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Marriage in Conflict: Formerly Abducted Women's Struggles with Marriage Upon Return

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Marriage in Conflict:
Formerly Abducted Women's Struggles with Marriage Upon Return



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A Case Study of the Acholi in Gulu, Northern Uganda

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“Formerly abducted women, I can assure you, are not welcomed in society”

– Interview, Gulu University Assistant Lecturer

11 November 2009

Abstract

With the end of the twenty-year war in Northern Uganda, the area has begun the long process of rehabilitating, rebuilding, and reintegrating. For women who have now returned from abduction and forced marriage, reintegration has proven difficult, specifically in regards to these women's desires to marry upon return. The experiences of these formerly abducted women in the bush as well as the conflict-induced changes to traditional marriage often limits their ability to remarry and thus prevents them from fully regaining their place in Acholi society. Ultimately, this study sought to examine these difficulties by looking at the societal norms for marriage, how these may have changed in the midst of the conflict, and how these changes, as well as these women's histories in captivity, have now affected their marriage options.

Research was conducted in Gulu for 5 weeks in order to study this aspect of post-conflict reintegration. Gulu town was chosen as the researcher's focus because hundreds of women have returned here from the bush during the past 3 years. Also, the many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other organizations in the area provided the researcher with background information about this issue in addition to formerly abducted women's testimonies. In order to gather the necessary information, the researcher relied on semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the affected women as well as a focus group of the counselors who work with this wounded portion of the population.

This study concludes that unmarried women who had been abducted receive diminished respect and are kept on the outskirts of Acholi society. Their horrific experiences and forced marriage combined with the post-conflict changes to the institution of marriage now make it significantly more difficult for this group of vulnerable people to join in marriage and form traditional families. As a result, they often cannot fully reintegrate back into society, and are thus limited in their options for development.

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Acronyms

GUSCO – Gulu Support the Children Organization
GWED-G – Gulu Women’s Economic Development-Globalization
IDP – Internally Displaced Person
KKA – Kerkwaro Acholi (Acholi Cultural Organization)
LAPEWA – Laroo Peace Women’s Association
LRA – Lord’s Resistance Army
NGO – Non-Governmental Organization
NRM – National Resistance Movement
UNLA – Ugandan National Liberation Army
UPDF – Uganda People’s Defense Force
YEP – Youth Education Pack

Introduction

The roots of the conflict in Northern Uganda can be traced to the establishment of the National Resistance Movement's (NRM) hold on national power in Uganda in 1986. At this point, the Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA), Uganda's primary fighting force after the overthrow of Idi Amin in 1979, had fled to Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan after experiencing defeat by the NRM.¹ The UNLA, comprised mostly of Acholi, had aimed to restore Milton Obote, a man of an ethnic group similar to the Acholi, to the presidency. Obviously, the NRM intended to install its own candidate, Yoweri Museveni, and when this was accomplished, members of the UNLA fled north, where they hoped to regroup and again try to take over the country. When the force failed to recover, Alice Auma Lakwena established a religious campaign to overthrow the government.² By 1987 her movement had been quashed, and her cousin, Joseph Kony resumed her place, forming the Lord's Salvation Army, later renamed the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).³ This force terrorized Northern Uganda for over 20 years in the name of God and of overthrowing Museveni's government.

The LRA is estimated to have abducted 60,000 children and youths since its inception in 2006; these numbers reduce to one in three male adolescents and one in six female adolescents in Northern Uganda.⁴ A significant number of these adolescents come from the Acholi ethnic group, one of the largest in Northern Uganda and largely located in Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader Districts.⁵ Ultimately, LRA fighters abducted these children and youths in order to facilitate the troops necessary to wage a war against the well-

¹ Kevin Ward, "The Armies of the Lord: Christianity, Rebels, and the State in Northern Uganda 1986-1999", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 31, Fasc. 2, (2001). JSTOR, www.jstor.org. p. 192

² Ibid

³ Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay, "Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique: Policy and Program Recommendations", (2003). CIDA's Child Protection Research Fund p. 5

⁴ Khristopher Carlson and Dyan Mazurana, "Forced Marriage Within the Lord's Resistance Army, Uganda", (2008). Tufts University p. 4

⁵ Khristopher Carlson and Dyan Mazurana, "Forced Marriage Within the Lord's Resistance Army, Uganda", (2008). Tufts University p. 16

equipped standing army of Uganda, the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF).⁶ While all of these adolescents, whether male or female, are likely subjected to fighting, female abductees often experience a unique form of oppression—forced marriage to an LRA rebel. According to a recent approximation, a quarter of LRA abducted females have experienced this violation.⁷ In short, “The presence of forced wives in the LRA served to bolster fighter morale, and support the systems which perpetuate cycles of raiding, looting, killing, and abduction.”⁸ In these forced marriages, female abductees must function as a wife to a member of the LRA, cooking, cleaning, bearing children, and providing sexually, while not actually taking part in a recognized marriage.

With the relative peace in Northern Uganda a significant number of abducted women have now returned home to what is left of their families and previous lives. Many of these women are back in their original communities coping with the aspects of life they were forced to leave when abducted. Naturally, their experiences in the bush often complicate their prospects for marriage. However, many have pursued new marriages, with varying levels of success. Further, many aspects of the institution of marriage have changed as a result of the conflict; adding another layer of issues to couples trying to rebuild their lives

Objectives

This study sought to ascertain the realities of marriage for formerly abducted women who have now returned home. However, in order to understand the situation in which these women now find themselves, clarification of the history of marriage in Acholi culture and the changes the institution experienced due to the conflict was first necessary. Therefore, the researcher sought to:

- Examine the practices and values involved with traditional marriage in Acholi culture

⁶Jeannie Annan, Christopher Blattman, Khristopher Carlson, Dyan Mazurana, “The State of Female Youth in Northern Uganda”, (2008). Survey of War Affected Youth, www.sway-uganda.org p. 16

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Khristopher Carlson and Dyan Mazurana, “Forced Marriage Within the Lord’s Resistance Army, Uganda”, (2008). Tufts University p. 4

- Determine how these traditional practices and values have changed as a result of the conflict
- Discern how these changes to marriage and these women's experiences in captivity have specifically affected formerly abducted women's options for marriage upon their return.

Justification

Like most social issues, marriage can never be expected to remain constant and unchanged—it is an inherently dynamic structure that transforms with time and events. Unfortunately for the Acholi, it so happens that the time and event associated with the recent changes to marriage is an extended conflict. Now, the culture must attempt to either move forward with the changes the institution has experienced, embracing them, or attempt to revert back to the old ways.

In the midst of this confusion, formerly abducted women have encountered these changes with their own unique struggles in their recent past. These factors further complicate the already difficult path to marriage for them. Now, based on the cultural importance of marriage, this particular group of women must struggle even harder to regain their deserved positions within Acholi society as married women.

To the Acholi, marriage represents a primary source of respect, especially for women, who, if unmarried, experience a high level of social immobility. This remains constant despite the ravaging effects of the conflict in Northern Uganda. However, the idea of traditional marriage has not fully escaped the effects of the war. The conflict has been the only way of life for many Northern Ugandans—due to the fact that the war spanned for over 20 years, most of the people now of marrying age have lived most of their lives without peace. Now, these individuals are facing the issues of adult life with a new outlook having spent time in IDP (Internally Displaced Person) camps, war zones, and captivity with the LRA. The culture as a whole sees marriage in a new way in light of these influences—therefore, the average marriage for a typical couple is not what it would have been 20 years ago. The conflict caused these changes to marriage and they have left a lasting impression on Acholi culture.

One of the unique subgroups within the recently returned individuals are women who were forced into marriages with members of the LRA during their time in the bush. Many of these women were young girls at the time of their abduction and subsequent marriages and are now women returning home with the life expectations they once held before their abduction. However, the difficulties of these women's experiences and the changes to culture that occurred during the time of the conflict and their abduction have made some aspects of life—like remarriage—difficult. As a result, these women are experiencing different degrees of social exclusion which limits their abilities to remarry. In effect, they have been socially rejected and prevented from functioning as productive members of Acholi society.

Ultimately, marriage is highly valued in Acholi culture but is coincidentally neglected as a development issue despite the fact that marriage is the most important social institution for women and children in Acholi society. For many of these women, life without marriage means life without respect and social security. Without these entities, women cannot pull themselves out of the abject poverty to which they often return. Therefore, a study of their difficulties in reintegrating into this aspect of Acholi life proves an important development issue for this particular group of vulnerable people.

Methodology

The researcher chose the location of Gulu town based on the fact that the town itself and the surrounding areas received high numbers of formerly abducted individuals in the time since the peace agreement in 2006.⁹ Therefore, the area provided accessibility to a large number of formerly abducted women. In addition, Gulu served as a major center for the rehabilitation of these individuals, so a number of NGOs and other organizations are located in the area. These organizations employ a significant number of development practitioners and professionals involved with the rehabilitation and reintegration of these women. Finally, Gulu also houses Gulu University, in which many academics and scholars have located in recent years.

Based on the fact that marriage is such a cultural and personal issue, the researcher determined that a wide range of interviews must be conducted in order to fully

⁹ Staff Member; GWED-G, interview, GWED-G Office, 21 October 2009

understand the current situation. Therefore, the researcher sought out 4 different types of individuals for interview—academics, development practitioners specifically involved with formerly abducted women, cultural leaders, and formerly abducted women themselves. The researcher talked to such a wide range of people to ensure that all facts were verified by at least three different people from the different groups. The researcher approached the topic in this manner so as to clarify any biases that may result from one specific group.

Organization of Interviewees

The researcher utilized the snowball method to obtain individuals to interview. At the completion of each interview, the researcher asked the individual for suggestions of other organizations or individuals to pursue for further information. Most interviewees provided at least one additional contact. However, the researcher did not ask the formerly abducted women for suggestions of other formerly abducted women. The interviews with these formerly abducted women were arranged through organizations that had provided previous interviews with particular members.

In order to interact with formerly abducted women, the researcher relied on four specific organizations to organize groups of women to interview. Gulu Women's Economic Development-Globalization (GWED-G) organized two field visits to Unyama Trading Center to interview 17 women involved with the organization's counseling program. Two additional women were interviewed through the resources of Youth Education Pack (YEP). The researcher also traveled to the field with a group from Caritas which provided the opportunity to observe the work being done as well as interview four formerly abducted women in the community. Empowering Hands also organized four women involved with the organization for interview. Finally, members of Laroo Peace Women's Association (LAPEWA) organized the chance for the researcher to conduct a focus group with nine of their counselors during a regularly scheduled meeting.

In situations where translation was required, members of the organization who arranged the women for interview provided this service. However, for the interviews at YEP, an individual associated with another organization offered to provide this service. Because of this factor of translation, any quotes directly from the formerly abducted

women themselves were indicated through a translator; therefore, the pronouns were changed accordingly to reflect the actual originator of the quote.

Relevance of Interviewees

All 28 of the women spoken to experienced abduction. In total, 19 were married during their time in the bush; 18 had children from those marriages. Eight were not married based on the fact that they escaped as a marriage was being planned, were too young to be married during their time of abduction, or were in the bush for too little time to be married. Finally, one woman had been a soldier and not forced to marry a member of the LRA.

These different types of women were interviewed to establish trends amongst the groups. These trends will be discussed and clarified in the findings section of the study. All other interviewees were chosen based on research they had completed or general knowledge of formerly abducted women or traditional aspects of Acholi marriage before and after the war, or based on their current professional involvement with formerly abducted women.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The researcher relied almost exclusively on semi-structured interviews to obtain the desired information. For these interviews the researcher prepared a list of questions beforehand and began the interview with a few of them. However, once the interviewee began speaking freely, the researcher followed the natural flow of the interview asking questions that related to previous statements made by the interviewee. Toward the conclusion of the study's duration, the researcher often prepared more a more rigid list of questions to verify previously discovered pieces information, but the researcher still primarily relied on the natural flow of the interview to determine the conversation.

Focus Groups

The researcher conducted one focus group with nine counselors from LAPEWA. These individuals are members of the communities in which formerly abducted women live. However, they receive specific training from the organization to counsel these women in a peer-like setting. Thus, these women know the difficulties formerly abducted women face in regards to marriage. The researcher prepared a list of questions, but as in the semi-structured interviews, followed the general flow of conversation as the focus group progressed.

Research Findings and Analysis

Ultimately, the researcher sought to determine the realities of marriage for formerly abducted women upon their return home. In order to accomplish this goal, the researcher first approached the topic of traditional marriage to determine the norms of the institution. In light of the lasting-conflict, the researcher also examined the changes to the institution of marriage as a result of the war. Now that abducted women have returned to find this altered approach to marriage, the researcher ultimately sought to determine how these changes compounded with their time in captivity have affected formerly abducted women's abilities to get married.

Therefore, the first section of the findings and analysis will discuss the typical practices and values of traditional Acholi marriage. These include explanation of the marriage as the institution, as tradition, and the significance of dowry. The second section will detail the forces of change in regards to marriage including the breakdown of the clan, death rates, poverty, commercialization of dowry, and individualism. This section will also explain the phenomenon of forced marriage within the LRA. The third section will explain the motivations of formerly abducted women to pursue marriage upon return; these include a desire for social security, children from forced marriages, economic difficulties of living alone, and self-esteem issues. The final section will clarify the challenges of formerly abducted women in their attempts to remarry—stigma, cleansing, and children from forced marriages. In addition, this section includes an analysis of many of these women's marriage realities.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with all of the individuals included in this study. To determine traditional ideas of marriage and how they have changed with the onset of the conflict, the researcher relied primarily on interviews with cultural leaders and academics of Acholi culture. The researcher turned to development workers specifically involved with formerly abducted women as well as academics associated with the topic to determine the marriage options for formerly abducted women. However, the researcher relied primarily on interviews with formerly abducted women to determine their marriage situations.

Traditional Marriage

The Institution

For the Acholi, marriage represents the most basic institution of culture and life in general. Acholi view marriage as the necessary union through which children are created—the ultimate goal of marriage lies in having children. In short, “Marriage is seen as a way of extending culture and traditions through the next generation.”¹⁰ In order for Acholi culture to continue, traditional Acholi families must continue to have children.

In fact, procreation from within the institution of marriage is so important that the Acholi consider barrenness and impotency curses. Individuals with such conditions take significant measures to correct them. If a woman proves unable to produce a child, the husband is entitled to take a second wife and often will—a higher number of wives, and a resulting higher number of children, symbolize wealth. Thus, even if the first wife produces children, men sometimes choose to marry multiple women in order to prove their ability to support a large family.¹¹

The institution of marriage also provides that each family will produce children in a stable environment. When a woman marries a man, she becomes a member of his clan, as do the children produced from the union.¹² When a woman gives birth to a child out of wedlock, the child still ultimately belongs to the father’s clan whether he is a presence in that child’s life or not—the mother, however, cannot claim membership in that particular

¹⁰ Assistant Lecturer; Gulu University, Interview, Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies, 11 November 2009

¹¹ Author of Acholi Culture, Interview, Florida Hotel, 30 October 2009

¹² Senior Official; GWED-G, Interview, GWED-G Office, 23 October 2009

clan. Therefore, at any time the father may reclaim his child from the mother and bring the child back to his clan. The tradition of marriage ensures this child's place in the clan as well as the mother's. The official union of a couple ascertains that the family will remain together as a solidified structure.¹³

Specifically for women, the institution of marriage represents a form of social security that can only be gained from such a union. When a woman partners with a man, she is seen as part of her husband's clan and participates in decision-making. A married woman holds specific responsibilities within the clan. First, the married women of the clan make preparations for new births in the clan. These preparations include the birth itself and for the rituals performed after the birth of a child. Secondly, married women voice their opinions about the propriety of possible marriages within the clan. Specifically for the sons of the clan, married women evaluate the women these men choose for themselves. If the married women disapprove, there is little chance of the marriage occurring. Finally, the married women of clan must handle the preparations for and management of funerals. When an individual dies within the clan, the married women of clan prepare the body for burial, organize food for host guests, and even lead in songs of bereavement and other rituals.¹⁴

Additionally, married women possess rights not granted to unmarried women in the clan. In Acholi culture, women cannot hold land based on the fact that when a woman gets married, her land would move with her to the new clan.¹⁵ This land would no longer exist in the collective property of the female's clan; it would belong then to her husband's clan. Marriage, however, ensures that women can access land for farming. Also, in the event of a husband's death, marriage ensures that the deceased's wife can hold his land in trust for the male children of the family. When those male children become adults, the land transfers to their control. For the remainder of their childhood, however, their mother technically owns the land. If the two were unmarried, however, this woman

¹³ Author of Acholi Culture, Interview, Florida Hotel, 30 October 2009

¹⁴ Assistant Lecturer; Gulu University, Interview, Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies, 11 November 2009

¹⁵ Senior Official; GWED-G, Interview, GWED-G Office, 23 October 2009

would possess no right to the land; at the death of the man, the land would be removed from her care.¹⁶

Furthermore, if a woman's husband dies and they are technically married, she receives justified custody of her children. When a couple marries, the woman and the resulting children are considered members of the man's clan. However, when a couple chooses to remain unmarried, only the children are considered members of the man's clan. Therefore, when the man dies, the children can be taken by his clan rather than allowed to stay with their mother. She does not belong to the clan and therefore possess no right to her children who do.¹⁷

Ultimately, a married woman receives respect from those surrounding her, whereas a woman living alone receives little respect. With this respect she gains social mobility and the freedom to function as a member of society. As an unmarried woman, this mobility is significantly limited. To achieve this ability, women often seek to get married.

The Institution as Tradition

In the most traditional approach to marriage, a young man can determine a potential spouse during traditional courtship dances, at the market, during public meetings, or at the places where water and firewood are gathered. However, clans often select "good matches" for its single members.¹⁸ The importance lies in the subsequent involvement of both clans after the couple meets. Traditional protocol requires that once a man identifies the woman he wishes to marry, he must tell one of his aunties about the woman. She then encourages him to bring the potential spouse home to meet the clan and his individual family. This marks the beginning of the "probation period" during which the woman stays with the man's family for 2 to 4 weeks. Family members make their judgments about the woman during this period—they observe her eating habits, work ethics, politeness, and general mannerisms.¹⁹

¹⁶ Author of Acholi Culture, Interview, Florida Hotel, 30 October 2009

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Social Worker; LAPEWA, Interview, Abola Lapok Hotel, 23 October 2009

¹⁹ Author of Acholi Culture, Interview, Florida Hotel, 30 October 2009

This probation also marks a point at which the man's clan investigates the woman's clan to ensure that she has been raised in a stable and positive environment.²⁰ Often, this involves visiting the home of the woman to witness the welfare of the families—how many cows, goats, graineries are owned.²¹ Also, this investigation can go so far as to conclude what kind of diseases the family may possess and what kind of criminal record they might carry.²²

At the conclusion of the probation period, members from the potential wife's clan will convene at the man's home. When they arrive, they will be asked about the purpose of their visit. The delegation will explain that a member of their clan currently resides with that particular family at which point they will be paid a fee to enter the home and take a meal. Then, the negotiations for the marriage begin; if both parties agree that their children should be married a date is set.²³

Afterwards, the potential husband's clan makes the final decision about the marriage. If the clan decides yes, a delegation is sent to the woman's family, bringing the woman herself, an elopement fee, and a portion of the dowry, which is compiled by members of the man's clan. On this particular day, the couple participates in the marriage ceremony. One of the most important aspects of a traditional wedding ceremony rests in the assurance that both individuals truly consent to the marriage. At the beginning of the ceremony, the bride and the groom are asked if they truly wish to marry the other person. If both answer yes, the ceremony can proceed.²⁴

A majority of the ceremony consists of the negotiation of the dowry. On the day of the ceremony, the man's family brings a general amount of gifts for the dowry, however the negotiations can allow for additional requests from the woman's clan. If her clan desires more items, they can be brought at a later date. This dowry does not function as the purchasing of the woman; rather, traditionally it stands as a token of thanks to the woman's family for raising her as a successful member of society. Traditionally, the

²⁰ Social Worker; LAPEWA, Interview, Abola Lapok Hotel, 23 October 2009

²¹ Former Senior Official; Caritas, Interview, Catechist Training Center, 4 November 2009

²² Senior Official; YEP, Interview, YEP Office, 26 October 2009

²³ Author of Acholi Culture, Interview, Florida Hotel, 30 October 2009

²⁴ Minister; KKA, Interview, Residence, 3 November 2009

man's clan collectively assembles the components of the dowry in order to ensure that the clan will not die out. Dowry can include livestock like goats, chickens, and sheep and other items like clothes, soap, and foodstuffs—however, all dowries must include cattle based on the fact that they symbolize wealth to the Acholi. These commodities are traditionally determined during the wedding ceremony itself, at which point representatives from both clans discuss the desires of each. When these negotiations are completed, the two are officially married.²⁵

The Dowry Issue

A standard, minimum dowry of one bull and one heifer was in place in Acholiland until 1986 with the onset of the Northern conflict; at this point a number of different groups raided the Acholi's herds of cattle.²⁶ First, the newly formed LRA was dependent on cattle to feed its soldiers. Initially, some individuals supported the forces with donations of cattle with the understanding that once the LRA overthrew the standing government that they would be compensated. This same pattern occurred with the formation of the UNLA, the force that supported the overthrown president, Milton Obote. Many families donated cattle to this cause in hopes of one day receiving compensation for their support. When the Acholi became disenchanted with these promises and stopped donating to the causes, the two forces began to raid the remaining cattle.²⁷

The NRM viewed the raiding of cattle in the north as a military strategy. As a result, the UPDF began to raid cattle as well. Those in charge saw these raids as a method in which to demobilize the LRA and other rebel forces through removing a main source of food. Additionally, the Karamojong took advantage of the conflict and also raided the remaining cattle. This particular ethnic group, located in Eastern Uganda, believes that all the world's cattle belongs to their tribe and therefore seeks out these animals in raids of neighboring regions. The conflict in the North provided an opportune moment for the tribe to regain some of the cattle believed to be theirs in the first place.²⁸

²⁵ Senior Official; YEP, Interview, YEP Office, 26 October 2009

²⁶ Senior Official; YEP, Interview, YEP Office, 26 October 2009

²⁷ Tutor; Gulu Core Primary Teachers' College, Interview, Sacred Heart School, 16 November 2009

²⁸ Ibid

These raids were devastating in multiple ways. First, the Acholi base ideas of wealth on the number of cattle owned. The removal of these herds threw almost the entirety of the Acholi ethnic group into extreme poverty in that the Acholi depends on cattle as food but also as the means through which they plow their fields.²⁹ The raids of these groups paralyzed many Acholis' ability to provide for themselves and their clan. Finally, this extremely limited access to cattle disrupted the traditions of Acholi marriage in that cattle constitute the most crucial aspect of dowry. As a result, the tradition of dowry was greatly affected and continues to feel these effects today.

Marriage In Conflict

War Changes Things

The conflict has disrupted many aspects of life for the Acholi, especially important features of culture. As previously mentioned, the institution of marriage experienced significant blows as a result of the conflict. While appreciation for the traditional ways in which people marry still exists amidst the Acholi, the conflict has limited the possibility for fully traditional marriages to occur.

The single most destructive influence on the institution of traditional marriage can be attributed to the breakdown of the clan. This crucial aspect of Acholi culture coincidentally stands as possibly one of the most war-damaged structures. "The actions of the rebels have harmed the basic idea of the clan. Now it is less of a sovereign structure because the rebels could come in at any time and do whatever they wanted to whomever they wanted."³⁰ Traditionally, clans represent the main decision-making bodies as well as a source of identity for its members. Additionally, as previously mentioned, the clan plays a crucial role in the selection of marriage partners and the collection of dowry. While other complications from the conflict have affected marriage, the weakening of this most important social unit has remained at the foundation of changes to marriage norms.

²⁹ Social Worker, Interview, African Center for Torture Victims Office, 23 November 2009

³⁰ Lecturer of Acholi Culture, Interview, Sir Samuel Baker School, 3 November 2009

There are 4 common factors that have affected the institution of Acholi marriage in relation to the Northern conflict—all relate to the weakening of the clan as a major factor. These include the high death rates and high levels of poverty due to the conflict, the commercialization of marriage, and the influence of individualism. In effect, all of these factors closely relate and often have exacerbated one another to some degree. As a result, all 4 factors must be considered when examining each one individually.

The Breakdown of the Clan

Before the war, the clan and its member families played crucial roles in the establishment of new marriages. During the conflict, the structures were disrupted specifically through the scattering of individuals to IDP camps, other parts of the country, and even abroad. Similarly, high death rates from the conflict results in fewer members for each clan. With fewer members of a clan in a consolidated area, its members can make less input available.³¹ The weakened state of the clan leads to more independence when couples begin making marriage choices.³² In the past, the clan could easily veto a clan member's a choice, but the disorientating effect of the conflict has led to disorganization of remaining members. Members of the clan often become preoccupied with taking care of their own individual families and less concerned about the clan in general.³³ Thus, fewer clan members contribute their input when individuals want to marry.

Death Rates

The high numbers of individuals killed in the conflict has affected practically every aspect of life for the Acholi. Overall, the population is significantly less than before the conflict—an obvious effect of a war. However, the quantity of women of marrying age currently out-numbers the quantity of men of a similar age.³⁴ This fact can be

³¹ Social Worker, Interview, African Center for Torture Victims Office, 23 November 2009

³² Former Senior Official; Caritas, Interview, Catechist Training Center, 4 November 2009

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Senior Official; YEP, Interview, YEP Office, 26 October 2009

attributed to the fact that men involved in the conflict were more likely to be engaged in actual combat and therefore more likely to be killed. Additionally, because of this same reason, fewer men return from the bush after abduction. Abducted women, however, are more likely to return back to their original communities through escape, rescue, or release. Specifically in regards to consented release, LRA leaders and even husbands themselves would often allow abducted women to return home for their safety and that of their children who were produced in the bush. Men, however, are less likely to be given such liberations in that they are responsible for fighting. Thus, higher numbers of female returnees than male returnees further contribute to the high number of females. Ultimately, this disparity in numbers leads to a higher competitiveness in marriage, especially for formerly abducted women who are often stigmatized.³⁵

Another effect of the disproportion of men and women can be seen in the numbers of women completing higher than average education. When a woman reaches the appropriate age of marriage but no men are available to marry, parents often will send that child to higher levels of education.³⁶ In effect, this higher education often correlates to a higher demanded dowry because parents wish to recover the money spent on the education.³⁷

Basically, the conflict has resulted in fewer clan members in most clans, which has led to less cohesion in clan decisions. Additionally, the role of clans in the consolidation of dowry from the clan's resources is now an issue. The average clan as a whole possesses fewer assets than before the conflict in addition to the fact that the clan members are no longer always located near one another. Where in the past the clan provided for dowry, now individual families and even individual couples are responsible for the payments. This has significantly limited the abilities of couples to marry one another officially, so they often end up cohabiting with one another.

³⁵ Social Worker; Caritas, Interview, Caritas Office, 13 November 2009

³⁶ Senior Official; YEP, Interview, YEP Office, 26 October 2009

³⁷ Former Senior Official; Caritas, Interview, Catechist Training Center, 4 November 2009

The Poverty Factor

Currently, issues of poverty caused by the conflict play directly into the marriage decisions made. Acholi are likely to make marriage decisions now based on their potential spouses' ability to pay a dowry or support a family. The conflict disrupted the tradition of compatibility and instead has forced individuals to consider socioeconomic conditions first.

This poverty originated as in most war-torn situations, through the physical destruction of homes and property. Specifically, however, the conflict also eliminated the most important sign of wealth to the Acholi—cattle. With the onset of the conflict in 1986, a number of different groups raided the Acholi's herds of cattle causing widespread poverty. As previously mentioned, these raids devastated the Acholi in a number of ways.

First, the Acholi value cattle as the main sign of a clan's wealth. The removal of these herds threw almost the entirety of the Acholi ethnic group into extreme poverty in that the Acholi depend on cattle as food and as the means through which they plow their fields.³⁸ Now, the use of simple hoes provides the main option for plowing, thus limiting the amount of tilled land physically possible. Many families can no longer grow enough crops to sell—only enough to feed their families and sometimes not even to that degree. Also, the limited access to cattle also disrupted the traditions of Acholi marriage in that cattle constitute the most crucial aspect of dowry. As a result, clans could rarely compile the necessary cattle to pay for dowries. Cohabitation became a main solution to this problem, despite the fact that Acholi values prohibit such an arrangement.

Additionally, the high death rates play significantly into the problem of poverty. Individuals who find themselves without family members from which to draw economic support are likely to marry someone based on that person's ability to support them. Further, the fact that those parents and often, other members of the clan are not available to assist the child in the decision of who to marry contributes to their choice based on money rather than compatibility. However, even if parents are still alive, they often

³⁸ Social Worker, Interview, African Center for Torture Victims Office, 23 November 2009

choose a spouse for their child based on that person's ability to provide for their child rather than on the pair's compatibility.³⁹

Commercialization of Dowry

This factor of poverty has also driven a shift in the approach to dowry. This idea in marriage is becoming highly commercialized in that when a female is pledged to be married to a man, her family is likely to prepare an extensive list of items desired for dowry. These lists are driven by the presence of poverty and the desire to draw out of it somewhat through the marriage. This has driven the idea of dowry from a token of appreciation to an economic gain. Thus, individuals involved with the marriage arrangements are likely to err towards a profitable union rather than a traditionally appropriate one. As a result, this economic factor drives up the standards for all dowries across all socioeconomic levels. High prices have become the norm.⁴⁰

These higher standards end up helping no one in reality. The families seeking to benefit from these high dowries end up limiting their child's options for partners. Additionally, all families have experienced the economic damage of the conflict, so those responsible for paying for the dowries are strained as well. Additionally, the higher prices have encouraged a culture of viewing wives as items to be bought rather than partners in a relationship. Domestic violence is higher than ever before because men have an opinion of their wives that, "I've paid so much for you that you have become a thing."⁴¹

Higher standards of dowry have also driven up the numbers of couples living in cohabitation rather than actual marriage.⁴² This idea of cohabitation basically disregards the traditional idea of marriage as a sign of respect to one's parents.⁴³ Additionally, cohabitation shows no sign of appreciation to the woman's family because no dowry is paid. Now, more than ever, couples opt to live together in a marriage-like situation, but

³⁹ Social Worker; LAPEWA, Interview, Abola Lapok Hotel, 23 October 2009

⁴⁰ Former Senior Official; Caritas, Interview, Catechist Training Center, 4 November 2009

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Senior Official; YEP, Interview, YEP Office, 26 October 2009

⁴³ Social Worker, Interview, African Center for Torture Victims Office, 23 November 2009

without the legality of the institution. However, Acholi typically disregard this situation as appropriate based on the cultural values of marriage.

Individualism

The scattering of and deaths of clan members has also affected the general outlook of the Acholi on social issues. Indirectly, the conflict has fostered a new culture of individualism as a further result of the weakening of the clan. Basically, as mentioned before, so many members of clans were killed by the conflict, which weakened the clan's ability to intervene in usual decisions. During the conflict, people were scattered everywhere, so re-establishment of the clan's influence while in a camp was difficult. As a result, more people began to rely less on the clan and more on themselves.⁴⁴

This new attitude can also partly be attributed to the politics of the IDP camps. While the United Nation's World Food Program provided members of IDP camps with foodstuffs, these supplies rarely provided adequate amounts for the families confined to the camp. This constant state of want led individuals to shift their focus from the clan and the group as a whole to their own specific nuclear families. Whereas before members of a clan thought of themselves as participants in a collective group, people in the camps began to identify themselves with their nuclear families. Rather than worry about the clan, people began to only worry about the provisions for their own, small family. As a result, families stopped relying on the clan for a number of decisions, including marriage.⁴⁵

Forced Marriage

The nature of the LRA and the ideologies associated with the force has significantly disrupted perceptions of traditional marriage. The LRA specifically utilized methods of abduction in order to facilitate the fighting forces necessary. However, many of these abducted individuals were women who were forced to marry other members of

⁴⁴ Former Senior Official; Caritas, Interview, Catechist Training Center, 4 November 2009

⁴⁵ Ibid

the LRA in order to produce children and eventually propagate the ideologies of the LRA.

Forced marriages inherently conflict with the idea of traditional Acholi marriage in that traditional marriage specifically requires both parties to fully agree to the union. In a forced marriage, women are often subjected to random selection by one of a number of men. This person can choose a particular woman from whatever criteria he deems important, whether it be age, height, weight, intelligence, or any other factor. At other times the selection occurs completely randomly. One formerly abducted woman explained, “The men each took off their shirts and threw them in a pile. Then all of us women were told to go up to the pile and select a shirt. The owner of the shirt was your new husband”⁴⁶

Additionally, all of the women interviewed, if forcibly married, explained the circumstances that surrounded a woman’s refusal. If a woman chose to refuse a husband, they were subjected to a number of punishments—rape, beatings, and even death. Many of the women explained that they felt express fear of being killed had they chosen to refuse their husband. One woman explained, “I had to accept the conditions or they would kill me.”⁴⁷ Therefore, few women in reality choose to reject forced marriages.

Furthermore, forced marriage violates Acholi values in that the parents of both individuals in a forced marriage are not involved in the selection process. No approval is sought from either family for the children to marry. Consequently, the man pays no form of dowry for the union—another violation of Acholi tradition.⁴⁸ Therefore the idea of a forced marriage is not recognized by Acholi culture; according to the traditional definition of marriage, the members of a forced marriage are not technically married. Further proving this fact, no formal divorce process exists for the members of the supposed marriage upon return.⁴⁹ If one or both partners return from captivity, they do not need to pursue a divorce from the other in order to marry a different person.

⁴⁶ Formerly Abducted Woman 3, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 27 October 2009

⁴⁷ Formerly Abducted Woman 4, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 27 October 2009

⁴⁸ LAPEWA, Focus Group Discussion, 9 November 2009

⁴⁹ Senior Official; Empowering Hands, Interview, Empowering Hands Office, 11 November 2009

The women themselves obviously feel negatively towards these forced marriages for similar reasons. Every single woman spoke of her discontentment with the forced factor of her marriage in the bush. Each one explained that she had been given to a man; the women possessed no say in the matter. Some women expressed the fact that the marriages meant nothing in reality, that the time spent with these men was essentially wasted. One formerly abducted woman explained, “When you come back from the bush the marriage is over—you gain nothing from it”.⁵⁰

The fact that forced marriages are not technically marriages causes complications in a few different ways. First, it conflicts with a generally accepted belief that the father of one’s children is in effect one’s husband as well. If children result from forced marriages, then those who produced those children are effectively married according to general Acholi belief. As explained by an academic of Acholi culture, “There’s an Acholi saying that ‘Once you’re pregnant take your pregnancy to someone who is responsible for it’”.⁵¹ In any situation, children born to a couple belong to the father’s clan, whether the parents of the child are married or not. Therefore, in order for those children to possess some kind of identity they must associate with the father. In effect, women are tied to the father of their children in a somewhat socially binding situation.

Because of this, some members of the Acholi community believe that when women return from captivity they should seek out their husband from the bush as soon as possible. In this same opinion, these women should wait for the man and should only consider another partner if their husbands from the bush die. While this opinion is not such a publicly stated one, there is “silent talk” within the community and a general acceptance that women should continue the union they began in the bush.⁵² This pressure often stems from women’s mothers who see this continuation of marriage as a pragmatic solution to the complications of these women attempting to remarry.⁵³ Thus, in some

⁵⁰ Formerly Abducted Woman 6, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 27 October 2009

⁵¹ Assistant Lecturer; Gulu University, Interview, Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies, 11 November 2009

⁵² Social Worker; Caritas, Interview, Caritas Office, 13 November 2009

⁵³ Ibid

instances, despite the fact that these marriages are not legitimate, the community allows them to continue for the sake of simplicity.⁵⁴

Current Marriage Realities

Motivations to Marry Upon Return

Ultimately, the existence of forced marriages skews many of these women's ideas of what a marriage should constitute. Having been forced into a partnership with someone not of their choosing, many women understandably experience difficult forced marriages. Every one of the women, except for two, expressed that the partner forced on them was not someone they wanted to remain with.⁵⁵ A majority of the women explained that throughout the duration of the forced marriage, they hoped that when they returned they would marry someone of their own choosing. Despite the destructive experience of a forced marriage, many still hope for the marriages they always expected for themselves.

When formerly abducted women return to their original communities a number of factors contribute to their willingness to remarry. The trauma of their experiences of the bush sometimes encourages these women to wait before marrying again in order to allow for a longer recovery period. Almost all of the women interviewed expressed this desire to wait when they returned home. However, almost every woman expressed that she desired to marry someone else once she took time to somewhat reestablish herself in the community. These women explained that this recuperation period took from a few months up to 5 years.

However, the realities of these women's lives rather than their expectations for a perfect marriage often drive them to pursue another partner. Once women completed the time they deemed necessary to recuperate, they cited a number of reasons for wanting to remarry. Additionally, the development workers associated with these women as well as the academics interviewed cited the same reasons as the formerly abducted women. These motivations included the desire for a reestablished social security, the economic and social strain of their children born in the bush, the economic difficulties of living

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ The two who said they wanted to remain with their husbands because of the children they had produced.

alone, and the self-esteem issues associated with the trauma they experienced. Obviously, these motivations do not correspond with the desires of a little girl for an ideal marriage; instead, these motivations reflect the complications of these women's lives post-abduction.

Social Security

Based on the societal restraints placed on unmarried women, formerly abducted women often see re-marriage to a different person upon return as a chance to establish themselves again as members of society.⁵⁶ Without a husband, women continue to belong to their father's clan but cannot take part in that clan's decisions. As previously mentioned, if married, the husband's clan absorbs these women and permits them a place of respect. They can participate in the rituals and decisions associated with the clan. The clan also grants these women a sort of social protection from the typical stigmas associated with formerly abducted women. A clan that chooses to accept a formerly abducted woman, while rare, can establish that she deserves a place in society again. "Every person desires a sense of dignity, especially these women."⁵⁷

While formerly abducted women can choose to remain single upon their return, problems can result from this decision. "If these women live alone their lives are very insecure. Anyone can come in and hurt them at any time. We have had times when this happened to the women we work with" one of the members of the LAPEWA focus group.⁵⁸ These attacks result from the fact that these women are seen as targets after their experiences in the bush with forced marriages and the sexual relations involved with them. Without a husband and his clan to dispel these beliefs, single women remain vulnerable.

Children from Forced Marriage

Traditional Acholi perceptions of the family do not incorporate a place for the idea of a single motherhood. Essentially, "Childbearing should be in the context of

⁵⁶ Former Senior Official; Caritas, Interview, Catechist Training Center, 4 November 2009

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ LAPEWA, Focus Group Discussion, 9 November 2009

marriage...which ensures that clans will survive and that traditions will continue.”⁵⁹ In the event that a husband dies, traditionally another man of the clan will inherit the now single woman as his new wife.⁶⁰ This tradition keeps the woman herself and the children produced from that marriage within the clan. Also, the belief exists that every child should be brought up in a nurturing and socially acceptable home with the presence of a father and mother. This structure ensures that Acholi culture will continue.

Therefore, children brought up without a father are often susceptible to a crisis of identity. Technically, children belong to the clan of their father, but with no father present there is no clan with which to identify. At times, children can identify with their mother’s clan but often, difficult relationships with that clan due to stigma and rejection complicate those interactions. Male children also find identification with the mother’s clan difficult based on the issue of inheritance. Obviously, a mother who owns no land can provide no inheritance for any male children she produces. Inheritance stems from a husband’s clan, and if a formerly abducted woman remains unmarried and unable to buy land, her male children must face a future with no inheritance.⁶¹ Even if she associates with her parents’ clan, the male children from her forced marriage in the bush do not technically belong to the mother’s clan, so land cannot pass down to those male children.

Another issue stems, again, from the destruction of the clan. Sometimes women return home to find their clan destroyed from the conflict, which leaves children nowhere to turn for an identity. In order to gain a social status for her children, a formerly abducted woman may be convinced to attempt another marriage. Otherwise, the children she gave birth to in the bush will continue their lives as social pariahs of sorts, without a place of belonging.

Economically Difficulties of Living Alone

The economic situations of a formerly abducted woman with children and one without differ significantly. A formerly abducted woman can more easily provide for only herself, but still, the difficulties of these two types of women remain similar. In

⁵⁹ Assistant Lecturer; Gulu University, Interview, Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies, 11 November 2009

⁶⁰ Senior Official; GWED-G, Interview, GWED-G Office, 23 October 2009

⁶¹ Senior Official; World Vision, Interview, World Vision Gulu Office, 22 October 2009

short, a woman's choice to live a single life whether with children or without makes her life significantly more complicated. In many cases, a woman's choice to live alone basically makes her dependent on her clan and family—which are likely already strained by poverty. This dependence usually comes in the need to access the family's land. However, complicated relationships with these groups can lead to pressure for these women to get married.

The purchase or securing of land stands as one of the main issues formerly abducted women face. Without land to farm, women find it difficult to provide food for themselves and their children. Traditionally, women could not hold land based on the idea that individual lands of a clan's families are pooled together and collectively associated with that clan.⁶² If a woman holds land, that land would technically transfer from her clan to her husband's clan when she got married. Thus, women could not hold land based on the fact that it would not remain within the clan. Now, legally women can purchase and hold their own land, but the complete eradication of this traditional belief has been slow, especially in rural areas.

This traditional belief obviously restricts women's abilities to purchase land. Secondly, single women often find it economically difficult to purchase land—land in Gulu is particularly expensive as compared to the rest of the country.⁶³ These women can experience problems with providing the necessities for their families and therefore cannot raise enough extra capital to eventually purchase land. The combination of these factors leave the women with the two previously mentioned options—remain a burden to one's family, or seek out a husband who can provide land.

Another issue stems from the skills training some of these women received by organizations in hopes of empowering the women. Much of this training involved a similar list of economic activities—tailoring, catering, small business management and others. While this empowerment helps to some degree, so many women received training in these areas that now these markets are highly competitive.⁶⁴ Despite the training they received, women still cannot fully make a living on their own in some cases.

⁶² Author of Acholi Culture, Interview, Florida Hotel, 30 October 2009

⁶³ Senior Official; World Vision, Interview, World Vision Gulu Office, 22 October 2009

⁶⁴ Social Worker; Caritas, Interview, Caritas Office, 13 November 2009

Self-Esteem Issues

Not surprisingly, issues of self esteem also play into formerly abducted women's decisions to remarry upon return. The experience of a forced marriage in the bush often traumatizes these women to a point of feeling worthless. "When I returned from the bush I felt like I was useless in the world," summarized a formerly abducted interviewee.⁶⁵ Also, women's ages when abducted often exacerbate these problems. Typically from this study, the younger that women experienced abduction and subsequent marriage, the higher the chance of self-esteem issues. One formerly abducted woman, who was 11 when abducted explained, "[I] was abducted when [I] was still in school. When [I] came back I thought that [I] had become dull because [I] was gone from school for so long. So [I] got a man".⁶⁶ The cultural impropriety of marrying at such a young age significantly affects these women when they return. It also affects the women themselves and the future relationships they pursue. Another formerly abducted woman stated, "The idea of [my] marriage was completely different than what it should be. [I] was so young that [my] husband ended up being almost a father who raised [me] but he was also [my] husband at the same time"⁶⁷

Additionally, the stigma they experience upon return further adds to these issues of self-worth. Many of the interviewed women expressed the fact that others contributed to their feelings of worthlessness. Community members attempt to prevent relationships with these women, call them names, and generally ostracize them. These actions push women further into dissatisfaction with themselves.

All of these factors contribute to destructive decisions when choosing a marriage partner. The worry that no man will want them when they come home can drive women to marry the first man who shows interest in them. "These woman are likely to feel privileged if a man pays attention to them—so they marry them. The courtship process traditionally takes a very long time in an average situation. This is not so with formerly abducted women."⁶⁸ This reality causes unhealthy relationships in some situations.

⁶⁵ Formerly Abducted Woman 20, Interview, Amuru Village, 17 November 2009

⁶⁶ Formerly Abducted Woman 22, Interview, Amuru Village, 17 November 2009

⁶⁷ Formerly Abducted Woman 5, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 27 October 2009

⁶⁸ Senior Official; Empowering Hands, Interview, Empowering Hands Office, 11 November 2009

Obstacles to Marriage

Practically every single woman interviewed expressed the desire to remarry after rehabilitation and an extended period of recovery after official rehabilitation. Additionally, when asked if they thought about getting married when they returned home, every single woman but one agreed that during their time in the bush they hoped they would return home so that they could eventually marry someone of their own choosing.

However, the realities of these women's options are not so simple. When they return they carry along the baggage of the bush, both in the form of emotional complications and even children produced from their time in captivity. These factors make the search for another marriage often difficult and disappointing. Ultimately, few women end up with the marriages they previously hoped for.

Stigma

Stigma stands as the single most influential factor in all of these women's problems with getting remarried. When people return from the bush, many believe that an evil spirit, referred to as *cen* in the Acholi language, Luo, follows them home.⁶⁹ Traditionally, this spirit resides in the bush; when people go into the bush they can contract *cen* and bring it back to their families. This belief in *cen* continues to inhibit formerly abducted women's marital options, despite the fact that one can receive cleansing from *cen*. One formerly abducted woman cited that "If a child does something wrong and [I] beat them, people blame it on *cen*."⁷⁰

This belief in a looming evil spirit leads people to call these women insulting names. For example, one of the formerly abducted women cited having been consistently called *dukpaco*, meaning "people back from the bush who are stupid" and *anyiri pakony* "girls for the rebels who are stupid".⁷¹ Women's children from their abduction are commonly referred to as *lutino pa duk paca tha wigi obale*, meaning "children of the abductees who are stupid."⁷²

⁶⁹ Formerly Abducted Woman 6, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 27 October 2009

⁷⁰ Formerly Abducted Woman 16, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 30 October 2009

⁷¹ Formerly Abducted Woman 7, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 27 October 2009

⁷² Ibid

People continue to fear former abductees because they believe that all people in the bush killed and will continue to kill even after their return. Formerly abducted women are particularly feared because violence is seen as specifically unfeminine; “We live in a very patrimonial society where women are supposed to be nurturers. It is abnormal for a woman to be aggressive, which is what people believe these women are”.⁷³ It is difficult to gain certainty as to whether a woman participated in killing while in the bush because the details of the war remain ambiguous. “You cannot bear the risk of staying with someone whose background is associated with war and conflict and very unpredictable—you can’t just take that for granted”.⁷⁴ When someone returns, many people automatically default to the belief that they participated in the killing. As a result, many families continue to live in fear of their daughters when they return.

Because of this, bringing a formerly abducted woman into one’s family through marriage is seen as a curse. The high female to male ration further propagates this fact; men typically have a significantly higher number of choices for partners due to the death rates of men in the conflict. There are more women as compared to men—with these choices available to them, many clans encourage their sons to pursue women who were not abducted. At times, members of society look at a man with a formerly abducted woman as a wife with the attitude that “‘You’re not good enough to get a woman who was not abducted’”.⁷⁵ In this way, the marrying of a formerly abducted woman is seen as a kind of social suicide.

Even when a young man is attracted to a formerly abducted woman, his family often will prod him to consider someone else. A majority of the women interviewed repeatedly expressed displeasure with the treatment they receive from their mother in laws. One formerly abducted woman summarized “[My] mother-in-law is so very mean to [me]. She practices witchcraft against [me]. This all stems from [my] time in the bush.”⁷⁶

⁷³ Social Worker; Caritas, Interview, Caritas Office, 13 November 2009

⁷⁴ Assistant Lecturer; Gulu University, Interview, Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies, 11 November 2009

⁷⁵ I Senior Official; Empowering Hands, Interview, Empowering Hands Office, 11 November 2009

⁷⁶ Formerly Abducted Woman 2, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 27 October 2009

This community driven stigma also affects men's intentions with these women. The relationships formed with these women are somewhat less serious in many circumstances; men willingly engage in sexual relationships with these women but do not often pursue marriage with them. If anything, the couple begins cohabiting but does not move beyond that stage to an official marriage. These situations cause complications in that all of the relationships' bargaining power falls onto the man who can choose to leave the formerly abducted woman at will.⁷⁷ The women involved in these relationships, however, seek to gain security from these men and therefore hope to marry them. This lack of bargaining power can lead to more children due to little to no family planning, sexually transmitted infections due to little to no condom use, and even domestic abuse from a general lack of respect.⁷⁸ In the end, the men still possess the choice to leave these women if they so desire, regardless of the complications they leave them with.

Fear in other forms also cautions people against formerly abducted women. When a woman returns, many assume that she experienced sexual mistreatment of some form whether through rape or forced marriage. Because of this, fear also exists these women carry along dreaded diseases like HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections back from the bush. This blanket assumption encourages men to avoid them.⁷⁹

Also, people sometimes suspect that the husbands forced on the women in the bush still continue at large. Thus, men fear marrying these women because they worry their rebel husbands will one day surface and demand their wife back. Those with these assumptions also believe that if this occurs that the men will kill them to retrieve their wife.⁸⁰

Cleansing

The issue of cen also resurfaces in regards to women's marriage options. Many of these women returned home through one of the reception centers like Gulu Support the

⁷⁷ Senior Official; Empowering Hands, Interview, Empowering Hands Office, 11 November 2009

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Social Worker; Caritas, Interview, Caritas Office, 13 November 2009

Children Organization or World Vision.⁸¹ These organizations incorporated aspects of psychosocial therapy, medical treatment, and provisions for reestablishment in their communities; they also provided access to traditional cleansing ceremonies. However, many women returned directly home, receiving no rehabilitation through these organizations. As a result, these women possibly did not experience traditional cleansing ceremonies; this can be based on the fact that organizations assisted in paying for the necessary components for the ceremonies and that issues of poverty may affect individual families' ability to provide these components.

Ultimately, women who have not been cleansed experience higher levels of stigma and continue to feel uncomfortable in their communities.⁸² A formerly abducted woman said that she is blamed for troubles that occur, which makes her feel excluded even in her own family; "When the children gets sick my husband thinks I should get cleansed to make them better. He blames my cen."⁸³ Another formerly abducted woman explained, "[I] stepped on people's skeletons and other things like this. [I] need goats to be slaughtered but I can't afford the process. [I] can't feel comfortable until these things are done."⁸⁴

Children From Forced Marriages

These women often attempt to hide the fact they were abducted based on the discriminations they face as a formerly abducted woman—however, a woman with children from her marriage in the bush cannot easily hide this fact.⁸⁵ These children cement the fact that these women spent time in captivity and prove that they were sexually involved with at least one member of the LRA. Consequently, these children complicate women's reintegration and their possibilities for marriage.

⁸¹ Senior Official; World Vision, Interview, World Vision Gulu Office, 22 October 2009

⁸² Senior Official; Empowering Hands, Interview, Empowering Hands Office, 11 November 2009

⁸³ Formerly Abducted Woman 24, Interview, Empowering Hands, 19 November 2009

⁸⁴ Interview 3, Formerly Abducted Woman, Empowering Hands, November 2009

⁸⁵ Social Worker; GUSCO, Interview, GUSCO Main Office, 23 October 2009

If a formerly abducted woman does find a man who shows interest in her, she will likely attempt to leave the children she has from the bush elsewhere.⁸⁶ This is based on the fact that, culturally, a man should not be asked to take care of another man's children. Children from a woman's forced marriage technically belong to that man's clan, so any new partner most likely would be opposed to using his resources to care for such children.⁸⁷ One formerly abducted woman explained this situation saying, "[I] worked in the market to make money [for my child] but [my] husband didn't want [me] to take care of [my] child from the bush because it was from a different man. He didn't want to child to come in the house at all."⁸⁸ Because of this, she ended up leaving the child with her mother.

Similarly, many women end up leaving their children with their mothers and family in order to handle this problem, based on the fact that a child born out of wedlock technically falls under the care of the mother's family.⁸⁹ However, when women return from captivity they commonly find their families scattered or the members killed. In these instances, women will try to leave their children with another family member and sometimes even go to the extreme of leaving them with an NGO, other organization, or even on the street.⁹⁰

In cases where men are unwilling to care for children born to other fathers, men are even less willing to support children born in the bush. "People fear identifying themselves with children who can pose risk and dangers for the clan and families."⁹¹ All of the formerly abducted women with children from their forced marriage explained that people are quick to accuse these children of being troubled. "People are quick to think that these children are violent if they're rough with one another and when a child is quiet,

⁸⁶ Interview, Father Felix, Catechist's Training Center, November 2009

⁸⁷ Assistant Lecturer; Gulu University, Interview, Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies, 11 November 2009

⁸⁸ Formerly Abducted Woman 7, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 27 October 2009

⁸⁹ Former Senior Official; Caritas, Interview, Catechist Training Center, 4 November 2009

⁹⁰ LAPEWA, Focus Group Discussion, 9 November 2009

⁹¹ Interview, Opio Washington, Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies, November 2009

people blame this also on the bush.⁹² They often classify these children as coming from the bush with specific names like *ogwang*, which means a wildcat in the bush.⁹³ Others call them *lutino pa duk paca tha wigi obale*, which literally means “children of the abductees who are stupid.”⁹⁴ People often try to find problems with these children when they do not actually exist. Thus, if a clan takes these children in, the community will likely gossip about and accuse these children. This ultimately reflects badly on the clan.

Another complication relies on the children’s gender. During an interview with a formerly abducted woman, she explained that her new husband liked the one child from the bush because that child was a girl. “[He] didn’t like the other one because he was a boy. [He] saw the boy as a threat to the inheritance that would go to [his] legitimate sons”.⁹⁵ This worry traces back to the fact that children born to a different father technically belong to that clan and any land inherited from a stepfather would default to the biological father’s clan. Thus, men sometimes more willingly care for girls rather than boys from the bush.

Marriage Commonalities

In the end, these formerly abducted women end up in comparable situations when it comes to the realities of the relationships they accomplish. They experience similar traumas in the bush, motivations to remarry, and obstacles to those marriages. Likewise, the marriages and relationships they achieve follow similar patterns.

One of these similarities lies in the number of children these women have from new relationships. Often women end up with extra children from their attempts of obtaining a husband.⁹⁶ When these men discover that the women are pregnant, they often leave them. These added children complicate the women’s lives even further based on the typical discriminations applied to father-less children.

⁹² Two Senior Officials; World Vision, Interview, World Vision Gulu Office, 22 October 2009

⁹³ Social Worker; Caritas, Interview, Caritas Office, 13 November 2009

⁹⁴ Formerly Abducted Woman 7, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 27 October 2009

⁹⁵ Formerly Abducted Woman 10, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 30 October 2009

⁹⁶ Two Senior Officials; World Vision, Interview, World Vision Gulu Office, 22 October 2009

Additionally, trends exist as to whether these women deem marriages to other formerly abducted individuals--not their husbands from the bush—can result in better relationships. Women who marry an individual who was also abducted often experience more stable marriages than those who marry an individual who did not experience abduction.⁹⁷ This is based on the fact that a couple with the shared experience of the bush will likely understand the difficulties of reintegration, while a pair of one formerly abducted person and one who was not abducted cannot share that experience. Therefore, understanding on the part of the non-abducted partner must be higher. At times women disagreed with this generality, but these women were either not currently married or they had only been abducted for a short time. Women with significantly longer experiences in the bush, and therefore most likely higher levels of trauma, believed that marrying another abducted person would be best.

Most women also expressed disinterest in marrying the husband they were forced into a relationship with in the bush. One formerly abducted woman forcefully stated, “No, I don’t want to marry that man again. I never want to hear about him again.”⁹⁸ Women who marry these husbands from the bush upon return often end up in unhappy marriages in which the husbands continue habits they exhibited while in the bush. These include forms of abuse and general mistreatment. Based on these understandings, most women, therefore, expressed no interest in rejoining with that spouse. Additionally, a majority of women explained that even if they had shown that interest their husbands from the bush had been killed in one way or another, thus eliminating that option.

Ultimately, based on all the factors working against them, women usually end up in situations of cohabitation with men regardless of the unacceptability of this situation. Most women, therefore, do not return to get married, but end up finding a partner for an extended amount of time. In most cases, the men they find do not want to pay for dowry, so the relationships remain invalidated. Even further, these relationships often exist in

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ Formerly Abducted Woman 3, Interview, Unyama Trading Center, 27 October 2009

situations of domestic violence and mistreatment based on the fact that the men involved with these women do not see them as their wives but rather as passing flings⁹⁹

Conclusion

After more than two decades of conflict in Northern Uganda, it is no surprise that Acholi culture has become major casualty of the war. These injuries to culture have forged many changes as a result of these injuries to culture; specifically, traditional marriage has experienced significant blows to its main components. In the midst of these transformations, formerly abducted women have returned home to find a different culture of marriage. Now, with traumatic experiences in the recent past, these women must struggle even harder to regain the highly valued positions of married women in Acholi society. If not, they stand to continue their lives on the periphery of Acholi culture.

Ultimately, for formerly abducted women, factors from the conflict as well as their time in abduction do not affect their desires to get married—many still look to accomplish the marriages they had always hoped for. However, some of these factors motivate the women to get married for different reasons than before their abduction. Now, a desire for social security, the economic hardships of living alone, the complications of children produced from abduction, and low self-esteem drive formerly abducted women to marriage. In effect, marriage becomes more of a need than a desire for formerly abducted women.

Despite the presence of these motivations, formerly abducted women often cannot find suitable partners to marry—exclusion from normal Acholi society drives this reality. These women experience difficulties in their pursuits to marriage based on stigma from the community as a whole for a number of reasons; the belief in *cen*, a woman's inability to receive cleansing, and often the presence of their children from the bush all contribute to this stigma. Often, a combination of all of these issues leads to high numbers of cohabitation or a marriage in a less than ideal setting—domestic violence, mistreatment, and instability.

⁹⁹ Former Senior Official; Caritas, Interview, Catechist Training Center, 4 November 2009

If this culture of exclusion does not begin to change, the Acholi risk creating another generation of LRA fighters. This may not occur amongst the women experiencing discrimination themselves, but in the generation of their children—“If we continue to segregate the children of formerly abducted women we are grooming them to be rebels.”¹⁰⁰ Through excluding these women from their rightful place in society, the Acholi are excluding their children as well, showing any child born in the bush that the only place they belong is the bush. In the end, the choice lies with the Acholi people and their ability to move beyond the residual fear of formerly abducted people. If they cannot, perhaps this peace is only temporary.

¹⁰⁰Minister; KKA (Acholi Cultural Organization, Interview, Residence, 3 November 2009

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