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From Camp To Slum:

The Politics of Urban Displacement in
Gulu Town, Uganda

Adam Branch
Senior Research Fellow
Makerere Institute of Social Research

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Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR)
Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda
www.misr.mak.ac.ug

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Introduction

For most of northern Uganda's two-decade civil war, which lasted from 1986 until 2006, Gulu was an island of relative security in the midst of the violence that wracked the rest of Acholiland.¹ Although a centre of internal displacement, with over 130,000 people crowded into a space meant for a quarter that number,² the town remained mostly isolated from the massive devastation in the countryside. While the streets of Gulu were generally safe even at night, one had only to pass a military roadblock and leave town to enter a zone of unpredictable violence, where tens of thousands were killed, tens of thousands abducted, and waves of humanitarian crises left perhaps over 100,000 civilians dead – civilians who, like in many of today's "dirty wars," were the main target of the extreme violence by both Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels and the Ugandan military alike. Gulu was even spared in large part the internal conflict and upheaval that often characterise such scenes of massive displacement and deprivation.

It is perhaps counter intuitive, therefore, that it is only now that the fighting in northern Uganda has been over for several years that Gulu's stability may be at risk from internal displacement. Today, the slums that blossomed from Gulu's interstices during the war have expanded and social conditions have worsened. The new population is mostly young and extremely poor. Many of them are the new landless, unable to leave town and move back to rural areas, and thus without the hope of return that had sustained many of the wartime displaced, but also without hope of employment in town. Increasingly desperate and frustrated, they represent a group that is disproportionately marginalized and excluded from Acholi society. As poverty worsens, Gulu is also seeing growing and highly visible disparities of wealth. Its rising crime rates may be a harbinger of increased insecurity for the population as the war is left further in the past.

To make this argument – that it is not war but peace that may introduce conflict in Gulu – this working paper begins by discussing wartime internal displacement and the reasons why it did not lead to significant instability in town. Then, the social tensions that were introduced into Acholi society during the war are discussed, for it is these tensions that are producing a phase of post-war internal displacement as certain groups are prevented from resettling in the rural areas. This sets the stage for understanding why displacement into Gulu today is

demonstrating a different and more destabilizing character than that which occurred during the war. But first, I place displacement in Gulu in historical and theoretical context.

Slums without cities

Civil war between the Ugandan government and a series of rebel movements based in Acholiland began in 1986, immediately after Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army captured state power (Finnström, 2008, Dolan, 2009, Branch, 2011). In 1996, a decade into its brutal counterinsurgency, the government initiated a new strategy: the sudden and violent forced displacement of the entire rural population of western Acholiland, totalling hundreds of thousands of peasants, into internment camps. The government gave the population 48 hours to leave their homes and assemble around designated trading centres, and soon after the military began bombing villages, burning down huts and granaries, and arresting, torturing, and killing civilians who did not comply (Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative, 2001, Human Rights Focus, 2002). Once concentrated, people were forbidden from leaving those areas at risk of being shot. Unprotected from rebels and without any provisions made for food, shelter, or water, they were left to fend for themselves.

Within days, the region was violently transformed from being characterized by widely dispersed homesteads and small trading centres to a space of "slums without cities," an archipelago of a couple dozen desperately congested agglomerations of squalid mud huts with no sanitation or services, containing up to tens of thousands of people. Gulu, the small provincial town that housed the district headquarters, was also transformed almost overnight into, effectively, the largest camp in the region, as its small, already decrepit urban core was overwhelmed by slums of mud huts.

While important academic work has been done on displacement in northern Uganda, little has been done to understand the displacement camps, whether in the countryside or in Gulu, as urban spaces. In doing so, I follow Michel Agier's proposal for an "urban anthropology of refugee camps" (Agier, 2002). However, I diverge from his exploration of what he calls the "city-camp," which he terms a "novel sociospatial form" that corresponds to an important "new category of world population, that of displaced persons and refugees" (ibid., pp. 318-320). By placing camps in the normative frame of the city and by generalizing from the refugee's legal exceptionality to the entire social and political existence of all displaced persons, Agier arrives at the conclusion that the camp is a "crippled" form of the urban. Or, as another analyst writes, "refugee and famine relief camps in Africa" comprise "a permanent space of exception" (Edkins, 2000, pp. 11-13), in which "the possibility of the political disappears" (ibid., p. 19).

Liisa Malkki provides a corrective. She explains that the camp she worked in "was a 'city' neither for me nor for the tens of thousands of refugees who were enclosed by it" (Malkki, 2002, p. 358). Instead, she argues, following Frederick Cooper, that the urban in Africa needs

to be left as an “open question” (ibid., p. 355), addressed in its specificity and not subsumed under Eurocentric normative frameworks. The camp is not a deviant city—rather, its specific urban qualities should be discerned.

Therefore, we need to explore the specificity of different camps and forms of camps in order to discern their different social and political possibilities. The case of Gulu as a small town that became a camp, a displaced persons’ slum with only the most rudimentary ‘city’ attached, and the social and political changes entailed by the shift from wartime to post-war displacement demonstrates the need for this more nuanced approach.

The research for this paper draws on my experience living in Gulu for approximately two years between 2003 and 2007 and my regular visits throughout 2011 and 2012. It also draws on several periods of formal research: first, the extensive interviews I conducted for my PhD dissertation and book on the conflict in northern Uganda (Branch 2011); second, research conducted for the LSE Crisis States Working Paper that was the first iteration of this MISR Working Paper (Branch 2007), as part of which two research assistants and I conducted several dozen individual interviews and group discussions in Gulu over two months; and third, interviews I conducted in 2012 with municipal authorities and rural community members for this working paper.

Wartime displacement in Gulu

During the first decade of the war, Gulu was primarily a base for the government’s counterinsurgency; it was also a centre for forced displacement and voluntary flight by the peasantry during peak times of violence because of the relative security it enjoyed. In the first years of war, Gulu was attacked on occasion by rebel groups, but from 1990 onwards it remained for the most part exempt from the violence in the countryside.³

Before 1996, there was a small amount of permanent movement of people from the countryside to town for safety, but for the most part, except for those under personal threat from rebels or government, there was little incentive to move to town since food aid was only distributed during critical periods and people had the option to stay on their land and provide for themselves. Thus the population of Gulu, outside of temporary spikes, had increased only slowly and was still below 40,000 by the early 1990s (Republic of Uganda, 2007a).

The Ugandan government’s 1996 forced displacement fundamentally transformed Gulu. Immediately, 30,000 people were displaced into town, taking over sports fields and assembly grounds, or finding shelter with relatives (UNDHA, 1996). There was a rapid response among aid agencies (UNDHA, 1996),⁴ and the relief operation in Gulu provided some basic services for the town’s displaced. But it soon tapered off, as aid was focused increasingly on the more desperate situation in the rural camps. By mid-1997, the displaced in Gulu faced a hard choice: either find sufficient income to pay for food and shelter, which depended

upon being able to make a living in town's difficult economic environment, or leave Gulu for the rural camps. As a result, thousands of displaced people – mostly those without the skills, resources or family or social connections needed to survive in town – left. But tens of thousands remained, and a circular flow began of people into Gulu seeking security or economic improvement and out of Gulu of those who could not sustain their lives there.

A small town that had consisted of a few paved streets surrounded by widely spaced buildings and houses was thus swamped by dense clusters of grass-thatched mud huts built by the displaced. Entire new neighbourhoods of slums were created, as people from the same home areas would often stick together and create new settlements. From 1996 until 2006, as the government's policy of forced displacement expanded to encompass the entire rural Acholi population, over a million people were affected, most of whom moved to camps, but many of whom moved to Gulu, which became a centre for the displaced from throughout Acholiland (WFP, 2004, UNOCHA, 2006).

From 1996 onwards, Gulu was in effect one large camp, home to the biggest population of internally displaced persons in the region, eventually housing a surplus population of around 90,000. While Gulu's slums shared many characteristics with the rural camp-slums dotting the countryside, there were also significant differences. For one thing, Gulu was relatively safe compared to the camps, where protection was minimal and people felt at the mercy of the rebels and government troops (Human Rights Focus, 2002). For another, whereas the rural camps were almost totally dependent on food aid, Gulu did not receive aid. As a 71-year old man put it in 2007, 'we are the biggest IDP camp, but NGOs provide us with nothing. They should give us food also, we are suffering the same as those in the camps.' Despite these sentiments, however, people in town generally insisted on the superiority of town life to camp life, precisely because of the camp's dependence on relief aid and lack of protection. Gulu's displaced were clearly not in the same situation as those in the camps – people in the camps were unable to survive without food aid, whereas those in town maintained a level above that of the camps even without aid.

Gulu's population was thus sustained largely through its own economic activity, made possible by the town's expanding humanitarian industry. By 2003, over one hundred relief organisations were working in northern Uganda (UNOCHA, 2005), and by 2007, US\$200 million was being spent annually on the camps. Gulu was the primary beneficiary of this humanitarian industry, as most aid organisations established offices there and it became the central supply and management hub for the camps. Without agriculture or industry, Gulu developed an almost exclusively humanitarian economy, with significant economic opportunities for Gulu's displaced. Aid agencies directly employed people as administrators, guards, office assistants, cleaners, or drivers, while the most significant expansion took place in the service sector that grew up around the humanitarian industry and in the small-scale petty vending sector around that.

As economic opportunity increased, the population of Gulu continued to swell as more people could settle in town permanently. Nevertheless, due to the widespread desire among many rural camp dwellers to move to town, the supply of labour in town far outstripped demand, leading to chronic unemployment and underemployment. This swollen population provided a large, easily accessible labour reserve which, along with the effectively bottomless reservoir of labour in the nearby camps, led to a ruthless job market, low pay, and bad working conditions. Individuals would drift between temporary formal employment, informal employment, and unemployment, and those that remained in the last category for too long would eventually return to the camps, to be replaced by others seeking the security and opportunities of town life. The camps, given the access they offered to relief aid thereby served as an essential safety valve for Gulu during the war.

Despite these tough conditions, there was no significant attempt by Gulu's displaced to improve their conditions through political organisation or action. This was due in part to job insecurity, but was more fundamentally rooted in the way that the displaced in Gulu tended to think about their lives in town. For many people, the solution to the problems they faced in Gulu was not to be found in social or political change in town, but in returning home. Town life was only a temporary time of testing and hardship which would be abandoned for their real lives back in the village as soon as possible, the time when their conditions would permanently improve.

This sheds light on the reasons why Gulu's slums, comprising the biggest camp in the region, but without the disciplinary humanitarian regulation of the rural camps, were stable internally throughout displacement. First, as just discussed, most displaced people in Gulu saw their time there as temporary and were willing to endure significant deprivation while waiting to return home. Second, the only alternative for most people to life in town was life in the rural camps, which was generally regarded as vastly inferior, and so many in town saw themselves as comparatively fortunate. Third, there was a significant Ugandan military presence in town, which intimidated potential dissent. Fourth, economic opportunities were generally sufficient to sustain most people in town, and the camps and the armed forces provided safety valves for the most marginalised. Finally, despite the changes introduced into Acholi society as a result of displacement, those living in town were often tightly connected to, and in close proximity with, their families and those they lived with before displacement, so there was considerable internal social regulation among Gulu's displaced population. Together, these factors prevented open conflict or crisis from erupting in town – but these same factors, I argue, are lacking from post-war internal displacement.

'Kwo Town': Social change among Gulu's displaced

The violent urbanization of a large rural population into slums had a dramatic impact upon Acholi society, the consequences of which are still being played out today. Most significantly, displacement and internment have produced fractures within Acholi society that are leading

to the systematic dispossession of land, with the result that a new landless population is emerging for whom moving to Gulu is their last resort. In this section, I discuss the social changes introduced by the war that set the stage for today's new phase of displacement.

War, a monetary economy, NGO interventions, government development projects, and women's and children's rights promotion – all were all recognised among Gulu's wartime displaced as having had a dramatic impact on Acholi society and as being definitive of what came to be known as '*kwo town*', or 'town life.' While there might be agreement on the catalysts of this transformation, there is controversy over the meaning of the social changes introduced. For some, especially young men and women, town life, despite its material hardships, is seen as the foundation for a world that is modern and global, instead of traditional and local, a world that offers a degree of freedom, independence and opportunity that was impossible in the village. However, for others, especially many older men, town life is a world turned upside-down, a fundamental corruption of Acholi society and its values. I introduce this ambivalence of *kwo town* as imbued with both freedom and corruption by examining Acholi perspectives on the commercial economy of Gulu, and then considering town life for Lord's Resistance Army returnees.

In pre-war Acholi society, significant authority was held by a lineage- and clan-based structure of patriarchal, gerontocratic, leadership (Allen, 1991, Atkinson, 1999, Finnström, 2008). This structure, always subject to contestation, was thrown into crisis by the war and displacement. Many elders died, and the war presented problems beyond the capacity of 'traditional' leadership to resolve. The authority of this lineage-based structure was also undermined by the creation of Local Councils, which took over many of the conflict resolution roles previously held by 'traditional' authorities. Finally, displacement itself had a significantly negative impact on lineage-based leaders, as clans were dispersed, and restrictions on movement made clan meetings difficult and left elders and clan leaders with little way of enforcing their decisions. In short, Acholi elders and chiefs largely lost their power of social regulation, their role of mediating conflicts, and much of their legitimacy.

This loss of authority was intensified by the expansion of a monetary economy and by development interventions, which tended to specifically target youth and women. While the rural camps were dependent upon relief aid and so had only a limited monetary economy, in Gulu, without relief aid, people's livelihoods became totally incorporated into the cash nexus. In the words of one 21-year old woman, 'town life is all about money.'⁵ The consequences of money's dominance are controversial. One older woman presented a widespread sentiment when she explained that, 'Village life is better than town life. Life in town needs money at all times and every day which is not the case in the village. In the village you can just dig and eat well even if there is no money there.' People invoked the self-sufficiency, independence and plenty of the village, where, they said, they could provide for themselves from their land and cows, customary land tenure was secure, grass huts for the entire family could be easily constructed, and they did not live at the mercy of employers or the market.

Older male Acholi in particular saw the dominance of money as a corruption of Acholi society and its values. Because, before the war, wealth was not held in money, but in cattle, they explained, money itself was perceived as a symptom and agent of the destruction of Acholi society, as it replaced tangible, rooted resources. For some Acholi elders, Gulu had given birth to a lost generation of Acholi, addicted to money, disconnected from their roots in the land and without even basic cultural knowledge. Elders often condemned all forms of acquiring money, whether petty vending, *boda-boda* (motorcycle taxi) driving, unskilled labour, theft, or prostitution. International NGOs and UN agencies were also portrayed as contributing to this corruption by promoting dependency among the Acholi in the camps, turning Acholi against each other within the NGO job market, and demeaning the Acholi practice of coming together to resolve problems collectively by paying people to come to NGO ‘workshops’ and ‘sensitisations’. In short, money and the foreign presence were seen by many older male Acholi as standing in need of fundamental and vigorous correction in the post-war period.

But other town residents represented the cash economy as having made Gulu a realm of freedom: money offered many youth and women the opportunity for independence from older male authorities and for personal advancement. As a 25-year-old hotel worker explained, after expressing her preference for village life, ‘people have learned to be more innovative in making money, and people do not despise work now as long as it pays.’ Thus, although people faced economic difficulties in town and most said they would like to move back to the village, there was also a recognition by many of the benefits from employment and business experience they were gaining as a result of living in town. Younger Acholi in particular tended to see their engagement in business as a positive change: in the words of a female local gin brewer, ‘the rigid thinking of the Acholi has changed. All are ready to take on any work that can bring money.’ Many youth and women saw significant new economic activities, as they gained access to loans, both individually and through groups and owned property, vehicles, and their own businesses.

This newfound freedom and opportunity was expressed in social as well as economic domains. Town, like camps, saw a flourishing of youth groups, as the small, but intensely concentrated, urban environment of the slums provided the public space in which youth were able to come together in the context of the massive social disruption caused by the war. Displacement into town also gave rise to new attitudes among this previously subordinated group, as developmental interventions spread ideas around ‘modern’ economic activities. Life in town, and in the rural camps to some extent, placed on display all the furniture of modern, global consumer culture—cell phones, global fashions, or television itself, as gathering to watch European football matches on satellite TV powered by a generator, with an entrance fee of around 500 shillings (US\$0.20), became a major social experience for young men in town and in many camps. In the post-war period, this generational divide would give rise to significant tensions in rural society.

It is not surprising, then, that many youth were ambivalent about returning to the village from the town, especially if it were on the same patriarchal terms as before displacement. Many expressed their desire to build a second home in the village so as to have one foot there and one in town. For those that lacked the resources needed to maintain two homes, some would try to bring some *kwo town* back to the village by maintaining the groups they had formed in town as they moved back, or by frequently returning to town for business or social purposes. Through mobility, they sought to retain economic opportunity, the power of association, their hard-won public space, and the foothold town had offered them in a global world.

While men, and especially male elders, saw their authority and status within Acholi society wane, women saw their authority and status rise during displacement in town. Women's new physical proximity in town was a major factor itself: as a 43-year-old woman in Pece explained, 'we [women] were very far apart in the village. We did not have groups or come together like we do now.' Women had a specific assigned role in the home and the field, which was controlled at the family level by the husband or father, and at the village and clan level by male elders and male clan chiefs. But with displacement into town, in the context of the death and disruption already caused by the war, women's roles changed significantly.

Despite the new hardships faced by displaced women, many women also recognised that town life had led to certain positive changes in their lives and opportunities. Economically, women gained access to loans, both individually and through groups. They owned property in town, such as buildings, vehicles, and land, and owned their own businesses. Women also expressed satisfaction at having learned to sell agricultural produce and save the money. Socially and politically, women pointed out the number of women who were in positions of authority in prominent NGOs and in the local government system. Women were achieving higher levels of education and undergoing training by NGOs and government on health and other issues.

Perhaps most notably, women recognised the importance of women's organisations. Most of these organisations were oriented around small income-generating activities or loans, but women also described how these organisations had provided them with a space in which to come together and discuss their problems. As one group of women in Layibi Go-Down sub-ward explained, women's voices were being heard in public, whereas before 'women [were] not supposed to have a voice.' The Local Council I Chairperson in Centre A/B sub-ward, Teegwana, a woman, explained how it would have been impossible for her to achieve that position before the war and displacement. Women acknowledged that these changes were unusual, not only in Acholiland but nationally. As a woman in a group discussion in Layibi Go-Down explained, in 'Hoima, Fort Portal, and Mbarara everything has remained the same because there was no war there.' In short, Gulu, as a small, but intensely concentrated, urban environment, provided the public space in which women were able to come together in the context of the massive social disruption caused by the war. Through the material and educational resources provided by government and NGOs, they came up with ways of

addressing not only the immediate practical pressures they experienced as heads of families, but also the lack of power, authority, voice, and opportunity they experienced before displacement.

As a Layibi Go-Down sub-ward women's group explained, women with significant investments in town and others with the capacity to maintain a home in town were probably not going return to the village permanently, but would prefer to build a second home in the village so as to have one foot there and one in town. For those that lacked the resources needed to remain in town, as a women's group in Layibi Central put it, some women would try to 'take back their town life to the village.' Many women, like youth, explained that they planned to bring the benefits of *kwo town* back to the village by maintaining the groups they had formed in town as they moved back, or by frequently returning to town for business or social purposes. They would thereby retain some of the power that association gave them and preserve some of the public space they had in town. Many of those who were in positions of authority planned to continue in those positions as well.

Many men, however, expressed disapproval in no uncertain terms of the changes introduced in women's roles in Gulu. For example, when men brought up the issue of women's groups, they sometimes dismissed them as opportunities for women to get together and drink or gamble. Women's abilities to take out loans and start businesses were seen by some men as a direct challenge, since financial dependence upon husbands is diminished through access to credit. On the level of day-to-day affairs, men complained that women were marrying without being given permission by their families and engaging in licentious behaviour. Most fundamentally, according to many men, women had lost the respect they used to show men and elders. For some men, therefore, women's economic and social activities represented an illegitimate attempt by women, encouraged by government and NGOs and backed up by local government authorities and the police, to usurp male authority and impose themselves as equal or superior to men. Women were very aware of these sentiments; as a 28-year-old woman in Pece Vanguard explained, men were jealous 'because we earn money and do not go asking for money from them all the time. We can also plan our earnings and acquire assets, which men do not like,' whereas before 'at home girls were seen as assets or a source of wealth when they would marry.' These changes set the stage for the conflict being seen today.

Another post-war divide has stemmed from the LRA's practice of forced recruitment, especially of youth. Over the years, thousands of Acholi have spent significant amounts of time with the LRA; while representing a small proportion of the total Acholi population, this is still a sizeable enough group to be a major presence in Acholi society (Allen and Schomerus, 2006, Annan and Blattmann, 2006). For many of these former LRA, Gulu was nothing short of a haven. During the later years of the war, the majority of LRA returnees lived in the rural camps, but a significant number remained in or moved to town (Allen and Schomerus, 2006, pp. 13-14). It appears that those LRA returnees who ended up in Gulu

were often those who had stayed with the rebels for longer periods. This tended to make them more fearful of living in the camps, where they lacked protection from revenge attacks by the community, accusations of collaboration by the government, or violent punishment by the LRA for having escaped. Many long-time LRA therefore sought the relative protection and anonymity of town over the camps where, as one returnee put it, ‘everybody knows who you are and what you have done.’ The multi-ethnic character of Gulu contributed further to this anonymity, and legal protection in town was seen as superior to that in camps. In short, Gulu was a place of urban mixture and anonymity for ex-rebels, where they could avoid the repressive aspects of Acholi society and could potentially have recourse to state protection when needed.

This is not to say that LRA returnees faced no problems in town: many reported being subject to discrimination, accusations of possession by evil spirits, and resentment on account of the assistance they received from NGOs. The hardships of employment in Gulu were magnified for former LRA: often with little vocational training or education, many sank to the lowest end of the economic scale. Some LRA returnees who could not live in camps or find employment in Gulu ended up joining the Ugandan military or paramilitaries. A few, it was reported, had even gone back to the bush to re-join the rebels, and some expressed their wish to return to the LRA, but their inability to do so because the rebels would kill them if they tried to return without their guns.

As a result of its monetary economy, NGO and government interventions, increased proximity and ease of association, and relatively significant state presence, Gulu was at the cutting edge of the changes introduced into Acholi society as a result of war and displacement, and as such served as a haven for many of those for whom those changes were beneficial or necessary. Today, though, Gulu is coming to represent even more of a haven – or perhaps the only haven – for a new, expanding group of those who cannot return to rural life.

Rural crisis in post-war Acholiland

After people were finally allowed to go back home in mid-2007, the rural camps’ populations decreased dramatically: by 2012, UNHCR estimated that over 95 percent of the camps’ inhabitants had left. Gulu, however, has seen a different trajectory, as its population has, instead, increased since the end of forced displacement and is now estimated at over 154,000. Although conclusive data are absent, it appears that many of the wartime displaced have moved out of Gulu (Dunovant, 2011, p. 40) and have been replaced by a new internally displaced population, those who have been forced to move to town not because of civil war and government policy, but because of their exclusion from access to land for farming. This new group, which cannot or will not return to the village, are changing Gulu’s social composition, as what had been a cross-section of the Acholi peasantry is being replaced by a larger proportion of marginalised and excluded. With the former camps no longer viable

places to live, Gulu, it appears, is becoming the principal refuge for an anomic, frustrated, and economically and socially desperate population. As a result, Gulu may become an index of the failure of post-conflict peace in the villages, and, because many of the factors that had preserved relative stability within Gulu during the war are now absent, the town could become subject to internal conflict or become a destabilising force within the region.

As I will explain, land dispossession is occurring through two channels, both results of the changes introduced into Acholi society through forced urbanization described above. First, there are those who are losing access to land through the re-assertion of patriarchal, gerontocratic authority, the very authority that had broken down during displacement. Second, there are those losing land through forced dispossession effected by individuals with political connections or with enough wealth to manipulate state institutions, which occurs on large and small scales. There are also those who are giving up their land not because of direct state coercion, but because of the desperate poverty faced by much of the rural population in neoliberal Uganda in a kind of dispossession through structural violence.

Older men's bid for power

While some revival of 'traditional authority' appears to be widely supported among Acholi, there is controversy over just what this authority should comprise in the post-war period. Many male elders projected a vast increase in authority in a bid to correct the corruption introduced into Acholi society during displacement. In the most extreme versions, elders interviewed in 2007 explained how they saw themselves as taking a dominant and all-encompassing role in social regulation in the post-conflict period by dealing with everyone from ex-rebels, thieves, government informers, prostitutes, foreign women, and troublemakers generally. This revival of their 'traditional authority', men and elders explained, would take place through imposing discipline at the family and clan levels, using warnings, fines, corporal punishment, and, if all else failed, expulsion from the clan. In the words of one group of elders, 'the rules in the village are different from those in town.' Among women and youth, especially those in town, the attempt to impose older male idealisations of pre-war order -- in which youth and women unquestioningly obeyed and knew their place -- advocated by many male elders is seen as neither acceptable nor just.

Consequently, disciplinary projects are being seen carried out by men, especially men with family or clan authority, designed to eliminate what they see as the corruption that infected Acholi society during life in camps and town. Independent women or youth, those with unclear ancestry, or simply those deemed undesirable are accused of contravening 'Acholi tradition' or 'Acholi laws' and possibly excluded from clan affiliation.

Discipline or exclusion by male authorities has a prominent gender dimension, since women lack a strong claim to authority within the family or clan and are generally dependent on husbands, fathers, brothers or male clan elders in resolving disputes or in accessing land.

Although firm adherence to patrilineal and patrilocal norms has been disrupted at present as a result of the war and displacement, this only increases the negative impact of their purposeful re-imposition by male authorities upon women and youth. Indeed, among men interviewed for this research, the re-establishment of 'traditional authority' was often framed explicitly in terms of undoing the power gained by women and youth in the camps and imposing the power of men and elders over these putatively formerly subservient groups. Many women in town expressed reservations about leaving Gulu for the village for precisely these reasons, and some declared that they would not move back at all. As one woman explained, she was afraid that men, on returning to the village, would try to make women their 'property under their full control' again. Men's predictions and plans for post-conflict life varied, but most men interviewed shared a perception that, in the words of the Limo sub-ward group of elders, 'the rules in the village are different from those in town.' Thus, because women have 'forgotten' the rules and even how to do their basic duties, these men argue, women will have to be 'trained' again in their proper roles and duties, 'reminded' of village life. Men admit that women might not be ready to accept these roles, being used to town life as they are, and so it will take a concerted effort, a group of men from Kirombe Custom sub-ward explained, on the part of men in their homes, and then by elders and chiefs at the village and clan level, to make sure women conform to the rules of the village. Much of this may involve physical violence, as older men explained how women could be caned for refusing to work or to cook, for refusing to have sex with their husbands, or for breaking other social norms. Women's public space, and the social and economic opportunities they enjoy with it, could be erased as women are confined to the private world of the home, while the public space of men will re-open through social interaction within the lineage and clan.

Significantly, male elders are also using their re-established authority to reject land claims by those who are vulnerable due to fractured family connections, in particular widows and orphans, find themselves without access to land (Adoko and Levine, 2004, Sebina-Zziwa et al., 2008, Sjögren, 2011). Thus, as older male Acholi seek to re-establish their authority and subjugate those groups who saw a degree of empowerment during the war, or seek to take advantage of their new power to acquire land for themselves or for outside actors willing to pay, those who refuse to submit to this power or are victims of it are finding themselves without access to land. For some, Gulu is the best or only option left.

Former LRA and land conflict

For many of the same reasons, former LRA face tough challenges in returning to rural society and accessing land. One fear among many is revenge attacks. 'People in town look at the ex-Lakwena [LRA fighters] as their enemies, it is just that there is tight security in town and so ex-Lakwena are protected,' said a 26-year-old interviewee in 2007. Former LRA were very conscious of the potential for violence against them in the village and often expressed fear of being away from the protection they received in town. As one male former LRA member

put it, ‘Well, at least we are treated fairly here in town, but we expect all this fair treatment to end out in the village. Here in town, we are close together, but in the village, people are far apart and anyone can come for payback. That is why most of us will not go back to the villages.’ Beyond revenge attacks, many former LRA expressed their fear of exclusion, especially from access to land, or mistreatment at the hands of the community, including clan and family authorities.

Indeed, as soon as movement out of the camps began in 2007, so did former LRA begin to report being dispossessed of their land by other members of the community, sometimes with the collusion of clan authorities. Those who were with the rebels for a long time, those who were born with the rebels and are unsure of their father’s family, and women whose husbands were in the bush or died in the bush were said to face particular problems—they may ‘have no relatives left,’ as a woman who had been with the LRA for eight years said. One young former LRA expressed the sentiments of many when he declared that ‘I am going to die in town here.’ As significantly, some former LRA in the rural camps expressed their intention to move to Gulu for safety once the camps were closed. It makes sense that those who match the profile of the returnees already in Gulu – those in the bush for long periods, seen as bearing significant guilt, or without strong family and clan connections – are the most likely to move to town.

The fears expressed at the beginning of the transition appear to have been justified. According to a 2010 International Organization for Migration study, ninety percent of male former LRA respondents in post-war Gulu ‘reported experiencing acute isolation and/or fear of revenge upon return,’ and over ninety percent of ‘former Lord’s Resistance Army combatants surveyed in Gulu municipality reported being unable to access land upon return’ (McKibben and Bean, 2010, p. 8). The report also gives a ‘conservative estimate’ of 2000 former LRA who have moved to Gulu because of their inability to return to the village (ibid., p. 21). Young women who were with the LRA face particular hardship; of the several hundred interviewed by IOM in Gulu, eighty-seven percent could not access land (ibid., p. 9).

Many returnees explained that they would only return if the government could provide them with safety in the village: as a *boda-boda* driver put it in 2007, he wanted the ‘government to follow them back home so that their security is guaranteed.’ Returnees particularly expressed their desire for government protection and regulation of land issues, since they did not trust the capacity or intention of clan authorities to ensure their protection or fair access to land. That is, like many women and youth generally, LRA returnees want to bring some *kwo town* back with them to the village. But whereas for some youth and women this was seen as an aspiration, for returnees it was often seen as a necessity.

Dispossession by state and market

Land grabbing has become a major concern throughout East Africa in recent years (Daniel and Mittal, 2009), and may be seen as a form of what David Harvey has termed “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2005). African land, not labor, has become of foremost interest to global and domestic capital, leading to the creation of a surplus population whose only economic significance is as obstacles to be evicted for speculation or commercialized farming. Northern Uganda is not exempt from this trend (Mabikke, 2011), as demonstrated by the prominent case of a major Ugandan corporation, the Madhvani Group, seeking to acquire 40,000 hectares for a sugarcane plantation and processing factory. The Ugandan government is deeply invested in the project, and has deployed its usual arsenal of violence and bribery in an effort to evict the inhabitants and secure the land for the company.⁶

While there are numerous reports of other such large land grabs in the pipeline by domestic and foreign interests, thus far the Madhvani Group’s attempt is an exception to the dominant trend of smaller scale land dispossession, a trend characterized also by alliances between private capital holders and state violence. There are extensive accounts of individuals using money or political connections to acquire large tracts of land: they can secure legal cover for their acquisitions by manipulating any of a number of local judicial and administrative institutions, and then depend on the violence of the state to enforce those decisions. Due to the politicized distribution of money and privilege to the rural population by the state, there is also the possibility that those without political connections, or those belonging to the opposition, will be increasingly and disproportionately dispossessed of land.

Given the decimation of the large cattle herds held by Acholi before the war and the deep poverty into which life in the camps has cast most of the rural population, land remains the only resource left for most. Therefore, those who need money have no option but to sell their land, even if in contravention of customary rules of tenure. Sickness is just such a necessity for many: the dearth of social services in neoliberal Uganda means that those who need medical care have no choice but to sell their land. Self-inflicted land dispossession becomes the only way to survive the structural violence of the neoliberal state. These people, too, may well end up in Gulu’s slums as refuge.

Another prominent dimension is land sales by youth. Youth are incessantly blamed, in particular by older men, for selling their land without family or clan permission in order to move to town and engage in a “*boda-boda* lifestyle”: in the words of the Amuru Resident District Commissioner, “They want to get rich quick. They look at land as an asset that they can easily sell. There has been a breakdown in cultural norms. The subregion’s social fabric has been torn. It has left young people uncontrollable” (McKibben and Bean, 2010, p. 17). Of course, this discourse reflects the broader effort by older men to assert their authority over people and land, but it also reflects the desire by youth to maintain something of their urban life and not subject themselves totally to the dictates of, in their eyes, often illegitimate

elders. The *boda-boda* is, in a sense, a perfect symbol of the mobility they seek, both as a means of transport and as a means to earn enough cash to maintain a foot in town's globally-connected world. Increased land sales also reflect changed attitudes among youth towards land: instead of seeing land as a communal possession, many youth describe land as an asset to be invested in and developed for financial gain, and to be sold when it no longer makes economic sense, with the money being invested in other activities. This change in attitudes can also be traced to the ubiquitous development interventions that all young Acholi grew up with in the camps.⁷

Therefore, it is not that youth are opposed to returning to the village — many in fact state in no uncertain terms that they would like to participate in rural life — but rather that they wish to do so on their own terms. In the words of AdbuMaliq Simone, without access “to either ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’ modalities of social reproduction,” these youth “come to rely on *provisional* actions, identities and social composition” (Simone, 2004, p. 5). Youth seek to make town life and village life provisionally complementary—but this may be difficult without a restructured relation between the rural and the urban in northern Uganda, as discussed below.

Gulu today

The consequences of this rural crisis and systematic land dispossession are already being seen in Gulu. As noted, the town's population is increasing, many of whom are the new landless. Meanwhile, according to local government reports, employment opportunities are decreasing. In Gulu District as a whole, fewer than 1200 people are employed in formal sector, while just over 4000 are engaged in small businesses (Gulu District, 2012). While there are no official statistics on unemployment and underemployment, it is said to be high even by Ugandan standards—which has a youth unemployment rate nationally of over eighty percent! The departure of NGOs has had a major impact on employment opportunities, as has the fact that increased investment in Gulu has not led to increased employment, focused as it has apparently been on property speculation.

The lack of employment and swelling population have led to increasing poverty since the end of the war. Nationally, the proportion of people below the poverty line decreased between 2004 and 2011 (from over 50% to 32%); in Gulu, between 2004 and 2007 the proportion similarly decreased (from 50% to 42.8%), only to spike immediately after the war, rising to 69% in 2009/2010 (Gulu Municipal Council, 2011). Poverty's increase has occurred in tandem with the expansion of slums. Over seventy percent of Gulu's population lives in huts or other types of makeshift housing, and the Municipal Council warns that informal and illegal structures are “mushrooming” (ibid.). In fact, so serious is the expansion of slums that, in 2011, the municipality planning report declared that the most important intervention

needed to reduce poverty is the “Decongestion, return and resettlement of IDPs/Slums [which is] key to eradication of poverty in the Division.”

Along with growing slums and unemployment, crime is also reported to be on the rise—again, in contrast to a declining national crime rate. A spate of murders in early 2012 were the subject of intense anxiety in town, but of more general concern is the broad rise in robbery, theft, and assault, especially in the slums.⁸ Many of these crimes are reportedly related to the increase of drunkenness, which the Municipal Council says is at an “alarming level.” There is also a minor moral panic among district leaders about the purportedly vastly increasing number of sex workers in the municipality. According to government statistics, in fact, Gulu has the highest rate of HIV infection in the country. The numbers of street children are rising, and malnutrition has become an urban problem.

In the midst of this increasing deprivation, there has been a new influx of money into Gulu, as diaspora Acholi, the politically connected, military officers, and other local elites take advantage of the peace to buy land and build ostentatious new houses or upscale hotels. This has led to gentrification, as a new wave of gated houses with razor wire and private security have gone up. Thus, as with neoliberal urbanization elsewhere, the dispossession of the many is paired with the concentration of wealth in a few, as the former are left living, often literally, in the shadow of the walls protecting the latter. Walking around town, it almost feels that there is more armed security in Gulu today than during the war—which is perhaps not surprising, given that the acquisition of land is leading to dispossession in and around Gulu itself, driving up land prices, and forcing more people into even worse slums. But most of the houses and hotels sit empty, as those buying them prefer to live in Kampala or abroad—thus ensuring that the city does not develop while the slums expand. Even when infrastructure development occurs, it occurs at the expense of the poor, not for their benefit, as seen with new roads being constructed to facilitate the Kampala-Juba trade, which uproot poor neighborhoods in the service of the business elites controlling the trade (Dunovant, 2011, p. 43). The much-touted “peace dividend” is accruing to the rich, as conspicuous consumption in cars and houses cannot but create even more resentment among the poor, who have seen no material benefit from peace.

The consequence is that, in coming years, Gulu might see a shift from war to some form of urban violence, as the factors that had helped prevent upheaval in Gulu during the previous phase of displacement are largely absent today. First, today’s displaced do not see their residence in town as a temporary sojourn, but rather face the possibility of living there permanently. Without hope of returning, this new population might be unwilling to endure the same levels of deprivation the previous internally displaced population was willing to endure. Second, even as employment opportunities decline, there is no place for the unemployed to go. Instead of the rural camps being a safety valve for Gulu, Gulu’s slums are a safety valve for the crisis of rural society—but how long it can remain so without bursting itself is unknown. Third, instead of seeing town life as a superior alternative to life in camps, as the

previous displaced population did, for many of today's displaced people in Gulu, town life is an inferior alternative to life in the village, and especially inferior to the preferred option of having one foot in the village and one in town. Finally, whereas the previous displaced population in town retained tight social bonds and was often displaced with families or neighbours from their home village, today's displaced are a more anomic group, comprised of those who have lost their family and social ties, former LRA, and the very poor. Together, this new conjuncture is giving rise to tensions that might cause increasing urban violence or provide a recruitment ground for government militias or rebels.

The Ugandan state's response, however, has been predictable: despite the fact that it foresaw increased unemployment and poverty as far back as 2007 (Republic of Uganda, 2007b, p. 77), the state's most noticeable interventions have been the politicized distribution of resources and the intimidation of those parts of the population that might protest. Almost every day fighter jets roar overhead – these are the planes bought by the Ugandan government in 2011 for three-quarters of a billion dollars, conducting training exercises, apparently preparing for an unnamed future war.

Avoiding conflict in Gulu will be dependent upon a host of initiatives, mostly focused on securing inclusive land access and increasing employment—neither of which seems to be a central concern in neoliberal Uganda. Through an urban lens, the question will be whether Gulu's growing population, even if not re-integrated into the village, might become productive, willing participants in a new urban Acholi society. This urban society could have significant political importance, as the possibilities for open deliberation and discussion within the public sphere that are inherent to urban life can be capitalised upon in order to promote an inclusive, democratic process. If this can happen, then sustainable peace and justice in Acholiland may end up being built upon the very changes that were brought into being by war and displacement, instead of being precluded by them.

Such an outcome would also involve re-thinking the relation between urban and rural in northern Uganda, taking into account the irreversible changes that transpired during the war. It is too late to think that an idealized pre-war rural order can be returned to: too many youth expect some *kwo town* and will ensure mobility in their lives; too many former LRA are stuck in town and need productive livelihoods there; and too many women are unwilling to submit to re-established male authority. Perhaps one way to help establish a sustainable relation between the rural and the urban is to create lines of mobility between them, allowing those who wish to have a foot in each. A new focus is also needed on the urban margins, the zones that are today being polarized between dense, unsafe slums and empty, fortified homes and hotels, and to undo this polarization by bringing some of the village into the edges of the city.

Post-war northern Uganda demonstrates the broad need for new urbanisms in contemporary Africa, in which the urban remains an open question and is not subordinated to a Eurocentric

normative framework of ‘the city.’⁹ Throughout Africa, new configurations of the urban are emerging at the same time that small farming, often based on customary tenure, remains the only viable livelihood for most of the population today and into the future. Urbanisms that respond to this heterogeneity of the urban, while also recognizing the continued centrality of the rural, require practical experimentation and theoretical explication. This inclusive praxis should occur within a normative framework not of a ‘city’ that may never be, but of an equal insistence upon the right to the urban and the right to the rural.

Endnotes

- 1 For convenience, I will refer to Gulu Town simply as Gulu; I will specify Gulu District where it is referred to.
- 2 In 2002, Gulu municipality's population was given at 119,430 by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2002); by 2007, division and ward leadership in Gulu municipality gave figures totalling approximately 132,000 people.
- 3 As with any situation of massive deprivation, there was certainly violence, in particular structural violence, in Gulu (Dunovant, 2011), but town was uniformly considered significantly safer and better off than the camps.
- 4 See also WFP (1997a). WFP had established a sub-office in Gulu by March 1997 (WFP 1997b).
- 5 All direct quotes in this section are from the 2007 period of research referred to in Section I.
- 6 This is based on two research trips to Lakang, Amuru District, the community being displaced by the proposed land grab, conducted in May and June, 2012.
- 7 Thanks to Lara Rosenoff Gauvin for insight on these issues.
- 8 Acting Regional Police Commissioner, Interview with author, Gulu District, 2 July 2012.
- 9 See Pieterse (2009) for a recent expression of this imperative.

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