors of organized violence are [...] confronted with a set of enduring and stressful phenomena with which they must contend while also coping with the impact of direct exposure to situations of violent conflict" (*Ibid.*: 11). The lack of academic research on post-conflict stress stimuli and stress,

alongside the observations collected during the field study, led this thesis to explore where the stress of the Acholi people stems from and the impact it has on their lives.

The term stress, which was used as early as the 14th century, is a known condition in all dimensions of society that signifies hardship, strain, tension, frustration, anxiety, etc. (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). It is normally associated with a state of emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances (Merriam-Webster dictionary). Lazarus and Folkman, who have contributed a detailed theory of psychological stress, building on the concepts of cognitive appraisal and coping, further define psychological stress as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman 1984: 19). Stress, which encompasses a wide range of phenomena, is not a single variable but a rubric consisting of many emotions (*Ibid.*). We understand stress as an emotional perception or negative psychological phenomenon, such as anxiety, burden, strain, struggle, hardship, and tension (Segal 2014).

Stress is the psychological outcome of stress stimuli; as pioneer psychiatrists Korchin and Grinker write, stimuli produce disturbance (Korchin & Grinker 1955). Stress stimuli are often defined as “events impinging on the person[’s wellbeing]” (Lazarus & Folkman 1984: 12). With the help of Lazarus and Folkman’s definition, the stress stimuli will be selected based on the criteria that they have a negative or burdensome impact on the lives of individuals or communities. From this, we identified different levels within which stress occurs. Keeping in mind that stress stimuli can affect a large number of people, a few people, or individuals, we found three realms in which stress stimuli, and thus stress, are experienced: a macro or state level, a meso or community level, and a micro or household level.

Despite the Acholi people facing a multitude of hardships and stress, the focus will be on the stress stimuli that are triggering the most stress, which we have found to be the following: corruption, brutality, boundary disputes, land grabbing, and a crisis in masculinity, associated with aid-dependency, unemployment, and loss of male role models. As Lazarus and Folkman write, “many sources of stress cannot be mastered, and effective coping under these conditions is what allows the person to tolerate, minimize, accept or ignore what cannot be mastered” (*Ibid.*: 140). And thus, the stress that ensues from these stimuli is “an inevitable aspect of life.” The thesis will demonstrate these seemingly-inescapable stress stimuli for the Acholi people, and develop an understanding of some of the ways the Acholi people are coping (*Ibid.*: 21).

## **The concept of coping**

The important process of coping describes the way that people deal with psychological states of stress. As Muhwezi states, most literature and studies on coping in post-conflict states tend to overemphasize the coping strategies of former armed actors in conflicts (Muhwezi et al. 2014; Hofmann & Schneckener 2011). Therefore, there has been insufficient focus on the coping mechanisms applied among all conflict-affected people. Coping often involves a reconstruction of the meaning of life, as it alters ethno-cultural insights, such as in the realm of the state, communities, and households (Muhwezi et al. 2014).

Coping is a widely used term within several fields of study, including psychology, sociology, and biology. For instance, sociology and biology use the term coping to describe ways in which society or an organism deals with a crisis (Mitrousi et al. 2013). Lazarus and Folkman define coping as “ongoing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific (external and/or internal) demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resource of the individual” (Lazarus & Folkman 1984; Mitrousi et al. 2013: 131). From the psychological field, Mitrousi et al. define coping as “the struggle against external and internal adversities, conflicts and intense emotions” that arise from a post-conflict setting (Mitrousi et al. 2013: 131). Since there are varying understandings of coping, it is crucial to specify exactly what is to be understood by it in this research. We construct the following definition: coping is the attempt to manage stress, and more specifically the manner in which the Acholi handle the stress they face within the state, community, and household spheres.

### The three coping strategies

According to Mitrousi et al., there is a two-way process when handling stress. The first one is the “cognitive assessment which refers to the extent and way the situation relates to the individual,” (*the effect of the stimuli*) and the second “refers to how the problem is dealt with” (*the coping method*) (*Ibid.*: 133). When applying coping, we understand it as a state of being in which one either remains within the stressful sphere or proactively moves forward. We therefore notice a dynamic and a static way of coping, which we’ve divided into two strategies: active coping and avoidance strategy. The first, referred to as active coping, can be considered a coping mechanism that aims at actively altering, reducing or removing the source of stress (Caver et al. 1989). Active coping implies a direct action by the person to decrease the stress stimuli and thus its effects. The second, although called a strategy, is considered a maladaptive coping technique, and involves denial,

concealment, or withdrawal (Glennie 2010). This avoidance strategy is “aimed at reducing or managing the emotional distress that is associated with or cued by the situation” rather than actively addressing the stress stimuli (Caver et al. 1989: 267). The avoidance strategy involves an indirect level of apathy towards how the individual handles the stress stimuli.

A third process for coping with the stress that has been observed is to simply give up on the attempt to reduce or avoid stress stimuli rather than cope. According to Miller and Rasmussen, there is a “growing body of evidence which suggests that it may be the less dramatic but more enduring stressful conditions of everyday life that eventually take the greatest toll on people’s psychological wellbeing” (Miller & Rasmussen 2009: 12). This toll on people’s wellbeing can lead to helplessness, and as a last resort to death by suicide. The reason this category is important yet subtle is due to the sensitivity of the topic of suicide in Acholi society. There exists a lack of knowledge in regards to mental health, which has led to stigma and shame for people struggling with depression. Often, they are excluded and shunned from village life, primarily because the villagers believe it is contagious and related to bad spirits and ill-faith (Lucy in Field Notes 2017; William in Field Notes 2017). Therefore, there is a shamefulness connected to the act of committing suicide due to mental imbalances, which leads to silence and evasion by the community. While the Acholi perceive this coping strategy as shameful, in this thesis, the coping strategies will not be labeled as positive or negative, since “not one strategy is considered inherently better than another” (Lazarus & Folkman 1984: 134). However, there are instances where the perception of what is negative or positive to the Acholi will affect the way coping is presented in this paper.

These three aforementioned coping strategies, which will be used as parameters when analyzing the data, differentiate from each other, in that one employs constructivity, the other continuously endures the stress stimuli, and the last gives up. We expect that active coping strategies will be used when the stress stimuli seem manageable and controllable, while the avoidance strategy will be employed when the stress stimuli cannot be objectively modified (Mitrousi et al. 2013). Giving up will be used in bleak situations where no other options seem possible. In relation to these processes, we have observed similarities with the social science concepts of social navigation and stuckness, which will be outlined in the following section. The combination of these concepts will increase the grasp and understanding of the theoretical field of coping, as well as unfolding the mechanisms within Acholi society.

## Social science components of coping

Social navigation will be used when discussing active coping strategies, while stuckness will be used when talking about avoidance strategy. By combining the social science and psychology perspectives, the thesis aims to add nuance and a better understanding of where the stress is derived from and how the Acholi cope with it.

Social navigation, as defined by political anthropologist Vigh, is related to the Guinea Bissau concept of *dubria*, where people navigate through unstable social terrains. *Dubria* implies “motion within motion requiring both an assessment of immediate dangers and possibilities, as well as an ability to envision the unfolding of the social terrain and to plot and actualize one’s movement from the present into the imagined future” (Vigh 2006: 52). Inspired by Vigh’s definition of *dubria*, social navigation focuses on finding passages to create change and also new trajectories, which connects to active coping in regards to its aim at actively altering or reducing stress. While conducting our research, we were introduced to the Acholi phrase *kato i kine*, which was explained to us as “like a passing,” where one was in limbo, stuck in the middle of a bridge, but now has successfully crossed the bridge arriving on the other side. Thereby indicating a transition from hardship to “being alright” (Jacob in Field Notes 2017). We believe that *kato i kine* demonstrates the result of social navigation. They both indicate a presence of engagement, where the people use active coping strategies to address the stress stimuli (Glennie 2010).

On the other end of the spectrum, stuckness is a betwixt and between category defined by inactivity, and the enduring of stress stimuli (Vigh 2006). Stress develops into a psychological debilitating prolonged state that has to be endured, and results in existential stuckness (Harnish 2016). Within this confined space of stuckness, there exists a sort of acceptance. In the Acholi language, the word *omoko* implies a physical stuckness, which was defined by one of our informants, as “like being stuck in the mud” (Jacob in Field Notes 2017). On a metaphysical level, *omoko* refers to the feeling of immobility and helplessness insofar that you are enduring the stress stimuli, and struggling to break out of the all-engulfing mud. Thus, the state of *omoko*, or stuckness, will be treated as an indication of avoidance strategy.

Through our fieldwork, it became apparent that when people were stuck there seemed to be a level of acceptance to their inability to move. In psychology, as discussed by Caver et al., “acceptance is [normally] a functional coping response, in that a person who accepts the reality of a stressful situation would seem to be a person who is engaged in the attempt to deal with the situation” (Caver et al. 1989: 270). In the case of the Acholi people, there seem to be different dynamics at play, in which acceptance does not tend to entail actively dealing with the stress stimuli.

Therefore, acceptance is identified as part of the stuckness and avoidance strategy, where people disengage by deflecting away from the stress stimuli.

It is important to note that when working with the concepts of stress stimuli and coping, these two do not equal each other, in the sense that negative stress stimuli do not necessarily lead to maladaptive coping. Thereby, despite the fact that stress stimuli are often negative, they can lead to a positive outcome on the individual's life trajectory. In this thesis, the most prevalent negative emotional strain faced by the Acholi, which we refer to as the predominant stress stimuli, will be analyzed within the state, the community, and the household. Then, their response to the stress stimuli will be discussed by using the three coping strategies we have chosen, which are active coping, avoidance strategy, and giving up. This structure is founded upon the understanding that the stress stimuli (corruption, brutality, land boundary, land grabbing, and the crisis in masculinity) cause negative psychological stress (such as anxiety, frustration, and hardship), that then requires some sort of coping (such as active coping, avoidance strategy, or giving up).

#### De-selection of an alternative theoretical approach

In the field of post-conflict studies, researchers will commonly explore resilience and apply it as an explanatory tool for understanding the mechanisms present in the fragile state of being (Harnish 2016; Zraly & Nyirazinyoye 2010). Resilience can be defined as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of serious adversity” (Luthar et al. 2000: 543). Due to the fact that resilience can encompass so many dynamics, it is also defined by scholars as “achieving better than expected outcomes for at-risk people, positively adapting in response to stress, or recovering well from trauma” (Glennie 2010: 178). As implied by the definitions, resilience is often viewed as the end result after positive coping mechanisms were utilized. Despite resilience and coping often being paired, they are two distinct concepts. Whereas “coping involves a set of skills, [...] resilience indicates a successful result of the exercise of those skills. Not everyone who uses coping skills is resilient. Some attempts to cope are not successful, and if the coping skill does not lead to a good outcome, the person is not resilient” (*Ibid.*: 171). As Harnish further points out, “resilience entails a normative judgment of what is considered healthy/unhealthy, normal/deviant or pathological” (Harnish 2016: 144). As the explanations by Glennie and Harnish imply, resilience would post certain limitations to the study of the current post-conflict situation in Acholiland, imposing a focus on those who have achieved successful results from their coping strategies. Our interactions with Acholi people demonstrated that the majority are struggling with social and

material stresses impeding on their resilience, hence the more neutral concept of coping is the most appropriate framework for analyzing the responses to stress stimuli. Furthermore, this more neutral and inclusive focus allows exploration of unsuccessful as well as successful coping strategies, which could have utility in informing support to people recovering after a conflict.

### **The concept of conflict**

This thesis is built upon the concept of conflict in the sense that our research on stress stimuli and coping takes its departure in the post-conflict setting. Hence, it is essential to define the concept of conflict, explain its stages, and interrogate the *post* in post-conflict from which we derive our notion of ongoing conflict (Vigh 2008).

The term conflict is rooted from the Latin word *conflictus* meaning collision or clash, however, over the last few decades there has been a considerable struggle over how to define the concept of conflict. There is no general consensus when defining ‘conflict’, this is largely due to the numerous features encompassed within the ever-evolving nature of conflict (Staub 2006; Lyamouri-Bajja et al. 2012). The way conflict is perceived is often shaped by how an individual thinks about the nature of the conflict. A common misconception is the belief that conflict equals war. However, the perspective taken in this paper is that “war is not the conflict, but rather the negative result of how the conflict was dealt with” (*Ibid.*: 54). In this perspective, the conflict can either be a catalyst for change or a paralyzing stalemate. Based upon this, “definitions of conflict move backwards and forwards between conflict being perceived as a negative or as a positive process” (*Ibid.*: 47).

Due to the complexity of the concept, it necessitates a more holistic approach when defining conflict. On one hand, Goodhand states, “conflict is a struggle, between individuals or collectivities over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are to assert their values or claims over those of others” (Goodhand 2001: 7). On the other hand, Lyamouri-Bajja et al. defines conflict as a “disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns” (Lyamouri-Bajja et al. 2012: 56). As illustrated by the two definitions, different authors apply different focal points when understanding conflict. The former definition emphasizes the struggle over power, while the latter prioritizes the threat perceived by the conflicting parties. In the case of Northern Uganda, the origins of the conflict were both based on a struggle over power and a threat. There existed a power struggle from the time Obote lost power and Museveni took over, causing Northern soldiers to flee, and Museveni to retaliate. The threat of the impending violence from Museveni, brought about the rise of fear in the North, and resulted in the creation of the LRA rebel movement to counteract the threat of violence.

## The stages of conflict

Studies of conflict typically discuss three stages: pre, during, and post conflict. These are often used as a tool for determining the space we find ourselves in, and thus the stages of this conflict were the backdrop to our understanding of the current landscape the Acholi live in. Investigating conflict, and its stages, was a way to “reveal the complexities of life and politics in the gray areas between war and peace” (Schneiderman & Snellinger 2014).

Conflict is an ever-changing and long-term process, where components and actors “can change dramatically as time goes by” (Lyamouri-Bajja et al 2012: 47). Throughout the conflict, there exist phases that shift between escalation and de-escalation. These phases can be divided into three general stages, the pre-conflict, the during-conflict, and the post-conflict. The pre-conflict stage is identified by a level of potential threats, and an escalation and de-escalation of violence (*Ibid.*). In a Northern Ugandan context, the pre-conflict phase was characterized by an amalgamation of an absence of political openings and poor economic conditions leading to a feeling of injustice. As a result, some of the Acholi people devoted themselves to the cause promoted by Joseph Kony, as a way of addressing the injustice they were experiencing. The exploitable sense of injustice allowed Kony to mobilize what would become the LRA (Smith 2004). This served as the backdrop for the transition from pre-conflict to during-conflict. The during-conflict phase is identified by intense violence and a state of exception, often referred to as war (Lyamouri-Bajja et al. 2012). It is possible to wage war “as soon as weapons are available with which to fight it and as long as there is a dispute between two or more parties” (Smith 2004: 5). As this definition states, both parties in the Northern Uganda conflict took up arms as a way of handling their irreconcilable differences. A disturbing shift in warfare in the last century is that the distribution of suffering has changed from combatants losing their lives to civilians being the main casualties - as was the case for the Acholi (Goodhand 2001). As the war in Northern Uganda was fought internally, it created a division among the people, and further helped to undermine trust between state actors and citizens (*Ibid.*).

The final phase is the post-conflict stage, which ideally involves an agreement between the conflicting parties. The cooperation that ensues from such an agreement creates a landscape of positive peace (Lyamouri-Bajja et al. 2012). Further indicators of positive peace are the absence of violence, the growth of domestic product (GDP), and fair and free elections (Schneiderman & Snellinger 2014). It is this stage of the conflict that is of particular interest to the thesis, because the analysis is founded within this timeframe. However, it was determined that this post-conflict setting we found ourselves in, was not marred by positive peace, but instead tainted with ongoing threats and power struggles coming from the different predominant stress stimuli. It became apparent that

“the technocratic categories deployed to define social and political complexity in the constrained terms of post-conflict” settings did not fit with the lived experience of the Acholi (*Ibid.*). This led us to explore the notion of ongoing conflict.

### Interrogating the “post” in “post-conflict”: Ongoing conflict

We realized that the current reality for the Acholi people did not entirely fit into the stages defined above, which led us to the finding of the notion of ongoing conflict (Vigh 2008). Throughout our fieldwork research, whenever we discussed the conflict and the perceived end of it, our informants corrected us by affirming that “the conflict is not done” (Interview with Dora 2017; Interview with Okello 2017). Therefore, the notion of ongoing conflict emerged from our empirical findings and led to the elaboration of it as a theoretical concept. In order to fully define and shed light on our understanding of ongoing conflict and how it will be used within this thesis, we propose that theoretical underpinnings from Vigh’s definition of crisis and its chronicity can be applied to this context (Vigh 2008).

As Vigh explains, crisis, or in our case conflict, is often framed as a temporary phenomenon that is episodic, and a “rupture in the order of things; an intermediary moment of chaos where social and societal processes collapse upon themselves only to come to life after the crisis is overcome” (Vigh 2008: 8). However, in our research, we found that conflict is not a singular event but rather an ongoing experience (*Ibid.*). From Vigh’s work we extrapolate the idea that an ongoing conflict is a “prolonged period of decline” that perpetuates a “dense feeling of deterioration related to social, economic, political and even identificatory decay” (*Ibid.*: 6). It is a “constant prospect waiting on the other side of the horizon” that keeps the Acholi feeling the incompleteness of the conflict (*Ibid.*: 6). Vigh writes about the *chronicity* of crisis, however, in the case of Acholiland, the people believe that positive change is impending and there will be an eventual end to the current paralyzing stalemate they find themselves in. Since we understand threats and power struggles as distinct components of conflict, it follows that if they are still present in the ‘post-conflict’ stage, this indicates the prolongation of the conflict. The Acholi are experiencing stress stemming from corruption, brutality, land boundary and land grabbing disputes, and from the crisis in masculinity, “which are timber that could reignite violence [or] initiate war by other means. Glossing over these tensions may ultimately fail to stem further conflict” (Schneiderman & Snellinger 2014: 1).

## Theoretical reflections and limitations

The theoretical framework outlined above was grounded in other research, then validated and enriched from the data generated during our ethnographic fieldwork, as well as other research, regarding the Acholi and post-conflict life. Our analysis is situated within our understanding of the perspectives of the Acholi people we interacted with. When analyzing people's perceptions, there is a need to reflect upon the fluidity that exists in human responses, in terms of stress, coping, and the lens used by the authors and the reader.

The post-conflict pressures, which we refer to as stress stimuli, produce stress for the Acholi in varying degrees within the state, community, and household levels. People "differ in their sensitivity and vulnerability to" the stress stimuli that emerged from the conflict, as well as their reactions and interpretations (Lazarus & Folkman 1984: 23). Similarly to how stress affects people differently, the coping strategies that people rely on may vary according to one's perception of the stress. So while each individual copes in his/her own way, our empirical groundwork determined three overarching coping strategies. Some scholars apply an idiographic portrait based on their case studies to maintain the individuality of their cases, while we implemented common coping styles, which allowed us to encompass the data generated in regards to coping strategies (*Ibid.*: 4).

Further reflection is required in order to recognize the nuance that external voices reproduce, considering that they stem from the internal psychological perspectives of the Acholi. When conversing about coping methods, it was often clear that the Acholi assigned positive and negative labels to different ways of coping, arising from discourses created by NGOs, religion, tradition, family, etc. Despite wanting to represent the Acholi perspective through their stories and words, we are unable to fully escape our western way of thinking (Harnish 2016). Hence, why it might seem as though coping could be labeled as positive or negative based on assumptions from a western lens, but one must attempt to detach the Acholi way of coping from the one's presumption of good or bad.

The theoretical psychological concepts are from an expanded field and hold a certain level of complexity, meaning that the stress stimuli and coping are "slippery concepts" (*Ibid.*: 62).

Furthermore, by combining the latter with the social science perspective, some argue that an interdisciplinary analysis often "runs the risk of remaining shallow" (*Ibid.*: 34). We are aware that our theoretical framework simplifies and limits the perspectives through which we analyzed our data, which may have diminished the nuances that exist within the post-conflict setting. We created makeshift boxes that allocated data into the most significant negative emotional struggles within each level, followed with the identification of coping responses that we learned from our informants. However, this allowed us to find patterns in the predominance of stress stimuli and the coping

strategies applied in post-conflict settings, and consequently to determine when a conflict has truly come to an end.

### Theory in context

As the theoretical section demonstrates, each chapter will first identify the predominant stress stimuli within the macro (state), meso (community), and micro (household) levels of Acholi society. Then, the stress stimuli will be analyzed in accordance to the three coping strategies: active coping, avoidance strategy, and giving up (*Refer to Figure 1 below*). All of the above will facilitate our quest to answer our problem statement of what predominant stress stimuli are currently present in post-conflict Acholiland and how the community is coping with those. The last chapter will employ the notion of ongoing conflict presented above, as well as the results from our analysis, to determine whether or not the conflict in Acholiland has come to an end.

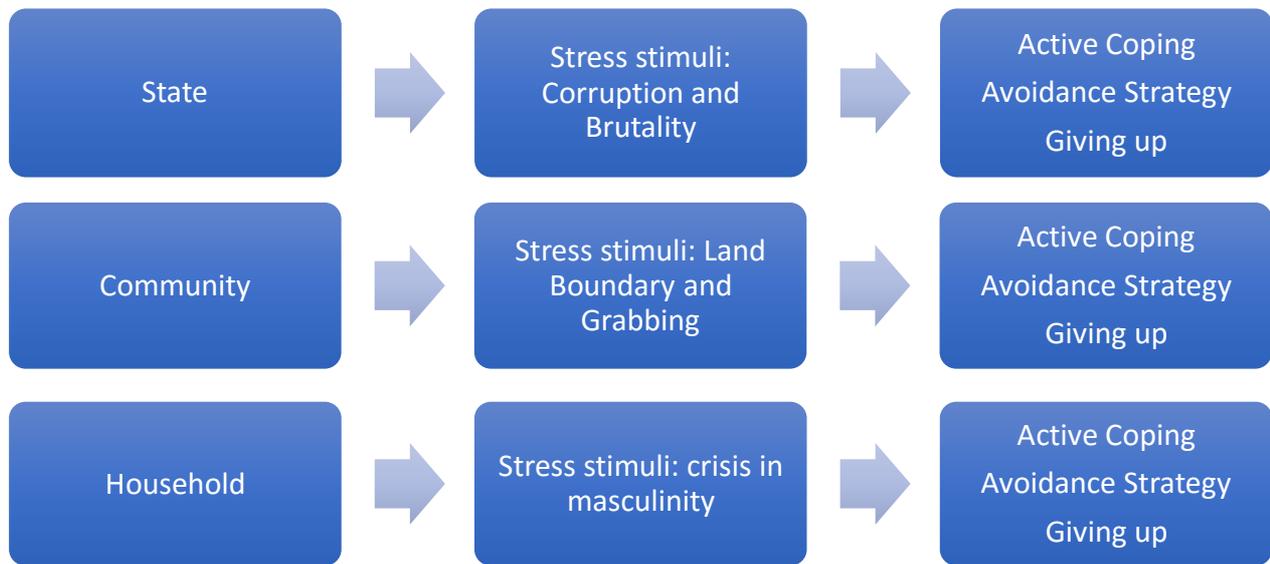


Figure 1: Illustration of interaction from aspects of Acholi society to their stressors and then coping.

## METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodological framework used to collect empirical data and to develop the theoretical framework discussed above. It also demonstrates how the research question and theoretical framework were shaped to strengthen their relevance to the current situation of the Acholi people. Finally, it will describe the selected study area, the type of design applied, the data collection, the selection of participants, and the analysis process, alongside the limitations experienced in this thesis.

The research initially set out to investigate how the community copes in post-conflict Acholiland and how this resonates with the reintegration process of former child soldiers. As we conducted our fieldwork, it became apparent through our informants that the matter of former child soldiers' reintegration was no longer the main concern. It is often the case in research that increased understanding throughout the process necessitates a shift in focus. As Lund states, "the opening questions are merely a first step in a long series of gradual precisions, and one often ends up answering a slightly different question from what one set out to ask" (Lund 2014: 227). This holds true for this thesis, where the question was shaped by the empirical data collected. This strengthens the research and its potential applications because, it grounds the problem formulation in a relevant context and reality for the Acholi people.

### **Study Area**

This thesis was conducted in the Gulu region of Northern Uganda, and therefore, our current contextual information will be based on the Gulu district. The Gulu district borders with the districts of Adjumani in the Northwest, Kitgum in the East, Masindi in the South, and South Sudan in the North (*Refer to Appendix 1: Map of Uganda*). Gulu is the western part of the former Acholi District and is divided into counties with Gulu Town as the administrative headquarters (Rwabwoogo 1998). The main languages spoken are Lwo and Acholi. Despite this, English is commonly spoken across Uganda for those that have attended school. Uganda is comprised of five kingdoms, each of which has its own language(s), thus English is the prevalent language in the country. The main economic activity is centered around agriculture, with an emphasis on food crops (Rwabwoogo 1998; Index Mundi 2017). Over the last decade, Gulu Town has experienced an urban influx, turning it into the hub of the North and the center of trading. It is estimated that there are around 460 thousand people living in Gulu Town (City population 2016). Along with the districts of Kitgum, Pader, and Lira,

Gulu experienced the highest levels of violence and terror from the LRA and state, hence our analysis is based on the experiences of the Acholi in Gulu district (Pearson & Pedersen 2016).

Moreover, the study was primarily conducted within the context of THRIVEGulu, an NGO located in Layibi, on the outskirts of Gulu Town. THRIVEGulu is a community-based nonprofit organization that supports communities recovering from the traumatic effects of conflict through mental health education, economic empowerment via Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA), and counseling. The VSLA groups are THRIVEGulu's community savings and support groups, that provide economic, social, and emotional support to members, as they work together to heal and thrive. The VSLA groups will appear in our analysis as both informants and as a way to cope (THRIVEGulu Webpage).

While conducting research at THRIVEGulu, there were 16 staff members running the program on the ground, while the Executive Director is based in the US. THRIVEGulu's main financial backing comes from partnerships with USAID and Save the Children, alongside individual donations and annual fundraising campaigns. The THRIVEGulu center served as our base during the field study, and through interactions with all staff members generated valuable insights and connections to people outside the organization. Furthermore, by participating in THRIVEGulu's field activities, we were able to acquire knowledge about community infrastructure and happenings at the local level. While THRIVEGulu allowed us to acquire information from informants and happenings, it also hindered our ease to reach people outside of THRIVEGulu's sphere. Through the multitude of participant observations and conversations with informants, it became evident that stress stimuli as direct consequences to the conflict were deeply impacting the lives of people in Acholiland, and thus their ability to cope.

## **Design of Study**

In this thesis, the philosophy of science illuminated the research we conducted, in the sense that it provided a way to describe our research and how to carry it out. We were inspired by the phenomenological research method that enabled us to explore experiences and perceptions of the Acholi people, and build an in-depth understanding from these. We used the Acholi experiences to acquire knowledge and analyze the stress stimuli and coping phenomena in order to generate valid findings. Furthermore, as the narratives of the Acholi people are the empirical base for the thesis, a dialogic attitude towards communication was applied to gather information, which later facilitated the development of the theoretical framework (Laverty 2003).

We set out to understand people's stress stimuli and coping within a post-conflict setting, and followed an inductive rather than a deductive approach, which allowed us to pursue a bottom up method. A strength of the inductive approach is that the data is the driver that leads to the determination of the concepts, rather than letting the concepts drive the definition of the data (Yin 2011). As social scientist and case study expert Yin states, "most qualitative research follows an inductive approach" (*Ibid.*: 94). Since the thesis focuses on the concepts of stress stimuli and coping, it is relevant to use qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, as this can help to unfold questions that otherwise would be hidden if only applying quantitative methods (Moore 2006). By using a qualitative method, it is possible to detect small changes in reflections or to delve more into nuances that become present throughout the conversation. As an added level, the thesis will be strengthened by a quantitative component, which will be presented further below. Overall, the thesis wishes to investigate the "inner responses" in regards to how the Acholi are coping with the stress stimuli. Thus, a qualitative method, with a quantitative component, allows for an unraveling of the responses experienced by the Acholi, with their narrative always at the center (Harnish 2016).

The paper draws on both primary and secondary data for its analysis. The primary data includes qualitative and quantitative data gathered in the district of Gulu, over a three week period from March to April 2017, as well as first hand field experiences. The secondary data utilized in the analysis is comprised of academic literature and pre-departure research, alongside further investigation into more specific inquiries inspired by the fieldwork conducted. From the academic literature, we sometimes also derived information from informants and participants that we did not interact with ourselves but that other academic researchers met in Northern Uganda.

### **Data collection: qualitative**

Our initial decision to have THRIVEGulu as our base, allowed us access to information and informants in a more efficient manner within our allocated timeframe. It became evident that it was easier to access people when you are associated with a known and trusted organization. The interview approach, which focused on the human experience of the Acholi, led to the construction of a narrative. As explained by Harnish, who studied the notion of resilience in an Acholi context, "there is a social function inherent in how the experiences are narrated" (*Ibid.*: 61).

## Semi-structured interviews

We carried out semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observations. By applying a semi-structured interview technique, it is possible to examine topics in detail and in depth, while we as interviewers have the ability to adjust and redirect as the thread of the conversation continues. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were used when interacting with people whose profession is in our field of study, and often people with time constraints. This was done in order to create a more formal space, with questioning and audio recording, where the expert answered a set of questions prepared prior to conversation (*Refer to Appendix 2: Transcribed Interviews*). Other data collected was gathered through informal conversations when interacting with people we saw on a more daily basis, which were then documented in our field notes. Our initial strategy in relation to collecting data through conversations was to begin by asking general questions about Uganda, and delving into the political landscape by asking about the government. This often opened up the conversation into interesting topics since everyone we spoke to had strong opinions about the state. After settling into a routine at THRIVEGulu, sharing lunches with the same staff members everyday, we began asking more pointed questions about the community and household life, and the personal grievances since the war and violence ended. This resulted in the gathering of information related to stress and struggles experienced by the Acholi. We would then inquire as to how they were facing the stress and hardships they talked about. All of which inspired our theoretical framework of studying stress stimuli and coping.

Since the data was collected in a formal and informal space, it is interesting to compare and find patterns in the respective answers. By applying semi-structured interviews and casual conversations, we anticipated that it would create an added level of authenticity to our empirical framework. Throughout this process, experts and community members expressed similar concerns at state level, community level, and household level, which then further validated the information gathered.

## Participants

Due to our general interest in the Acholi society, there was no criteria for the right type of participant. We talked to people from different professional spheres, ages, and social classes. All of which helped to create the nuance required for assessing the complex and extensive question of stress stimuli and coping. As mentioned previously, the initial contact with our informants was made through THRIVEGulu, and later through connections of THRIVEGulu, thus a snowballing method

was applied (Harnish 2016; Heckatorn 2011). All our participants, despite different levels of education, spoke English, which encouraged the flow of conversation. We also didn't have to rely on an interpreter's translation of conversations. This was a clear asset for the empirical data since it removed any insecurities that could otherwise have occurred if interpreting had been necessary. One of the advantages of not having the data translated, was that it came directly from the source, therefore limiting the influence of someone else's interpretation. Moreover, it must be noted that the information received from the participants was their own recollection and narrative in regards to their post-conflict struggles. It is thus important to keep in mind that all narratives are positioned from their viewpoint, but as this thesis wishes to explore the experienced and perceived struggles of the Acholi people, it is not considered to be a limitation to the study.

Despite interacting with a multitude of people, a few key informants became a prominent source of information in regards to our qualitative data collection (*Refer to Appendix 3: Table of Participants*). Due to this, it is necessary to present a brief background of the informants because they come from a certain context which leads to a specific narrative, which should be taken into account when analyzing the data. There were seven female and seven male informants, their age ranges from 26 to 44, and all are strong Christians, participating in church activities on a weekly basis. Nine of the informants are from Acholiland, born in surrounding villages, but have all at some point relocated to Gulu Town. Two others are from West Nile in the North and Buganda in the South, and both now reside in Kampala region. Twelve of them were affected during the conflict in different ways, but most of them were fortunate to be sent to schools or residences in bigger towns or in safer areas. All of them feel a level of resentment towards the current government, however, some of them have been more directly targeted by Museveni's regime, making them more careful about sharing information. Despite having access to informants from both the South and the North, we were unable to reach village elders, as well as those in the peripheries of Gulu district. Two of the fourteen informants were from the UK and the US. Lindsay Dakan, from the US, is worth mentioning as she was our main contact, and acted as our liaison between the Western world and the Acholi culture, considering that she has been living in Gulu for several years. Furthermore, she offered a lot of expert knowledge on general matters concerning communities and life in Acholiland.

### **Data collection: quantitative**

As stated above, our research not only relied on a qualitative approach, but it also included a quantitative aspect. The collaboration with THRIVEGulu permitted us to have access to their Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey and provided us with data generated in a quantitative study. This

assessment was made with the purpose to determine the immediate situation in the VSLA groups. The questionnaire was divided into three topics: community, individual, and THRIVEGulu's work. Due to the problem formulation, only the first two topics will be applied in this study. At the moment, there are 26 groups, constituted of 277 people, all located in Gulu district. The demographic composition of the groups is as follows: both genders are represented, with both all-female groups and mixed groups; some of the groups are constructed on the basis that the members are all returnees, others are intergenerational groups, where mothers and daughters are in attendance; all group members have a strong affiliation to Christianity; the age ranges from 22 to 76; and all are classified within the lower income percentile.

This survey was created by THRIVEGulu staff, but was collected by external data collectors to ensure independence of the data, as well as people who were able to ask questions in Acholi and write down the answers in English. It should therefore be noted that the quantitative study participants were mostly unilingual (Acholi), whereas the qualitative study participants were bilingual (English-Acholi). While the survey was created by THRIVEGulu as an evaluation for themselves, the content was appropriate to be treated as primary data for this study. While the data collectors might have interpreted, simplified, or translated the data in their individual way, we are the ones that entered the raw data, then coded the responses to the surveys. This systematic handling of the data ensures sufficient accuracy and validity of the analysis.

### Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey

The survey consisted of 8 sections and 16 different items, some of which had multiple parts (*Refer to Appendix 4: Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey*). The two first questions are the ones that were applicable for our research. The questions were:

1. What are your three biggest concerns about your community?
2. What are your three biggest concerns in your life?

These were open-ended questions where the participants could freely answer (no multiple choice options). Often participants answered more than simply three concerns or challenges. As the thesis is focused on identifying concerns, these answers have helped determine the most predominant stress stimuli within their communities (the stresses that statistically scored the highest), which then helped determine the coping strategy utilized. As Lazarus and Folkman state, the burdens in one's life often induce stress (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). We consider concerns to be similar to burdens. Therefore, the questions regarding community and individual concerns facilitate our determination of the burdens, and thus the stress stimuli. In order to deal with the stress stimuli, one must apply some

form of coping strategy; in our case either active coping, avoidance strategy, or giving up are applied (Miller & Rasmussen 2009). Hence, the concerns help identify the causes that require coping.

### Qualitative aspect

Besides using the statistics from this quantitative component, the paper also extracted answers from the participants to use as quotes in order to build evidence of the stress stimuli and coping. Moreover, it was decided that the quantitative survey participants remain anonymous, while the qualitative informants confirmed that their contributions did not have to be confidential.

The combination of both the qualitative approach and the quantitative component has allowed for a wider scope of data, but has also helped to reconfirm patterns discovered in the interviews conducted. Thereby, the mixed methods strengthened our empirical data and thus our analysis.

### **Data analysis**

By submerging ourselves into the social environment through participant observations, informal conversations, interviews, and from simply being present within the current post-conflict context, the ethnographic fieldwork allowed us to slowly zoom in on the most recurring topics discussed by our informants. Due to the abundance of empirical data, it is important to be selective in order to avoid redundancy and to systematically answer the problem statement in a holistic manner. We therefore identified the most predominant stress stimuli on their level of recurrence and according to our theoretical framework of what constitutes a stress stimuli. Within this process, we disregarded any unique stimuli that only concerned specific situations or individuals. On this basis we chose stress stimuli that were prevalent in each of the realms: macro, meso, and micro; and directly related to the state, community, and household levels. Based on Lazarus and Folkman's understanding that stress is a condition that is burdensome and taxing, and therefore can be straining on an individual's mental balance, we selected the most relevant stress stimuli for each realm of the analysis. With this in mind, poverty, which is a concern for most Ugandans, was de-selected as a stress stimuli because of its presence in each of the realms. It must therefore be presumed a precondition in each level, despite it being heightened by the post-conflict vulnerability. Two other stress stimuli that came up during our fieldwork were mental health challenges, and the hardship brought on by taking in orphans from the war. Even though these are valid community or household concerns, they are not the most prevalent ones.

Despite our conversations being informal, we audio recorded and transcribed the interviews we conducted, and based on our theoretical framework, we meticulously selected the stress stimuli that appeared most often and therefore were given more value. Throughout our research, not only did we become aware of the most prevalent stress stimuli, but we also remained sensitive towards how people responded and the setting in which they found themselves. Thereby, we attempted to understand how they were dealing with the burdens of the post-conflict landscape, and thus determine the most common coping strategies applied by the Acholi people. In short, we sought out patterns that created consistency in our selection of stress stimuli, and their coping methods.

### Thematic selection and model

As our fieldwork progressed, we started to identify recurring themes and concepts based on conversations with our informants. Using our field notes, we initially constructed 16 themes, which we then continually filled out with statements, stories, and observations throughout our time in Gulu. The initial themes were: IDP camps, land wrangles, trust/mistrust, the government, NGO's/THRIVEGulu, the rebels, unemployment, Buganda Kingdom, suicide, gender roles, agriculture, forgiveness/healing, violence, peace and security, violence to peace, and orphans. Similarly to Harnish, “whenever a theme proved to be a pattern across more than one Acholi’s experience, [we] would pay more attention to it, and start inquiring about whether this theme and experience resonated with others” (Harnish 2016: 67). It became apparent that some of the themes had more quotes and observations tied to them, therefore the themes that were less potent were deselected. As a result, we derived eight main themes, which serve as the backdrop of our analytical levels – the state, the community and the household. By employing a thematic method it allowed us to identify, analyze, and report patterns as a way to forefront the most predominant themes on which to formulate our research question (Braun & Clarke 2006:79). Once this thematic approach was concluded, additional readings were made based on the empirical data in order to better understand the struggles the Acholi face and how they deal with them. As a result, “an analytical movement was conducted back and forth between the concrete and the general,” in order to “discern the phenomenon empirically and describe it conceptually” (Harnish 2016: 32; Lund 2014: 228). Below is an illustration of our final thematic model:

<b>Final themes based on informants reports</b>	<b>Chosen Levels</b>	<b>Predominate Stress Stimuli as described by informants</b>	<b>Selected Quotes</b>
<b>Government, IDP Camps, &amp; Trust/Mistrust</b>	State	Corruption  Brutality	“Where does the money go, who benefitted from it”  “The government killed my family”
<b>Agriculture &amp; Land Wrangles</b>	Community	Boundary disputes  Land Grabbing	“If land could be carried there would be no more Acholiland”  “Without land you are nothing”
<b>Gender Roles, IDP Camps &amp; Unemployment</b>	Household	Dependency syndrome, unemployment & lack of male role models	“Strong men, their power was taken away by the war, when they were bundled and thrown into IDP camps”

Despite selecting eight out of the original 16 themes for our research, the de-selected ones still captured important data. Themes such as violence to peace, peace and security, and forgiveness/healing have not only given us an understanding of the Acholi people’s history and culture, but also helped to spark our interest in regards to the notion of ongoing conflict.

### **Limitations**

A component of qualitative research that could be considered a limitation is the fact that the interviewer plays a significant role in regards to how the empirical data is shaped. The empirical data is both influenced by the researcher’s ability to ask the ‘right’ questions at the ‘right’ time, as well as the unavoidable biases and pre-meditated assumptions that lie within all people. In order to avoid some of these common issues, we have created a strong relationship with the informants, allowing us more time and space to formulate the ‘right’ questions, and being able to follow-up on any further leads. As argued by Lund, “scholarly inquiry is not objective; we have objectives with our research, that is, certain concerns we want to investigate” (Lund 2014: 226). We are aware that it is impossible to arrive on the field blank of all assumptions, thus we tried to avoid pre-conceived notions of ‘right’

and ‘wrong’ data, and remained open and responsive towards the data collected. All information gathered is relative, but we’ve attempted to be critical and neutral when handling the data.

Another challenge we faced in Uganda was building relationships with female informants, implying that it took numerous conversations and time before women felt comfortable sharing their hardships with us. We noticed that it is rare for Western and Acholi women to build relationships. This could be due to the cultural differences that exist (Lindsay Dakan in Field Notes 2017). Despite this, we managed to generate data from women’s perspective, after spending more time familiarizing ourselves.

Overall, this thesis pursues an understanding of the stress stimuli the Acholi face and how they cope in the post-conflict setting through a psychological theory and a social science perspective, while at the heart lies the desire to explore whether the conflict truly ended.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

As presented in the introduction, our aim is to unfold the most predominant stress stimuli observed in the Acholi society, and the ways that people are coping with them. The Acholi people face high levels of emotional strain and burdens in their everyday life, coming from all angles of society (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). We are therefore aware that it would be challenging to encompass them all in a conducive manner. As a result, the paper has identified the most prevalent areas where the stress stimuli come from, and will take its departure from a macro perspective, analyzing the stress stimuli emerging from state level practices, before investigating the meso perspective of stress stimuli at community level, and finally the micro perspective at household level. The hierarchical structure not only allows the stress stimuli to become more clear within their allocated spheres but also to better determine if Acholi people are employing active coping, avoidance strategy, or giving up.

Before beginning with the macro level, it is necessary to note that there exists an overarching stress stimuli that impacts the Acholi society at each of the three levels, this being poverty. During Museveni's time in office, Uganda has been hailed as a success story by the Western world (Finnström 2008). This is because the country has undergone an economic transformation, progressive development, liberalization of formerly state owned enterprises, and political stability. Furthermore, according to the World Bank, Uganda's poverty rate has steadily been decreasing since 1993 due to a series of economic reforms that were implemented, targeting young people and farmer groups, both on a national and a household level (World Bank 2016; Alava & Varma 2016). While macroeconomic stability was reached and the national poverty rate decreased, Uganda experienced the doubling of primary school education enrolment and the dropping of HIV levels (Economist 2013; Gelsdorf et al. 2012).

Despite these success stories, not everyone has experienced the improvements. For example, the economic growth facts can be misleading, in the sense that "more than a third of its citizens lived below the international extreme poverty line of US \$1.90 a day" (World Bank 2016). The government has been able to embellish the decreasing poverty rate by basing the poverty line on a measure determined 20 years ago, and is therefore no longer accurately reflecting the reality of the economic situation for the Ugandan people (*Ibid.*). The burden brought on by poverty has led even the more peripheral areas to vocalize their agitation for change (Alava & Varma 2016). As explained by Denis, a young boda driver who drove us to and from the THRIVEGulu offices everyday, there

has been an increase in prices on basic goods, such as jeans, posho<sup>3</sup>, and petrol, due to a large inflation. The level of vulnerability therefore remains high, especially in the Northern and Eastern regions of Uganda (World Bank 2016; Pearson & Pedersen 2016). More specifically, 12 percent of the Acholi respondents of the Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey we analyzed, stated that the biggest concern in their life is poverty. This percentage doesn't take into account those that mentioned struggles over money, school fees, and food insecurity (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). The situation has been exponentially worsened by the fact that the growth has mostly benefited the ones loyal to Museveni or affiliated with his Bahima ethnic group, which is a common practice in Uganda, since culturally there is a reciprocal relationship between a leader and his regional ties (Mwenda & Tangri 2005; Okuru 2002). So for every three Ugandans who move out of poverty, another two fall back into poverty (World Bank 2016). Poverty, worsened by the conflict, is the foundation from which stems the frustration and hardships the Acholi people are living with, and therefore serves as a catalyst for other stress stimuli. It should thus be noted that the presence of poverty is to be assumed within the three levels we will address.

## **Chapter one: macro level: the state**

The state, or government, was determined to be one of the most prevalent stress-inducing actors. The web of stress stimuli will be mapped out through the continued buildup of tension caused by the current government, and the mechanisms the Acholi people have employed to cope with these challenges. And, as pointed out by Lazarus and Folkman, efforts to manage the stress stimuli, also known as coping, have to occur in order to deal with the demanding situation.

As introduced previously, Museveni gained political power by a military coup in 1986. While he has been in power for 31 years, Museveni's rule has remained a military one, rather than a civilian rule (Alava & Varma 2016). Hence, a high percentage of government officials, alongside top administrators, are selected from the military ranks and have previously been commanders in the UPDF (Kasasira 2014). This perpetuates unease in Acholi communities considering their physical and mental battle scars are still fresh. Thereby, the government is considered a taxing source straining their mental balance. The predominant stress stimuli identified within the state are corruption and brutality. This chapter will therefore elaborate on those stress stimuli before delving into coping mechanisms.

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<sup>3</sup> Staple foods in Northern Uganda.

## **Stress stimuli: Corruption**

As stated above, corruption is one of the predominant stress stimuli experienced in the government level. We ground our understanding of corruption from Nye's classical definition: "behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding [...] pecuniary or status gain; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence" (Nye 1967: 419). We further broaden his definition by adding de Sardan's notion of 'corruption complex,' which goes "beyond corruption in the strict sense of the word, to include nepotism, abuse of power, [and] embezzlement" (de Sardan 1999: 27). Thus the analysis will use these notions of corruption to examine Museveni's presidency, which is rooted in corruption, and made visible by the bad infrastructure and nepotism. The political landscape, alongside conversations with our informants, led us to recognize the impact that corruption and mismanagement within all levels of state institutions has on the Acholi people. As the case in Northern Uganda illustrates, "rather than representing the citizenry, the government becomes predatory, committing abuses to maintain power," such as through the use of corruption (Genesan & Vine 2004: 3). The effects of mismanagement become exponentially more strenuous in a post-conflict setting, considering that support from the government is vital, and the lack thereof must therefore be considered extremely straining on the people (Miller & Rasmussen 2009). The following section will demonstrate different ways that the Acholi people are facing stress from bad infrastructures and nepotism that stem from corruption, which is the cause of these stresses.

### Corruption: setting the stage

From the time Museveni set foot on the political scene, dealing with the corruption in Uganda has been one of his campaign promises. In a speech he gave in 1979, he stated: "Uganda's causes of disunity mainly spring from fears that public officials are cutting up the national cake among themselves. During the last 12 years, most people especially the top brass have been grabbers" (Mugabe 2014). After gaining presidency, he continued his rhetoric of fighting corruption, not only vowing that the NRM<sup>4</sup> would eliminate it, he also challenged the financial administrators of the state. As recently as the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 2017, in a congressional speech, he said: "keep accounts properly, fight corruption then your country will grow. Accountants must record correctly. If they are faithful in their profession, Uganda will move forward" (State House of Uganda 2017a). It is interesting that

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<sup>4</sup> NRM stands for the National Resistance Movement, which is Museveni's political party.

Museveni has taken such a critical stand on corruption since, as we know from most of our informants, corruption continues to debilitate Uganda's progress. As reported by Ugandan journalist Mwenda and political scientist Tangri, "there has been considerable corruption in the large sums [...] disbursed annually by the central government to the district administrators" (Mwenda & Tangri 2005: 462). This is further validated by our informant Dora<sup>5</sup>, who worked under an EU project to promote local government structures, accountability, and development in Northern Uganda, and explained that "even if the president changes, it's the entire government and institutions that is corrupt and therefore needs to change, [...] even the opposition leader is Museveni's old vice president" (Interview with Dora 2017).

The Acholi people are especially sensitive to the destitute social and material conditions considering that they find themselves in a stage of recovery after the prolonged war. As a way to move Uganda forward after the conflict in the North, Museveni recognized the need for aid and allocated funds for the Northern recovery (Interview with Dora 2017). According to Dora, the funds never made it to the people, somehow getting lost along the way, either at state or local government level (Interview with Dora 2017). Dora gave an example of the gross mismanagement by recounting her disappointment when she learned that a government rehabilitation center that was supposed to provide land to child mothers and to those disabled by the war, was in fact giving land to military officers (Interview with Dora 2017). This yet again demonstrates Museveni's will to prioritize his military over the vulnerable people of Northern Uganda. When asking Chris, another informant from West Nile who has lived in Kampala for some time now, about the government aid provided to the North, he shared a Ugandan proverb: "The tears of the cow benefit the person eating it" (Interview with Chris 2017). He implies that the government benefited and continues to benefit from the Northerners' suffering (Interview with Dora 2017; Interview with Chris 2017; Interview with Okello 2017). As Chris pointed out during one of our many conversations about Uganda, "Uganda is a democracy on the paper but in reality [is not]," because no one is looking out for its people, instead everyone is taking their piece of the cake (Interview with Chris 2017).

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<sup>5</sup> Dora is currently the Director at THRIVEGulu.

## Nepotism: family and friends first

The root of corruption runs deep within the Ugandan society, public enterprises have been used “as centers of patronage to reward or appease relatives, friends, [and] political supporters” (Mwenda & Tangri 2005: 453). Thus demonstrating how nepotism is an element of corruption. Furthermore, the level of corruption has enabled Museveni to build intricate networks where mutual benefits, reciprocity, and contributions to coffers of the political benefactor all favor those within his circle. This means that for all those outside Museveni’s circle, there exists a certain uneasiness in regards to the system.

Evidently, corruption is embedded in all administrative and governmental levels, casting “a dark shadow on local sentiments towards the sitting government” (Alava & Varma 2016). According to Mwenda and Tangri, “top administrators have been appointed on the basis of personal and political ties to those in state power” (Mwenda & Tangri 2005: 455). At the forefront of this trend is his immediate family’s involvement in the government, by the fact that they hold powerful political positions. His wife Janet was appointed as Minister of Education and Sports in Uganda’s Cabinet, while his son Muhoozi Kainerugaba has recently been promoted from Special Forces Commander to Senior Presidential Advisor for Special Operations (Biryabarema 2017). This means that he will be in charge of the President’s security along with “other sensitive installations in the country” (*Ibid.*: 1). When confronted by his family’s titles in his government in an Al Jazeera interview in April 2017, he responded: “that’s not nepotism. The few members of my family that are involved, I involve on their own merit. My wife, against my advice, stood for election and had the biggest majority in the whole country - because the population appreciate what I have done” (Al Jazeera Interview 2017). It is ironic the way Museveni connects merit with his own personal achievements, rather than basing their appointment on their own contributions to Uganda. This nepotism is not only limited to his nuclear family but is extended to his Bahima ethnic group. One way he is nurturing his network of clansmen is by appointing hundreds of ambassadorial positions to them when in reality there are only 36 embassies (Mwenda & Tangri 2005). This is one of several cases of Museveni taking advantage of his title to promote his loyal followers, while also ensuring his own political agenda is fulfilled. Because most positions of power are “in the hands of [the] ethnic kinsmen of the political leadership and, not surprisingly, all of these individuals are loyal Movement supporters,” the Acholi people once again find themselves sidelined with no true power (*Ibid.*: 459). Although the Acholi also practice nepotism within their own communities, the ethnic homogeneity within the state institutions causes anxiety because you can trust your own kinsmen but when outsiders group together, it’s perceived as a threat. The lack of representation that the Acholi are faced with, not only

in the military but also within the government, exaggerates the feeling of mistrust towards the state and its practices. The power imbalance that exists due to corruption hinders the manner in which the Acholi must navigate an environment without voice nor agency, which is extremely taxing.

### Bad infrastructure: a consequence of corruption

A consequence of the corruption is bad infrastructure, since the government is responsible for the upkeep of public institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and roads, but often the allocated funds disappear. As a result, these public institutions fall to the wayside, and thus the developmental growth of Uganda may not appear everywhere. During our fieldwork, we discussed Uganda's economic status and what appeared to be developmental stagnation with our informant Robert, who works in tourism by driving private tours in Kampala and the surrounding area. He talked about how Uganda has found oil, and how tourism has boomed in recent years. However, he has not experienced nor seen the effects of this progress, and said "where does the money go, who benefitted from it?" (Robert in Field Notes 2017). The level of corruption becomes apparent when driving with Robert, as well as why he is critical of the state's economic mismanagement, when noticing the state of the roads, which are laden with potholes; the hospitals, which are run to the ground; and the schools, which are experiencing shortages of materials and space. The decaying infrastructure and public institutions are impeding on people's ability to lead a full and successful life. More specifically, in the case of the Acholi, the crumbling infrastructure and institutions have hindered their ability to handle and break free from the destruction left by the war.

As demonstrated by the Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, many of the participants expressed direct concerns about the bad infrastructure. Whenever Museveni is confronted with the poor conditions his people are facing, he often shrugs off the reality of the situation. As Besigye, a political opponent from the last election, pointed out during a rally: the "massive poverty all over the country, [Museveni] calls it steady progress. When you go to a hospital and there are no drugs, steady progress. All the roads are bad, steady progress" (Alava & Varma 2016: 1). As stated by his opponent, and many others, Museveni's understanding of the progress in Uganda is delusional, since the hospitals are in fact deteriorating, the schools are becoming more expensive, and the promised infrastructure is nonexistent in Northern Uganda. This further undermines the Acholi people's very real stress and everyday concerns for themselves and their families. During a fieldwork visit to a local village, we observed a community meeting where women and men spoke about the difficulties that arise from the poor sanitation and inaccessibility to hospitals, schools, and markets, subtly criticizing the government's negligence. The main concerns vocalized during the community

meeting regarded the state of hospitals and schools, and the high cost of these services. Some parents voiced how upsetting it is to not be able to provide a better future for their children. Most households have an average of five to eight children, and other dependents, which includes external family members and orphans (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). These orphans are remnants of the consequences of the war, and many Acholi families took on the responsibility of their care and schooling. The high number of dependents brings stress to households due to the challenge of providing for all of them, especially when state institutions are left decrepit due to corruption. Sixteen percent of the respondents of the Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey voiced concerns about paying school fees, when the government continues to raise the cost of tuition (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017; Ahimbisibwe & Mafabi 2017). And ironically, as we learned, the teachers are paid minimally and the condition of the classrooms and materials are less than adequate. Furthermore, as for the state of hospitals, a woman reported during the meeting the heart-wrenching story of watching her child crawl from home to school because the hospital could not provide a wheelchair (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). Her concern is not a unique one, as 18 percent of the participants are experiencing health issues which cause anxiety due to inaccessible and ill-equipped hospitals (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). This is a result of the government funds for materials and medicine being diverted into the wrong pockets. This loss of funds causes difficulties for the overcrowded hospitals who are struggling to support patients (Kate in Field Notes 2017). The general deterioration of the infrastructure reflects the negligence of the state with dealing with corruption, and symbolizes a lack of care on the part of the government in regards to the Acholi population.

### **Coping with corruption**

Despite the Acholi people's frustration with the corruption and the government's lack of support, many of them have taken proactive steps towards change by grouping together and attempting to find solutions, for example, by petitioning local government to fix the roads, or by moving the market to more accessible areas. During the community visit mentioned above, when asking some of the women how they dealt with their difficult situations, they said that they joined the VSLA group where they could share their burdens with other struggling women. This gathering provides them an opportunity to speak out and have a voice. This active coping, as confirmed by Mitrousi et al., is the more common tactic applied to alter, reduce, or remove the stress stimuli when the problem is palpable and thus changeable (Mitrousi et al. 2013; Caver et al. 1989). We witnessed

that in terms of the condition of the roads and such, most often, active coping was employed primarily because it is perceived as a more tangible issue that can be dealt with and modified through problem solving on both individual and group level. The bad infrastructure, which is continuously disregarded by the government, causes a daily strain on people's lives as it affects basic necessities such as access to markets, as well as access to schools and hospitals.

However, community members often feel helpless when it comes to reducing the stress stimuli associated with school and hospital facilities. They feel as though they hold no control over the state of these public institutions. They are entirely in the hands of the government. The inability to objectively modify the situation leads people to resort to the avoidance strategy. Consequently, the people affected by corruption remain within the stressful sphere. While the Acholi people do not accept the current corrupt government, they understand that in order for corruption to end, every single state entity would have to change. Therefore, they resort to religion as the only option they perceive as viable. They “pray to God for change”, and they believe that “when it's time God will provide” (Robert in Field Notes 2017; Interview with Chris 2017). This is considered acceptance, or avoidance, because the Acholi are not actively seeking to alter the stress, they are accepting their reality until God decides it is time to change it. Thereby, they are waiting for another to change their situation - putting their faith in someone else's hands.

Consequently, the corruption, nepotism, and mistrust that arises from the “government's suspected unknown agendas,” as well as from its “largely authoritarian and unaccountable public institutions,” act as stress stimuli and exaggerate the feeling of anxiety about uncertainty of the future (Alava & Varma 2016; Mwenda & Tangri 2005: 455).

### **Stress stimuli: Brutality**

When discussing the government during our fieldwork in Gulu, we sensed an unease, and even fear, in relation to the practices applied by Museveni and his military. This prompted further curiosity, and led us to the conclusion that brutality is a real strain on the Acholi people. To demonstrate where the fear derives from, we will first present a small fragment of the brutality that occurred during the war, which has permeated into the current fear. We will then elaborate on a couple example of current brutality, which will further illustrate the stress the Acholi experience at the hands of the state.

## Brutality: the rise of fear

In the Northern region, Museveni used deception tactics as a way of installing fear, since he felt that the Acholi people were in alliance with the LRA. Our informants shared stories of horrors and brutalities committed by Museveni's UPDF. Under his orders, people were given 48 hours to relocate, often at gunpoint, otherwise the military would forcibly move them (Interview with Dora 2017; Davenport 2014; Finnström 2008). People were not given time to collect their belongings, had to walk long hours to reach IDP, and upon arrival had to build temporary homes on their own (Martin 2009). These camps had improper infrastructure, were overcrowded, and "caught between the crosshairs of Museveni's troops and Kony's, these camps became sites of innumerable human rights violations, cultural degeneration and dehumanization" (Davenport 2014: 4). One of Martin's informants explained that the camps showed Museveni's true intentions, and said: "5,000 or 10,000 people in one place with no sanitation, no water, no nothing. What do you expect from that type of setting? Death. It is genocide indirect you see" (P.C in Martin 2009: 20; Norwegian Refugee Council 2005). By 2005, a government report stated that an estimated one thousand people were dying each week in the camps (Dunson 2008). The prolonged stays in the IDP camps, where they were being antagonized by military troops, has been a catalyst that has facilitated a sense of defeatism and mistrust towards the government by the Acholi people. The chaos, overcrowding, and hard conditions of the camps exceeded the Acholis mental resources, so while some were able to proactively move forward by modifying their situation, many endured the stressful sphere or gave up. Some turned to alcohol and substance abuse as a way of deflecting the new reality of life in the camps, while others handled the stressful crisis by killing him or herself.

Tension was further enhanced by the dehumanizing words of Museveni, when he attempted "to dissuade local Acholi from joining the insurgent movement against the state, he compared the Acholi people to grasshoppers in a bottle, and he said that (the Acholi) will eat each other before they find a way out" (Finnström in Davenport 2014: 14). Despite being unable to find evidence of this speech, both Finnström and Davenport, who extensively studied the war and post-conflict period of Northern Uganda, refer to this as a turning point for the Acholi people. They have gained nothing except further loss and despair, alongside the feeling of defeatism, fear, and dehumanization. As Davenport's informant mentions, "we failed even to overthrow the government. So people now ask, 'What were you people fighting for? Instead you are just killing one another - and that's another shame. You killed one another, just over some issues between two people: that's Museveni and Kony.' So that alone made us kill ourselves" (Bosco in Davenport 2014: 15). Thus, the two decades

of the war, marred with brutality and dehumanization in part by the government, have left the Acholi with open wounds and deep-rooted fears.

### Brutality today: the power of the gun

Interestingly, when talking about the current government, our informants would contrast Museveni's rule to the regimes of Obote and Amin. For example, our informant Robert pointed out that "I can't tell what [Museveni] has done for us" while he spoke fondly of Amin's contributions to Uganda (Robert in Field Notes 2017). While Chris drove us to Gulu, he pointed out the train tracks and, similarly to Robert, he enthusiastically listed the legacies of both Obote and Amin: "Obote brought the train and hospitals," while "under Amin, people had new cars, were introduced to color television, to the internet, to refrigerators, and he built the airport" (Interview with Chris 2017). When asked about Amin's international reputation as a brutal dictator, and whether or not it was easier to remember the positive impacts left by him because he never experienced his regime personally, he responded: "He did kill people but not as many as Museveni has. And when Amin killed people, you knew, whereas Museveni uses poison" (Interview with Chris 2017). In part due to the unpredictability and deceit brought on by his regime, the subtle way Museveni eliminates those opposing his hidden agenda creates yet another stressful sphere (Robert in Field Notes 2017; Interview with Chris 2017; Davenport 2014).

The fear that comes from the way Museveni runs the country, is further exaggerated by the fact that the Acholi do not hold significant positions of power. This is made worse by their lack of representation in Museveni's growing military force. The Acholi people might have lost their previous military status, but what is worse is the fear caused by their association of the UPDF with beatings, harassment, and rape (Martin 2009). The Northerners' anxiety still exists because the UPDF remains ever so present as Museveni's personal militia, and "are nearly all drawn from President Museveni's Banyankole (Bahima) ethnic group" (Mwenda & Tangri 2005: 460). As mentioned previously, the Acholi perceive the nepotism, or the grouping of Museveni's kinsmen, as a threat. It is even more threatening that the military forces are entirely comprised of Museveni's own clansmen, which perpetuates the fear that as an Acholi, you are not protected by your people.

The insecurity experienced in regards to the government by the people of the North is more than a feeling, it is a constant state of reality sustained by elusive operations to eliminate people opposed to Museveni. For example, in December 2016, the UPDF stormed the palace in Kasese village after rumors emerged that the King of Rwenzori wanted to secede from Uganda and create a

new state, the Yiira Republic (Daily Nation 2016). According to the government, “terrorists” had to be stopped with violent means, in the sense that houses and huts were burned and men, women and children were killed (*Ibid.*). The UPDF stripped down the women who were in the royal palace as a humiliation mechanism and to propagate fear. The harbored fear in the surrounding area, and in many parts of Uganda, grew exponentially after this event, and led to further loss of hope in regards to the future of Uganda. Many of our informants spoke with sadness and disbelief about the massacre that occurred at the hand of the state. To further spread fear, in March 2017, the Assistant Inspector General of Police, Andrew Felix Kaweesi, was gunned down in a drive-by shooting (The EastAfrican 2017). According to several sources, this was most likely government sanctioned because he was seeking justice for those involved in a political killing several months before (Interview with Okello 2017). We were in Gulu when this event took place and witnessed the sadness and disarray people felt, as well as the fear brought on by the graphic images of a bloody Andrew Felix, shot several times in his car, which were displayed on every TV screen for the next week. It was assumed Museveni eliminated a possible threat to his hidden agenda, which meant that justice and truth would again be swept under the rug.

At a public speaking event held on the first of May 2017, Museveni continued his narrative of brutality by stating, “we shall destroy anybody involved either directly or indirectly” when discussing the “lawbreakers” in Kasese, the village mentioned above (State House of Uganda 2017b). Not only does Museveni use harsh rhetoric when discussing his political intentions, but also the graphic images that circulate help emphasize the fact that he is not afraid of using brutality in order to maintain power. Once more reminding the Acholi people that Museveni and his military rule are the ones with the guns, and thereby the power. As Chris said, “they have the gun, no one can do anything” (Interview with Chris 2017). This attitude towards the lack of options in changing the political situation was common among our informants. The lack of opportunity for change created an internal need for acceptance in order to endure this ongoing, seemingly never ending regime.

### **Coping with brutality**

As a way of coping, we often saw that rather than actively altering the political environment for themselves, and protesting the brutality to end it, the Acholi have yielded to the avoidance strategy. It is characterized by acceptance and withdrawal, and the general sentiment seems to be that “it is better to know the devil than to deal with a devil you do not know” (Alava & Varma 2016). Rather than protesting and retaliating these brutalities, people feel deflated and as a coping

mechanism accept the situation as something unavoidable. This general acceptance of the political situation as unchangeable is what imprisons them in stuckness, unable to break free from the insecurity brought on by Museveni's military brutal regime. This relates to *omoko*, like being stuck in the mud, and feeling as though one is unable to move forward. The sense of loss of mobility is perhaps the reason why many Acholi people remember Obote and Amin more fondly than the picture painted by the Western world. The possibility of a better future presented by Obote and Amin, seems to have disappeared as the years of Museveni's regime went by.

Speaking to our informant Okello, an Acholi who lost family members to the war at the hands of the state, helped us better understand why the Acholi are not protesting the brutality. Despite wanting political change, Okello stated, "I don't want to get involved in politics, the government killed my family." Okello is unable to act on his political beliefs, as is the case for many Acholi people, because they are caught in a system of fear, between the crosshairs of Museveni and his web of benefactors. For Okello, Museveni's ruthless way of dealing with opposition was further exemplified by his uncle, who vocalized his dissatisfaction with the government's methods. Standing up to the government led him to be targeted, and after several attempts on his life, he fled the country and now resides in Canada. As Okello added, he must be careful as to the ways he communicates with his uncle, because the government is still surveilling his family (Interview with Okello 2017). This story demonstrates how the paralyzing fear of the government's unstoppable power to snuff anyone out, maintains the Acholi in a captured state of *omoko*, where they are stuck, and therefore relying on avoidance strategy as a coping mechanism.

Some turn to religion as a response to the suffering that arises from the brutality. They place the stress in the hands of God. "If God believes that change is needed, then it will happen" (Robert in Field Notes 2017; Jacob in Field Notes 2017). Further showing that: "God is the one who is supposed to know about why things happen and what the future holds; not man" (Harnish 2016: 174). While some handle the state of brutality and fear by enduring and accepting the situation as an avoidance strategy, others are pushed past the edge by the lack of support and the stress, which leads to giving up on and ending one's life. This is an ultimate last resort, considering the stigma and shame that is not only brought upon the individual committing the act, but also on the community left behind. The bleakness of the situation in the North in regards to the government's treatment leaves the Acholi in a space of uncertainty, feeling unable to alter their reality.

## **Revisiting remark: How do people cope when their government relies heavily on corruption and brutality?**

The mistrust and fear from the corruption and brutality, tied with the loss of hope, leads the Acholi people to feel abandoned by the government. Therefore, this prompts the question: how do people cope when their government relies heavily on corruption and brutality? Due to the emotional strain that the government has inflicted on them through brutality and corruption, the change that active coping could provoke seems hopeless. As a result, avoidance is the most prevalent response to the stress brought on by the state (Harnish 2016). Not only does change seem unreachable, but the real possibility of retaliation creates a space of apathy, where one believes that “if you get involved then attention is pointed at you and you don’t want that” (Robert in Field Notes 2017). Most people want to stay clear of the government’s radar to avoid further conflict and suffering.

This holds especially true for the Acholi people, considering the war is still horrifyingly fresh in their minds. The government’s role as both the savior and the perpetrator during the war, as well as their lack of commitment to supporting the recovery of the North, has generated a strong sense of mistrust, and even fear, which causes considerable tension and stress to the Acholi people. As Chris reveals, “we lost hope in the government [because] the government does scary evil things but we don’t have the power to stop [them]” (Interview with Chris 2017). Thereby, they are shackled to the fear, which causes the Acholi to be unable to break free of the stress from the corruption and brutality inflicted by the state.

## **Chapter two: meso level: the community**

As presented in the introduction of the analysis, we have determined that the stress stimuli found at community level hold a significant impact on the Acholi people and their ability to move forward from the post-conflict setting. In Acholi society, community and clan ties are an essential part of their culture, and therefore many elements of life are treated within the communal sphere (Brenda in Field Notes 2017; Davenport 2014). During our fieldwork, we witnessed this cohesion and togetherness when we participated in a community dialogue. While we waited for the event to begin, men and women congregated under a big tree in the center of the village, and would reach out to anyone from the community who was missing. They also visually showed unity by embracing each other and holding hands in companionship.

The stress stimuli we extricated from the community level were derived from our interactions with our informants, alongside observations of the environment that surrounded us in Gulu, as well as further readings. It quickly became apparent that the struggle over land plays a big role in inducing stress in the Acholi people, so this analysis will focus on the strain brought on by land wrangles. The section will begin with a short presentation of the cultural value of land in Acholi society, as well as the traditional tenure system. It is important to present the above in order to understand the context from which the land wrangles emerge. To illustrate how the conflict intensified the fight for land, the next part will discuss the conflict's direct influence on land ownership. This will be followed by an explanation of boundary determination and the trend of land grabbing, which are the two stress stimuli experienced in the current post-conflict setting.

According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, the “requisition of land by the state from owners who are expropriated to make way for land deals by the government, politicians and military officers for economic and infrastructure development” is part of Museveni’s political agenda (Norwegian Refugee Council 2012: 32). However, this act by the government is not the leading cause of stress, rather it’s communal feuds that ensued from the post-conflict land disputes that are the true burden on the people, since they illustrate a breakdown of the clan culture. Therefore, the focus will be on the communal feuds brought on by land disputes in this chapter. As we have learned, the land disputes broke down the bonds between the clans and households, and thus the community cohesion weakened, but has not completely disappeared (Angucia 2010: 30; Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017).

### Understanding the significance of land

It became very clear throughout our field study that land defines the Acholi identity and status. Often land would find its way into our conversations, especially in regards to the disparities between our cultures. It shocked people that we were not aspiring to own land, considering that for them, land is “more than real estate [and] isn't just a slice of earth” (Okot 2013: 1). To the Acholi, it is more than something that can be cultivated or built upon, “land equates to history, heritage, identity, belonging, rights and relationships. It creates social security and helps define social, cultural, religious values and beliefs systems” (*Ibid.*: 1). As Dora told us: “buy land, because if you have a small piece of land, however small it can be, you have a home for you and the children” (Interview with Dora 2017). Due to the long and proud connection to the land, the Acholi created a customary tenure system, which was passed down through generations as a way of securing their children’s way of life and the care of the land.

Our cultural understanding of the tenure system involves two dimensions, which are property rights that are put in place to secure one's right to land, and property rights distribution that exist to determine to whom the land belongs (Rugadya 2008). In the Acholi society, customary land tenure is the most predominant way of securing land rights, where "93% of the land [...] is held under customary tenure" (Nakayi 2011: 11). Customary land tenure denotes traditional rules, often unwritten, where ownership belongs to the elders of the community, who are usually also considered the chief of clan (*Ibid.*). In relation to the way that land is perceived by the Acholi, the customary land tenure system "goes beyond land as an object [or] item that defines people's identity, social class and social relationships" (*Ibid.*: 10). Additionally, land is viewed as communal and should be cultivated in consideration of the interest of all community members (*Ibid.*). Under this tenure system, the good of the community should take precedent over individual interests in case of dispute between the two (*Ibid.*).

It is with the knowledge of the value of land and the tenure system that land can be understood as undeniably important to the Acholi, and therefore disputes over land put pressure on the customary tenure system, which hinders the mechanisms in place for conflict resolution. This means that when dealing with boundary disagreements or land grabbing disputes, the traditional ways of resolving conflict are no longer available, leaving the Acholi people to seek out other methods.

### Land rush and the fight for land

During the conflict, the Acholi people fought for survival. The fight continued when the people were finally able to return to their ancestral lands, but this was a different fight - the fight for land. The post-conflict environment has witnessed an escalation of land disputes caused primarily by the abrupt and forceful relocation of the Acholi communities to the IDP camps (*Ibid.*). Approximately 90 percent of all Acholi people were forcefully displaced by the war, driving them away from their homes and land for sometimes more than a decade (*Ibid.*; Harnish 2016). In the aftermath of the war, there was a rush and "scramble for access to land as a means of survival, together with pursuit of land resource opportunities" (Rugadya 2008). While people's return was gradual, the pressure to reclaim one's land and the desire to resettle after the war created a sense of desperation (Nakayi 2011). Because of the harsh conditions in the IDP camps, the Acholi realized that they were vulnerable without land resources, since land equates to survival and livelihood. The detachment from ancestral lands threatened the loss of cultural knowledge and practices, alongside food security, thereby generating stress, not only for the present communities, but also for the future

generations of Acholi. As Betty Okot describes: “Not only was that relationship between people and land distorted but the knowledge about it could no longer be accurately handed down” (Okot 2013: 2). As mentioned above, people returning at different times meant that early returnees could claim land, as well as expand it, which caused conflicts with late returnees (Nakayi 2011). Even though the war is over, people are unable to settle and start rebuilding their lives, because they are faced with the strain of boundary disputes and the emotional burden of having to fight with their families and communities over land.

### **Stress stimuli: Boundary disputes**

Prior to the war, land was delimited by landmarks, such as rocks, streams, and big trees, and further determined by the customary land tenure system (Nakayi 2011). Throughout the war, these informal boundaries shifted, were destroyed, or were forgotten due to protracted nature of this conflict, “none of these features [...] remain unaltered after a lapse of over 15 years” (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, a consequence of the war is the death of many clan elders, who as we stated above are the ones that hold both the knowledge and the power in regards to succession of land (*Ibid.*). Therefore, the loss of elders led to a lack of support in terms of determining property lines. It disrupted the customary land tenure system, because when people returned to their land, others had laid claim to it, which led to conflict within communities. The death of the elders, alongside the disappearance of the landmarks, led to the breakdown of traditional ways of regulating land boundaries.

The contentions over boundaries are further complicated by the fact that there are limited records of parameters and ownership, both on a state and local level. According to the World Bank, “the state of records in land offices was found to be very poor and in some instances, the districts were unable to produce records because they were not in existence or there were administrative wrangles” (Rugadya 2008: 17). All of these factors seriously impeded the Acholi people’s hope and eagerness to go home and to reestablish their land, thereby causing anxiety for the future. As explained to us by our informant Lucy, who is a counselor at THRIVEGulu and has helped patients struggling with land disputes, the war has changed people’s attitude from one of solidarity to one of individualism, where people prioritize their own interests (Lucy in Field Notes 2017). The opportunistic behavior has hindered the manner in which people deal with land wrangles. This is further validated in a report by Mercy Corps on boundary disputes, where one informant disclosed that “when you lose your parents, your elderly neighbors want to say the children don’t know the boundary of the land” (Mercy Corps 2011). As illustrated here, this situation has led people to take

advantage of their position within the community, and to question the legitimacy of those inheriting their parents land.

The stress caused by boundary disputes is one that resonates with a large part of Acholi society. In a report by the World Bank, “36% of threats are in [the] form of boundary disputes” (Rugadya 2008: 8). Many of our informants expressed concerns in regards to some of the people who were adjusting the land boundaries at will, encroaching on neighbors’ land (Lucy in Field Notes 2017; Interview with Dora 2017). The chaos and the stress that arose from finding one’s land altered or occupied after a long period of displacement and absence is one of the main stress stimuli that consumes the thoughts of every Acholi. As our informant Jacob, who lives on his deceased uncle’s land said, even if you yourself are not dealing with land wrangles, you have friends or family who are struggling over land (Jacob in Field Notes 2017).

### **Coping with blurred boundaries**

The environment of stress the Acholi find themselves in, brought on by blurred boundaries, requires coping. As Mitrousi et al. explains, after the assessment of how the above situation relates to the individual, it is natural to observe how the problem is dealt with (Mitrousi et al. 2013). Since the stress stimulus of boundary disputes is complex, especially considering all the actors involved, the coping strategies vary. As observed, some pursue active coping while others rely on avoidance strategy. During our field study, it became evident that some of the returned families employed active coping by involving their local councils as a way of resolving the boundary disputes. These local councils, who are part of the communities themselves, serve as an alternative to the state justice system, or the previous traditional tenure system. Hence, they operate in a unique fashion, as “they are created by statute, but run with minimal state control and supervision” (Nakayi 2011: 15). When discussing local councilors with our informants, it became apparent that they were not associated with the government, and that their sole objective is the interest of the village members, parish, or town (Jacob in Field Notes 2017; Denis in Field Notes 2017). The feeling of trust in the local councils also becomes exemplified through the statement found in the Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, where participants reveal that the local “leaders are good and hard working, in case of problems, they mobilize the community” (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). Therefore, when it comes to boundary disputes, the Acholi often use active coping by attempting to modify their situation. As land equals not only livelihood but also status, it motivates many to challenge the disputes over landmarks and parameters.

Besides seeking support from the local councils, the Acholi also sought out unity as an active coping mechanism. Throughout our conversations, and through observations at community meetings, we learned that villagers reach out to each other and regularly hold meetings to discuss issues and attempt to resolve them without implicating the local government. By employing mechanisms of mediation, the communities are able to find solutions. As pointed out by one of the participants of the Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, “people of the area are united and ready to provide help to others in times of problems or difficulties” (Anonymous Participant in Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). Unity and successful mediation among community members are some of the driving forces that enable social navigation. This process of moving away from the stress is illustrated in an interview by the Independent Development Fund, who support civil society organizations in Uganda, with Kinyera, a farmer in Gulu district, who shared his story of experiencing boundary disputes after the war. Before the war, Kinyera had inherited land from his late father, which was separated from his neighbor Oola’s land by a stream. During the war, Kinyera’s land was used for crop farming by the community. After the war, Kinyera wanted to restore it to its original purpose, as a grazing area. A dispute arose when Oola asserted that the land belonged to him and should only be used for crop yielding. Kinyera rejected this and contacted the local mediators in order to resolve the dispute. As a result of the mediation, it was agreed that the disputed land boundary was in fact divided by the stream, with one side belonging to Kinyera, and the land across from the stream belonging to Oola. To avoid further disputes, a written agreement was created and signed by Kinyera and Oola (Independent Development Fund 2015). The fact that Kinyera actively sought out solutions, in this case through mediation, demonstrates social navigation, as he put effort into altering or removing the stress stimulus. Because of the successful outcome, and Kinyera overcoming the struggle of the dispute, he was finally able to find himself in a state of *kato i kine*, or being alright.

An interesting observation was that avoidance coping in the shape of acceptance was rarely applied. It appears that when one has land, it is easier to fight for that piece of land, ensuring that the rightful boundaries are upheld. This speculation comes from interactions with our informants, who shared their determination to preserve their land because of its cultural value, by whatever means necessary (Denis in Field Notes 2017).

## **Stress stimuli: Land grabbing**

Another prominent stress factor in the community is land grabbing. The gradual return of the northerners from displacement allowed early returnees the opportunity to occupy land that was perhaps not previously theirs. Due to this, the issue of land grabbing is one that has been taxing on all Acholi since the war ended. According to Mabikke, land grabbing is the “acquisition of land [...] in a manner that is illegal, fraudulent, or unfair, taking advantage of existing power differences” (Mabikke 2011: 31). Land grabbing, as aforementioned, has been executed by the state but in this section our interest lies in the community approach to dealing with this stress stimulus (Norwegian Refugee Council 2013). Therefore in this context, the definition of land grabbing can be understood as a community issue. For example, when a wife loses her husband, culturally she is obliged to appoint a caretaker that will provide support to herself and her children. This caretaker is responsible for all family property. As explained by our liaison Lindsay, if something was to happen to her partner, his brother would become responsible for her, as well as her belongings and assets (Lindsay in Field Notes 2017). As a result of the change in attitude, to a more opportunistic behavior, the post-conflict landscape is tainted with more misuse of the absolute power entrusted to caretakers, and often end up prying away the land from the family they are intended to protect (Mabikke 2011). The concern over clan and family members taking advantage of the situation, by taking and/or selling off land without legitimate consent from rightful owners, has increasingly occurred (Nakayi 2012; Okot 2013). According to the World Bank, 13 percent of the people are threatened by the possibility of relatives selling their land (Rugadya 2008). Moreover, Denis, our boda (motorcycle) driver, had himself been a victim of land grabbing by family. While he and his family were displaced during the war, his aunt, who was desperately in need of money, took advantage of their absence and sold their land (Denis in Field Notes 2017). Unlike many of our other informants, Denis has decided to reclaim his land by going through the state, and therefore will be using a lawyer and going to the sub-county courthouse, after other mechanisms failed to acknowledge his rightful inheritance (Denis in Field Notes 2017). While some might consider this venue shopping, Denis disclosed to us that his choice to take the state route is due to different reasons, one of which being that rather than the usual two parties disputing, in his situation there are three parties involved, complicating matters (Pralle 2003). He attempted to regain ownership of his family land by reaching out the local councilors, however he was not successful. As he said, with a sense of defeatism in his voice, the state process will most likely “take more than five years.” With sadness, he further admitted that “without land, you are nothing” (Denis in Field Notes 2017).

In the Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, many participants vocalized similar struggles over land: insecurity brought on by not having land, jealousy felt towards those who do have land, and loss of land at the hands of one's own clan (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). Land wrangles are the root of much frustration within communities, as "one person believes that he owns the land - that the land is his, and 'belonged to his father' - but another clan member disagrees" (Davenport 2014: 10). In fact, according to the World Bank, 15 percent of the people feel threatened by family members of being wrongfully evicted from their land (Rugadya 2008). Thereby, these disputes divide families and clans, and are the cause of much stress and hardship.

When the Acholi relocated to their lands after the war, some found squatters, landless people who had settled and built homes on their land. According to Amone, who was interviewed in an article on land wrangles for the Ugandan newspaper Saturday Vision<sup>6</sup>, "it became difficult for us as clan leaders to send away these people because they were homeless too. We only encourage rightful owners and encroachers to share the land with these encroachers and live in harmony" (Lule 2014). Despite the harsh post-war conditions, many Acholi showed understanding and tried to reach communal agreements and solutions between new and old land settlers. While being understanding, certain groups are perceived as unwanted and problematic for the community. Often these are vulnerable individuals, such as widows, child mothers, and orphans, who are not allocated land by their family or community (Interview with Dora 2017). In the case of widows, the post-conflict survival mode of protecting oneself has evolved to a state of prioritizing self-interest, where "family members sometimes seek to deprive widows and their children of [...] land" (Mercy Corps 2011: 6). While conducting fieldwork in Gulu, we interviewed Dora, who had formerly been a World Vision rehabilitation counselor. From her accounts, *child mothers* refers to those abducted during the war, forced to marry rebels, and bear their children. As Dora pointed out, the child mothers have experienced the most stigmatization since the war ended. Due to the shame that was associated with child mothers, families and clans would normally reject them upon return. Therefore, the outcome of the marginalization was that they were shunned and left landless and homeless (Interview with Dora 2017). As a Danish Institute for Human Rights report on gender justice and land disputes states, "when returning home from the displacement due to the war, women [like Lucy] are being denied re-access to land by their in-laws and surviving male relatives" (Anying 2012: 10). Lucy, who was introduced to us by Dora, gave us a first-hand account of the loss of land as a result of the stigmatization that her and other child mothers have experienced. When she was 12 years old, Lucy

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<sup>6</sup> Saturday Vision is one of the biggest news source in Uganda.

was abducted by the LRA and became one of the wives of a rebel. While in captivity she gave birth to rebel children, which further complicated her return home. Upon return with her children, she was rejected by her family and by the clan, who would not accommodate her and the children of the rebel, and who denied her access to family land. This left Lucy in a state of helplessness and despair, and in a situation that exceeded her mental resources (Lucy in Field Notes 2017; Mitrousi et al. 2013). Another group that suffered are the children of rebels, who are left with no parents and no opportunities as a consequence of the war. These children are also marginalized because of the dishonor at being associated with rebels, as well as being an emblem and reminder of the failed war. The repercussion of these labels - widows, child mothers, and orphans - is that they are not considered worthy of land ownership. This leaves them with no opportunities for a home, livelihood, and sense of belonging, for as was mentioned, 'you are nothing without land' (Interview with Denis 2017; Interview with Dora 2017).

Land is vital because it provides a sense of identity, with food security, with income, with a home, and with a heritage. Thereby, being robbed of your land by your own family or clan is destabilizing, and thus extremely stressful. For that reason, coping mechanisms must be employed in order to attempt to move forward.

### **Coping with land grabbing**

Because of the multifaceted stresses of land grabbing, the Acholi as a response have found different ways of coping. In Denis' case, since he is proactively pursuing his land through the court system, he demonstrates active coping in the sense that he is working towards altering his situation. Despite the long wait due to the overload of court cases concerning land rights, Denis is nevertheless determined to continue the fight for justice no matter the costs. From his perspective, it is worth it because land is everything (Denis in Field Notes 2017). By the end of this battle, he hopes to have crossed the bridge of hardships and resolved the issue so he can be in a state of *kato i kine*, reclaiming his inheritance and status.

Not everyone has the means to challenge those who have wrongfully claimed one's land like in Denis' case. For example, in Lucy's case, because of her label as a child mother, she faced strong rejection and stigmatization by her family and clan. She was vulnerable after the war because she had no resources, had children in tow, and was labeled a rebel mother (Lucy in Field Notes 2017). As a result, Lucy in desperation sought help from World Vision, who provided her with shelter and support while attempting to find a durable solution. With the help of World Vision, and more specifically Dora, Lucy was referred to an organization that provided her and other child mothers

with land in Gulu for them and their children (Lucy in Field Notes 2017). Although Lucy did not proactively seek to alter or resolve the situation with the family/clan, she did take measures to find help. This means that she did not resort to avoidance strategy by withdrawing or giving up, instead she found alternative solutions (Mitrousi et al. 2013). After trying to mend the relations with her family and getting back the land that should have been hers, Lucy realized she would not be successful. And thus took matters into her own hands by taking her children to find new land to settle on. By going to World Vision and seeking help, she was consciously altering her and her children's situation from one of extreme stress and anxiety to one of hope and possibility. We are aware that not everyone would have found an organization able or willing to provide support. Therefore, Lucy is one of the relatively fortunate cases, for in the end, she was given a plot of land.

Another example of dealing with the struggle of acquiring a future by having access to land, is the story of a widow named Lamara, found in the article regarding land disputes from the International Development Fund. Lamara and her children were denied access to their land upon return from the war as her nephew had claimed and sold off chunks of the land. For this reason, she tried to confront her nephew but he responded aggressively and dismissed her. Lamara recognized that she was in need of assistance, and therefore sought out help from local mediators. By taking this step, she demonstrated active coping as she attempted to modify her situation. With the help of the local mediators, her nephew was counseled in regards to her land rights, and finally agreed to return her land so she could provide for her children and herself (Independent Development Fund 2015).

Even though the above stories show successful methods of coping and social navigation, there are cases where Acholi people struggle to move past the issue of land grabbing. For instance, not all child mothers received the same support as Lucy; some remain stuck. When families reject them, they have minimal options or channels to go through, and end up trapped with no agency. Sometimes, the confinement is too difficult to break and therefore they find themselves remaining in a fearful space of misery and anxiety. Without land, these child mothers have no way of connecting to their ancestral heritage, which they were abruptly uprooted from during the war. Since they are denied their home, they are in a state of *omoko*, stuck without hope for a better future, and unfortunately this is not unique to child mothers. When the state of *omoko* becomes too burdensome and heavy, some resort to alcohol as a way of avoiding the reality. This is a way of deflecting the issue that arises from lack of land. We further inquired about the ways land grabbing can be dealt with, when speaking with our informant William. He shared that in extreme cases where there seems to be no hope of regaining access to one's land, and thus status, many people choose to end their life (William in Field Notes 2017). Moreover, Kizza et al.'s study on suicide in Northern Uganda states that, "no land means no hope for the family's future" and thus is a cause of suicide (Kizza et al.

2012: 705). The avoidance strategy and giving up being used as coping mechanisms can be destructive and often lead to a downward spiral of despair and darkness.

### **Revisiting remarks: How can the Acholi communities face the current challenges regarding land boundary and land grabbing disputes?**

The stress and the fear that are entrenched in the current fight for land, arise from the disputes over land boundaries and land grabbing. While communities remain bonded and unified in many ways, when land becomes disputed, the ties are quick to break. As we learned from many heartfelt stories, like Denis' and Lucy's, family cohesion is not as unconditional as it was before the prolonged war. And thus, knowing that historically the Acholi have always relied on the support of the family and the productivity of the land, we wondered how they could face the current challenges without both of those pillars of their community. As we experienced, often there is a desperate fight or attempt to regain these two pillars.

When discussing boundary disputes and land grabbing issues, we recognized different coping strategies, ranging from actively seeking land justice to giving up by ending one's life. Upon further reflection, we noticed that there were more cases of employing active coping when dealing with land boundary disputes. We believe that when one already has access to land, it seems more promising and tangible to regain full access to the entire land one owns. Hence, a tug of war appears to begin, where on one side of the rope, the owner of the land pulls while on the other side the contestor(s) pulls back. However, in the scenario of land grabbing disputes, the one who has lost his/her land has no rope to pull on. Therefore, we have analyzed more instances of avoidance strategy and giving up as coping mechanisms. This allowed us to answer our question regarding how the Acholi communities face the current challenges regarding land boundary and land grabbing disputes. The number of disputes over land, through the two stress stimuli in this chapter, are a direct threat to the living, who need a home and livelihood, the dead, who rest on the ancestral land, and the future generations of Acholi, who hold onto the hope of securing land for a bright future.

### **Chapter three: micro level: the household**

The state level and the community level hold a significant impact on the stress stimuli experienced in the lives of the Acholi, nevertheless the stress stimuli at household level should not be overlooked when investigating the predominant stress stimuli affecting the post-conflict Acholi people and their way of coping. Throughout our fieldwork, we discussed with our informants the changes in the post-war setting, and learned that a considerable cause of tension is the crisis in masculinity brought on by the abrupt shift in gender roles caused by the war.

According to Connell, a pioneer in the field of masculinity, “gender identity is a constant process, always being reinvented and rearticulated in every setting, micro or macro” (Connell 2005: 7). From this understanding, we take the crisis in masculinity to be the struggle to reinvent and rearticulate gender identity, or in this case, masculinity.

We ourselves saw the evidence of the change in gender roles and relations, for example when we were hosted by Brenda, who is a married career woman and the decision-maker in her household (Brenda in Field Notes 2017). According to the Gulu District NGO Forum and the University of British Columbia who created the Justice and Reconciliation Project in 2005 that works with transitional justice at the local level, countless lives were disrupted, forcing both men and women into battle zones, which caused the construction and understanding of gender roles to evolve (JRP 2017; Brenda in Field Notes 2017). When conversing with both men and women, it was apparent that their perception of the roles of each gender before the war has now changed. It is difficult to extrapolate women’s stress from men’s and vice versa, since they are in a dynamic relation to each other, with a back and forth movement of influence. However, we found that the men’s crisis of masculinity is the predominant stress stimuli that finds itself at the center of household stress, which in turn serves as a catalyst for other stress stimuli, such as gender based violence. While this chapter focuses on men’s stress, the household space includes both men and women, therefore it is important to involve women in this analysis considering that their experiences directly correlate to men’s experiences. Thereby, the Acholi men and women are faced with having to learn how to navigate the evolving gender roles that have provoked a crisis in masculinity.

Other stress stimuli exist at the household level, such as the stigma brought by those suffering from mental illness. Because of the bad memories caused by the war, many Acholi continue to be haunted, leading some to be unable to move past the trauma. The number of mental health cases, especially PTSD and depression, have increased since the war ended (Saile et al. 2013). However, as this is only experienced by some households, it is not considered the main stress stimuli impacting

the Acholi. “While the conflict in Northern Uganda brought unimaginable horrors, the post-conflict scenarios have been fraught with challenges” in regards to gender relations, which were dramatically affected, and are therefore the focus of this chapter (JRP 2017: 20; ACCS 2013).

In order to fully grasp the movement from traditional gender norms to the current crisis in masculinity, it is necessary to present an overview of the pre-war gender roles, the during-war escalations, and the post-war redefining phase. From this, we will derive the most prevalent stress stimuli that men face, and how different coping mechanisms are employed.

### Pre-war Acholi gender roles

This section will delve into the pre-war gender roles, which were clearly divided into men and women’s responsibilities within traditional Acholi society. It was the duty of men to be the head of the household, to partake in community decision-making, and to ensure that household members conform to appropriate community behaviors (JRP 2017). They were given this role because they were recognized as being authoritarian leaders who set house rules, alongside providing for the family (*Ibid.*). They were expected to provide basic needs for their family, such as food, shelter, and education, as well as protect them by caring for their welfare (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, it was their responsibility to “handle domestic issues, mediate family conflicts and help solve community problems” (*Ibid.*: 17). They were perceived as action-oriented and decision makers, who represented the cultural and traditional trends in masculinity within Acholi society (*Ibid.*). As decision-makers and heads of household, the men were the ones who held the final say, even when it came to the number of children their wives were expected to “produce” (William in Field Notes 2017). The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) did a study on the change of gender roles in Northern Uganda, where a community member shared that before the war, men would “decide on the number of children, and women [were] expected to obey such a decision and not dissent, otherwise they [would] be described as disrespectful” (JRP 2017: 17). According to Sengupta and Calo, who studied the shifting gender roles in post-conflict Uganda, “the hegemonic model of masculinity always assumed the biblical superiority of men over women and children as absolute in Uganda” (Sengupta & Calo 2016: 292).

On the other side of the spectrum, women were expected to take care of the majority of domestic responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning the premises, washing dirty clothes, collecting firewood, and more (JRP 2017; Irene in Field Notes 2017). They were expected to support and obey men by caring for and satisfying their needs “and remaining faithful to them” (JRP 2017: 17). Furthermore, women’s primary role was and still is to bear children, to nurture them, and to raise

them (*Ibid.*). They were expected to fulfill the role of household caretaker, as well as full time mother, “making sacrifices for [their children] to grow and succeed” (*Ibid.*: 17). Another cultural practice in Acholi society is the one of bride prices, which allows men to quantify the value of a woman and then purchase to assume ownership of this woman, who then becomes his wife (*Ibid.*; Anying 2012). While speaking with our informant Jacob, he explained that women were “only allowed to sit on the mat [and that] only men could sit on chairs” (Jacob in Field Notes 2017). This imagery of the hierarchy present in pre-war Acholi practices portrays women with little to no individuality, in the sense that they were expected to behave in accordance to their husbands’ rules and expectations. Despite this, men were “expected to establish and nurture harmonious relationships with women as well as treat them with respect” (JRP 2017: 17). Up until this point, men had held a position of authority and power, which meant that all decisions went through them. When the war broke out, the traditional roles and norms were disrupted by the uprooting of people from their households into internment camps (Davenport 2014; Martin 2009).

#### During-war: IDP camps shifting the gender roles

The IDP camps acted as the catalyst that provoked struggles in terms of dependency and the beginnings of a crisis in masculinity. The government gave the Northerners 24 hours to vacate their homes and lands “or they would be forced off their land and into the camps, and killed if they were found outside the camps” (Harnish 2016: 28). These changes affected over 1.8 million displaced Northerners, who were forced into disorganized and chaotic camps during the two decade war (ACCS 2013; Interview with Dora 2017). People were so scattered that it made it quasi-impossible to recreate community structures, lives, and livelihood within the confined spaces of the camps. As explained in the state chapter, the original purpose of the camps was to protect the Northerners from the LRA, however, the UPDF were also committing crimes against the displaced people, such as sexual exploitation, beatings, and other violations (Interview with Okello 2017; Martin 2009). The women unfortunately received the brunt of this violence, as they were vulnerable to rape and sexual harassment (JRP 2017). While women were subjected to these violations, they were expected to maintain their role as nurturer within the camps, even without access to social or economic support (*Ibid.*). This meant that when they did not receive sufficient aid from the international organizations providing monthly food and supplies to the camps, some women were obliged to use their bodies as the only means of currency to receive extra food from the guards (Interview with Dora 2017). Women experienced extreme pressures and hardships in the camps, and while it was not the same, men also underwent numerous challenges in an attempt to adapt to changing conditions.

One of the consequences of life in the camps was that men could no longer farm and therefore no longer provide for their families, which was their traditional way of life. Having lost the role of responsible caretaker, many men felt demoralized and disempowered (JRP 2017; Interview with Dora 2017; Kizza et al. 2012). Not being able to protect and provide for their families, men lost their sense of worthiness and place in the world, leaving them struggling to fulfill the expected male role. This was made worse by the constant fear the men lived in, as they were often the targets of abductions by the rebels. This led men to be paralyzed within the confines of the camp and to remain reliant on women and aid organizations. This notion was supported by a local leader who said that “during encampment, while men enjoyed the benefits of relief assistance, they always feared for their lives. They thus restricted their movements, in which case, they became even lazier to do their responsibilities” (JRP 2017: 19). As a counter reaction, women were faced with the necessity and the opportunity to create petty businesses through innovative and creative means, as a way of providing for their families. The negative side effect was the resentment men felt towards women handling the hardships better and finding their independence (Interview with Dora 2017). Since women had to assume men’s previous roles, their workload increased, but they were able to break free from traditional Acholi norms and gain autonomy, thus provoking a crisis in masculinity. Although the war had devastating effects, it also generated social transformation (JRP 2017).

### **Stress stimuli: the crisis in masculinity**

As illustrated above, gender roles have evolved due to the prolonged war. This has primarily led to the emasculation of men and the empowerment of women (JRP 2017; Interview with Dora; Brenda in Field Notes 2017). During our time in Gulu, it became apparent that many of our informants had concerns in regards to how the war had changed the traditional gender roles. We reflected on their belief that the war was the cause of gender roles changing, and asked if it was rather simply because of modernization. For example, we had seen that in Kampala, women were no longer so confined to traditional roles. Our informants acknowledged that the gender roles are shifting in the rest of Uganda, but the difference in Northern Uganda is that the war disrupted the traditional gender roles in an abrupt way. When the war ended and people returned home, they realized things were dramatically different within the household. The stark contrast in the gender roles before the war and after, and the lack of a gradual transition like in the rest of Uganda, made it hard for the Acholi to adjust when they came home (Lucy in Field Notes 2017). It is “the rationale of the changing practices through which gender is ‘done’ or ‘accomplished’ in everyday life” that is bringing stress to men, who no longer have fixed gender roles and expectations (Kimmel et al. 2005:

6). In consequence, the lack of predefined responsibilities and clear guidelines, which were based on traditional gender values, brought about the challenge and insecurity of having to redefine one's roles and identity, and over the last decade or so has remained the main hardship within the household.

Through our conversations with both male and female informants, the crisis in masculinity emerged as the predominant stress stimuli experienced within the household. We will therefore explore the emotional strain brought on by having to redefine one's place within society, and the causes of the stress that arise from the crisis in masculinity. When having to redefine one's identity, multiple causes can affect one's feelings. Since women are part of the household, it is important to write about their experience of the social transformation and the repercussions of the crisis in masculinity, before delving into men's experience of the stress stimuli, or the crisis in masculinity. The choice to focus on men's crisis in masculinity is in no way to minimize women's stress and burdens, and the impact of this crisis on women and the rest of the household. Within this section, the male stress stimuli were narrowed down to a select few with the help of our informants' on-the-ground knowledge and secondary research, which are aid-dependency syndrome, unemployment, and lack of male role models.

#### Female empowerment: the amplifier of the crisis in masculinity

It is important to remain aware that there are two entities within the household that are facing the post-war challenges of social transformation. The evolving gender relations in the post-conflict setting have been difficult for men to adapt to and to navigate for different reasons, one of which being women's response to the conflict. It is therefore important to present the post-war transition the women underwent, which is directly connected to men's struggle with masculinity, while also presenting the consequences they experience in relation to this crisis. Within the household, there is a discrepancy in regards to men wanting to uphold the pre-war gender norms, as leaders and providers/protectors of the family, while at the same time women are demanding more equitable power and influence (JRP 2017; Interview with Dora 2017).

Since the war either killed or caused the men to withdraw, women took on the responsibility of becoming heads of households, and thus acquiring more responsibilities outside the domestic sphere (Jacob in Field Notes 2017). As a result, women have increasingly had a voice in the decision-making process within households. As illustrated by William, who has remained somewhat traditional and is a 28 year old father of four, women can now also "decide" on how many children to "produce" (William in Field Notes 2017). In his situation, his wife wanted six children, but since he came from a family of 13, he felt as though eight children was the bare minimum. They therefore

compromised and decided to have eight children (William in Field Notes 2017). Another example of female empowerment is that women can now speak during community meetings, and can even “compete with men for leadership positions” (Jacob in Field Notes 2017; Interview with Dora 2017). While discussing the gender changes, Jacob informed us that since the war, women not only have a voice but are also part of VSLA groups and saving money without even needing to ask their husbands, which “used to not happen” (Jacob in Field Notes 2017). When asking him why the war caused this change, he elaborated that with the loss of many men, the women grew stronger, and realized they could “manage without men” (Jacob in Field Notes 2017). For example, Dora’s mother assumed the primary role of caretaker and provider during the war, by starting her own petty business (Interview with Dora 2017). As women managed on their own, they took on responsibilities outside normative gender roles, such as income generating activities, all while they continued to fulfill traditional domestic duties (JRP 2017; Interview with Dora 2017).

The dynamics within the households between men and women are constantly having to be renegotiated as women continue to be empowered while men attempt to regain their masculine footing within Acholi gender norms. The female empowerment is perceived as a direct threat to men’s Acholi male status. This causes unease within households, and often leads to tension. Some men end their lives as a way of coping with the feeling that they’ve lost their masculinity due to women’s empowerment. As women have gained responsibilities and independence, both within and outside the household sphere, it has perpetuated men’s feeling of inadequacy, and sometimes has resulted in them becoming aggressive to reaffirm their control and identity (Kizza et al. 2012; UNDP 2015). In traditional pre-war Acholi culture, it was the right of the husband to punish his wife when she was “unruly,” “undermining culture,” or disrespecting him, and while this practice is becoming less accepted, some men still resort to this tradition (UNDP 2015: 70).

The following story is an example of the female empowerment intertwined with the tension that exists within the household. While participating in a community meeting in Koch Goma, we witnessed the fact that women can now participate and contribute to the dialogue. What we found interesting was that women were very vocal when it came to community matters, however, when asked about household matters, they became hesitant to share. Upon further investigation, we learned that women were insecure about responding to private family matters. For example, when asked if any of them used family planning, only 4 out of 35 of them raised their hands. We asked the women why not more of them had raised their hands, and they answered that they were not comfortable responding as “it could bring trouble with the men” (Anonymous community dialogue participant 2017). Therefore, the women did not always answer household questions in fear that they would suffer repercussions from their husbands.

Through further research, the issue of gender-based violence became evident as a backlash to the crisis in masculinity (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). The shift in power dynamics for women “without a similar proactive shift in gender norms for men, directly exacerbates gender-based violence” in Uganda (Sonke Gender Justice Network 2014: 4). Gender-based violence (GBV), which is “any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and that is based on socially ascribed differences between male and females,” can be said to stem from the male masculinity crisis (Sengupta & Calo 2016: 286). Despite GBV’s existence in the pre-war phase, and its escalation during the war, it persists in the post-war setting and remains prevalent due to the changes in power dynamics between men and women (Ullrich 2015). The violence men are inflicting on women is rooted in their inability “to cope with feelings of male vulnerability and powerlessness” (Sonke Gender Justice Network 2014: 4). According to Lundgren, who studied GBV in Northern Uganda, about 63 percent of the women in Northern Uganda had experienced GBV by a husband or partner in 2012 (Lundgren 2015). The hardships brought on by the war and the post-war rehabilitation, pushed women to become self-reliant and empower themselves to manage and alter their stressful surroundings. Women would apply *kato i kine* by getting themselves safely across the bridge, because they successfully engaged in transforming their situation, thus capturing social navigation. The war led women to take on more responsibilities, which has left an impact on the post-war social norms affecting both themselves and men by the destabilization, and transformation, of the traditional Acholi gender roles (Ullrich 2015).

### Redefining one’s identity

The emasculation of men that began during their encampment, has for many continued into today's post-conflict setting. With the silencing of the guns, and the fear of abduction finally subsiding, men found themselves confronted with a set of new challenges: how to navigate within a landscape of changed gender roles. As mentioned above, while some women have become head of households, in the sense that they are now the main decision-makers, men find it increasingly hard to fulfill the expectations of pre-war masculinity. Furthermore, a substantial amount of literature points to how the burdens of the war have changed the role of the Acholi man, from hard working and proud to one who is lazy and unworthy (Davenport 2014; JRP 2017). Also, the inability to provide and financially support, as well as the continuous increase in bride prices, has made it difficult for men to fulfill their traditional role as caretaker and husband. As a result, men are experiencing shame, inadequacy, and disconnection, all of which are perceived as extremely straining, and thereby must be considered the cause for emotional distress (Caver et al. 1989). As shared by our male

informants, the main reasons for these feelings are the aid-dependency syndrome and the loss of male role models, both of which are direct consequences of the war, as well as unemployment, which is directly connected to the post-war setting (Interview with Okello 2017; Jacob in Field Notes 2017). The following will therefore derive its structure from these stress stimuli.

### Aid-dependency syndrome and unemployment

The paralyzing fear felt by men during their time in the IDP camps has helped to accompany a negative cycle of unproductivity due to aid-dependency (Sheperd et al. 2011). The aid-dependency syndrome that ensued from the humanitarian aid and the prolonged stay in camps, can be understood as an attitude or belief that one is unable to solve his/her own problems alone (Kasozi 2016; Ali et al. 1999). In the Policy Brief regarding social assistance and the dependency syndrome of the Chronic Poverty Research Centre, Sheperd et al. understand the aid-dependency syndrome as any social assistance that leads to a dependency on “handouts” and as a consequence the recipients lose their “inclination to improve their circumstances” (Sheperd et al. 2011: 2). During their time in the IDP camps, both men and women were reliant on charity and unable to pursue usual livelihoods. Concurrently, aid agencies facilitated this dependency by providing free food, water, clothing, medicine, and other amenities (Kasozi 2016). As an accidental side effect, male’s roles were undermined in regards to contributing to their families and communities within the camps, primarily because they could no longer farm. According to Finnström, “men’s physical displacement corresponded with their psychological displacement from their sense of masculinity” (Finnström in Durick 2013: 38). Acholi men are still today dealing with the psychological displacement tied to their sense of lost masculinity.

Upon return from the camps, many men are still not able to break out of the circle of aid-dependency, and as a result they have become idle and unable to live up to the Acholi ideal of productivity and hard work, often begging or yearning for free support (Davenport 2014; Kasozi 2016; Robert in Field Notes 2017). As Ojak, Davenport’s informant, further explains: “People nowadays, because of staying for 10 years in the camps without production [...] they are used to [aid from NGO’s], and they still think that somehow somebody is still coming to give them something” (Ojak in Davenport 2014: 8). He used a castigating tone while criticizing the Acholi people who are still expecting free support. However, it must be noted that the conflict has perpetuated a lack of income generating activities, and thus those depending on aid are not lazy as others (like Ojak) might believe, but are struggling to sustain themselves without aid (Jacob in Field Notes 2017). As we discovered, most men want to work and provide for themselves and their families. For example, one

said he would like “getting something (work) [...] to feed the family,” and another said that he wanted “a wife so that [he] can take care of them [and] to do something/work to sustain them” (Anonymous participants in Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017).

Therefore, when people like Ojak, or our informant Robert, say people who can work, should work, they stigmatize unemployed men and forget that inactivity is not a choice but rather a condition experienced by many in this post-conflict setting (Davenport 2014; Robert in Field Notes 2017). As a result, these men feel sidelined and ashamed of not being able to fulfill their role as caretaker and therefore their sense of masculinity is put in question (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). This proves to be difficult for men already struggling to navigate the fragile post-war state, considering the pressures that come from fulfilling the role of male provider and protector. In Acholi tradition, men and women had very clear roles and responsibilities, but the current landscape has blurred these predetermined identities. The insecurity that follows from this uncertainty causes stress for the majority of men.

Unemployment causes strain for the Acholi men since they come from a society where a big part of one’s identity is based on hard and productive work (Davenport 2014). Unfortunately, the camps hindered this value because the longer one was in the camps, the less there were opportunities for productive labor. Subsequently, a culture of ‘male idleness’ developed over time and remains present today (Gelsdorf et al. 2012; Davenport 2014; Robert in Field Notes 2017). This causes frustration for men and makes it harder for them to find their own place within the post-war landscape, and further inhibits them from redefining their masculine identity. Based on our field research, there are true and significant concerns in regards to unemployment (Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). This is in part due to the lack of land, which would provide agricultural crops to sell and profit from. “Apart from losing the mainstay of rural Acholi livelihood, the inability to access and exert control over the land left the Acholi people bereft of their primary way of marking a boy’s transition into manhood, and thus publicly acknowledging his respectability as a family provider” (Durick 2013: 38). The onset of the aid-dependency combined with the difficulties of obtaining employment in this post-war setting, severely inhibits males from reaching their innate status as an Acholi man. The constant hardship of having to reconstruct one’s meaning of life is strenuous and brings tension in the household.

From our observations, there exists a struggle of defining oneself in relation to traditional Acholi male expectations within the evolving post-war gender roles. The attempt to combine and navigate the traditional roles with the modern gender roles has left many men in limbo, causing them to feel insecure and stressed. Before delving into how Acholi men are coping with these stresses, it is important to further explore the consequences of the loss of male role models on masculinity.

## Male role models: not a boy, not yet a man

Gender studies point to the fact that men enact their masculinity by making “situationally specific choices from a cultural repertoire of masculine behaviour,” often inspired by one’s father figure or other male role models (Connell 2005: xix). One of the sad consequences of the war has been that a large number of men were killed, thereby leaving a generation with few positive male role models (JRP 2017). We learned of this loss of male presence through two of our male informants in Gulu. Both Jacob and Okello have lost their fathers while their mothers were carrying them. Their fathers were both killed in the bush by rebels. Jacob and Okello shared their stories and the pain of losing one’s father before they could even know them. Their fatherlessness has left them feeling an emptiness, made harder by the lack of photographs to put a face to the name, as well as a lack of proper burial due to their fathers’ being killed in the bush (Jacob in Field Notes 2017; Interview with Okello 2017). As explained to us, when people are killed in the bush they do not receive a proper burial (Interview Okello 2017). Not having any images, heirlooms, or gravestone marker, there is no sense of connection to the most important men in their lives. Despite being raised and nurtured by strong, independent, and loving mothers, this has led both to struggle with their identity as Acholi men (Interview with Okello 2017; Jacob in Field Notes 2017). They are not alone when it comes to this loss of guidance from a male role model. Many struggle with their identities as men, primarily with their transition from boyhood to manhood.

The lack of guidance has equated to a sense of stuckness, as they may lack the knowledge to negotiate their role within certain spheres. For example, information about the traditional ways of courting a potential wife and then figuring out the bride price. This is made even more stressful by the fact that bride prices are becoming increasingly expensive in an environment in which unemployment and aid-dependency are prevalent (Lucy in Field Notes 2017). Therefore, men either have to accept that they will remain boys, in the traditional sense, until they can marry, or will circumvent the traditional definition of manhood. During our fieldwork, we encountered men dealing with these pressures several times, who spoke of the burden and stress that arises from not being able to attain traditional marriage status until much later in one’s life. As Sengupta and Calo argue, “the inability to marry and perform their expected roles has undermined men’s identities and their legitimacy within the clan. Instead cohabitation is fast becoming the norm, although elders and the clan itself do not regard it as legitimate” (Sengupta & Calo 2016: 293). Alex, another informant from Gulu, has been with his partner for a considerable amount of time, they live together, and have two children together (Alex in Field Notes 2017). However, they are not married. As he told us, Alex is waiting to save enough money to be able to pay her bride price, which would be the “right thing to

do for an Acholi man” (Alex in Field Notes 2017). This would have traditionally meant that manhood has not been reached, but with the current post-war struggles over income and responsibilities, most couples cannot marry until much later.

As a backlash, there exists a discrepancy between the elders and the younger generation of men in regards to how to define manhood. For example, Alex, Jacob, and Okello all consider themselves men even though none of them have successfully transitioned from boyhood to manhood in the traditional sense through marriage. Despite the fact that they are all doing well in life, they all experience societal pressures to formally marry and produce children, as is their duty as Acholi men. Interestingly, all three of them also put the pressure onto themselves and feel a sense of frustration to “achieve their gender-based aspirations” (UNDP 2015: 70; Alex in Field Notes 2017). They all have the desire to fulfill their expectation as men to “create a family, provide for and protect that family,” and fear that if they do not succeed, they will be portrayed as “less of men” in the traditional sense (UNDP 2015; Jacob in Field Notes 2017). This feeling is exemplified by Ojak, Davenport’s informant, who talks about his lack of worthiness as a man, but also as a father and a husband. Davenport elaborates that “the loss itself of worthiness then becomes a source of shame: he is so embarrassed by his own inadequacy and failure to perform his social responsibility that he resorts to suicide, and if he does not resort to suicide, he remains silenced by the shame of this past experience” (Davenport 2014: 8). This illustrates the hardship that many Acholi men are faced with when having to navigate and redefine themselves as proper men, fathers, or husbands without a strong male role model to guide them.

The post-war landscape is painted with pressures and burdens that come from all directions, however having to find yourself without a father figure or male role model has proved challenging and stressful for Acholi men. As a consequence of the loss, today’s Acholi men are left to deal with their fractured masculine identities in different ways.

### **Coping with aid-dependency, unemployment, and the loss of male role models**

Today’s Acholi men are handling the aid-dependency syndrome, the unemployment, and the loss of male role models through different coping mechanisms. In order to cope with emasculation and fractured masculine identities, most men resort to avoidance and giving up. The loss of male identity, as provider and protector of the family, has led to avoidance strategy through gambling, alcohol abuse, and violence, as well as coping by giving up through suicide (Sengupta & Calo 2016; Kizza et al. 2012; Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017; Interview with William 2017).

As the aid-dependency syndrome remains a problem and unemployment rates are rising, the only way some men believe they can cope is through gambling and alcohol use. Some men resort to gambling as a desperate last attempt to earn a living and provide for their family, and break from the stuckness. They are drawn in by “the magical allure of making money from nothing” as a way of attempting to take control of fate and regaining their masculinity (Comaroff & Comaroff 1998: 281). They gamble in the hopes of reaching potential opportunities, or of being in the right place at the right time (*Ibid.*). This is considered active coping since they are trying to alter their reality by reaching an imagined future, and attempting to solve it “through risk-taking behaviour”, thus applying social navigation to change their trajectory (Kizza et al. 2012: 703). However, as we learned most men use gambling as a distraction from the constant search for their male identity. As they are unable to achieve traditional male status because of their inability to provide for their families, many find themselves “trapped in an identity vacuum in which they were neither men nor children” (*Ibid.*: 703). Gambling is their coping response to dealing with the stress of not fulfilling traditional Acholi masculinity. Rather than being a solution for them, gambling is a way to avoid and conceal their shame and struggle (Mitrousi et al. 2013). As one woman said, her husband is “gambling like playing cards [...] and making him to leave her with full responsibility” (Anonymous Participant in Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). Another said, her husband is “gambling in order to get money for feeding and drinking” (*Ibid.*). The way men are coping with their identity crisis adds pressure to the household. For many men, gambling is a gateway into excessive alcohol abuse. We not only heard about men who resorted to drinking as a way of handling trauma, shame, and other male pressures, but we also witnessed many young men drinking at all times of the day, stumbling around, slurring their words, and being oblivious to their surroundings. Participants of the THRIVEGulu Survey further validated this drinking problem in Gulu by saying, “many men (adult and youth) are involved in drinking alcohol,” there is “excessive drinking of alcohol,” and “the level of drunkardness is high” (Anonymous Participants in Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). As noted by Roberts et al., after a study on alcohol disorder in Northern Uganda, men are “7 times more likely than women to be above the threshold level for alcohol disorder” (Roberts et al. 2011: 871). Drinking as a way to cope in regards to their masculinity crisis can be considered an avoidance mechanism, because often it is a way for men to deny and withdraw from the stress and the feeling of inadequacy. As explained by Kizza et al., who wrote a qualitative psychological study of suicide in Northern Uganda, the war created a limitation in opportunities for income, which left the majority of the men unemployed, and often drove them to excessive drinking and gambling (Kizza et al. 2012; Roberts et al. 2011).

In the Acholi pre-war tradition, the husband had control over all resources and all household matters - his power and control within the household was unquestionable. As Kizza et al. state, “a man’s honor, reputation, ego and masculinity are severely affected if he cannot control his wife” (Kizza et al. 2012: 703). Therefore, the post-war empowerment experienced by women is a direct challenge to men’s authority and status. If men do not resort to drinking as a coping mechanism, they sometimes turn to violent measures. Often men use domestic violence as a way of exerting control over their wives or children, and as a way to demonstrate their male ego and place in the household (UNPD 2015). Many participants from the THRIVEGulu Survey spoke of domestic violence. One expressed fears about “domestic violence because the husband beat and destroy her things in the house,” another said her “husband was chased from the house because of the violence and damage he caused on her,” and said that there is “gender based violence among the people in the area due to drinking and lack of food (hunger) in the families” (Anonymous Participants in Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). A general consensus was that “violence is too high” (Anonymous Participant in Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey, THRIVEGulu 2017). The Ugandan Development Report further states that the value of dialogue that existed in the pre-war phase has turned into one of aggression (UNDP 2015). The rise in violence is a manifestation of the lack of self-esteem that leads to stress and tension within households. This is why men use aggression as an avoidance coping mechanism by concealing their insecurities through violence (Sonke Gender Justice Network 2014).

As a result of the stress brought on by the crisis in masculinity, some Acholi men give up and end their lives. Suicide can be viewed by these men as the only escape route from the post-war insufferable circumstances. They give up because their feelings of loss of control, isolation, and shame are too taxing on their mental resources, and they see no possibility of changing the situation (Kizza et al. 2012; Mitrousi et al. 2013). Our informant William affirmed that the change in traditional gender roles has influenced many men to kill themselves. He further disclosed that 31 men had resorted to this option in the town of Koch Goma within a one month period (William in Field Notes 2017). As Kizza et al. state, four men for every one woman dies by suicide (Kizza et al. 2012). After the conversation with William, we spoke to one of the counselors at THRIVEGulu about suicide as a coping mechanism for men who had lost their purpose. Lucy confirmed what William had shared, as well as the fact that it is more common for men to end their own lives than women, and went as far as to elaborate on the common ways these men go about committing suicide. She said the main methods used are through the consumption of “drugs used for ants, cutting themselves with pangas [a large broad-bladed East African knife], running out in traffic, setting fire

to themselves, or hanging themselves with a kitenge [Ugandan print fabric]" (Lucy in Field Notes 2017).

As stated above, the Acholi men obtain their self-esteem and social value from the ability to provide for and protect their families. However, "the war destabilized rural Acholi families, interfering with traditional processes of socialization and social transformation of young men into socially valued adults who are able to live up to the cultural expectations. Hopelessness and despair at the failures to achieve the status of an adult was common among the young men who died by suicide" (Kizza et al. 2012: 709). These men are not giving up because of the dramatic impact of the violence during the war, but rather because of the everyday enduring of the stress of the failure to live up to the expectation of an Acholi man (Miller & Rasmussen 2009; Kizza et al. 2012; William in Field Notes 2017).

While many Acholi men turn to gambling, alcohol abuse, violence, and suicide as coping mechanisms for the crisis in masculinity within the household sphere, some have managed to employ active coping. They do this by successfully asserting themselves within the post-war society as Acholi men regardless of the stress stimuli that they must confront. We met Acholi men who have held onto their agency by adapting to and managing the social transformation that the war brought on. For instance, Okello has managed to overcome the loss of his father rather than being in a state of *omoko*. Thereby, the lack of a male role model has not hindered his ability to actively cope. Instead of resenting the new gender roles, Okello has adapted and is now happily partnered with an empowered woman, who earns more than him and lives independently (Interview with Okello 2017; Lindsay in Field Notes 2017). Despite the fact that in the traditional sense, he is not officially a man, he feels confident about his masculinity and place in the household. A different way of actively coping that we experienced was in the case of Jacob. While Okello has adapted and created his own identity as an Acholi man, Jacob actively seeks the more traditional ways of transitioning into manhood, in the sense that he can't wait to get married, have kids, and live off of his land (Jacob in Field Notes 2017). Even though Jacob desires the more traditional Acholi male norms, he believes in female empowerment, partly due to his mother's important role and her influence in his life, and furthermore, he does not feel as though his masculinity is being questioned or threatened (Jacob in Field Notes 2017).

## **Revisiting remarks: How will the Acholi society respond to their struggle with adjusting to new norms?**

The insecurity, unworthiness, and shame felt by men, alongside the situation women finds themselves in, speaks to a greater problem: many Acholi, especially men, are struggling with the new post-war gender norms. The dichotomy that exists between the traditional pre-war Acholi society and the post-war social environment is fragile, and constantly keeps challenging the relations within the household. The collapse of traditional masculinity, as well as the empowerment of women, engaged the Acholi in “alternative ways of coping in a landscape rife with anxiety, trauma and abuse” (Durick 2013: 21). This chapter set out to determine how the Acholi men responded to their struggle adjusting to new norms and their crisis in masculinity. As the analysis illuminated, the crisis in masculinity affects many, and thus there exists variation in how men cope with this stress stimulus. We found that men apply all three coping mechanisms by actively coping, avoidance strategy, or giving up through gambling, drinking, and suicide. The struggles in the household sphere are both gendered and generational, and therefore, beyond observing the gender relations, we observed how the younger generation are negotiating their sense of masculinity while growing up in an environment that still takes pride in Acholi tradition.

## **Chapter four: Is the conflict truly over or is it ongoing?**

*Ashley: Is the conflict really done?*

*Dora: The conflict is not done.*

The buildup of tension and insecurity, present not only on the micro level, but also on the meso and macro levels, drives the question: is the conflict truly over? By conflict, we do not refer to war but rather to its cause; it is the struggles, disagreements, and dissatisfactions permeated within the Acholi society, that they must face. Throughout the thesis process - from background research, to fieldwork data collection, to overall analysis - there has been a recurring sense that perhaps the conflict never truly ended. Even though the guns were silenced, the pre-existing causes remain, fueling the continuation of the conflict (Harnish 2016). Throughout our conversations with the Acholi people, we learned that the current state of the region was unstable and uncertain. As the generator roared in the background because of yet again another power outage, Dora affirmed that

“the conflict is not done, actually now it’s even worse” primarily due to the corruption and brutality within the government, the land wrangles tearing families apart, and the crisis in masculinity adding another layer to the already existing tension. This sentiment will be justified by an introduction of the peace process, including the Acholi’s’ wishes and the lack of resolution, followed by justifications gained from the stress stimuli found in our analysis, which will demonstrate the current causes of the continued tension. This chapter will be concluded with a speculation of the coping strategies the Acholi will turn to in order to handle the present and ongoing reality.

### Did the war end with official peace?

*“Wars do not start with the first shot or end with the last” (Vigh 2008).*

Over the twenty year span of the war between the LRA and the government, there have been several attempts to conclude the conflict and reach peace, stemming from both government actors, grassroots NGOs, and religious organizations (Royo 2008). The first attempt to bring peace to the Northern region of Uganda was in 1994, when Ugandan Minister Betty Bigombe started negotiating peace talks between the government and the LRA (Martin 2009). Further peace talks were attempted in 1997 and 2000 but continuously failed. The war raged on for two decades because none of these peace attempts were ever successful. Furthermore, there existed a lack of political determination in ending the conflict, which was also illustrated in President Museveni’s unenthusiastic attitude towards the peace talks (Pearson & Pedersen 2016; Angucia 2010). His argument for continuing to fight was expressed in the following statement: “I know there are those who think you can talk and the problem just gets solved by talking, unfortunately I don’t agree with that. Sometimes you may have to use force to solve the problem” (Martin 2009: 22). According to Xavier Ejoyi, a Ugandan working in the peace and reconciliation sector, “the government did not have the political will to end [the conflict] since the officers were benefitting from the conflict, the Nile provided a natural buffer that kept violence from penetrating to the South, and there was no real threat to the government center in Kampala” (Pearson & Pedersen 2016: 6). There was therefore no true engagement in regards to negotiating peace between the LRA and the government, and thus the violence continued for two decades with very occasional lulls (*Ibid.*).

It wasn’t until 2002 that critical actions occurred that led to a slow winding down of the violence. One of which was the agreement between the Sudanese and the Ugandan governments that allowed the Ugandan military forces to enter into South Sudan in order to fight the LRA (Armstrong 2014). In 2005, there was a further turning point when the Sudanese government settled their

disputes with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, thereby indirectly causing the LRA to lose their funding and supply chain in South Sudan (Royo 2008; Pearson & Pedersen 2016). All of the above resulted in the weakening of the LRA (Armstrong 2014).

In the meantime, another important shift was the UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland declaring that the North Ugandan conflict was the world's largest humanitarian disaster (Pearson & Pedersen 2016). As a consequence from the international pressure, Museveni felt more inclined to settle the violence and therefore made an agreement with the International Criminal Court (ICC) (*Ibid.*). However, rather than promoting further peace talks, the ICC's involvement slowed down the peace process, because it deterred the indicted rebels from engaging in negotiations (Armstrong 2014). Museveni, in a desperate attempt to alleviate the criticism in regards to his lack of action towards a resolution to the conflict, agreed to remove the ICC indictments on the LRA leaders. This proved to be the finalizer that would lead the parties to get involved, and as a result peace talks in Juba began in 2006 (*Ibid.*). The Juba peace talks set out five agreed-upon steps to recovery over the course of several rounds of negotiation (Royo 2008). The first was the signing of a cessation of hostilities, which occurred on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 2006. The second was an Agreement on Comprehensive Solutions, which established a framework for the separation of powers, the right of the displaced population to return and resettle, and the allocation of resources to rehabilitation programs in the affected areas (*Ibid.*). The third involved accountability and reconciliation. The fourth demanded a permanent ceasefire. Lastly, the fifth dealt with disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (*Ibid.*). All of the above were intended to be finalized and signed in March 2007, however, the peace talks continued well into 2008. But despite ongoing negotiations, the signing of the peace treaty was postponed indefinitely due to lack of will from both parties (*Ibid.*). Thereby, the official peace agreement that had aimed to end the war, secure long lasting peace, and ensure recovery for the North, was never ratified by either the LRA nor the government, and therefore "the Uganda National Transitional Justice Policy is still currently only a draft" (Royo 2008; Pearson & Pedersen 2016: 7; Davenport 2014).

Nonetheless, from this point on, the international community labeled Uganda as being in a post-conflict stage. As a consequence, they glossed over the symptoms and stress stimuli that could "ultimately fail to stem further conflict, [and therefore] the post-conflict label can serve as a set of blinders for the international community" (Schneiderman & Snellinger 2014: 1). According to a report by the Council of Europe, the final stage of conflict, or post-conflict phase, should have brought an absence of violence, the growth of GDP, and multiparty elections (Lyamouri-Bajja et al. 2012; Schneiderman & Snellinger 2014). However, the fact that the international community classified Uganda as being in a post-conflict stage, meant that they overlooked the indicators of the

final stage. In reality, the post-conflict level has not been reached considering that the GDP growth is inequivalent in the North as it is in the South, the election fairness is questionable, and the violence can reignite at any time (Lyamouri-Bajja et al. 2012; Schneiderman & Snellinger 2014; World Bank 2016). Therefore, although the peace talks did lead to de-escalation of violence, it is inaccurate to apply the post-conflict label. Furthermore, the daily fear of gunshots, mutilations, and land mines may have subsided but now there exists a monumental mistrust towards the government and all state agencies, a fear of losing one's homeland and opportunities for self-worth, and the insecurity that comes from redefining your role in a post-conflict society, all of which are fueling the ongoing conflict. Hence, we argue that the conflict did not truly come to an end in Acholiland, and the "cessation of violence does not, in itself, imply long term stability," but rather ongoing conflict (Pearson & Pedersen 2016: 11).

### The Acholi perspective on justice

When Kony began his uprising with messages of empowerment for the Northerners, the Acholi, who faced unequal treatment and a lack of socio-economic opportunities, believed that Kony would help bring transformation to the region (Interview with Okello 2017; Interview with Chris 2017). However, as the conflict escalated, and the violence became more brutal and inhumane, the Acholi people lost the hope that Kony had initially inspired. As further elaborated by Finnström, "many of the things that the LRA says make sense to people in northern Uganda but their practices do not," which caused a shift in support to Kony's rebellion (Finnström 2003: 314). As the Acholi themselves not only witnessed, but also suffered the horrifying realities of the war, they expected the government to intervene and bring security and peace to the region (Interview with Okello 2017; Interview with Chris 2017). Instead, the government responded with military forces, who brought further chaos and violence. The Northerners now found themselves balancing on a double-edged sword - on one edge the LRA, with abductions and mutilations, and on the other edge the UPDF, with civilian torture and rape (Davenport 2014; Martin 2009). As communities and families were uprooted, and Museveni's attempts to overturn the LRA with violence failed, the Acholi sought to resolve the war, especially considering that "military operations had actually served to increase rather than allay the suffering of the population" (Armstrong 2014: 200). They believed the best method to secure a peace and restore social harmony in the region was through the use of traditional reconciliation and restorative approaches (Latigo & Ochola 2015; Harnisch 2016; Interview with Dora 2017).

When the ICC joined the peace process, it undermined the Acholi's wish for solving the conflict through traditional peace methods, such as Mato Oput, and only worsened the situation (Armstrong 2014; Interview with Dora 2017). There was a general frustration by the fact that Museveni turned a blind eye to addressing the root symptoms that caused the conflict (Latigo & Ochola 2015). The wish of most Acholi was to lessen the losses and to end the war through the mediated dialogues of Mato Oput, which would have freed the "hearts of the offender and the offended [...] from holding any grudge[s]," did not occur since Museveni resorted to "acts of revenge" and brutality (Tom 2006: 3; Latigo & Ochola 2015: 16).

There was a strong desire to transition from war to peace by addressing injustices through nonviolent measures (Gerhard & Zenker 2014). More specifically, the Acholi hoped for "full accountability for the atrocities, where both parties involved in the conflict [had] to account" (Okiror 2016). While we were in Gulu, this sentiment was confirmed by several informants; Dora, the director at THRIVEGulu, expressed that the conflict could not be deemed over until all parties were held accountable for their actions (Interview with Dora 2017). Okiror, a journalist from Kampala who gathered information about the post-war Acholi sentiments, states that "people have brought up the question of accountability for state-led atrocities" (*Ibid.*). Thus, the Acholi wish that the ICC, or those involved in the justice and reconciliation process, would actually persecute all the people who violated them - Kony and the state - and pursued their ideals to protect human rights and promote justice for all. This illuminates that the justice and reconciliation process has been marred by the interest of external actors, and has overshadowed the Acholi wishes by pushing methods onto them, that "did not come from the heart" (Interview with Dora 2017).

### **Stress stimuli contributing to the ongoing conflict**

Throughout our thesis, a startling finding that calls for critical reflection is the level of tension, agitation, and hardship, which are consequences of ongoing stress, that bring us to the conclusion that the conflict is ongoing, and that war is bound to respark. Our analysis led us to an understanding that there still exists "deep-rooted problems plaguing the country," which are made worse by the lack of actions to fix their endemic causes (Pearson & Pedersen 2016: 7). As we have found, corruption, brutality, land boundaries, land grabbing, and the crisis in masculinity, are all stress stimuli that threaten to "reignite violence [or] initiate war by other means" (Schneiderman & Snellinger 2014: 1).

Thereby, the drivers of the conflict, or stress stimuli, continue to affect the Acholi and their everyday lives. As Dora further shared with us, during the war the Acholi's constant state of being

was one of “survival and safety”, but after the war, silence and emptiness left the Acholi to deal with “the reality of the loss”, “the memories”, and “the unresolved issues” (Interview with Dora 2017). As was written earlier, she even goes so far as to say that the situation today is worse than during the war, and others agree, believing that if you “scratch beneath the surface” you find “plenty of hidden scars” (Okiror 2016; Interview with Dora 2017).

### The state debilitating the Acholi recovery

The lingering insecurity caused by the ongoing corruption and brutality, as previously presented, has deepened the stress and tension experienced by the Acholi. From the moment Museveni took power, he has vowed to improve state institutions and eliminate corruption in all levels of government. However, as Dora states “all the systems are still affected by corruption,” and Museveni has been under the pretense that there is “steady progress,” which he says Uganda is experiencing (Interview with Dora 2017; Alava & Varma 2016). From our interactions in Gulu, we sensed the frustration the Acholi people feel and the fact that they “have lost trust in the system,” especially since the government did not and still does not protect and prioritize the Acholi (Interview with Dora 2017). As a result, the government is resented almost as much as the LRA. As shared previously, the government has been accused of being responsible for killing civilians as a way of eliminating threats and reaching hidden agendas (Interview with Okello 2017). Furthermore, security forces have inflicted the Acholi population with horrendous and degrading treatment (Martin 2009). The power imbalance makes it impossible for the Acholi not to feel deep-seated distress and resentment. As a consequence of the corruption and brutality, the people of Acholiland cannot accept the government, and there is little to no trust between citizens and state actors. Concurrently, “when people perceive themselves to be politically marginalized [or threatened] in this way it has far-reaching economic consequences and implications for how people see themselves in relation to the country” (Angucia 2010: 29). The bond of trust has also become damaged by Museveni’s harsh rhetoric towards his own people, when he is “on record stating a preference for complete removal of the Acholis,” and with his close associates referring to the Acholi as “biological substances who should be eliminated” (Pearson & Pedersen 2016: 5). Such strong dehumanizing statements by one’s own government, combined with the brutality and lack of protection, are difficult to forget and have provoked the Acholi into disassociation from the government. People stay clear and uninvolved when they encounter guards with their weapons out, police patrols in large groups, or government officials. Unfortunately, “the power of the gun has become pervasive and the violence and devastation it wreaks has become normalized” in Acholiland (Davenport 2014: 12). The threat of

violence feels imminent, especially with the visual reminder of brutality and the inequitable corruption, and thus preserves the sense of ongoing conflict.<sup>7</sup>

### The community: once bound by tradition now divided by disruption

The disputes over land are a direct attack to the Acholi people's core social, cultural, and economic existence (Okot 2013). A general consensus by our informants was that land is everything and without it, you are nothing. With the threat of losing land, and therefore the life source of the Acholi, it is understandable that when people returned to witness the physical damage and scarring from the war, the loss of land, and the disputes it caused, it created an emptiness in the soul of the Acholi. "For people going back to their homestead it is not the same as the one they left, [...] the reminders [of the war] are everywhere" (Interview with Dora 2017). The current landscape continues to be tainted by land conflicts and power struggles, which tear communities and families apart. As the people returned to their homes in Acholiland, a chaotic and stressful scramble to reclaim land took place. There were struggles over the lack of concrete land boundaries, land grabbing by early returnees or those who stayed, and missing documents evidencing land ownership (Nakayi 2011: 13). The post-war landscape is marked by contestations on land, with a rush to claim that which could secure one's survival, livelihood, and future (Rugadya 2008). Hence, as people are still struggling to rebuild lives and move forward, this is only made more complicated by the fact that today, land disputes are tearing communities, clans, and families apart. During Davenport's research on Acholi identity, one of his informants, Mary, explained that, "the way life was before the conflict is no longer there. People no longer share or do things in groups. They are only concerned with themselves. You can't even get help from your clan anymore" (Davenport 2014: 24). The fragile peace in Northern Uganda, coupled with debilitating land disputes, greatly contributes to high degrees of tension and instability (Pearson & Pedersen 2016). Dora shared the strong imagery of the loss of land by saying that: "because land cannot be physically moved, I think if someone could just carry land like you carry a chair, Acholis would have nothing" (Interview with Dora 2017). Knowing what land means to the Acholi and the sentiment from Dora that land is being grabbed from under them, create a strong feeling that the conflict is ongoing, and perhaps is even more intense today (Interview with Dora 2017; Denis in Field Notes 2017).

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<sup>7</sup> When asking about peace in Uganda, both Okello and his brother replied that the conflict had not ended, it was merely on a break. The rebels are still out there and so many want to see a change in president.

## The household: instability continues

The conflict provoked a social transformation to occur more abruptly than men could handle or accept. So while women were pursuing innovative endeavors, adapting to their conditions, and receiving support from western NGOs, men were rendered idle by the loss of authority and independence - for example, the need for an escort to go even one kilometer was crippling on their sense of masculinity (Pearson & Pedersen 2016; Interview with Dora 2017). In the post-war setting, men are grappling with the financial insecurities and pressures that arise from not being able to find employment intertwined with the IDP camp aid-dependency, as well as dealing with their fractured male identity due to the lack of guidance and male role models. These challenges exacerbate the current social tensions and burdens present in Acholi society, as well as the men's struggle to regain power (Pearson & Pedersen 2016). When we talked with Dora about men and women and the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism, she shared that "for the men [in IDP camps], it was seriously disabling during the war, because our men in those regions are only used to farming [...] so what did they do? They started drinking to forget...forgetting the problem and being absent from this situation," while the women "they were coping way better" (Interview with Dora 2017). The abuse of alcohol has worsened the already tense situation within households, exacerbated by the crisis in masculinity, which has led to violence at home. As a result, women have been experiencing an increasing amount of GBV, which perpetuates an ambiance of unease, anxiety, and frustration. While both men and women try to adapt to and confront the social transformation brought on by the conflict, for each "the war still continues in their minds despite the guns falling silent" (Okiror 2016). Experiencing ongoing battles internally and unresolved issues can create an explosive environment, as Dora says, "if you just open it [unresolved issues], it just explodes" (Interview with Dora 2017). Behind the façade of growth, in terms of social development, lies a disturbing and tense reality of violence and a struggle for independence, as well as a power struggle and a desire to "return to the idealization of pre-war order" (Branch 2014). Therefore, the Acholi men's struggle to adjust to the new norms, is a space of rising tension that has the potential to erupt, and thus this unstable situation and lack of resolution perpetuate an ongoing conflict.

## **How to cope with an unresolved conflict?**

The Acholi have yet to witness and experience justice for the 20 years of atrocities. How can they move on? How do they manage the stress stimuli that have brought more tension? And how can they cope when none of the symptoms of the war have been addressed properly?

In our opinion, the conflict has not been resolved, and is ongoing, because the root symptoms of the war are very much present and experienced in a twofold manner, even though the guns, abductions, and mutilations ceased. As a result of the tension, stress, and burdens, the Acholi are deeply dissatisfied, and the lack of socio-economic opportunities deepens their frustrations (Pearson & Pedersen 2016). From the research and analysis we have generated, we came to the realization that the stress stimuli experienced at the state, community and household level relate to each other in a dynamic fashion, more specifically the perception of the stress stimuli trickles down from the macro, to the meso, and into the micro realms, and vice versa. This means that at individual level, the stress stimuli are amplified and intense - having to cope with the government's deceit, the disputes within the community, and the strain from the crisis in masculinity in the households - all of which need to be released. We argue that the ongoing conflict can lead to two different coping reactions from the Acholi people: avoidance strategy or active coping.

### Acceptance: living with the reality of ongoing conflict

Our prediction, founded on the use of the avoidance strategy as a way to release and cope, is based on the notion of acceptance. We argue that there are different reasons for why some Acholi might resort to acceptance, even though they feel that the conflict is ongoing. Based on our field experience in Gulu, we recognized the importance of faith and religion in Acholi society. Many turn to praying to God as a tool for releasing the ongoing turmoil that they experience within the post-war setting. Some of our informants disclosed that they were praying for change and that they believe that God will provide such change when it's time, but until this time comes, they will accept their current hardships (Chris in Field Notes 2017; Robert in Field Notes 2017). There are also those that are surviving by suppressing and numbing vulnerable emotions, "dissociation, distraction, and silencing," which often turns into indefinite "coping strategies and adaptation to a continuous" environment of conflict (Harnish 2016: 171). Others use acceptance by simply moving on with their lives by following their daily activities, such as work and family, knowing that the guns, bloodshed, and abductions have stopped. Many realize what is bubbling under the surface, in terms of stress and

tension, but choose to accept the current situation. In these different cases, since they are not taking direct actions to alter their situation, we consider this to be part of the avoidance strategy.

While working at THRIVEGulu, we saw examples of people seemingly accepting their current status quo, two of which stood out for us. The first was in relation to the Mon Yele VSLA women's group we interacted with; during an activity, they were presented with a wheel of life where they had to rate the most important factors in their lives, which demonstrated the struggle areas as indented. From this activity, it was clear that the women encountered different hardships but chose to accept them because they acknowledged the little improvements they have experienced since the war ended. Other women in the group are confronted by violence within their household but feel as though nothing can be done, causing them to feel *omoko*, or stuck. A mantra that was repeated to us a couple times was, "forgive and forget" as a method for acceptance and moving on, which we found interesting because it meant that they were not truly addressing the inner unresolved hardships and realities of the ongoing conflict (Interview with Chris 2017).

The second example regards Patrick, a former abductee, who shared his story of the challenge to move forward after returning from the bush. He explained that he initially could not move, and was stuck in a place of darkness, but since attending mental health counseling, he has been able to take a step forward. He is now working, volunteering, and building a life for himself. He affirms that there are still struggles and stresses, such as the land he is still trying to reacquire, but he has accepted the reality of the post-war situation, and doesn't want to go back to fighting, fear, and blood. The traumatic experiences caused him to take time to move forward, and thus he would rather accept the stress stimuli than risk losing what he has now achieved. His last words to us were that, although he has accepted the challenges of today, he has not forgotten the war (Patrick in Field Notes 2017). While these examples illustrate an acceptance and relative calm in regards to the ongoing conflict, there are unresolved issues under the surface; "it's an eerie calm. Large questions are unresolved that are being avoided or are unable to be solved. [...] A lot has changed. There's uncertainty even in fundamentals that could be exploited" (Pearson & Pedersen 2016: 8).

#### Active coping: ready to fight for change

Our second prediction revolves around active coping as a way of acting upon the stress stimuli. We consider active coping as the taking up of arms as a means of altering the "ongoing regional instability" (*Ibid.*: 10). The accumulation of all the stress from each realm can serve as a trigger, and thereby propel some to revolt. We view this as a possible option because there are two generations of trained fighters, alongside an abundance of weapons, who might eventually channel

their aggravations into renewal of warfare as a response to the ongoing conflict (Smith 2004). According to Pearson and Pedersen, who did a political study in Northern Uganda on the current stability, “there’s an entire group of young men trained in military tactics that have said, ‘We’re ready, just call us’” (Pearson & Pedersen 2016: 9). As a result of the lack of opportunities to improve their situation, combined with the lack of recognition from the government, a fertile ground has been created where mobilization could easily occur if a leader, like Kony, started a rebel movement (*Ibid.*). After two decades of war, many Acholi now hold military training skills and were never properly disarmed, especially considering that the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration part of the peace agreement was never upheld nor followed through (Branch 2015). This means that as long as there are “weapons available with which to fight” and as long as there are unrectified hardships, it is possible that the war will reemerge (Smith 2004). When asked about the likelihood of renewed war, most of Pearson and Pedersen’s interviewees, as well as our own, voiced that “the area is a ticking time bomb without ongoing efforts” (Pearson & Pedersen 2016: 9; Interview with Okello 2017). This sentiment was further validated by a local chairman in Gulu who said that ‘yes’ there would be another war and that “there are lots of old fighters, just waiting. If anything happens, Museveni’s tribe will be targeted. [...] it will be entire Uganda versus West Uganda [where Museveni comes from]” (Pearson & Pedersen 2016: 1).

The stress stimuli from the government, the community, and the household have amplified this ticking time bomb. As long as these stress stimuli are neither recognized nor rectified, the ongoing conflict lives on, and the violence could erupt, “especially given evidence that openness to extreme beliefs is ignited during times of oppression” (*Ibid.*: 5). A small scale example that Dora pointed out is that unresolved issues are “why even little things in the community cause a big fight,” showing the significance of the underlying tensions. If these remain unaddressed, there is a chance the ticking time bomb will explode, and even “take [them] back to a bigger war” (Interview with Dora 2017).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As time went by during our fieldwork, we learned that the Acholi felt the conflict was not over, and that war would begin again, which brought us to the question: why hasn’t the violence returned? In response, many attributed the overall eerie calm to “war fatigue” as the only reason why the lingering anger and resentment have not surfaced. According to our informant Okello, “they [the fighters] are just taking a break, it [the war] will all come back in July.”

**Revisiting remarks: can the conflict truly be considered in the post-conflict stage once one is aware of the stress experienced within all three levels?**

As the above chapter illustrates, the ongoing conflict is not a figment of the imagination of the Acholi but a bleak reality they must face everyday. The findings in this paper indicate that the stress stemming from the government, the community, and the household may have a significant part to play in the uncertainty that is the future of the Acholi people. Additionally, the omnipresence of threats and power struggles that also indicate the conflict as ongoing, represent the potentiality for further war in the hopes of reaching “correct and desirable progress” (Vigh 2008: 10; Lyamouri-Bajja et al. 2012).

In our opinion, in order for recovery to be successful and truly impact the Acholi’s lives, the symptoms of the conflict have to be addressed within all levels. The ongoing conflict maintains the Acholi in a landscape of vulnerability, oppression, and stress. The current situation in Acholiland is perhaps a lull in the storm, but a period of no war, certainly doesn’t mean a period of peace and thus the question remains; not when, but if it will end (Finnström 2008).

## CONCLUSION

We set out to explore the state of Northern Ugandans in the post-conflict environment, and in doing so discovered that the Acholi people were overcome with stress exacerbated by the war. Through our ethnographic fieldwork, we found that stress stimuli existed within three levels: the state, the community, and the household. Within each of these realms, there were predominant stress drivers, which we determined to be: corruption, brutality, land boundary issues, land grabbing disputes, and the crisis in masculinity with the aid-dependency syndrome, unemployment, and the lack of male role models, all of which represent the stress, hardships, and fear that the Acholi live with. Based on these stress stimuli, we aspired to illuminate the coping strategies that ‘keeps them going’ in an inescapable environment of stress (Harnish 2016). As we have learned from Lazarus and Folkman, one cannot master the stress but only the coping, by altering, accepting, or giving up, from which we derived the three coping strategies: active coping, avoidance strategy, and giving up.

Therefore, based on our analysis we were able to shed light on the ways the Acholi people cope with the predominant stress stimuli after the war. We found that at the macro state-level, people resorted primarily to avoidance strategy, through accepting the hopelessness of changing the deep-rooted corruption and the threatening brutality. At the meso community-level, the Acholi can grasp the potential to regain their entire land and thus employed active coping by fighting or seeking mediation. Lastly, at the micro household-level, the crisis in masculinity led men to avoidance, by distracting themselves with gambling, or forgetting with drinking, or to despair. When they see no way to adapt, some men choose to end their lives. In spite of the coping stories we shared throughout the thesis, it is likely that all three coping strategies appear in all three levels because people respond differently to stress. The overall result of the above findings led us to deduce that the *post* in post-conflict was not accurate, but rather that the Acholi continue to survive in a state of ongoing conflict, especially considering that many believe that the current stress stimuli that plague their everyday life are in many ways worse than during the war (Interview with Dora 2017). Thereby the war brought decay socially, economically, culturally, and even personally, and unfortunately this perpetuated, as the ongoing conflict raged on, rather than transition into positive change within the three levels.

Some Acholi have chosen to accept their shattered lives, while others still seek justice, as well as political, social, and economic transformation in Acholiland. And thus, these responses to the loss of actualizing hopes and dreams should inspire us to remain “awake when others have fallen asleep,” rather than taking for granted the post-conflict status of Northern Uganda (Vigh 2008: 12). As our time in Gulu taught us, the stress stimuli are not a normal constant in Acholi society and not how things should be. Instead, the ongoing conflict obliges us to strive for an end to the hardships,

fear, struggles, and tension. The people and their stories this thesis led us to, have helped us formulate an understanding of the human beings who experience ongoing conflict, “whether with fear [or hope, which] can teach us about how and what will hinder as well as promote peace - in minds, men and societies” (Harnish 2016: 24). For recovery to be successful, the predominant stress stimuli of the ongoing conflict must be addressed within the three levels in order to truly impact the Acholi people’s lives and to allow them to fulfill their hopes and dreams.

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## Appendix 2: Transcribed interviews

### Interview with Dora

**Hella:** Thank you for talking with us.

**Ashley:** Yes, thanks for doing this. Lindsay told us that you had a breadth of knowledge and that you know a lot. So we thought maybe we'd start with you introducing how long you have worked at Thrive, maybe what you did before, where you're from, and just a little bit about you before we start asking more questions.

**Dora:** My training background is psychology, so my first degree is a bachelor of science but I majored in psychology. And after my first degree, I started work as a social worker at a rehabilitation center that was 2000 to around 2002. So I worked at a rehabilitation that was receiving children that were being abducted and being rescued by the army and they needed rehabilitation and of course we were providing, being a center, we were providing holistic support looking at their medical needs, and of course looking at clothing needs, looking at their emotional and psychological needs and then the other aspect was doing family tracing for them because for some of the children who were abducted years before, when they came back the communities were actually forced into IDP camps and then when the people was coming into IDP camps it was not logically arranged that maybe communities in this location come to this specific arranged area, so people were going wherever they felt was safe, it kind was disorganized (*2 minutes*). So even when a child was pretty clear about where their village is, it would be difficult now to trace where the parents actually went during the displacement and some of the communities actually went to Massindi district, close to Karoma, and yeah actually a lot of Acholi families went and settled across Karoma. So we had the aspect of family tracing for the children and of course that comes with family preparation, we needed to again prepare the family because everybody was scared. I remember that at the initial beginning when the children were coming back, when the soldiers who rescued children, (*3 minutes*) they would bring them to a market place and parade them and say "if you know any of these child, can you come for them" and people feared to come, to identify with them, one because of the many bad things that the rebels were doing so for you to identify that that one is my child and yet last evening the rebels had burned huts they had done bad things so people kind of were shying away from even getting the children even when they knew them. So eventually, we...the district had to think of how else do we take care of those children and then also of course we looked at the risks of just somebody picking the children from the market and then going with them home and then even in my own mind even when its my son I'm like 'but how many has he killed? And what are going to be the effects within our family?' so eventually the rehabilitation centers were opened and the government through the district gave space and (*4 minutes*) then the NGOs were able to mobilize resources and be able to start to operate those centers, where the children would stay for, I think I minimum standard was not more than 3 months at the rehabilitation center, but of course we had special cases who stayed even 2 years haha, who stayed 2 years, because either they had serious medical problems, many they were just shot, they had serious wounds, and they needed to be first in hospital, then they would come back to the center, then maybe the legs needs to be amputated, they go back to hospital, then they come back to the center. Yeah so we had those special cases. In the year from 2002 to 2004, in the same organization, I was promoted as the center administrator. (*5 minutes*) So I was overall managing the center, of course planning, doing fundraising, mobilizing resources for the children. But also we had a lot of visitors who would come in, and then within that period, is the time we also received very many, we call them child mothers, the girls who were abducted and then they were being used by the rebels commanders as what? Mothers, and they came back with the children. Because within that period, is when government of Uganda and Sudan signed an agreement so

government of Uganda was allowed to send their soldiers into Sudan, so that they could go and fight the place of Joseph Kony in Sudan. So the fighting was so furious and intense in Sudan and so the rebel groups, especially commanders, recognizing that they had many children, they also had grown in number by the way (6 minutes), because they had settled into Sudan, they had big settlements, so they'd grown in number, they had many little children, so when the fighting was fierce, the commanders decided that, to release the women because the women could not cope, the running was too much, the ... and the [*foot patrol??*] was too much for them, so they decided to release most of the child mothers with babies and toddlers, and so they came to the center. And that was the time we had the biggest influx of children, and then because of also like intense fighting that was going on, some of the children either were separated in the process of running, [*and came*] to the center maybe with a...uhm...they would call them...they would attach young girls into the house of the commanders to work as babies, as nannies...as babysitters. (7 minutes) So some of the children got separated and arrived to the centers with babysitters, who are actually not their real mothers, and some of them were actually brought alone, so we again at that point we started seeing a scenario of children we called unaccompanied children, who were coming. So it was also a bit of a challenge for us, tracing for those children, because most of our children when they are abducted *by the LRA and taken* in captivity, they tried *to* hide their identity. So most of them are not giving their real names. Now that is the name that the other people abducted them knows, and they're not their real name. So for us now, at the center, we would not know what was their real names from home (8 minutes) so that you can't say maybe 'this dora *alal* has a baby at the center and we want to get Dora alal has used *ateem* or somebody's, you know another name while in captivity, so it was a bit a challenge.

**Ashley:** would they not remember their name from before?

**Dora:** For some of those mothers didn't come, until even today for those unaccompanied children. So, now we were left with a child, the mothers name *that is not the real name*, is not the name she has been using in captivity, so the link is not there, the link was a bit challenging. But eventually some of them got attached, some of them were taken to SOS children's villages, *where* SOS brought their village to Gulu, and I think a few of them were adopted. I think there is a child that should be either in Netherlands, I think in Netherlands, he must not yet be ??? so (9 minutes) some of them were formally, legally, adopted. So I worked in that organization for like 5 years. And then I worked at, I worked for EU funding, European funded project, that one was working more with the local government structures, holding the local government accountable, and helping communities to initiate their development needs, and then to provide support, for one year and after that I came to World Vision. I came to World Vision, I went back to the same rehabilitation work, although I was at, I was at a specialist level. I was placed as a social coordinator (10 minutes), so I was more in charge of trainings, and providing back up support for the councilors who were working at the center, where maybe if a case seems difficult for them, and then trainings for them, and then I would go out and train for the other districts, where World Vision is having other centers. So that was up to 2011, 2012 I came to Thrive.

**Hella:** Very impressive.

**Dora:** so my career path has actually been, actually I have a lot of knowledge and experience working with ex-combatants, also I know enough of them physically. I just interface with them and I see them through their challenges. They tell me 'mother we remember you, you used to tell us please *now we are singing?* (11 minutes) and then the little children who came through when I was at the rehabilitation center, they are now big, they are in secondary...actually the other time we had, we had a meeting organized under the USAID, the *save?* Project, we got trainings for the children born in captivity. Actually but I was interested just to check because I know that those children, we did

not give them psychological support *when they were there*. Because they were young, they were so little, and I think also at that time, because of the too much work, our focus was not so much on the children *but of course* for assuring that they were ok, *and that* they were safe, and then of course we tried attaching them to schools, but a number of them have challenges now, I think, coping. And (12 minutes) actually even when we had the training with the child mothers, *in?* of the children complained about their mothers ... and then the mothers *they said*, 'you know these children they are so difficult ... one of the ladies said, 'when I talk with my daughter she just looks at me, she never answer, and me when I talk I want her to answer and tell me she has understood, she doesn't ... haha. So in the two follow up meetings, I just felt it was still important to, I think, you know of course, people were excited, there was a lot of money around but afterwards the money went and then we thought that integration processes were happening well. But actually they are not happening well, for most of the child mothers, their children, there are still aspects of rejection but also, there are aspects of where they are just (13 minutes) stuck, where the mothers are stuck with 'where to send those children', we go to another marriage, the children will not be accepted in that marriage; you want to leave them with your family? Your parents are saying we cannot keep the children of the rebel here, you know. And then when they do something small, like any other child, can make a mistake, for these children it will be attached to because they are from the rebel group. So it is challenging for them, and I think, ok the child mothers requested *amnesty ...*, 'mother even when there is no money, just call us at the center and keep talking to us, because sometimes we are really stuck, we are really stuck and *we don't know what to do, and also* our children, maybe you people can be able to talk to them and they listen.' So we are trying to *wait* as long as I am here and there is this place, we will be able to do *it*, also because we have (14 minutes) an advantage that most of those child mothers are benefitting from our VSLA groups. So we can use still that link to have meetings with them. They are willing to come and do meetings even when there is no water, when there is no soda, but you know they just to come to where they can share there challenges, and then meet counselors individually. [...] I was discussing with Austin that even without funding we can do some holiday programs for the children because most of them are going to schools outside [...] like the children that are being sponsored by [...] was being headed by a Belgian lady [...] she wrote the book the broken girls. So she raised a lot of money so she has been supporting especially the [...] school fees and they have a school in Lira district which is the next district to Gulu, and I think now (15 minutes) children are in another school in [...] also sponsored by Sponsoring Children in Uganda. So we want to try and also utilize one or two days during the holidays and still engage with the children and help them. Because now their life, their social support around them is very thin, usually they have their mother. And so if they are in disagreement with their mother it means the children might have to depend on friends so it is important to empower themselves so that as colleagues, as friends, they can support one another (16 minutes) respective of whether [...] most of the children they are very disturbed when the mother is in a marriage with another man. So that disturbs them a lot [...] a point of grievance and discomfort.

**Ashley:** so do you think those children are the ones that are the least reintegrated?

**Dora:** Yes they are because apparently, actually for me most of the child mothers I tell them you must look for ? and buy land, because if you have a small piece of land, however small it can be, you have a home for you and the children. For your children who are rejected, you have something for them, where you can keep them.

**Hella:** So even though, just to be totally clear, so even though it was their mother who were actually directly involved in the war, it is her children who are kind of paying the price?

**Dora:** yeah.

**Hella:** Are the women or girls who were involved with the war/rebels are they not also stigmatized or have a hard time coming back to the community (*17 minutes*)?

**Dora:** It has been a struggle. But also when we train them we tell them it's a [...] game, because also me having them abducted, first I must accept, yes I was abducted, so that label, that labeling it should not affect me because I know it has happened, it is a reality that occurred to me. [...] my behavior should model to accept [...] because once you do anything outside the normal, then you give [...] people a way to say you see that [...] because you are abducted. So when we are training them we tell them to be conscious about how they behave and also to try and model their behaviors so that they can behave in acceptable ways, even if (*18 minutes*) in the groups, I think a number of times I had some of my child mothers calling me to go and help settle disagreement meetings with them in the markets and for one of them to say 'this woman usually calls me a rebel', I am an abductee, I am feeling proud with the support of [...] so when I went and of course we settled in our meeting, I pulled her out and I said it is true that you were abducted so if people say that were abducted and show annoyance, then you are opening up more opportunity for them to keep irritating you. (*19 minutes*) you tell them, yes it was unfortunate that me I was abducted, it was fortunate that you were not abducted but everybody has suffered in this war. Even me Dora, who was that abducted, I suffered. I almost stopped going to school by the way. If it were not because of my uncle who [worked? Was?] at Makerere University, a lecturer, he is the one who told my mother, send that girl because I know she is not going, she is going to stop going to school. And so he took me in his house for one year, and I went and did P7 which is our last class before we go to secondary. From his house and then I came back to secondary. [...] when I came back here in the second year, the rebels were attacked our school and it was fortunate that they attacked and went to the dormitory of the higher classes. You know [...] abducted girls, they closed the schools for some time, parents who had money transferred their children to Kampala to where. Those of us who did not have money, we had to come back. We moved [...] for some times and then later on (*20 minutes*) again we were taken [...] so we have all suffered.

**Ashley:** you are saying you suffered but were lucky to not be the target?

**Dora:** I'm telling you even I suffered. I remember when actually when my uncle asked me to go to Kampala, to walk to come from my village to come to Gulu, there were no transport, you can't [...] vehicle, you move on foot, but even that moving on foot you are risking. [...] rebels are around, you have to first stop and suspend your journey. You will hear if you can now pass. And actually when we were just near Lacho hospital here, the rebels were there and then the good thing is they collected all that we had carried (*21 minutes*) for all the long journey and remained with it and allowed us to pass. Now those are good [or God's] things. [...] so it was hard. Yeah it was hard.

**Ashley:** so can we tell you what we are thinking for our research, we have kind of created a question, you can tell us what you think: how does the community cope in the post-conflict Acholiland and does this resonate with the reintegration process of former child soldiers? [more rambling and explanation]

**Dora:** (*23 minutes*) if the university leaves it, a liberty for you people to choose your research question, that is a good one because one: there is a number of studies that have [...] which I think probably you have seen that has been done [...] so you can already have a number of material. And there are also materials on the integration challenges.

**Ashley:** but what we have seen a lot is the struggle in terms of the child side, in terms of how much time was spent with them and counseling, but we haven't seen so much the community side of things

and how they felt and how they dealt with the situation. We haven't found so much about that. (24 minutes)

**Hella:** or maybe more like the focus is moving on, not so much the emergency but kind of like some of the problems we are seeing now over land wrangles and lack of education, kind of how this also is leading back to the conflict and maybe the community's back then had a hard time but also how all these structural are affecting the children. Obviously in our society if you don't have a lot of money, I'm not going to take in all these kids.

**Ashley:** so that is our interest. I guess we can ask more specific questions maybe. (25 minutes) How was reintegration understood, here in the north? Was it based on individual NGOs and organizations or was there a general understanding of what it meant when the child was ready to be placed back in the community?

**Dora:** Reflecting back, I think at the initial stages we had a lot of coordination meetings [...] especially the NGOs that were here running rehabilitation centers, because one the rehabilitation centers were running here in Gulu were not modeled anywhere else so that as a working group we needed to work with many people at street level and many technical people to determine what would be the appropriate number of days and what (26 minutes) should happen at the centers. So we tried to make those things [...] now the reintegration in itself, is the other process where even us working at the centers do not have control over because then the reintegration needed to happen within the community, starting of course from the family. [...] what we did when at the center was to, after family tracing, we would do family preparation. Of course that was to help the family again to recognize this is our lost child, we didn't have her in our budget and now she is back so we need to take her in the budget and start planning for [...] (27 minutes). So that was family preparation, now we did a lot of community trainings and awareness talking about especially, I was actually involved in disseminating the Amnesty Act when it was, when it came out. And of course that act was talking about communities should look at these children as victims and not as perpetrators because they forcefully abducted, they were under age, and whatever they did they had to do it otherwise they would be killed, it was like a survival mechanism. If they asked you to kill, you must kill, otherwise it is you who is going to be killed. So I was part of that team also for some time [...] in communities, talking about Amnesty but also talking about [...] helping the communities to understand the former (28 minutes) combatants and then to forgive them.

**Hella:** and how would you do that?

**Dora:** You would do community meetings and of course look at, even talk about the problems these children go through while in captivity, and now that they escaped and come how should we support them as a community. And I have also been, I think also from the year 2000, I have been working in schools, I have been doing a lot of trainings with teachers because we knew that most of these children were still school going age. So part of that preparation was, in the rehabilitation center, is to prepare them to go back to formal school, or if they are passed the age for formal schooling, they should be able to find a professional skill that they would learn some skills as one of the ways to help with their reintegration processes (29 minutes). So I was also involved with training teachers in schools but also with doing follow up with some of the formerly abducted children who were in schools to know how they were doing. Now in most of the instances when a formerly abducted child runs [...] they say that is because that one is abducted. So still the aspect of stigma continues to interface at all levels, at family levels, we had some, actually one of the girls who is the first fundraiser for Thrive was rejected by her mother [...] 'see my back' and then she had to (30 minutes) do casual work, she raised some little money, she was already resettled from a rehabilitation center,

she couldn't find space to start life. She had to come back to Gusco? Center and then she came at the center and they start to receive and 'but madame this girls has already been in our rehabilitation center,' she was just crying with her children [...] misery. And I told them 'you receive her, et her first rest, because she is crying we don't know what she has gone through.' The fact that she has been in another rehabilitation center is not a guarantee for us to say you are finished with rehabilitation. So we took her in and after you know getting all the details of her stories, her struggles, we [...] send money to little huts where they would take some of the most desperate child mothers with their children. (31 minutes) then they would do some casual work on the compound, watering flowers, [...] cooking [...] some food and then also help them to learn skills. So she learned tailoring work from there. So she is one of our model. Thrive again picked her up, thrive picked her from there, bought for her land, bought for her a house. So she is there. She is very joyous, she is very happy. She stayed with her, she is also one of my child mothers who stayed for a long time alone because she couldn't settle first. (32 minutes)

she has a man...showing the integration challenges...for most of child mothers who have remarried ex-combattants, their marriages are the most stable, and then also for the child mothers who were ... commander's husbands...they went back to them...they have also been stable...

Yeah (to shared understanding)

Stockholm syndrome (33 minutes)

But for child mothers who have been trying to be with men who were not abducted it has been a struggle... sometimes they don't disclose that they were abducted...but later when they learn about it then can use it as an abuse - has been a struggle for those child mothers (34 minutes)

And hard for children they came with.

**Hella:** question about boys adapting better than child mothers?

**Dora:** boys who came back were often wounded or had their physical ability affected which has been challenging because can't work in hard labor...challenge for work when medical issues... the other categories that have had a challenge were the children born out of wedlock... they are not considered children from the married couple if not from that marriage...those with disabilities have the most issues (36 minutes)

**Hella:** question about problem with men and drinking - does that go back to the conflict and the trauma and the stress?

**Dora:** "drinking has been used as a coping mechanism for people of northern Uganda from the loss"... for the years of the conflict, people were just concern with survival and safety, and then the guns went off and we had to remember to go back to the villages...and then back at the "villages is now when the reality of the loss is coming, the memories you have" the frustration, the children who ran to IDP camps with died of HIV/AIDS or were abducted and never returned... all these problems have now come (37 minutes)... with those unresolved issues, "that is why even little things in the community cause a big fight"...the unresolved issues..."if you just open it, it just explodes"... "the drinking is a coping strategy" (38 minutes) "for the men, that was seriously disabled during the war, because our men in those regions are only used to farming" ... you go to the garden, you have cows, you have goats, you have chicken... strong men, you have resources...then you can marry how many women you want..."now, that power was taken away by the war, the resources were taken away, and then they were bundled and thrown into IDP camps, where you were totally rendered idle because there was a time to go even just 1 kilometer you needed to be escorted by army"... if you want to go look for firewood, cut grass, they needed to be escorted by army, so (39 minutes) "that loss for the men has been really significant, loss of power, loss of authority" and then because of i think that is god's creation the women are more innovative,...find a way to work around the problem more

easily... “the women while in the IDP camps continued to find ways to work around...they couldn't just sit and wait for UN to...they would still struggle to make pancakes and maybe sell them...trying to get something...sell in the market...”they were coping way better”... now for the men who were used to just waking up and going to the garden with my wife and then after the garden we come back and the wife is cooking and you sitting and listening to radio and then maybe afterwards in the evening you are going to gather fruits... this all stopped in IDP camps... so what did they do, “they started drinking to forget”...forgetting the problem and “being absent from this situation” (40 minutes)

**Ashley:** who was put in IDP camps? Did you have to go into an IDP camp?

**Dora:** We went across to Karoma instead of being in IDP camps...chose to move and had little money to buy land and settle elsewhere...in masindi district...it's those that couldn't move that were put into IDP camps (41 minutes)

**Ashley:** how was it organized or decided?

**Dora:** “I don't know, they would just come and give orders for people to leave”...because at that time it was..very difficult for the security to divide the resources to take care...people all over the places...and then also to concentrate on the fighting, the defending and protecting people - so i think somewhere at government level they just felt that people move to IDP camps so that it would be easier for the soldiers to give protection while people are in one place, so (42 minutes) the order was move out of this village you know, so it was not organized that this section would go to this section.

**Ashley:** what was the timeline (of the conflict)? When did it begin?

**Dora:** in 86

**Ashley:** and when did they start moving people into IDP camps?

**Dora:** around mid 80s or late 80s...

**Ashley:** and when did the conflict end - we've heard about the ICC and the government and the peace talks (*Dora starts laughing when I mention ICC*) - hard to know when the people felt like it was over...

**Dora:** I think...it is as if when the rebels settled in south sudan that was around the year 2000 to 2002, the communities here were relieved of abductions, but of course there was still the fear. And also the rebels would still come...it was not like we are ? Around 2006,8,9,10 it is actually when the rebels got dislodged from south sudan and they got scattered...they reassembled and went to Central African Republic.... It is when we gradually started feeling peace...many peace deals (44 minutes)...

**Ashley:** How did it start?

**Dora:** it started as a small movement - that disagreed, that we cannot have a president that is a westerner...in our olden days the westerners used to be our cattle keepers...so the Acholis felt that how can a cattle keeper be our leader...and i think for the history of Uganda, powers have been between Acholi, Lwo and West Nile - Amin was from West Nile, *someone* was from Lwo region, Obote was Lwo, so ... power shifted....started just building like a small movement, it started as ???

pocket of rebels groups building...and then Joseph Kony took over from Alice Lakwena (46 minutes) so when Joseph Kony took over it continued.

**Hella:** Museveni reason for conflict? How? Negative things about government and IDP camps - how are people feeling about this?

**Dora:** ... have never felt good about the president in power and he knows it..."but he has put extra extra effort to supporting the people of Acholi to recover"...he has done quite a lot (for reintegration) but because of this, i think, already in-built feeling...of course also poisoned by our politicians...so they only want to put pockets of government as failed...IDP conditions hard...the country was not just the northern region, and the focus in northern region shouldn't have paralyzed...because the other regions are struggling...west was badly affected by HIV/AIDS, so I mean all the regions had challenges so for me the government put a lot of effort... IDP's were a positive point because how would the government have controlled the abductions... "to make sure communities are within a centralized location where the soldiers can provide adequate support, where rebels would not be able to infiltrate" (48 minutes)

The government has kind of stopped with the funding for reintegration - now more focus on community recovery - like supporting livelihoods, the government of Uganda is trying Acholi community took government to court for their livestock that were destroyed or stolen during the war and government accepted to pay - but sad that when government is sending money, key people have been receiving it - so it has not actually benefitted those in every corner - the government have committed...not little money, it is billions of shillings into that one aspect... and have been getting external support that special grants be sent to northern Uganda

**Hella:** when we mentioned ICC you smiled - can you explain why?

**Dora:** (50 minutes) I have followed one of their review meetings and participated in 2009 with ex-combatants and ... the ICC..."we want accountability, and of course the person we want most is Joseph Kony" ...other commanders who were very mature people...who are actually retired... these people should have been targeted by ICC because these are people who joined when they were of age and were really exposed and they knew that they had intentions to support the war...so given the selection of Joseph Kony and others... it's of course not fair...2 the other aspect has been that government of Uganda and army of course has accountability aspects too...they are a lot of things that were actually done by the soldiers (52 minutes), the army of the government of Uganda so we also want to see accountability for them. Of course ICC is focusing on ??

**Ashley:** What did the army do?

**Dora:** the army were also beating people...at some point we had...he was tied so strong that eventually his hands had to be amputated...a lot of things happened to people...i remember when we were still home, the army came to our home and then they started getting the cattle out...moving our cows...then they told us "where have you seen the rebels? - we have not seen them" but unfortunately there was a neighbor's child who was in the rebel group and we didn't know, he had sneaked home that night and he took off. So the army instead of running after that guy, the army came and were beating my father, saying he was hiding information from the army, and then when the commander (who usually let the destruction take place)...her mother is lighter skin... something about herding cattle in the same tribe as him...my mom is a product from their tribe mate...the commander he might have thought that she could be the daughter of one of his tribe people (tribal ties) - asked mother who is the men they were beating, when she said it was the husband, so he

stopped them... Told to run...but couldn't run with clothes, cows, etc. so that was my last memory about my village... (55 minutes)

My father was abducted twice...one of the occasion he got one of his students so when they moved him to final location...solider asked if he remembered him - divided to answer because might want anonymity - said he couldn't remember very well - escorted him back because he is a teacher... "left the village and whatever we could carry is what we carried with us"...

**Ashley:** so to go back to the beginning, the ICC ...?

**Dora:** can't help...until the ICC prosecute or build up a case against government...in the recent classes in Kasese district - the district reported to ICC, they were not taken seriously...

**Ashley:** are people still waiting for justice?

**Dora:** people have very mixed feelings, because 1: by looking at how it will benefit me, justice, I am not sure... when we wanted the commanders to come and apologize and share their crimes, I am not sure that ... help much...so the justice we are all waiting for, even me I am still waiting, is Joseph Kony...

abducted when 10...survival mechanism...(59 minutes)...remember how to go home - where to cross river...that was the trick...most of the commanders were forced to commit atrocities in their homes...would not really recognize

**Ashley:** traditional justice?

**Dora:** we have had those rituals but I am not sure... many things have been mixed with different interests...have been pushed...not from the heart....a lot of things have been pushed on the Acholi people, even this Amnesty Act (1 hour)... a lot of negative things that showed that the Acholi have actually not forgiven...benefiting from being a rebel...thrive withdrew from supporting ex-combatants in isolation...in community groups better....although they do need more support...(1:02)... "we continue to support them but the stigma has not gotten out, and I am not sure it will ever get out" ...it is a disability...people will also use it as a description to locate you...

**Hella:** Amnesty Act/Package, not a lot of people got it - was it the government not offering it or people did not want it to not stand out?

**Dora:** "Our biggest problem in Uganda is the corruption, even when the government has got plans"...for them to reach...it's a challenge...the people will want to take advantage...Amnesty package same thing...package is so small especially with children...not a comprehensive plan (1:04) commonwealth center - big establishment - thought it would provide opportunity for ex-combatants to access land to farm, and opportunities for vocational skills

"Government planning is usual very vague" - hard to get exact need...struggle...(1:06)...identifying the land was another hell for them...tried here and there...not sure if any of our NGOs have really made a breakthrough because of land issues... (1:07) family from Australia...little houses...semi-permanent little houses...sustain, can last...

(1:08) for those accepted back in communities and given land by family or community even if disabled, they are stable...living well but for the child mothers it has been a challenge

**Hella:** housing...visual reminders of the conflict? Do people still carry the conflict with them in their daily lives in what they see? Forgotten?

**Dora:** they have not forgotten. 1 even the physical infrastructures that have been destroyed...that have not been replaced. 2 even for people who have gone back to their homesteads, most of the people have not settled back on the original compound where they had established themselves... (1:10) the great loss...effect of the big loss is becoming vivid (when they go home)

**Ashley:** question about Kony?

**Dora:** he has spiritual aspects...rare... stories about him saying move or do this and such...showing he somehow knew the future

**Ashley:** have heard about whether the rebels or the government were worse?

**Dora:** a lot of people suffered equally from both. At one point people have to run whether ..government or rebels..."because it was very clear that either of them was going to be very bad"...government soldiers were beating...too hard... (1:12)...groups of soldiers who were having sex with men...

**Ashley:** same government?

**Dora:** "that's why the people here cannot accept the government" (1:13)

**Ashley:** Is the conflict really done?

**Dora:** "the conflict is not done"...because all this land....actually now it's even worse..."there is a plot to make sure that the Acholi's do not have land"...more....will see trucks going from lands and will find out that the ones working are connected to very high government figures... "its because land cannot be physically moved, i think if someone could just carry land like you carry a chair, Acholis would have nothing"

**Ashley:** violence over but still conflict?

**Dora:** "the land wrangles are actually eating up into families", at the beginning when people were going back to homesteads...boundaries (1:15) went to family, clan and then ? it went to institutions...went out out out...brother and brothers fighting each other...at family level...so that is how serious it is...

**Hella:** negative changes brought on by the the conflict? What about positive change?

**Dora:** I think one of the positive changes is the empowerment, especially for the women. The empowerment for the women has been...to realize that they have a lot of potentials and can do a lot more...a lot more women owning land...before that wasnt the case...men need to pay bills and school fees but now it is women...they are attending meetings..."that has been the big shift that overall responsibility for household, the women got them"... because ran with nothing her mom introduced herself to the market... (1:18) army would intercept you and take it (the posho you carried)...were mother continued and runs a restaurant...women have continued... that is why as a coping mechanism...the men who don't have money...the power is not in their hands...kids go to mother to get school fees and money, not fathers like before..."that shift has really affected men" ...need to develop a program for male empowerment... struggling because of women's empowerment (1:19)

**Hella:** future of Uganda?

**Dora:** when it comes to my children, I don't know how it will be...anything can spark a very big thing (1:20) ... something small can lead to an explosion...even me, when i hear the president speak, i think he feels it too...that insecurity...example of commander of police being killed

**Ashley:** if somehow new president? Would it help in resolution?

**Dora:** I don't think it is just changing the president that will bring a shift, I think... an overall change...all the systems are affected by corruption... (1:22) .... they don't care about overall Uganda, they just care about themselves and getting money...how much money can they get... "people have lost trust in the whole system"...even here in Gulu we don't have a leadership...

**Ashley:** too much corruption?

**Dora:** yes (1:24)

**Ashley:** maybe we should wrap up since we've taken more than an hour

**Dora:** it's fine...even when you go back if you have questions, you can ask. Festival with ex-combatants on April when you will not be here anymore...reintegration festival from US department of State...and Thrive part of it....

**Hella:** maybe we can write to you on the 23rd and hear how it went

**Dora:** yes

**Ashley:** ... Patrick ....

**Hella:** taken many years to get to this point...mental health program...Mary

**Dora:** the challenge is that at the centers they could not see what the challenged...being fed and taken care of and focusing on acceptance and finding family...but as settled realized they were responsible for income generating activities and being soap and marrying traditions and who will get you cows to marry...counseling is a need now (1:29)... that support cannot guarantee helping the person as they settle back...the small quarrels that are there...the disappointments...

ThriveGulu is well placed...no other offering counseling support...very big advantage...if we do well and work hard can also do research...track the important aspects and been modeling program under USAID, we cannot consistently write that this many were ? need to document the good work...to see that this model works and this additional support is needed

**Ashley:** survey...

**Dora:** up until now, limited documentation...get students who can do research...just to check our work...what is working and what...always have good feedback...but in bits...not documented...get something, some strength...

### Group interview with Okello and Chris

The start of this conversation can be found in Field notes.

**Hella:** Who are the worst the rebels or the government? and how did the conflict start?

**Okello:** Soo what happens is that the government think that the civilian guys are trying to help the rebels so that they did is like – what you got if they think you are helping the rebels they give you like 500 beatings with a cane. My grandfather was also given 500 canings – he could not walk –

**Hella:** that's terrible.

**Okello:** yeah. They the (government) started to move people into the camps, they said it was for protection and so they could give us food. They did that, so that we could not give food to the rebels.

**Hella:** Okay.

**Okello:** So what happens was that whenever the rebels were around the civilian would call the government so the rebels were like we are trying to help you but now you are turning against us – so they started to do violence, it started quietly with the rebels taking food and later on they realized that the government was trying to do one on them – like what happened in Byugu – they cooked people in the pots

**Ashley:** What? Like in the camps?

**Okello:** yeah, yeah. They cook people in the pots and then people should eat them.

**Hella:** that's horrible

**Okello:** yeah, and that was not the rebels doing that, that was the government.

**Okello:** They the (government) surrounded all the camps and more than one million people died.

**Ashley:** but how can that government, then still be the government when all this has happened?

**Okello:** The government can maintain power since it had power for so long and because it mostly targets the north and since the north have had power for so many years.

Chris elaborates Okello's point with a story he has read in a newspaper many years ago.

**Chris:** I read a story about how the government have banned a newspaper and sieged their offices and throw down because they had published stuff. But that paper was saying, like, that the plan to destabilize the north began after the end of the British colonial time. So after Britain they realized that the northern people were so resistance and by that time in 1962/63 they had discovered olie in the north and their recommendation was that you could not get the oli or any mineral from the north if the people of the north are still strong. So you have to weakening them

**Okello:** yeah that was their plan.

**Chris:** so the plan was to cause war in north and end it by getting some biological weapons and things like that and eventually when they (north) get weak and they lose their name and strength, and their young men are taken down and really destabilized, then we will come and take the resources and all this is supposed to have been planned by this government! Because in 1967 the queen sent some guy who were the owner of (some general motors company) to the President's office, the idea was that this guy should get all the mineral right over Uganda and nobody should get told about it, and with that money he won the war in 1986 and that how he (Museveni) came into power.

**Okello:** yeah.

**Chris:** I read that this story before they discovered the olie.

**Hella:** and you said oli was discovered here in the 1960's?  
**Chris:** yeah, they say that oli was discovered in mid 1960's by Amin.

**Okello:** and that was in Northern Uganda.

**Chris:** Yeah on the other side of the River Nile, in Murchison and other places.

**Chris:** so I read that newspaper long time before the people of Uganda knew about olie so after some time the news broke about the olie. But the government had known that the olie was there for quite some time.

**Hella:** so your own government have kept that information from you?

**Chris:** It is just recently I realized that the story was true. Cause when the olie was discovered the oil price was going up and the oli rights were given to Heritage (olie company??) but when they were pulling out (5 years ago) after the expiration? They are selling their oli rights. But when I look at it, it is not like Heritage was selling it to Uganda. Uganda was nowhere to be seen and they are selling our olie – instead it got sold to France, China and that when I realized that what the newspaper had been written was right. Our resources belongs to Britain and the same thing for gold and that's how I became aware that all our minerals are owned by Britain.

**Hella:** so Britian own all your resources? Or mostly in the North?

**Okello:** No mostly in the North.

**Chris:** it is because the North belongs to the northerners and the resistant of the people, the other persons are weak.

**Hella:** But are there resources and minerals in other parts of Uganda?

**Okello:** there is a lot in the North: minerals, gold and oli

**Chris:** This is something that holds true mostly for northern Uganda but Uganda has resources all over.

**Hella:** so if there is many natural resources, is there then a big mining industry?

**Chris:** There is a big mining industry but again it is not something that benefits Uganda because it is all owned by foreign companies. It is a complex system that normal Ugandans can not figure not. When the foreign companies come in they say we don't have the experience or the knowledge.

**Hella:** but why is it that you don't have the expertise?

**Chris:** there is nothing for the Ugandans. There is also olie in Nigeria and they have their own industry so how come we can't?

**Hella:** Howcome the North is so known for its resilience?

**Chris:** the north is resilient because it is in their DNA

**Okello:** the northern part of Uganda is called the black Jews because they are known as warriors and the south was known as producers and farmers and cattle keepers.

**Ashley:** the Acholi is called the black jews?

**Okello:** yeah.

**Hella:** But, Okello is there a lot of farming in the North as well?

**Okello:** There is also a lot of farming in northern Uganda. In the past they called Northern Uganda, the fruit basket of Africa because they grow a lot of food.

**Hella:** so the thing we have heard about Northern Uganda being hard and fighters, are also a bit of a misrepresentation?

**Okello:** Cause what they say, what they say is kinda complicated.

(Blank Jew story of the Northerners resilience) Because when Moses was fighting and the wife of Moses was a black lady. They call the Acholi the black as well because we are fighters.

They tried to steal it (a box) several times, they know that the Acholi are called the black Jews because they were fighters.

### Appendix 3: Table of participants

Name	Role	Organization	Setting
Dora	THRIVEGulu Director	THRIVEGulu	Semi-structured interview with tape recorder, transcribed.
William	THRIVEGulu mental health educator	THRIVEGulu + USAID collaboration	Informal conversations, documented in our field notes
Lucy	THRIVEGulu mental health counselor	THRIVEGulu	Informal conversation, partly tape recorded and documented in our field notes
Jacob	Responsible for communication at THRIVEGulu	THRIVEGulu	Informal conversations both during and after our stay in Gulu. Documented in our field notes
Okello	Driver	USAID	Informal conversations and interview, partly tape recorded and transcribed otherwise documented in field notes.
Irene	Oversees cooking and cleaning at THRIVEGulu	THRIVEGulu	Informal conversations, documented in our field notes
Brenda	Literacy and Empowerment program at THRIVEGulu	THRIVEGulu	Informal conversations, documented in our field notes
Robert	Private driver	Self-employed	Informal conversations, partly tape recorded and transcribed otherwise

			documented in field notes
Kate	Volunteer doctor	Gulu Independent Hospital	Informal conversations, documented in our field notes
Chris	Private driver	Self-employed	Informal conversations, partly tape recorded and transcribed otherwise documented in field notes
Alex	THRIVEGulu mental health educator and counselor	THRIVEGulu + USAID collaboration	Informal conversations, partly tape recorded and transcribed otherwise documented in field notes
Lindsay	Head of Development at THRIVEGulu	THRIVEGulu	Informal conversations documented in our field notes
Lucy	Participant in THRIVEGulu activities	Not applicable	Informal conversations documented in our field notes
Patrick	Participant in THRIVEGulu activities	Not applicable	Informal conversations documented in our field notes

Group	Activity	Organization/Involvement	Setting
Mon Yele VSLA group	Literacy program	One of the 26 THRIVEGulu VSLA groups	Participant observation, Informal conversations documented in our field notes
Odek Village	Community dialogue	Mental health awareness session with village members	Participant observation, Informal conversations documented in our field notes
Koch Goma village	Community dialogue	Mental health awareness session with village members	Participant observation, Informal conversations documented in our field notes

# Appendix 4: Needs Assessment and Feedback Survey

Name: Akella Semjor Village: 50-34-015  
 Group: Subongo - Lami Group #: 28-24-206  
 Name of data collector: Abigail and M Date of data collection: 10/1/2017

**NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK**

11 What do you think are the three biggest strengths of your community? (Name at least two) (Ababio ma urani) (ye bebbene? Ma gye adde ma pite) (ye wadde)  
 - Inter-group relationship since they are in the same VSLA group to help one another  
 - peaceful security  
 - availability of clean water source.

12 What are your three biggest concerns about your community? (Name at least two) (ye bebbene ma urani) (ye bebbene? Ma gye adde ma pite) (ye wadde)  
 - No access to drugs get you pay tax to the government.  
 - School drop out due to financial problem  
 - Domestic violence by spouses

13 What are your three biggest concerns in your life? (Name at least two) (ye bebbene ma urani) (ye bebbene? Ma gye adde ma pite) (ye wadde)  
 - Her daughter is suffering from epilepsy disease  
 - Getting what to eat is not easy.

Getting she is stacked to get her brother's orphan's school fee.

14 In the past year, what do you think was the most significant change that happened in your life, your family, or your community? (Name at least one) (ye bebbene ma urani) (ye bebbene? Ma gye adde ma pite) (ye wadde)  
 Before joining the group she was stacked and confused due to her child being unwell all the time but after joining the group she was counseled by her fellow members on how to forget and manage her situation.

15 How satisfied are you with the following THRIVEGulu programs? (Name at least one) (ye bebbene ma urani) (ye bebbene? Ma gye adde ma pite) (ye wadde)

Program	Very unsatisfied	Unsatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied	Don't know/not applicable
Literacy			✓		
VSLA training and support				✓	

Comments:

Business skills training and support				✓	
Comments:					
Mental health education and outreach			✓		
Comments:					
Counseling services (individual, family, group)			✓		
Comments:					
Women's empowerment and SGBV activities				✓	
Comments:					

16 How satisfied are you with the following aspects of THRIVEGulu's programs? (Name at least one) (ye bebbene ma urani) (ye bebbene? Ma gye adde ma pite) (ye wadde)

	Very unsatisfied	Unsatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied	Don't know/not applicable
Ease of access to programs				✓	
Support from THRIVEGulu staff				✓	
Overall satisfaction with THRIVEGulu's				✓	

work in your community

Comments:

17 What needs in your community are not currently being met? What gaps in THRIVEGulu's programs are not currently being filled? (Name at least one) (ye bebbene ma urani) (ye bebbene? Ma gye adde ma pite) (ye wadde)  
 They have met all the requirements but to continue with their provision of their activities.

18 What suggestions do you have for how THRIVEGulu can improve its work? (Name at least one) (ye bebbene ma urani) (ye bebbene? Ma gye adde ma pite) (ye wadde)  
 They should continue implementing

Thank you for your time!!