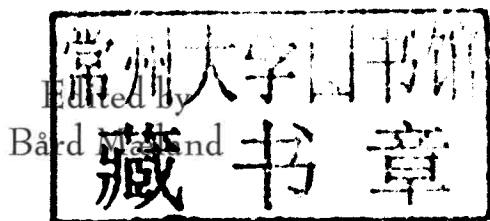


CULTURE, RELIGION, AND
THE REINTEGRATION OF
FEMALE CHILD SOLDIERS
IN NORTHERN UGANDA



EDITED BY
BÅRD MÆLAND

Culture, Religion, and the Reintegration of Female Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda



PETER LANG

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Culture, Religion, and the Reintegration of Female Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda

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Introduction

The reintegration of thousands of young persons and young adults back to the society of northern Uganda, from which they were abducted in order to serve as soldiers for the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in various capacities, represents tremendous practical, social, and cultural challenges. This is not least the case with regard to the return of females, whose background and experience prove particularly challenging for fragmented and fragile communities to handle.

The main aim of this book is to ponder some of the social, cultural, and religious complexities that surround young females who once were part of the Lord's Resistance Army, and who now are right in the midst of their return and reintegration into families and communities in northern Uganda. Situated in a culturally, religiously, and ritually rich environment, understanding this context may strengthen the ongoing reintegration process.

In order to ponder these complexities, this edited volume has recruited researchers from as diverse fields as anthropology, psychology, ethics, religious studies, and theology. Based on papers presented at a conference in Stavanger, Norway, in May 2009, as part of a research project funded by The

Norwegian Programme for Development, Research and Education (NUFU), this book brings scholars from various home turfs together. The overall aim is to examine and discuss major challenges of social, cultural, religious, and moral nature.

To examine the conditions of female youths and young women and mothers, often forced ones, in the midst of this process, is indeed challenging, primarily because of the exacting situation the females themselves face. First, it is challenging because there is not always a family to return to. Family members may have been killed or displaced. The social counterpart of this is that most people have been living in IDP camps, and hence much of civil society has been destroyed. For both reasons, the “reintegration into what?” question becomes a pressing one. Also, sometimes ex-soldiers who return do not necessarily wish to return to their family and community of origin. Secondly, to settle with one or more children, when there is hardly any network or resources to rely on, and when, most often, the father of the children is absent, is in itself a difficult task. Let alone that these women are often exposed to mechanisms of shame and stigma. Lastly, it is indeed challenging for a researcher to justify to do research with vulnerable people who too often have hosted researchers without seeing any significant improvement of their lives. “Why do you come—again?,” and, “When will our situation eventually improve?” have been asked more than once by our informants.

It is our conviction that there is hope for those who have been both victims and co-actors of this lengthy (since 1986) and dreadful chapter of human misery and history; hope that the children may be empowered through respect, education, and cooperation. As humans, we are not merely what we did and were subjected to in the past. We are also what dignity, self-respect, and empowerment may help us become. This is the idea behind making their autonomy an issue throughout a discussion of research ethics as well as their level of autonomy in carrying out their duties within the strict, yet not fully determined, LRA orders and “code of conduct.” This perspective is reflected in the majority of the articles of the book.

In the continuation of this idea, one may also view the resources of religion and culture: They may either prevent reintegration and produce stigmatization, or they may prove powerful in helping young females return to their families, their villages, and communities, and become active, esteemed, and empowered members of the northern Ugandan society.

Perception, politics, and peace

Part I of the book is concerned with some general issues that may be seen as framing the book from rather diverse angles. In short, issues related to the perception of who the child soldiers are, as well as the overall framework of politics and peace are examined.

In a rare kind of article, Milfrid Tonheim reviews the research status on the field of reintegration of former girl soldiers in an African context. Her contribution is based on a vast body of literature (scholarly books and articles; research and evaluation reports; doctoral dissertations; a few Master theses; as well as working papers) and will likely be a future “must read” for people working in this field. Due to the limited literature on girls’ reintegration, she has also taken a side-glance to the challenges of women and boys. Although the area of reintegration of girl soldiers is increasingly researched these days, it “is still in its infancy” (Michael Wessels). As she rightly states, “Until relatively recently, the term child soldier meant in reality a ‘boy soldier’.” Tonheim reviews and identifies areas that have been well covered by research so far, as well areas where more research-based knowledge is needed, as well as additional programming. The areas where she identifies that more research should be directed, is (a) on self-demobilised girl soldiers, who have long been excluded from Demobilization Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes, and (b) on the experiences and prospects of forced mothers and their children. As to the latter, simply put: the particularities of former girl soldiers require a stronger focus on their children, often having been born, and having lived with armed groups for years. According to Tonheim, “Undoubtedly, the needs of forced mothers and their children have been largely neglected by researchers and reintegration programmes alike, maybe especially the needs of the children born in captivity.”

Another topic Tonheim touches, is the issue of terminology and qualitative categories. How should the persons we are writing about, and have been talking to, be denoted? Are they ‘child soldiers,’ which is often used (cf. the Cape Town principles, 1997), but which may be limiting the various positions and experiences children, especially girls, may have had in armed forces or armed groups? Or should the long-winded ‘a child associated with an armed force and armed group’ be used, as recommended in the Paris Principles (2007)? And, what about the age issue when you interview a woman who have been with the LRA for more than ten years? With the particularities of females’ experience, one should consider a variety of other notions as well, such as ‘forced wives’, ‘forced mothers’, ‘girl mother’ and ‘forcibly involved girls’. Yet, this conceptual discussion should primarily

reflect contextual matters. If so, and that is one important message conveyed through our book, stereotypes should be abandoned. The choice many of the articles of the book have employed, however, are versions of 'formerly abducted children/girls'. As for the northern Ugandan situation, this term covers well the actual experiences of the persons (whether children, youths, or adults) many of our researchers have been talking to and are writing about.

Concepts and perceptions are not innocent, they may connect with important issues that are at stake. The article by Tor Arne Berntsen examines the role of child soldiers in the discourse by various political actors in order to end the conflict in northern Uganda. He demonstrates how the child soldier issue has been a discursive site of power struggle between the Government and the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF), on the one hand, and local initiatives to justice and reconciliation, such as the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), on the other. Disparate and contradictory notions were discovered in the discourse analysis. Hence the connection between the overall peace process and the concept and view of formerly abducted children, is a contested one, making the involvement of children in this prolonged conflict a delicate matter. It is Berntsen's contention that analysing such mechanisms may enable us to "acknowledge the complex moral and political reality of children in armed conflicts and thereby gain a deeper understanding of the war itself and develop a framework for effective resolution and peace building."

One of Tonheim's findings is an emphasis on the resilience and coping abilities of children in a context of war and armed conflict, as found in recent research. Again, this pertains to the perception of what a 'child soldier' is, and, accordingly, how the process of reintegration is viewed. According to her, "Scholars and professionals do no longer only view the child as a victim of war but also as a survivor of war and an agent who actively seek to cope with the adversities s/he faces." Departing from this perspective, Bård Mæland is writing about the issue of moral agency among formerly recruited children. Should they be viewed as victims, not to say supervictims, or are they somehow agents, also in moral terms? This contribution connects both to a legal discussion of perpetrator versus victim, and to a theory of decision-making. Mæland's discussion shows how distinctive moral agency, although confined by a number of constraining factors, can be traced in child soldiers narratives from the African continent. It is his contention that this is an important insight to use in how we approach young persons who have been with armed groups for shorter or longer periods, often also having committed the worst forms of atrocities. It may also prove an important resource for the sake of individual reintegration as well as social reconstruction and restoration.

In the last article of this first part of the book, Deus Nkurunziza argues that “child soldiering is a new form of slavery that targets the exploitation of humanity starting with the child,” an “attack on the most ethical foundations of society.” According to him, the intentional and strategic use of children by the Lord’s Resistance Army as well as the Uganda People’s Defence Forces (UPDF) represents a problem that must be tackled by focusing on the root causes of war, such as poverty, insecurity, and bad governance. Also Nkurunziza emphasises the importance and social potential of a successful reintegration of formerly abducted children. They need to be empowered with productive skills to counter the risk of resorting to taking up arms as a means of livelihood and thus contributing to a resurgence of war. Consequently, peace depends directly on an effective reintegration of children once abducted in northern Uganda.

Culture, rituals and stigmatization

Acholiand is a region very rich in traditional rituals. Embedded in a distinctive cosmology, often combined with a Christian or Muslim faith, rituals are for most Acholis seen as a necessary act of healing, purification, crossing of boundaries, returning back to the village, reconciliation, or otherwise bringing the youth and the community in harmony with their ancestors. To understand the acts and the social and cosmological impacts of conducting these rituals may indeed open our eyes to the depths of the reintegration processes that are taking place right now in the northern Uganda. But we also ask: Can culture, tradition, and social norms also make it more difficult for formerly recruited girls to return to their families and villages?

In Part II of the book, issues such as stigmatization and traditional rituals are examined in order to see how culture and religion may prevent or support reintegration. It is our general conviction that the cultural factor is important for the reintegration, both when cultural norms provide productive resources and when they provide obstacles for female youths and forced mothers who wish to return and reintegrate into their families and communities (some do not wish to).

Based on her book, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers* (Cornell University Press 2009), Chris Coulter invites the reader into the diversity—not the generalised picture—of experiences and strategies of abducted women in the postwar society of Sierra Leone. To give but two examples: First, toward the end of the war many abducted girls and women were released, some escaped, and many were abandoned by their bush husbands. Others stayed with their bush husbands and commanders, either out of fear or by choice, or by lack of

choice. Secondly, some were welcomed back to their families and communities while others, in fact the majority, were ostracized and expelled, often based on presumptions and rumors about what happened in the bush. Yet, given the diverse experiences, who were the most successful ones to return? One of Coulter's findings is that former girl soldiers who conformed to traditional norms and expectations increased the chances for being well received and reintegrated into their families and communities. Those who were not 'tamed' and 'domesticated' into the town or village, soon experienced stigmatisation, and, at worst, social death. Paradoxically, some of the survival skills acquired during the time of conflict, such as strength and independence, prevented some of these females from successful reintegration.

Based on extensive fieldwork in northern Uganda, Christine Mbabazi Mpyangu examines the use of traditional rituals, such as stepping on an egg (*nyono tongweno*) upon the return of returnees, or cleansing of the land (*moyo cer*). Her focus is the interconnectedness between Acholi beliefs, practices, and social structure; how the Acholi worldview and beliefs frame the rituals, and how the rituals depend on the clan system in the Acholi culture. She also recognises the role of the family as an integrated part of the the religious, cultural, and social contexts for conducting such rituals that may support the process of reintegration.

In another article based on field studies in northern Uganda, Fiona Shanahan and Angela Veale examine the importance of cultural resources for the social reintegration, complementing an individualistic perspective of resilience and strength of formerly abducted girls and young women. They find that culture is important as to the interpretation of what happened with abducted girls and their original societies during the war, as well as to how culture impacts on communal practices during the reintegration.

One of the cultural issues that Shanahan and Veale identify in their study—stigmatisation—is the single topic for Emeline Ndossi's explorative article on stigmatisation and how churches in northern Uganda may mediate and constructively contribute when stigma are enacted by local communities. She finds that there are a number of causes for stigmatisation, and that the churches have played an important role in counteracting stigma. Yet, as long as difficult issues such as breaking of cultural norms are involved, some of which are clearly oppressive to formerly abducted young mothers, one should not be too optimistic about the prospects of eradicating stigmatisation. In this situation, the churches have a role to play.

Miranda Worthen and her coauthors (Susan McKay; Angela Veale; Michael Wessells) take marginalisation and stigmatisation as a point of departure for their study on how young women and young mothers may be empowered to stand up against the prejudices and less generous reception as

they return. Based on a multi-year participating action research model, they show how a distinctive research methodology may produce a very positive effect throughout the research: that those non-researchers involved may be empowered by experience of care, respect, and self-esteem. This may in turn help them face various obstacles as they return to their families and local communities.

Whereas Worthen et al. have based their article on a human rights framework, Therese Tinkasiimire uses a liberation-theological framework (“woman defined theology”) to counter stigmatisation and to provide empowerment and an inclusive theology for accepting not only females who have taken part in the LRA, but also males and the entire God’s creation. Her perspective is deeply ambiguous. Although she presents narratives that witness the darkest hours a human can go through, she still affirms that women because of their involvement in the war have discovered hidden talents, which they would never have known under normal circumstances. In turn, this may in some instances give them the freedom and the independence to live in their communities without interference, which may ultimately accord them their rightful and God-given dignity.

The force of the Old Testament, and the power of interpretation

Tinkasiimire’s claims remind me of what the theologian Garrett Green says at the very end of his book *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, making a twist of the Marxist dichotomy of interpretation and social change. He says, “that the most powerful way to change the world is precisely by interpreting it” (Green 1989, 152). In the conflict of northern Uganda it is no hidden secret that the interpretation of the world is one that is heavily informed by a rather distinctive interpretation of both it and of the Bible. Promoting the enforcement of the Ten Commandments among the civilian population of the North, the Lord’s Resistance Army has terrified local people as well as the international society. Hence, the religious dimension of the indoctrination, as well as the life within the LRA, needs to be taken seriously in order to prepare the reception and reintegration of youths who participated with and have been exposed to such a religious community. In Part III of this book, the reading of religious text such as the Old Testament texts, has been subjected to exegetical and hermeneutical examination. Based on the difference between modern Biblical scholarship and the “LRA way” of reading the Old Testament, is there such a thing as a correct way of reading the Bible?

Helen Nkabala Nambalirwa shows in her article in an exemplary way how such a task needs to be twofold: First, the religious discourse of LRA