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WORD WARS

COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ARMED CONFLICT BETWEEN THE LRA AND
THE NRM GOVERNMENT IN NORTHERN UGANDA (1986-2006)

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Julia Vorhölter

WORD WARS

COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ARMED CONFLICT BETWEEN THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY AND THE NRM GOVERNMENT IN NORTHERN UGANDA (1986-2006)

ABSTRACT

This working paper analyses how representations of the war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government have evolved and changed over the past decades. I argue that one can discern and compare two more or less coherent discourses: a fairly uncritical and largely pro-government discourse which lays its primary focus on the LRA, its violence and seeming irrationality, and a counter discourse which tries to look beyond the LRA and which is highly critical of the Ugandan government's involvement in the war. The analysis shows how complex social realities (like wars), are ordered into coherent (but often competing) narratives over time.

Dieses Working Paper analysiert wie Darstellungen des Krieges zwischen der Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) und der ugandischen Regierung sich über die vergangenen Jahrzehnte entwickelt und verändert haben. Ich argumentiere, dass sich dabei zwei mehr oder weniger kohärente Diskurse unterscheiden und vergleichen lassen: ein relativ unkritischer und tendenziell pro-Regierungs-Diskurs, der seinen Fokus auf die LRA, ihre Gewalt und scheinbare Irrationalität legt, und einen Gegendiskurs, der versucht den engen Fokus auf die LRA zu überwinden und eine kritische Perspektive auf die Rolle der ugandischen Regierung im Krieg propagiert. Die Analyse zeigt, wie komplexe soziale Realitäten (wie Kriege) mit der Zeit in kohärente, aber oftmals widersprüchliche Narrative geordnet werden.

INTRODUCTION

In his recent publication *Holy War, Holy Profit – Africa as New Battlefield of International Terrorism*¹ (2004), German journalist Marc Engelhardt describes Joseph Kony, notorious leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), as the "terror pioneer" of Africa. In his chapter on Kony, Engelhardt reproduces some of the bluntest myths and media speculations about the LRA, its leader and their role in the war in Northern Uganda (1986–2006). In short, Kony and the LRA are described as psychopathic, barbaric and mystical actors who murdered and abducted in the name of the ten commandments and, for a quarter of a century, have caused immense suffering among the people in Northern Uganda and its neighboring countries. This media narrative on the so-called LRA war, which builds on two widespread images of Africans – as irrational, violent rebels (the LRA) and as helpless victims (abducted children, raped women, and the civilian population in general) – has existed since the 1990s. In 2012, it experienced hitherto unreached international recognition through the documentary *Kony 2012*, produced by the U.S. American organization Invisible Children (2012a), which was spread via Facebook and YouTube and was watched by millions of people worldwide within days after it was first uploaded.² Like Engelhardt's text, the film provides a sensationalist account of the 'evil and mad' Joseph Kony and calls on the international community to rescue the African victims of his terror. Both journalist and filmmakers adopt a highly patronizing attitude and, in order to support their mission, present a very selective and sensationalist version of historical facts.

In this paper, I draw attention to the way a narrow and uncritical version of Joseph Kony, the LRA and the historical events in Northern Uganda, as exemplified by Engelhardt and Invisible Children, has come to dominate international media and political discourses. In so doing, I do not call into question the violence and suffering caused by the LRA in Uganda and, more recently in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR), nor do I want reproduce a standardized criticism of sensationalist reportings on African wars.³ Rather, I want to show how this particular representation of

¹ Translated by J.V. from original German title "Heiliger Krieg, heiliger Profit – Afrika als neues Schlachtfeld des internationalen Terrorismus".

² On March 5th, 2012, Invisible Children released the film as part of a campaign to call attention to the LRA and its leader Joseph Kony and to lobby for a large-scale military intervention to capture Kony. In the 30-minute film, American Jason Russel, founding member of Invisible Children and director of the film, talks to his five-year old son Gavin about the war in Northern Uganda and the "bad guy" Joseph Kony. Using very emotional language and images, the film contrasts Gavin's life as a child growing up in the U.S.A. with the life of Jacob, a Ugandan friend of Russel, who grew up in Northern Uganda during the war and experienced terrible suffering due to Kony and the LRA. Russel states that his motivation for the campaign is that children across the globe should grow up in a better world and calls upon the international internet community to support his mission.

³ For a good overview of such criticism see for instance Marthoz (2007), Allen & Seaton (1999), Falola & ter Haar (2010).

the war has evolved over the past decades and how it persists despite the fact that several scholars have published convincing and influential critical analyses which challenge its main assumptions.

More specifically, I want to show that one can, in fact, discern and compare two more or less coherent discourses on the war: the fairly uncritical and largely pro-NRM⁴-government discourse which is cited in international media, and a counter discourse which is highly critical of the government's involvement in the conflict and which for a long time only resonated among the people as well as critical scholars of Northern Uganda. The relatively stable strategic coalitions which have produced and disseminated these discourses have only recently begun to change, and new ones have emerged.⁵

As my title suggests, wars are fought not only at the level of practice, but also at the level of representation. This is not a particularly revolutionary insight, but what is interesting about this case is that despite, or maybe even because of, the myriad of research that has been published on the war in Northern Uganda in recent years, the complexity of representing the war and reconciling the different versions is seldom discussed. It is the manner in which complex social realities (like wars), are ordered into coherent (but often competing) narratives over time that is the focus of this paper. Taking a discourse-analytical approach, I do not claim to reveal what actually happened in Northern Uganda since the 1980s but instead concentrate on the (different) representations of these events. Drawing on Reiner Keller's *Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse* (cf. Keller 1997; 2005; 2006; 2007), I reveal how certain interpretations of historical events have become established as 'truths' and how these have had a profound effect on subsequent historical developments as well as their interpretations. This is not to claim that the historical events or actions in themselves are not true or 'real'. Rather, I look at the way that, often in retrospect, they have become fitted into a particular narrative which itself has then influenced (the interpretation of) future events. In doing so, I am inspired by Ian Hacking's notion of the "indeterminacy of the past" (1995: Chap. 17), i.e. the idea that – in a very ontological sense – as new interpretative framework (what he calls new descriptions) emerge, the past can be retroactively redescribed or rewritten. In this paper, I am interested precisely in these rewritings of the past, and the discrepancies that emerge when the past is 'fitted' into different story lines. Further drawing on Hacking, it may be helpful to think of the reconstruction of events at three different levels: the level of actuality, i.e. the 'real' event as it would be captured in a camera recording (Hacking, 1995:246),⁶ the interpretation of the event at the time of happening, and the interpretation of the event in retrospect when new possibilities for interpretation have emerged. According to Hacking (1995:243) "we rewrite the past, not because we find out more about it, but because we present actions under new descriptions". The main focus of this paper is on the third level.

The analysis is based mainly on an extensive review of the literature,⁷ but sometimes also refers to interviews and conversations which I carried out during fieldwork for my dissertation thesis in Northern Uganda between 2009 and 2011 (Vorhölter 2014). The aim of the paper is twofold: first, on the level of content, I present a systematic and

⁴ NRM is the acronym for National Resistance Movement which first emerged as the 'political wing' of Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) and, from 1986 until 2005, governed the country's non-partisan movement political system. Today, after the restoration of multi-party politics in 2005, the NRM is one, albeit the most powerful, of several political parties which compete in Uganda's electoral system.

⁵ The latter is especially the case when one looks at recent framings of the LRA activities in DRC, South Sudan and CAR as analyzed by Titeca & Costeur (2014).

⁶ Obviously, the less we know about the 'actual event', the greater the scope for interpretation. Titeca & Costeur (2014:3–4; 9–10) provide a good example of this in their analysis of recent framings of the LRA, where there are hardly any 'hard facts' on the actual capacities and aims of the LRA, leaving space for a wide variety of interpretations.

⁷ In recent years, there has been an explosive increase in research and literature dealing with the war in Northern Uganda, not all of which I have been able to view. My analysis in this paper is based on the most commonly cited texts, most of which were written by social scientists (commonly cited popular texts, books and films were also included, albeit to a minor extent) and published during and especially in the immediate years after the war, i.e. roughly between 1990 and 2012.

comprehensive overview of the vast literature which has been written on the so-called LRA war since the 1990s and analyze how discourses on the war in Northern Uganda have unfolded and changed in recent years. Second, on the level of methodology, I demonstrate an approach to deal with conflicting accounts of historical events which makes differences in interpretations visible rather than trying to come up with a singular version of the past. In other words, I aim to historicize rather than essentialize the past (cf. Branch 2014:628). This in itself does not solve the problem of always being confronted with and having to choose between competing 'subjective' accounts. It does reveal, however, how rarely the multiplicity of interpretations of a past event is actually revealed and openly acknowledged, and how thereby certain singular readings of the past become uncritically reproduced and eventually accepted as objective truths.⁸ A related and important field of study – which can only be superficially addressed in this paper – would focus not only on identifying which texts and reports become regarded as authoritative sources, in which contexts and why, but would furthermore analyze the social, political and economic positioning of a particular discourse's representatives and how this positioning and the interests connected to it affect their choices of a particular discourse.⁹ Such an approach would also enable a more comprehensive examination of 'discourse coalitions' (for instance between media and humanitarian industry, between local/international media and local/international politics, or between humanitarian industry and academia) and of the ruptures and changes that occur within such coalitions.

In this paper, however, I concentrate on tracing and comparing different accounts of the particular historical events which make up or 'cluster around' the war in Northern Uganda. In the first part, I briefly introduce the context and analytical framework of my analysis before then moving on to the pre-war history which is often cited in contemporary analyses of the war between the LRA and the NRM. The main part of the paper then compares the two major discourses of the war that have evolved over time, as well as their respective proponents.

⁸ In a recent article, Tim Allen (2015:105-108) gives a fascinating (and shocking) account of how interpretations, once established as supposedly objective facts, are nearly impossible to contest. He gives the example of the widely established claim that the war in Northern Uganda had led to a massive increase in HIV/AIDS infections, which was taken as a main 'entry point' for humanitarian organizations to intervene in the conflict-affected areas. Allen traces this assumption back to a widely cited World Vision report based on highly dubious internet statistics whose data and analysis were never questioned (and at the time of Allen's research, it seems, could no longer be questioned), but which nevertheless served to justify a particular humanitarian approach with wide-ranging consequences up until today.

⁹ For a good example of such an analytical framework, see Titeca & Costeur (2014).

IN SEARCH OF THE 'TRUTH' – CONTRADICTIONARY REPORTINGS ON THE WAR

Analyzing and writing about wars is always a difficult endeavor. First, because wars are complex and messy and thus nearly impossible to represent in detached, analytical scientific writing. Second, because even the most neutral and thorough analysis is always enmeshed in a web of discourses and power relations and is therefore 'biased', or to use a less negative phrasing, only one interpretation of the truth. To most social scientists the insight that accounts of historical events are always collectively negotiated and constructed, and that different versions or orders of knowledge may be contested among different societal groups, may not be very surprising. Nevertheless, few openly acknowledge the multiplicity of possible interpretations of a given event and rather uncritically and often unconsciously promote one interpretation which they present as historical fact.

It was during my fieldwork in Northern Uganda (2010 and early 2011) that I became aware not only of the incompatibility of different historical accounts of the war, but also of their consequences for a whole range of issues and situations which had nothing to do with the war as such, particularly ethnic relations between Acholi and non-Acholi Ugandans.¹⁰ Two perspectives dominated popular discourses on the war in the North: the Acholi (or more broadly Northerner) perspective which I found among most of my Acholi interlocutors and which was also represented by Acholi politicians and critical scholars of Northern Uganda; and the government version which dominated media and popular discourses (Leopold 1999), particularly outside of the Acholi subregion, and to a lesser extent also academic discourses. The Acholi presented themselves as victims not only of the LRA but also of the Museveni government and of post-independence history more generally.¹¹ By contrast, the government version (at least the initial one adopted while the war was still ongoing), presented all Acholi people as potential supporters of Joseph Kony and emphasized that historically the Acholi were known to be an uncivilized, dangerous, and martial tribe. This image of the Acholi originates in colonial times, during which a disproportionate number of Acholi were recruited for the King Rifles Army, and has been reinforced and intensified in recent years through statements by the Ugandan government and media reporting on the LRA rebels, and particularly on their leader Joseph Kony (Finnström 2008:74f./78ff.; Leopold 1999) – with very real effects. In conversations with non-Acholi Ugandans, I often found that they blamed the Acholi for much of the postcolonial

¹⁰ The Acholi are one of the larger ethnic groups in Northern Uganda (approx. 5% of the total population) and were the one most involved and affected by the war –as LRA fighters and NRM opponents and as victims, of both the LRA and the government.

¹¹ Below I briefly discuss the complex role the Acholi have played in post-independence politics, which immediately affected their positioning in the 1986-2006 war.

violence in Uganda generally, and the war in Northern Uganda in particular (cf. Finnström 2006a:204). In conversations with Acholi, on the other hand, I was often told about their experience of being called “Kony” and being feared by non-Acholi when they traveled to other parts of Uganda. The following statement by a university student, who had gone to high school in Western Uganda, is a typical example:

“The first two weeks I had a lot of problems, in fact people, the whole school feared me, the only word they call you is Kony, they relate you to the real rebel leader (...), everywhere you go ‘Kony, Kony, Kony. See that Kony?’ They thought everybody from here is too rough and too tough (...). Sometimes, in those places like Central Uganda, Kampala (...) people still call you a *Mukoko*, which means animal in their language. They call us from the North an animal...”¹²

During my fieldwork in Gulu, people often tried to teach me the ‘real’ history of Uganda according to which the Acholi were largely the victims of the colonial and postcolonial state. Sometimes people encouraged me to tell other Ugandans about my positive experiences among the Acholi, and asserted that my research would surely contribute to rectifying the negative image of the Acholi (cf. RLP 2004:23). In Kampala, on the other hand, I sometimes encountered Ugandans who warned me about the Acholi in the North. Thus, two contradictory images of the Acholi, as victims and as perpetrators, dominated Ugandan discourses, and which of them was invoked depended largely on the context and the speaker.

In recent years, the discourse seems to have shifted slightly. While stereotypes of the impulsive or aggressive Acholi are still very much alive in Western and Central Uganda,¹³ Northern Uganda and its people have predominantly come to represent a place of trauma, suffering and victimhood. Many people I talked to in Kampala during a recent stay (2015) expressed their pity and sympathy for the people in the North, who they thought still faced many difficulties as a result of the war. In Northern Uganda, while discourses on the historic and contemporary marginalization of the Acholi still prevail, political discourses have become much less ‘clear cut’ and positions are based on more short-lived, individualist and utilitarian motives rather than simple North-South antagonisms (Vorhölter *forthcoming*; cf. Allen 2015:115–116).

Different versions of the Acholi, the war and Ugandan history more generally are not only found in people’s minds and reflected in daily conversations. They are also reproduced in the social science literature, albeit to a lesser extent (cf. Bogner & Rosenthal 2012:137). While the major historical occurrences are not disputed, the devil is in the details. Only after returning from my PhD research and rereading some of my writing on Ugandan history that I had produced before entering the field, and which was mainly based on analyses of social scientists who had not carried out extensive research in Northern Uganda, did I notice how they differed not only from popular Acholi perceptions of Ugandan history (cf. Dolan 2009:Chap. 3), but also from articles on Ugandan history by Acholi social scientists (e.g. Lucima 2002) and by ethnographers of contemporary Acholiland (see below). The difficulty of reconstructing Ugandan history based on oral and written sources is captured in the following statement by Vincent (1999:123):

“I have referred several times to the difficulty of finding or trusting either written or oral sources relating to war in postcolonial Uganda. Experience has taught the people of Uganda that the powerholders of today may be overthrown by the powerholders of yesteryear, and, without the dangerous courage of an ideological commitment to speak out, journalists and those interviewed carefully and deliberately fashion their words, I would suggest, with double tongues. One may read what one will into their messages”.

¹² Interview with Ojok, in his early 20s, Gulu, 31.03.2010.

¹³ A common stereotype, for instance, that I encountered during a recent (2015) stay in Kampala when talking to Baganda and Banyankole students was that Acholi men on campus were known to be extremely jealous, passionate and sometimes violent lovers.

With regard to the war in Northern Uganda more specifically, different authors have recognized the various framings of the armed conflict and its root causes – by the conflict parties as well as by the media and other outside analysts – not only as a ‘scientific challenge’ but also as a practical problem to ending the war (Leopold 1999; Westbrook 2000:7). A report by the Refugee Law Project (RLP 2004:7) states:

“The absence of a consensus on the core causes of the war partly explains why there is no consensus on how to end the war. (...) [C]ompeting analyses [of the root causes] paralyze conflict resolution efforts, as key actors lack a firm consensus on which issues to address in resolving the conflict.”

When trying to give a brief overview of the conflict in my PhD thesis, I was thus confronted not only with a massive amount of literature that has been produced on the war in recent years, but also with a plethora of perspectives. The challenge and impossibility of presenting a coherent overview of this literature and the war led me to adopt a specific methodological approach which enabled me to place discrepancies and contradictions in the centre of my analysis. Drawing on Keller, I analyzed the war in Northern Uganda by using a sociology-of-knowledge approach to discourse analysis (*wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse*, cf. Keller 1997; 2005; 2006; 2007), which I briefly summarize in the following section.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

According to Keller (2006:115), *wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse* involves first reconstructing the processes of social construction, objectivation, transmission and legitimation of structures of interpretation and action at the level of institutions, organizations and social actors, and second, discerning the societal effects of these processes. This can include analyzing the emergence of specific discourses (including their power-knowledge constellations), their changes over time, the topics and audiences they address, the latent and manifest contents and convictions they convey, as well as the relationships between different, competing discourses (Keller 1997:318f.). Keller (2005:9–10; 2007:10ff.) has suggested four categories for the analysis of societal knowledge relations and politics of knowledge: *interpretative schemes*, *classifications*, *phenomenal structures* and *narrative structures*.

Interpretative schemes emerge over time and are interactively produced. They help social actors to interpret worldly phenomena, and provide practical orientation in daily life – in solving problems, in interactions with others, or in understanding and reacting to social processes and events. Interpretative schemes are transmitted through socialization processes but also, for instance, through the media. In discourses, different interpretative schemes of social phenomena are combined in specific ways. In my analysis, I show how certain hegemonic interpretative schemes of events in Ugandan colonial and postcolonial history have emerged over time and gained high symbolic relevance in contemporary representations of the war in Northern Uganda. These schemes have not only served to produce a dominant narrative of Ugandan history, but have in fact heavily influenced the actions and practices of social actors and thus fundamentally shaped and continue to shape historical developments in Uganda (see below).

Classifications, not only structure reality, but help social actors to experience reality in the first place. Classifications in this sense have a performative effect. Keller names the common example of ethnic categorizing, which can fundamentally shape self-perception as well as the perception by and of others (Keller 2007:12–13). In my example I will outline how classifications of the war in Northern Uganda are heavily contested between competing discourses, and how different classifications, for instance of the war's root causes or its major conflict parties, have had profound effects on suggested interventions and solutions to end the war.

Phenomenal structures establish causal connections between different elements of a discourse. They are necessary to convincingly construct an issue as a problem or concern and to place it on the public agenda. Different argumentative, dramatizing or evaluating statements can serve to define a topic in a particular way, establish certain interpretations of cause and effect, ascribe responsibilities and subject positions, or suggest possible courses

of action. In my analysis below, in which I discern two major and competing discourses on the war, I present a detailed analysis of the phenomenal structure of each, and demonstrate that they frame their respective interpretations of key analytical dimensions (for instance origin of the war, possible solutions, positioning of key actors, value attributions) very differently.

Lastly, *narrative structures* serve to establish a coherent story line of a discourse over a longer time span. Keller (2007:16) states that narrative structures are those structuring moments of statements and discourses which are related to each other in specific ways through patterns of interaction, classification and phenomenal structures. In making use of narrative structures, discourses become stories with a coherent plot, which can be convincingly communicated to a broader audience. Once established, a story line limits the range of possible interpretations of a given event. One may also find that certain events cannot be convincingly integrated into an established story line. The recent developments and activities of the LRA after the end of its operations in Uganda might well be such a case (cf. Titeca & Costeur 2014; see below). Keller argues that collective actors (for instance social scientists, journalists, NGOs) may form a coalition to raise public awareness of a problem by using a common basic story line. In my analysis of discourses on the war in Northern Uganda, I outline different narrative structures used by proponents of competing discourses. I further show how the discourses and their story lines have developed and been altered over time due to shifts in power structures and interpretation hegemonies, and in order to accommodate recent events.

Social scientists and academic institutions, among many other social actors, produce knowledge which, depending on the economic and political constellations, may be accepted as truths. According to Foucault (cited in Keller 2006:126–127), knowledge is always a form and effect of power, a power to establish one version of reality or truth, while excluding others. In my analysis, I was interested to find out not only how different narratives and types of interpretation of the war varied, but also how hegemonies of interpretation changed over time. In the following, I will first reconstruct the elements of Ugandan history which are necessary to understand the war in Northern Uganda. Thereby, I will present the hegemonic version, i.e. relatively uncontested historical facts, but also point out those aspects, which are highly disputed.¹⁴ I will start my analysis by tracing the (proclaimed) origins of the war to the times of British colonial rule in Uganda,¹⁵ and end by looking at the more recent debates, which directly concern the armed conflict and its impacts on Northern Uganda.

¹⁴ The analysis of all the contested elements would be enough material for a study of its own. As my main focus lies elsewhere, I will concentrate on the major points of debate, which are relevant to understanding interpretations of the war in Northern Uganda.

¹⁵ At this stage I will not focus on the precolonial era – for a summary of precolonial developments in Northern Uganda see Girling 1960:135ff..

COLONIAL TIMES: DOMINANT INTERPRETATIVE SCHEMES AND CRITICAL DEBATES

Colonial Rule as a Foundation of Contemporary Conflicts

1884 marked the beginning of the British Protectorate in Uganda. It is generally undisputed that the colonial rule by the British laid the foundation for many of the subsequent conflicts in postcolonial Uganda, particularly along ethnic and regional lines. Branch (2011:45) states that “ethnicity and the state have been in a dynamic, mutually dependent relationship ever since the establishment of indirect rule in the early twentieth century”. Similarly, Ndikumana and Nannyonjo (2007:17) remark that postcolonial antagonisms “were the outcomes of a colonial system of political control that transformed ethnicity from a latent factor into a primordial determinant of access to power and economic advancement”.

In the literature on Northern Uganda, the origins of the contemporary conflicts are often traced back to colonial times. The dominant interpretative scheme suggests that from the beginning, the British privileged the Southern ethnic groups. In colonial discourses, ethnic groups in Northern Uganda such as the Acholi were seen as inferior to the ethnic groups in Southern and Central Uganda, particularly the Baganda. This was largely due to their different form of political organization (Finnström 2006a:203–204). While the Baganda and other ethnic groups in the South such as the Bunyoro, Batoro, Ankole and Busoga (cf. Tripp 2010:42) were organized as centralized kingdoms – which thoroughly impressed the British (Vincent 1999:111) – many groups in the North had only very loose and decentralized forms of political organization beyond the level of the lineage, and some did not even perceive themselves as members of one ethnic group at all. Under British colonial rule the Buganda Kingdom was given a privileged role in governing the country – Vincent (1999:109) even goes as far as saying that “colonial sovereignty rested on Baganda sub-imperialism” – which has led to a complicated role of Buganda in the postcolonial state until today. As Tripp (2010:42) asserts, this legacy of privileged treatment under and collaboration with the British during colonialism has made Buganda “a thorn in the side of every post-independence Ugandan government”.¹⁶

According to the dominant interpretative scheme, the decentralized political systems of the Acholi and other Northern groups were not as easy to incorporate into the colonial system of indirect rule as the more centralized kingdoms. Therefore, instead of relying on

¹⁶ On the special role of Buganda during colonialism and subsequent Ugandan politics see for instance Low & Pratt (1960), Apter (1967) and Karlström (1996; 2004).

lineage heads and local chiefs (in Acholi: sg.: *rwot*, pl.: *rwod*), the British installed their own 'government chiefs' who were responsible for collecting taxes and organizing communal labour in Acholiland beyond the level of individual lineages. A common interpretation is that this policy eventually led to a disintegration of the different subgroups throughout Acholiland, and the importance of organizing in lineages decreased. At the same time, the central administration of Acholiland and the decreasing importance of the individual subgroups resulted in the emergence of an "Acholi consciousness" (Girling 1960:201), which has led some authors to conclude that the notion of the Acholi as an ethnic group was created by the colonial administration. I will discuss this point in more detail below.

A further, commonly emphasized aspect in the literature is that the colonial administration effectuated massive changes in the local economic organization, mainly through the monetization of the economy and the introduction of cotton as a cash crop. The Acholi population, which formerly relied on subsistence farming, was forced to cultivate cotton in order to be able to pay taxes. For the same reason, the colonial state encouraged labour migration of Northerners to the South, where the main economic developments were centred. According to Branch (2011:50), many Acholi were also recruited to become civil servants, and an educated Acholi elite started to emerge – a factor that is often neglected in the literature (see discussion below). After some initial hesitation, the British also recruited large numbers of Acholi into the King's African Rifles (particularly with the onset of World War I), and into the semi-military services of the police and prison department (Finnström 2006a:204). This fact is always mentioned (and sometimes overemphasized) in the literature dealing with the war in Northern Uganda. In a typical vein, a report by the International Crisis Group notes that "[t]he Acholi in particular had been told by their colonial masters that they were born warriors, effectively transforming them into a military ethnocracy" (ICG 2004:2).

Some authors point out that after the Second World War, when the anti-colonial struggle started to emerge mainly in the South of Uganda, soldiers from the North including many Acholi were also deployed by the British to fight anti-colonial revolts (Tripp 2010:133). Mamdani (1983:10) writes that "[t]he colonial view that northerners were 'martial' peoples was simply racist hogwash; the simple truth was that northern peasants were put in uniform to crush the resistance of the southern peasantry."

In any case, the North-South divide of the country installed under the colonial administration (and the narrative, which constantly reemphasizes this fact) has had long-lasting consequences for the political history of Uganda and still plays a major role in the conflicts (and their interpretations) of the country today (Mamdani 1976:133; Ndikumana & Nannyonjo 2007:16ff.). Similarly, ethnic classifications and ascriptions given to certain ethnic groups – such as claims that the Acholi are militant – have their origins in colonial ideologies, but have since profoundly shaped social relations in Uganda. As Vincent (1999:109) states:

"Imperial times bred colonial places and the hegemonic moment reified languages and cultures, tribes and bounded districts, and codified them. In Uganda, this lasted for the first sixty years of the twentieth century. Not pre-colonial animosities but modern state formation bred ethnic and regional conflict."

In most points, the accounts of Ugandan colonial history converge. The dominant interpretative scheme acknowledges the devastating effects of colonialism and the basis it provided for subsequent ethnic tensions and conflicts. Ndikumana and Nannyonjo (2007:16) summarize the three main channels through which the British colonial administration "sowed the seeds of ethnic antagonism": first, the division of Uganda into several ethnically demarcated areas and the privileged status given to the Baganda as collaborators in the administration of the country; second, the promotion of racial theories according to which some ethnic groups (i.e. the Baganda) were taken to be superior to other ethnic groups; and third, the concentration of economic and educational development in

the South and the military power in the North of Uganda. However, there are also contested issues which I will now briefly discuss.

Ethnicity, Regionalism, and the Marginalization of the Acholi?

In this section, I will point out debates and incongruities in the academic literature (and popular accounts) of Ugandan colonial history, which are relevant to understanding different analyses of the war in Northern Uganda. The first topic of debate concerns the origins of an 'ethnic consciousness' among the Acholi, the second concerns the origins and the extent of Acholi marginalization in the colonial (and later the postcolonial) state. Both ethnicity as well as the regionally uneven development in Uganda are often singled out as root causes of the war in Northern Uganda, which originated in colonial times. Evidently, both factors have shaped conflict realities and processes, and the way they are dealt with. However, as Vincent (1999:110ff.) has pointed out in her analysis of the Teso war (in the Eastern part of Northern Uganda), one must always carefully dissect how these explanations have been constructed and culturally produced in academic as well as in public discourses (cf. Keller 2006; 2007).

The first point of contestation concerns the question of whether the Acholi existed as an ethnic group before colonial times at all. This point is important because contemporary imaginations and interpretative schemes of a 'typical Acholi society' and of 'traditional Acholi culture' are frequently related to a pre-colonial past, and instrumentalized in national political debates (e.g. on cultural institutions) and in peace-building discourses, where 'cultural revival' is seen by some humanitarian organizations as a means to recreate social stability by reconstructing 'traditional cultural practices' (cf. for instance Pain 1997 and Liu Institute for Global Issues 2005; for a recent critical perspective see Branch, 2014). Historians and anthropologists working in Northern Uganda have long debated whether the Acholi existed as a distinct ethnic group before colonial times. Some researchers (e.g. Allen 2006:26; Behrend 1993:23; Branch 2014:621; Schäfer 2008:332; Vincent 1999:109) argue that the notion of an Acholi ethnic group was only created by the colonial administration. Others, notably Atkinson (1994, 1999), Dwyer (1972: 12), and authors in the edited volume by Onyango-Odongo and Webster (1976; the two latter references both cited in Finnström 2008:52), trace the origins of the Acholi to precolonial times and claim that Acholi collective belonging is not (just) a colonial intervention.

The debate is partly about classifications and collective terms (e.g. when the ethnonym Acholi was first used and by whom), and about the related question of when a collective Acholi self-consciousness first began to emerge. Girling (1960:Chap. 9) claims that before colonial times, lineages and domains were the most relevant categories of social organization. With the arrival of the first missionaries and the onset of colonial rule, these bonds started to dissolve, while the individual household became the most important institution. At the same time, he argues, something like an overall "Acholi consciousness" was born (ibid.:201–202). Finnström (2008:39), with reference to Girling, explains the missionaries' role in creating this Acholi consciousness:

"The missionaries encouraged the production of various vernacular texts dealing with Acholi history and culture, in which Acholi writers played an important part along with the missionaries. (...) [A] variety of localized Acholi myths and histories were systemized, standardized, printed and distributed widely, with the potential of promoting a higher degree of cultural coherence throughout Acholiland."

It is not possible and also not necessary to come to a final conclusion regarding the 'true' origins of the Acholi. What is important is that today a (however-defined) collective Acholi identity exists and has powerful effects (cf. Vorhölter 2014:Chap. 4) and, as Allen (1994:115) argues, "in spite of their limitations as analytical devices, these old [ethnic]

labels have the advantage of being categories used by actors themselves". However, ethnic classifications like "the Acholi" always also reinforce the notion of static, primordial identities and disguise the fact that these labels were – at least to some extent – reified as distinct categories only by the colonial administration (Allen 1994:113ff.; cf. Lentz 2006).¹⁷ Thus, they should be treated with caution. Particularly, when using ethnicity to explain the roots and processes of armed conflicts, differentiated analyses which go beyond emic conceptualizations are crucial (cf. Schlee 2006). As I will later discuss, different discourses on the war in Northern Uganda attribute different relevance to ethnicity as a root cause of the conflict. While the *official discourse* reinforces the dominant interpretative scheme and primordial classification of the Acholi, the *counter discourse* seeks to deconstruct and contextualize Acholi ethnicity and opposes classifications of the war as an ethnic conflict (see Table 1 and discussion below).

A second point of incongruity in the literature on colonial history, which to date has not gained much recognition, concerns the role of the Acholi in the colonial state. According to the dominant interpretative scheme, the Acholi were marginalized by the colonial administration and used only as cheap labour and as soldiers for the army (see for instance Finnström 2008:101–102; Schäfer 2008:331; Mamdani 1983:10; Doom & Vlassenroot 1999:7–8). The resultant and still continuing economic and political marginalization of the North is commonly mentioned as a root cause of the conflict(s) in Northern Uganda (Vincent 1999:110ff.).

Branch (2011:50), however, drawing on the works of Leys (1967), Sathyamurthy (1986) and Kasfir (1976), contends that the Acholi were not marginalized by the colonial state but were in fact *overly* incorporated into state apparatuses, particularly the civil service, and that it was this privileged position which led to the problems they faced in the postcolonial era. To emphasize Branch's point, which is rarely taken into account in analyses of the war, I will quote him at length:

"[t]he Acholi ended up being overrepresented in both [i.e. in the civil service and the military/police], because of a British policy of recruiting northerners to put down southern rebellions and of the lack of profitable unskilled employment opportunities in Acholiland. This situation thus belies the often-heard narrative that describes the Acholi as having been marginalized under colonialism, with their role restricted to providing military recruits; although the Acholi were indeed found in the security services, more important was their incorporation into the civil services and access to state resources. Marginalization cannot explain the roots of the conflicts in northern Uganda: instead, it is necessary to consider the particular way the Acholi were *included* in the state all the way until the purges undertaken by Idi Amin. For this reason, the exclusion of the Acholi in recent decades has to be seen in the context of the degree of privilege that they formerly enjoyed" (Branch 2011:50; emphasis in original).

The dominant interpretative scheme – used both by social scientists (e.g. Shaw & Mbabazi 2008) and the Acholi population – reinforces the idea that Northern Uganda, and Acholiland in particular, have been marginalized since colonial times and thus lag behind other regions of the country today (with regard to economic development, political representation in national politics, quality of school education etc.). The common division of Uganda into a war-torn and underdeveloped North and a prosperous, peaceful South has fundamentally shaped the perceptions of the Acholi people and has (further) alienated them from the Museveni government.¹⁸ The narrative of Acholi marginalization was also mobilized by the LRA, which cited the political and economic exclusion of the North as one

¹⁷ To draw on Hacking, once again, one could argue that ethnic labels like 'Acholi' became established as new descriptions over time which were then, retrospectively, applied to 'rewrite' the past.

¹⁸ There are certainly many indicators which suggest that economic developments and political representation have been and still are distributed very unevenly across Uganda. The IDP politics of the NRM government during the war; rumors of subsequent land grabbing by politicians from Kampala, which had been enabled through IDP policy, as well as the de-stocking of cattle by the army and the Karimojong in the 1980s and early 1990s have further reinforced this perception (van Acker, 2004: 344).

reason for its insurgency. (The contestations surrounding the supposed political reasoning and communication of the LRA are discussed below).

The hegemonic interpretation of Uganda's postcolonial history as an ongoing North-South conflict is a good example of a narrative which has fundamentally structured Ugandan realities and which has caused tangible societal effects. As Van Acker (2004:342–343) states, “[t]he fact that the pattern of economic differentiation is more complex than a straightforward north-south antagonism does not deny its perceived existence”. He further argues that

“Acholi perceptions of marginalization evidently present a picture of differentiation in Uganda that is not necessarily complete or accurate. (...) Rather than debating the accuracy of various arguments, however, what matters are the insights they offer into people's perceptions and the type of latent mobilizing power they convey for an entire generation spoon-fed on them” (ibid.:344).

As briefly mentioned above, the North-South divide plays a somewhat different role in political debates today. Following the end of the war, the Museveni regime has shown a visible interest, and has had remarkable success, in gaining votes in the former opposition stronghold of Northern Uganda (Vorhölter *forthcoming*). Imaginaries of the North as poor and backward have been superposed by the – related – image of the North as a place of trauma. In line with this shift, Gulu is no longer presented as the ‘war capital’ and hub of humanitarian assistance, but is commonly acknowledged as one of Uganda's fastest growing economic centers – which is also related to the expansion of trade opportunities in the North linked to the independence of South Sudan and Gulu's strategic position along the trade route to Juba.

Nevertheless, ethnicity and marginalization along regional and ethnic lines are two themes which have dominated the narrative accounts of and have shaped Ugandan postcolonial history, as I further demonstrate in the next section. My main focus lies on revealing the different argumentative schemes and narrative structures which emerge in the various accounts of post-colonial history, particularly after the fall of Amin, and to trace how they become manifest in different story lines which are cited in contemporary analyses of the war in Northern Uganda.

POSTCOLONIAL DEVELOPMENTS: DOMINANT INTERPRETATIVE SCHEMES & CRITICAL DEBATES

In 1962, British colonial rule ended and Uganda became an independent African state. However, independence did not bring stability to the country. On the contrary, ethnic (and religious) antagonisms, widely agreed to have been created by the colonial rulers, manifested themselves in post-independence politics and divided the country (Branch 2011:Chap.2; ICG 2004:2; Rubongoya 2007:19ff.; Ogenga Otunnu 2002:11–12). According to the dominant interpretative scheme, ethnification was a central component of the political developments in Uganda between 1962 and 1986 (and until today). However, ethnification alone cannot explain the complexities of the actual political processes in post-independence Uganda.¹⁹ Some authors acknowledge that postcolonial Ugandan governments made many attempts to prevent anti-sectarian politics, but that they largely failed in practice and are therefore often ignored in public and academic discourses (Tripp 2010:43ff.; Mamdani 2004:200–217; Vincent 1999:111; Van Acker 2004:341–242).

Upon independence, Milton Obote, a Langi from the North, became the first prime minister of Uganda and in 1963 the King of Buganda, Edward Mutesa II, became the first president of the state, demonstrating the privileged political status the Baganda had gained under the colonial administration. His rule, however, only lasted until 1966 when Obote abolished all kingdoms and Uganda became a one party state under the rule of Obote and his Ugandan People's Congress (UPC). Obote's break with Buganda is commonly interpreted as an attempt to weaken the power of Baganda and install a government and army dominated by Northerners. Ndikumana & Nannyonjo (2007:19), for instance, argue that Obote discriminated against the Buganda region "as a means of shifting the balance of power to the North" and thus perpetuated the ethnic and regional tensions and political divisions that had existed during colonial times. Tripp (2010:43ff.) and Rubongoya (2007:33ff), however, demonstrate that the background of the 1966 crisis was much more complicated than explanations based on simple ethnic or regional sectarianism would suggest (cf. also Branch 2011:53ff.). For example, both point to and analyze the role of Ugandan party politics in the crisis.

In 1971, Obote's regime was overthrown by Idi Amin, an army officer of Kakwa origin from the West Nile Region. According to the dominant interpretative scheme,²⁰ Amin was

¹⁹ Mamdani (1976), for instance, offers a Marxist analysis of class formation in Uganda and its influence on the political developments.

²⁰ The widespread interpretative scheme of Amin's regime – in Ugandan but even more in international (scholarly and popular) discourses – is often shaped by sensationalist accounts of his gruesome dealings with political opponents, his fanatical personality, and his devastating political decisions. Mamdani criticizes that the picture is more complex than these accounts would suggest. He writes: "[Their] sensational twist hides the ideological content. The trick is quite simple: a book on the Amin regime becomes a book simply on Amin, and instead of political analysis, we get an anecdotal biography" (Mamdani 1983:1).

initially welcomed by the majority of the population due to the increasing dissatisfaction with the Obote regime. However, he soon began to systematically oppress the Buganda as well as the Langi and Acholi who had made up the largest percentage of Obote's army. He also expelled the prosperous Asian business community (and all other Asians) from the country and institutionalized an economic system in which access to commodities depended on one's religious and ethnic background (Rubongoya 2007:51). Rapidly evolving corruption and nepotism, and the widespread killing of political opponents and people not belonging to Amin's ethnic group or religious confession (Amin was a Nubi Muslim) led to a fundamental breakdown of the Ugandan political, economic and social system. According to some estimates, up to 500,000 people died during his eight-year regime and thousands fled the country (Schäfer 2008:333–334; Rubongoya 2007:45ff.). The literature on the war on Northern Uganda commonly mentions that the Acholi specifically suffered from a series of ethnic purges by Amin's troops. Branch (2011:57) estimates that tens of thousands of Acholi (and Langi) civilians were killed during the time of the Amin regime and that several members of the Acholi political elite fled into exile.

In April 1979 Amin was driven from office by the Tanzanian army supported by the Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA), which had been formed by exiled opponents of the Amin regime. After short interim-governments by Yusuf Lule, Godfrey Binaisa and Paulo Muwanga (Tripp 2010:43), Milton Obote returned to power, claiming to have won the parliamentary elections in 1980. From the beginning, there was massive opposition against his regime as he was accused of having manipulated the elections, a claim which is widely accepted in most historical accounts. According to the dominant interpretative scheme, Obote then established patronage networks based primarily on Langi and Acholi loyalties, which had already served as an important cornerstone of his first regime. But in the 1980s, the lack of state resources to be distributed to loyal supporters led to these clientalist structures becoming considerably weaker. The resultant instability right from the beginning of his regime, meant that the military became of foremost importance to Obote's hold on power (Branch 2011:58). According to widespread perception, Langi and Acholi troops became overrepresented in the UNLA²¹ (cf. e.g. Tripp 2010:134). The regime did not go uncontested for very long. Soon after Obote regained the presidency, widespread popular frustration gave rise to opposition movements.

The "Ghost" of Luwero

In 1981, Yoweri Museveni founded the National Resistance Army (NRA) and started to wage a guerrilla war against the Obote II government. The bulk of the fighting was carried out in the Luwero Triangle in Central Uganda. Museveni, a Munyankole from South-Western Uganda, sought the support of the local population. It is often stated that, throughout the course of the fighting, more and more people willingly joined the NRA and Museveni managed to build an alliance between Baganda and Banyarwanda migrant workers, indigenous peasants from other ethnic groups and refugees of Rwandan origins (Mamdani 2004:200ff.; Branch 2011:58–59). Some authors, for instance Mamdani (2004), classify Museveni's strategy as an effort to mobilize support for the NRA without appealing to ethnic identities, and thus as an attempt to overcome sectarian politics in Uganda. Others disagree. Branch (2011:59–60), for instance, argues that the NRA framed its mission as a struggle against Northern ethnic power in the national state. According to Branch (*ibid.*: 60),

"the rebels also built support in Luwero by putting forth, not tribal ethnic commonality, but common ethnic regional identity, as Bantu southerners united against Nilotic northerners. The

²¹ Again, as in other accounts of postcolonial Ugandan history, one finds that ethnicity is singled out as the decisive factor in the analysis of army recruitment patterns.

rebellion became the crucible in which the north-south divide took a central place in national politics.”

The fighting in Luwero Triangle lasted until 1985. According to the dominant interpretative scheme, an estimated number of 250,000 to 300,000 people were killed by the UNLA, the national army under the command of Obote, and severe human rights abuses were committed, including rape and torture (Schäfer 2008:335). It is commonly cited that the profound humiliations against the local population and NRA soldiers committed by Obote’s army, believed to be largely consisted of Acholi and Langi, further deepened the antagonisms between Northern and Southern ethnic groups. Most authors therefore argue that the Luwero conflict and the ethnic hatred it conjured among Southerners particularly against the Acholi laid the cornerstone for the war in the North. In the words of Doom and Vlassenroot (1999:9), “Luwero is the ghost that haunts the Acholi”.

Until today, the Acholi widely contest accusations that they killed and raped thousands of innocent civilians during the Luwero fighting. In 2010, Olara Otunnu, Acholi and president (and later presidential candidate) of the UPC (Uganda People’s Congress) party, caused an uproar in the media, when he demanded an independent inquiry into the killings in Luwero and thus called into question the taken-for-granted culpability of the Acholi (and Langi) from the North.²² In a similar vein, critical social scientists like Ogenga Otunnu (2002:12) have remarked that “[a]lthough the UNLA was a national and multi-ethnic army, the NRM/A held the Acholi exclusively responsible for the atrocities committed, and this disputed perception was to shape subsequent attitudes toward the conflict”.

The events during the Luwero war, but also the repeated reporting of the proclaimed Acholi responsibility for the war crimes and the constant framing of the war as an ethno-political conflict, have profoundly influenced post-1986 social relations and politics in Uganda. As a report by the International Crisis Group states, “[t]he effects of massacres on the psyche of all protagonists are central to the failure to overcome the cycle of ethnic retaliation after the NRA came to power” (ICG 2004:2). The discourse on Luwero is thus an example of how profoundly discourses and the dominant interpretative scheme they propose can shape reality.²³

Comparing Debates on the Lead-up to the War

In 1985, a split occurred within Obote’s army when high-ranking Acholi generals initiated a military coup. Brigadier Bazilio Okello and General Tito Okello took over Kampala, and Tito Okello became the first Acholi president – albeit only for a very brief period of time. The events following Okello’s rise to presidential power are heavily debated in both the scholarly literature and public discourses. Some authors, especially those with a pro-Acholi stance, claim that the Okello regime tried to unite different fighting factions and political parties and engaged in protracted peace negotiations with the NRM/A. They blame the NRA for the failed implementation of the peace agreement, which was signed between all fighting factions in Nairobi in December 1985, and accuse Museveni of having used the peace talks only as a means to prepare his own take-over of Kampala (Ogenga Otunnu 2002:12; Kiplagat 2002; Allen & Vlassenroot 2010b:9). As Ngoga (1998:104) concedes, “the NRA had little interest in peace negotiations for anything but tactical purposes, when it was in any event on the brink of victory.” To this day, the Acholi blame Museveni for

²² See for instance: Khisa & Nalugo (2010), Ngabirano (2010) and N.N. (2010).

²³ This is also reflected in public discourses. In one discussion I had with two students from Gulu University, for instance, my interlocutors claimed that Museveni and his supporters had rewritten Ugandan history to make it sound that Obote committed “so many” crimes in Luwero Triangle (field notes 10.03.2010).

having betrayed the peace agreement and for having unlawfully taken power from Okello, who remains the only ever Acholi president (van Acker 2004:340).²⁴

Other authors describe the situation prevailing in 1985/6 very differently. They claim that Okello was unable to control his troops, had no clear political program, and was thus driven from office by Museveni and his NRA in January 1986 (Ndikumana & Nannyonjo 2007:21; Rubongoya 2007:53ff.; Schäfer 2008:336–337). Contrary to classifying Museveni as the spoiler of the peace talks, these authors celebrate him as the ‘savior’ of a war-torn country. Schäfer (2008:337), for instance, argues:

“General Tito held power only for a short while, because already at the end of January 1986 the NRA seized Kampala and Museveni officially took over the political leadership. The Acholi soldiers attacked Langi and men from the West Nile Region, among others, marauding troops moved through Kampala (...) Okello was not even able to control the troops stationed in Kampala. Museveni wanted to realize his vision of new economic and political developments in Uganda, including ambitious economic reforms, political consolidation and stabilization as well as pacification and democratization.” (Translation: J.V.)²⁵

Similarly, the media and the international community lauded Museveni’s ascent to power, and for many years celebrated him as a new type of African leader, who respected human rights and followed Western development imperatives (Hansen & Twaddle 1991:1)²⁶. Omara-Otunnu (1992:446) reflects on the different perceptions of the post-Obote phase:

“The reaction of the population to the defeat of Okello’s junta varied according to geographical regions, thereby reflecting in large measure the main structural imbalances in the country. However, the occasion was widely hailed as marking the dawn of a new era by the intelligentsia and the media: they announced that Museveni would usher in genuine democracy and the enjoyment of human rights for the majority of Ugandans, and it was their views that certainly helped to shape international opinion about the character and purpose of the new regime.”

While it is generally accepted that Museveni’s rule brought an end to the fighting in Central and Southern Uganda, one also has to acknowledge that it marked the beginning of the long lasting armed conflict in Acholiland, as well as in other ‘peripheral’ regions of Uganda (e.g. Teso and West Nile), which is often ignored in uncritical accounts of the Museveni regime. The events surrounding Museveni’s ascent to power (and their interpretations) are of crucial importance for understanding the conflicts arising in Northern Uganda in the mid-1980s and the subsequent 20-year war in the North, which I turn to in the following section.

In my analysis, I first outline the historical developments since 1985, and briefly point out those ‘facts’ which are debated in the literature. In a second step, I then introduce the two main competing discourses on the war in Northern Uganda which have existed until today.

²⁴ This topic often came up in personal conversations about politics and the (illegitimate) rule of the current NRM government with my interlocutors in Gulu, who blamed Museveni for having taken power from the Acholi.

²⁵ German original: “General Tito Okello hatte nur kurzfristig die Macht im Lande inne, denn bereits Ende Januar 1986 eroberte die NRA Kampala und Museveni übernahm offiziell die politische Führung. Die Acholi Soldaten gingen u.a. gegen Langi und Männer aus dem West Nil Gebiet vor, marodierende Truppen zogen durch Kampala (...) Okello konnte nicht einmal die in Kampala stationierten Streitkräfte unter seine Kontrolle bringen. Museveni wollte seine Visionen von neuen ökonomischen und politischen Entwicklungen in Uganda verwirklichen, wozu neben ehrgeizigen Wirtschaftsreformen, die politische Konsolidierung und Stabilisierung sowie die Befriedung und Demokratisierung zählten.”

²⁶ This image has only recently begun to change, due in part to corruption scandals and the debates on the controversial anti-homosexuality bill (Vorhölder 2012:301–304). However, Uganda is still regarded as an important US ally in the war on terror and is thus somewhat insulated from donor criticism (Fisher 2013; Titeca & Costeur 2014:17).

THE WAR IN NORTHERN UGANDA: AN ATTEMPTED SUMMARY

For people in the North, the time after Museveni's NRM/A took over the government in 1986 "was a strange time of holding one's breath while preparing for the worst" (Dolan 2009:43). While some of the former UNLA soldiers demobilized and resettled in their homes, others refused to disarm and accept the new Museveni government and started to regroup. The latter withdrew to Southern Sudan where they formed the Ugandan Peoples Democratic Movement/Army (UPDM/A). In the course of 1986, fighting resumed in Northern Uganda between the NRA and the UPDA. This marked the beginning of the subsequent war, which was to last more than 20 years.

Again, the events following Museveni's ousting of Okello and the withdrawal of the Acholi from Kampala are disputed in the literature. Some authors claim that many of the Acholi soldiers who had served in the previous government forces found it difficult to adjust to a peaceful life back in their villages and felt alienated towards their former communities. Due to the long and brutal fighting in Luwero, these soldiers had become "internal strangers" (Behrend 1993:23–24), or as Schäfer (2008:339) puts it more drastically, had become "brutalized". Due to their unwillingness and inability to reintegrate themselves into their communities and start a life as farmers, many of these soldiers joined the UPDA. Schäfer (2008:338) depicts the situation of the returnees as follows:

"Their bestialization through the violent crimes they had committed and their lack of future prospects drove many of the demobilized soldiers to join the Uganda Peoples Democratic Army (UPDA), which had been newly founded in Southern Sudan by Acholi soldiers, who had fled Northern Uganda. The UPDA soon began to terrorize the population in Northern Uganda with acts of excessive violence" (Translation: J.V.).²⁷

The brutal behavior Schäfer (and also Behrend) attribute to the newly formed UPDA is not confirmed in other accounts, which claim that the UPDA was well respected and generally supported by the local population (e.g. RLP 2004:5).²⁸

²⁷ German original: "[I]hre Verrohung durch die von ihnen verübten Gewaltakte und die Perspektivlosigkeit trieb zahlreiche Demobilisierte in die Hände der Uganda Peoples Democratic Army (UPDA), die geflohene Acholi-Soldaten im Süd-Sudan kurz vorher gegründet hatten. Mit Gewaltexzessen versetzte die UPDA die Bevölkerung Nordugandas bald in Angst und Schrecken."

²⁸ In personal conversations during my fieldwork in Gulu, I was often told that the UPDA is generally remembered by the Acholi as a well-behaved army which warned the civilian population before it launched its attacks on the NRA. This interpretation is also supported by the great popularity of the late Walter Ochora, a former leading UPDA commander and later prominent local politician.

Instead, some authors paint a very different picture of the situation which unfolded in Northern Uganda in 1986. Ogenga Otunnu (2002:13), for instance, claims that the majority of Acholi soldiers “heeded the appeal by the government to hand over their arms and demobilize”. He and others blame the escalation of the situation in Northern Uganda on Museveni’s troops, who followed the withdrawing Acholi soldiers to the North – officially to counter the burgeoning insurgencies and pacify the country. Ogenga Otunnu (2002:13) writes that

“anxieties escalated when the NRA began to commit human rights abuses in the name of crushing a nascent rebellion. Over time NRA soldiers plundered the area and committed atrocities, including rape, abductions, confiscations of livestock, killing of unarmed civilians, and the destruction of granaries, schools, hospitals and boreholes escalated. These atrocities were justified by some as revenge for the ‘skulls of Luwero.’”

It is widely accepted that the conduct of the NRA, which had been a relatively well-disciplined army during its guerilla war in Luwero, deteriorated severely when its soldiers reached Northern Uganda and were confronted with their former enemies.²⁹ Revenge killings, also against non-combatants, and cattle looting were widespread and created mistrust of the new government and its troops among the local population (ICG 2004:3; HuRiWa 1997:32). Some authors (e.g. Finnström 2008:71ff.) claim that the misbehavior of the NRA actually led the Acholi people to support and thus strengthen the UPDA and other emerging rebel groups.

Whatever the facts, the above accounts make clear that this period, particularly between August 1986 and May 1988, was one of great turmoil in Northern Uganda (Dolan 2009:41). This was also due to the emergence of different rebel groups which managed to mobilize popular support by combining political aspirations with spiritual motivations.

In August 1986, a religious movement – the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF) – had been founded by Alice Auma, the spirit medium of the ghost Lakwena.³⁰ There are various accounts of the HSMF, ranging from meticulous academic analyses to sensationalist media depictions, which I will not present in detail here. The following is just a summary of the most essential and relatively uncontested ‘facts’ reproduced in the dominant interpretative scheme. According to this scheme, the HSMF were opposed not only to the NRA/M but also to the proceedings of the UPDA. Their original aim was to overthrow the government of Museveni and establish a new moral order in Uganda. Apparently founded as an egalitarian, non-ethnic and gender-equal movement, which combined Christian doctrines with local beliefs, the HSMF managed to attract many followers. Up to 10,000 people – men and also some women from different ethnic and social backgrounds – are said to have joined the “March on Kampala” (Behrend 1993:Chap. 6), where the government was to be taken over. Before reaching Kampala, however, the HSMF were defeated by the NRA in Jinja in November 1987. During the march, thousands of the HSMF fighters lost their lives. After the defeat of the HSMF, Alice Auma’s father Severino Lukoya set up a rebel movement based on the ideas of the HSMF but never attracted as many followers (Allen 2015:98-100; Behrend 1998; Finnström 2008:77.; Schäfer 2008:339ff.).

It appears that around the same time, Joseph Kony, a former UPDA fighter, founded another spiritual military movement which would later become the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). There is some debate regarding the overlapping of the different rebel movements and the extent of commonalities they had. In 1988 the UPDA signed a peace agreement with the NRA so that Kony’s movement eventually remained as the main opposition force to the NRA. Some of the former UPDA rebels who refused to abide by the peace agreement joined Kony (Dunn 2004:140).

²⁹ This claim is frequently voiced particularly with regard to soldiers belonging to the FEDEMU unit, a former anti-Obote insurgency force during the Luwero war, which committed severe human rights abuses including massacres of the civilian population (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999: 14ff.; Gersony, 1997: 23ff.).

³⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of the HSMF see Behrend (1993; 1998).

Narratives vary regarding the events that followed the 1988 peace agreement and I analyze these in detail below. However, all accounts agree on the following key points. Over time, Kony's LRA resorted to increasingly atrocious tactics which were no longer solely directed at the NRA but also affected the local population. The LRA forcefully recruited children, youth and adults, looted food and other belongings from the Acholi population, and massacred local people suspected of supporting the NRA. The NRA/UPDF,³¹ for their part, also committed serious human rights abuses such as forcibly displacing the people of Northern Uganda into so-called "protected villages" (see below). Over the next two decades the Acholi population suffered from a protracted war situation in which periods of physical violence alternated with periods of relative calm.³² A variety of peace initiatives were attempted, but failed (see e.g. ICG 2004; 2010; Lucima 2002; Allen 2006).

In August 2006 a first peace agreement was signed between the LRA and the Ugandan government followed by further peace agreements in April and June 2007 and February 2008, which effectuated a tentative end to the fighting. The peace talks, held in Juba, Southern Sudan, did not however lead to a final success as leading commanders of the LRA refused to sign the ultimate peace deal (Allen & Vlassenroot 2010b:17ff.). The involvement of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which was called upon by Museveni in 2003 to "investigate the situation concerning the Lord's Resistance Army" (press release ICC, 29.01.2004 cited in Allen 2006:1), was seen by many to have had a particularly negative effect on the peace talks (e.g. Mamdani 2012:20). Contrary to the former policy of the Ugandan government to grant amnesty to LRA returnees if they agreed to cease all insurgent activities, the ICC had issued arrest warrants against Joseph Kony and four other high-ranking LRA officers in 2005.³³ As of today, Joseph Kony is still at large while three of the other indicted (Raska Lukwiya, Okot Odhiambo and Vincent Otti) are confirmed (or suspected) dead. Only Dominic Ongwen has surrendered to ICC custody and is currently awaiting trial.³⁴

Since 2006, Northern Uganda has experienced relative peace while the LRA has continued its attacks in the DRC and the CAR (ICG 2010; Titeca & Costeur 2014). While the debates on the war within Uganda have abated in recent years, they still periodically come up in international media accounts, as the examples in the introduction show.

³¹ With the introduction of the 1995 Constitution, the NRA was renamed to Uganda Peoples' Defense Forces (UPDF).

³² Dolan (2009:41ff.) distinguishes between seven distinct phases of the war between 1986 and 2006 involving an overall gradual intensification of violence with periods of relative calm in between.

³³ For an in-depth discussion on the debates surrounding the involvement of the ICC in Uganda see Allen 2006; for a more recent perspective on the ongoing debates about different forms of justice in Northern Uganda see Branch 2014.

³⁴ International Criminal Court, official website, accessed 26.01.2016.

COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE WAR: OFFICIAL DISCOURSE VERSUS COUNTER DISCOURSE

In the preceding pages, I have summarized important events relevant to the war in Northern Uganda and I have pointed out both relatively uncontested and disputed matters. I will now look more closely at these various interpretations. Following Finnström (2008:Chap.3) and Dolan (2009), I differentiate between two different meta-narratives³⁵ about the war.³⁶ The *official discourse* is propagated by humanitarian organizations, the Ugandan NRM government as well as large parts of the Ugandan population outside of the Northern region, and for a long time has also featured prominently in academic publications. Typical examples of the official discourse are the texts by Schäfer (2008), Eichstaedt (2009); McDonnell & Akallo (2007), De Temmerman (2001), Green (2009) and the films by Invisible Children (esp. *Rough Cut* (2006) and *Kony 2012* (2012)). In a modest version, the official discourse is also reproduced by Gersony (1997) and Shaw & Mbabazi (2008).

The *counter discourse*, by contrast, has recently gained currency through the voices of Acholi politicians and intellectuals as well as through several recent publications by critical scholars who have carried out extensive field research in Northern Uganda. The most prominent academic representatives of the counter discourse are Sverker Finnström, Chris Dolan, Adam Branch and most of the authors in the edition by Allen & Vlassenroot (2010a). Some aspects of the counter discourse are supported by Westbrook (2000) and Van Acker (2004). After having studied the literature on the war in great detail, I regard the latter discourse as more substantiated and convincing.

Following Keller (2007:14ff.), I have analyzed the phenomenal structures of these two discourses. Thereby, I have differentiated between their central analytical dimensions or categories and their contents, i.e. the perspective the respective discourse represents and the arguments it puts forth. The results of my analysis are discussed in the following text and summarized in the table below.

³⁵ Finnström and Dolan both use the term “narrative” to refer to the two conflicting interpretations of the war in Northern Uganda. In my analysis, however, I have decided to use the term “discourse” instead as it better captures the complexity and scope of the two positions. Both, the official and the counter discourse are made up of several sub-discourses, which I reconstruct in my analysis to show how they come to form a larger discourse.

³⁶ In doing so, one needs to acknowledge that different positions taken by different authors concerning the analysis of the conflict do not always neatly map out onto coherent discourses. There are several sub-discourses, and not all authors can clearly be assigned to one of the two discourses on the war at all.

The official discourse labels the war as a result of ethnic conflict in Uganda since colonial times as well as a result of ‘irrational, brutal, spiritual rebels’, which emerged in Northern Uganda in the 1980s (cf. Finnström 2006a:202f.; 2008:68; Leopold 1999:221–222). In Finnström’s words, “the typical depiction has been a one-sided and sometimes exoticizing focus on the various Holy Spirit rebel movements, and thus on the religious, even pseudocultural, aspects of the war” (2008:64). By overemphasizing factors such as ethnicity and spiritualism and placing blame primarily on the LRA, this discourse depoliticizes the war and ignores the ‘real grievances’ of the Acholi population. The official discourse furthermore conveys a highly moralized image of the conflict, which concurs with more general international perceptions of Africa as a continent of crisis, war and human suffering. According to Branch (2011:45), this has led to equally moralized interventions by the international aid regime, with largely harmful consequences. Proponents of the official discourse favour a military solution to end the war. They encourage the attempts by the US to support the UPDF in their fight against the LRA (cf. Atkinson et al. 2012). Unlike most proponents of the counter discourse, they still regard Museveni as a trustworthy partner and an ally of the West in development initiatives and the “war on terror”, and not as one of the prime actors in the conflict. In sum, the official discourse pinpoints the roots of the conflict in ethnic divisions, emphasizes humanitarian rather than political factors, views the Acholi populace as helpless victims rather than political agents and citizens, and focuses mainly on the actions of the LRA, and to a lesser extent the Ugandan government and army, thereby failing to ignore the broader complexities of the war.

In contrast, the counter discourse argues that the war in the North is highly complex, essentially politically motivated, and must be historically contextualized. It cannot be reduced to an ethnic conflict, or to a rebel insurgency led by a mad and barbarous leader. Rather, one needs to look at a range of different actors with very different (and sometimes changing) motives (cf. Titeca & Costeur 2014). In order to understand the length and complexity of the war, one has to consider not only local and national factors, but also the regional and international dimension of the conflict. Relevant aspects include the role of the Sudanese government in supporting the LRA and, more generally, the proxy wars fought between Uganda, Sudan and DRC; the global “war on terror” and the labeling of the LRA as a terrorist organization by the USA and the Ugandan government, which legitimated the extensive (military) support the US provided to the Ugandan army in their fight against the LRA; and the internationalization of the conflict resolution and the subsequent involvement of the UN, Western states, and international humanitarian and development organizations.³⁷ The counter discourse thus frames the LRA as a political or strategic (rather than irrational, spiritual) actor and attributes responsibility for the war not only to LRA violence but also to the irresponsible and intentional warfare of the Ugandan government and its uncritical support by the international community (cf. Branch 2011). Rather than lamenting the humanitarian crisis and lauding the efforts of humanitarian organizations to stop it, the counter discourse critically analyzes the complex politically-motivated reasons for the massive human suffering, which Chris Dolan (2009) has labeled “social torture”. He summarizes as follows:

“Social Torture is a counter-narrative which embraces complexity and rejects oversimplification. The range of local, national and international actors involved, the intersection of multiple economic and political motivations with psychological needs arising from cycles of oppression and subordination, and the transnational nature of justificatory public discourses and value systems, cannot be easily accommodated in the depoliticizing binary oppositions (such as ‘internal-external’, ‘greed-grievance’ and ‘rational-irrational’) which underpin the mainstream discourse of internal war” (Dolan 2009:252).

³⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the regional and international dimension of the conflict see Prunier 2004; ICG 2004:24ff.; ICG 2010; Dunn 2004; Branch 2011; Finnström 2008:112ff..

The counter discourse favors a political solution to end the war. It argues that only sustainable changes in Uganda's political landscape will prevent further violence in the long run.

The official discourse and the counter discourse are exemplary of the many controversies and conflicting interpretations surrounding the war in Northern Uganda, not all of which can be neatly assigned to one or the other. In the burgeoning literature on the war debates have become increasingly blurred. The most contested issue is the role and image of the LRA/LRM.³⁸ As Dolan (2009:74) states,

"[a]nyone attempting to assess the role of the LRA in northern Uganda is faced with a number of ambiguities, particularly concerning its composition and the extent of civilian support and link with the LRM. They are also faced with a media which fuels rather than resolves these ambiguities."

I will turn to this matter in more detail in the following section.

The Role of the LRA

Different accounts of the role of the LRA reflect different understandings of the war, its root causes and the reasons for its continuation. When assessing matters such as the political or spiritual motivation of the LRA, the magnitude of its child abductions, the extent of local civilian support, and the (in)sanity of its leader, diverse images of the rebel organization emerge.

The first matter of debate concerns the proclaimed *motives* of the LRA for its insurgency in Northern Uganda. Some authors (for a typical example see Eichstaedt 2009), especially those writing in the local and international media as well as for some human rights organizations, have portrayed the LRA as an irrational and absurd rebel organization, led by a mad leader, and fighting for no comprehensible goal at all (cf. van Acker 2004:336). This image is also conveyed in films, most prominently those by the US-American organization Invisible Children which I already referred to in the introduction. Others claim that the LRA is a Christian fundamentalist organization which wants to rule Uganda on the basis of the Ten Commandments (cf. Finnström 2008:108ff.; HuRiWa 1997:31). Sensationalist portrayals of the LRA also like to point to its spiritual elements, which can be traced back to its origins, or more correctly to other spiritual movements such as the HSMF, and which still serve as a signature feature of the LRA. In this regard, uncritical analysts often do not differentiate between the different rebel groups which existed in Northern Uganda in the first phase of the war and the diverse motives and tactics they each pursued. In recent years, several critical scholars have argued convincingly that the LRA is by no means an irrational movement (see for instance Titeca 2010). As a report by the Refugee Law Project maintains,

"[a]lthough the LRA is often portrayed as a band of criminals, such a characterisation is clearly inaccurate for a group that has wreaked havoc in northern Uganda for the past 17 years. Not only are its tactics appallingly effective, but the LRA also has significant military ability" (RLP 2004:21).

³⁸ Some authors, notably representatives of the counter discourse, who want to stress the political character of the LRA, refer to the organization as LRM – Lord's Resistance Movement – which is the self-designated name of the political wing of the LRA. Since the LRA has left Northern Uganda and shifted its activities to other countries in the region, it seems that the label LRM is no longer used, probably also due to the fact that there does not seem to be a clear political program behind recent LRA attacks (Titeca & Costeur 2014:10).

Sophisticated historical analyses of the insurgencies point to the differences between the spiritual and political movements (Finnström 2006a) which responded to two different crises faced by the Acholi – an internal crisis (Behrend 1993:36ff.) and a national crisis (Branch 2010:25). They also differentiate between the extents to which the different rebellions were supported by the local population (Behrend 1993; Omara-Otunnu 1992:455ff.). In this regard, the UPDA and HSMF rebellions are clearly distinguished from the LRA and are seen as having had the support of the majority of Acholi because they addressed their grievances and fears. This is also stated in a report by the Refugee Law Project which argues that

“[i]n retrospect, both the UPDA and HSM were similar in that they tried to mobilise popular grievances in a struggle against the new government. Although the former was more about capturing political power and the latter more about rejuvenating Acholi society, they both articulated reasons for rebellion that most Acholi sympathised with at the time. (...) Since they were trying to gain popular support, neither the UPDA nor the HSM committed significant atrocities against its own civilians” (RLP 2004:5).

This is typical of analyses of the HSMF and the UPDA, which identify clear ideologies that comprehensively explain their respective needs to take up arms – a point which is crucially lacking in several analyses of the LRA.

The *existence and scope of a political ideology* within the LRA is one of the greatest sources of controversy and is arguably a very complex matter (RLP 2004:15). As stated above, many analysts simply refuse or fail to grasp even the possibility that the LRA could be motivated by a political agenda. The violent tactics adopted by the LRA, which have caused immeasurable suffering among the civilian Acholi population, have led many to refuse to try to understand possible reasons behind it. This dominant attitude is captured very well in the following statement by the International Crisis Group (ICG 2004:5): “The LRA is not motivated by any identifiable political agenda, and its military strategy and tactics reflect this”.

Indeed, it is not easy to pin down the motives behind the LRA’s fight (Doom & Vlassenroot 1999:20). However, different authors have tried to unravel the “myth” behind the LRA (Allen & Vlassenroot 2010a) and take seriously the political aspects of the war, which reflect real grievances and concerns by the Acholi population and which have been addressed – however defectively and intransparently – by the LRA. Social scientists such as Finnström, Dolan, Branch, and Allen have convincingly demonstrated that it is important to acknowledge that, besides its spiritual and religious agenda, which have been overrepresented in the official discourse, the LRA also pursued a political agenda (Dolan 2009:90ff.). Against the common claim that, even given the existence of a political program, the LRA has been unable or unwilling to communicate it (Doom & Vlassenroot 1999:26), these authors have described various attempts by the LRA to disseminate their political program, for instance via radio messages and village meetings (Branch 2010:41). Dolan (2009:85) writes that “[t]hese broadcasts belie the claim that the LRA lacked any political position and had no interest in communicating with the civilian population – clearly they wished to, but were suppressed at the first sign of success.”

Finnström (2001; 2008:Chap. 3; 2006a; 2006b; cf. also Allen 2006:43) has gone even further and claimed the existence of “political manifestos”, which according to him had been distributed among the Acholi population, and which reflect the political issues the rebels wanted to address. He repeatedly refers to the frustration his interlocutors conveyed about the fact that these issues, which reflected real concerns of the people, have been ignored in the public arena (Finnström 2008:99; 2006b:207). In an article, Finnström (2001:247f.) summarizes the main points communicated in the manifestos:

“The manifesto takes a critical stance against ‘the New World Order’, as it is described by the globalization sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 55–76). Furthermore, the LRM/A claims to be fighting for multi-party politics, a key issue in contemporary Ugandan politics. Most government

officials dismiss this and previous rebel manifestos as diaspora creations disconnected from Ugandan realities. However, regardless of the origin of the manifestos, it must be noted that the LRM/A rebels pinpoint the issues relevant to most people in northern Uganda.”

As Finnström acknowledges, scholars and political actors alike have frequently claimed that the political manifestos of the LRA were mere diaspora creations, which had little to do with the motivations of those fighting on the ground. The Lord’s Resistance Movement (LRM), allegedly the political wing of the LRA, was seen by many skeptics to be largely a group of London-based Acholi in the diaspora, who were extremely critical of the Museveni government and its role in the war, but who not as close to Kony and his leading commanders as they claimed to be (Dolan 2009:76–77).

The debate about the political aspirations of the LRA is still ongoing. However, since the LRA has concentrated its attacks on the civilian population in the DRC and CAR, skepticism of the sincerity of their political motivations is even more widespread than before. This is also due to the fact that the LRA itself has withdrawn from communicating its motives to outsiders, and even insiders (Titeca & Costeur 2014: 10–11). Thus, the recent attacks of the LRA are hard to integrate into the explanatory framework of the critical discourse – which may be one reason why they are seldom discussed at all in the post-2006 publications on the war in Northern Uganda.

The *extent to which the local population supported the LRA* is another matter of considerable debate (Dolan 2009:75). The majority of analysts postulate that only a very small minority of the civilian Acholi population supported the LRA. They argue that due to the excessive violence committed by the LRA, the movement lost all the support it might have enjoyed in the initial years of fighting (Behrend 1998:117; Gersony 1997:68; Westbrook 2000:3, van Acker 2004:352; HuRiWa 1997:36). This and the fact that Acholi elders accused the LRA of having broken ‘traditional’ conventions and rules of Acholi warfare soon diminished the local support for the LRA.

Finnström, most prominently, opposes this opinion and claims that the LRA has enjoyed more support among the local population than is widely acknowledged. He writes:

“[Y]oung informants were often careful when they expressed their views on the public arena, and it took quite some time for me to gain their confidence so that they could freely share their feelings, views, and ideological standpoints. Again without being able to provide any proper or final statistics, I want to question the conclusion by Gersony (1997: 59) that of the Acholi people ‘more than 90% do not respect, welcome, encourage, support or voluntarily assist the LRA’” (Finnström 2008:105).

In a similar vein, a report by the International Crisis Group argues that

“Although few are willing to say that the LRA is fighting to rectify historical Acholi grievances, these grievances do exist, and many see the LRA, for all its faults, as the only group that is effectively confronting Museveni. This feeling is likely to be strongest amongst the Acholi diaspora, which is not directly affected by either the LRA’s actions or by any positive deeds of the government” (ICG 2004:9).

The issue has still not been resolved and debates on the extent of LRA support continue. However, since the LRA has not been active in Uganda since 2006 and the aims they supposedly fought for have been taken up and made public by politicians from the North, such as the charismatic DP president Norbert Mao or UPC president Olara Otunnu, this question is no longer so pressing.

The debate on the extent of support is closely intertwined with the question about the *extent of (child) abductions and violence actually committed by the LRA*. International human rights organizations, the media as well as other proponents of the official discourse on the LRA have frequently portrayed the LRA as an army of ‘child soldiers’. They derived their main motivation for intervention on the moral ground that the abducted children needed

to be rescued (Allen 2015:109). In discourses on military support for the Ugandan army as well as in debates on humanitarian interventions the issue of 'child soldiers' always figured high on the list of arguments which legitimated intervention (for an extreme example see, again, *Kony 2012*). There are several estimates of the number of children abducted by the LRA over the years but most are based on the number of returnees that have gone through reception centers, thus ignoring the majority of young adults who did not pass through these centers (Allen 2015:109). High estimates suggest over 30,000 child abductees (World Vision 2005:4)³⁹ and one commonly hears claims that "the LRA reportedly consists of more than 80 percent abducted children" (Shaw & Mbabazi 2008:230). Testimonies of children who returned from the bush are often used to underline the general perception of the LRA as barbarous and irrational (e.g. HuRiWa 1997; Dolan 2009:75).⁴⁰

Dolan (2009) and others (e.g. USAID/UNICEF 2006:vi), however, have questioned the assumption that the majority of fighters in the LRA were abducted children. Based on extensive interviews and long term research in Northern Uganda, Dolan (2009:75) suggests "that more than half of the abductees were adults, and thus did not confirm the image of an organization which focused primarily on abducting children." Also Blattman and Annan (2010; also Annan et al. 2006 & 2008) who have conducted an in-depth investigation of the magnitude, incidence, and nature of the violence of LRA abductions, based on an extensive survey of hundreds of former abductees, seek to provide a more balanced picture of the subject. They state:

"The phenomenon of abduction is (...) poorly understood. While we know that many youths met terrible fates – whether killed, forced to commit unspeakable acts or taken as slaves for combat or sex – we have little sense of what experiences are exceptional and which are the rule. (...) In the absence of a public face and (until very recently) an active political arm, the LRA's activities, motives and structure have been defined by external actors, most of all journalists, human rights groups and the Ugandan military and government. One thus worries that the most sensationalist rather than the most common experiences have found their way into discourse" (Blattman & Annan 2010:132).

Based on their data, they come to the conclusion that

"the LRA appears to be a much more strategic and conventional military organization than often supposed, however terrible its violence. (...) On the one hand, abduction is seemingly more widespread, more focused on adolescents and (on average) less grotesquely violent than often imagined. On the other hand, what is more common and broad based than previously supposed is the emphasis on political ideology in the group, as well as the level of cooperation and allegiance to the rebel cause reported by abductees..." (Blattman & Annan, 2010:132–133).

These and other controversies about the LRA have only recently been openly debated. The fact that the motives, practices and tactics of the LRA are more complicated than is generally portrayed by the official discourse should not belie their brutal abductions, killings, and mutilations, nor the suffering they caused in Northern Uganda for a period of 20 years. However, just as the position of the LRA was more complex than assumed, the role of the Ugandan army and government also needs to be critically re-examined.

The Role of Museveni, the NRM Government & the UPDF

Different evaluations regarding the inability or unwillingness of the government to end the war, and its potential motivations to continue it, can lead to various conclusions about

³⁹ See also Invisible Children, <http://www.invisiblechildren.com/history.html> (accessed 28.03.2012).

⁴⁰ For a critical discussion of these processes of "story-making" see Verma (2012).

the nature of the conflict. Many authors are surprisingly uncritical of Museveni's politics in Northern Uganda and the fact that his government and army have been unable – for more than 20 years – to defeat an army of 'insane rebels' and 'child soldiers' (for instance Hansen & Twaddle 1991; Schäfer 2008:337/343ff./358; Eichstaedt 2009:13; Ndikumana & Nannyonjo 2007; Mamdani 2004; Gersony 1997). Museveni's labeling of the armed conflict as a military rather than a political struggle, his long-lasting refusal to engage in peace talks and his IDP politics have led critical scholars (e.g. Omara-Otunnu 1992; Titeca & Costeur 2014:10–14) to question his motives and his willingness to end the war. As a report by the International Crisis Group states,

"[t]he war has been a disaster for Uganda but it has allowed him [Museveni] to maintain an unreformed and corrupt army as a key pillar of the regime. It stands in the way of thorough security sector reform and gives him the arguments with which to resist mounting international pressure to reduce defense spending drastically. It also gives him pretexts to maintain the political status quo by denying the opposition a power base and curtailing freedom of expression and association in the name of 'the war against terrorism'" (ICG 2004:10).

Besides these political motivations to continue the war, there were also economic incentives for the UPDF, especially its top commanders (Ogenga Otunnu 2002:13). Van Acker (2004:353–353) mentions large scale cattle theft, different forms of corruption, as well as the use of "ghost soldiers" as means by which some army members enriched themselves (cf. RLP 2004:27ff.). Only in very rare cases were these forms of misbehaviour recorded and punished (Dolan 2009:148–149). Proponents of the counter discourse have often noted that legal measures punishing war crimes have only been directed against the LRA, while the UPDF, despite its known gross human rights violations, has never been indicted. Here the most frequently cited example is the investigation by the ICC, which charged the top LRA commanders with crimes against humanity while refusing to investigate the crimes committed by the government forces (Mamdani 2012; Kalinaki 2012). Recently, some scholars have even questioned whether humanitarian organizations, which supported, and to some extent enabled, the government's strategy of internally displacing significant parts of the Acholi population into camps – and which were thus complicit in the massive harm, human rights abuses and deaths caused by it – should also be prosecuted (Allen 2015:114–115). It is against this backdrop, that the decision by the humanitarian community to continue reproducing rather than challenging the government version of events, which Tim Allen (2015) has so tellingly called 'cognitive dissonance', becomes very tangible and explicable.

A good summary of the complex debates on the LRA and the Ugandan government is provided by Chris Dolan, who, in his chapter *Reconsidering the LRA-Government Dynamic* concludes his analysis with the following words:

"The LRA was more motivated and organized than it was made out, and the GoU [Government of Uganda] less committed to finding a solution than concepts of wars as something you fight to win would have us believe. Indeed, for the GoU winning seemed to lie in keeping the opponent alive for as long as possible, in particular by using humiliation tactics to provoke him into reacting whenever the situation became calm for too long. In this interpretation the Government's behaviors, whether in military or non-military interventions, were not driven by political immaturity, but rather aimed to achieve the opposite of what was stated – namely to bring the situation back to the broil rather than to find a solution" (Dolan 2009:102).

	Official Discourse	Counter Discourse
1. Causes/Origin of the War?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnicity • North-South antagonism • Spiritual/religious beliefs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political and economic grievances • Complex historical developments
2. Who is to blame?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainly the LRA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple actors on the local, national and international level
3. Need for Action? Solutions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military solution, i.e. defeat of LRA • Humanitarian intervention to help the Acholi 'victims' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political solution, i.e. peace talks and peace agreement • Sustainable changes in Uganda's political landscape
4. Interpretations and value attributions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moralizing approach • Conflict as a humanitarian crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analytical approach • Conflict as a political crisis
5. Major representatives/ proponents of the discourses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NRM/UPDF • US Government • Aid industry • Large parts of the Ugandan population outside of Northern Uganda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical scholars • Acholi intellectuals and politicians on the local and national level • Acholi diaspora • Acholi population
6. Positioning of key actors:		
a) Museveni (as head of NRM Government & Chief Commander of UPDF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Savior' of war-torn Uganda • 'Developer' • Ally in the "war on terror" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoiler (of peace talks) • Profiteer of the war – political and economic incentives to continue fighting
b) LRA (Motives/Ideology? Extent of popular support? Extent of child abductions?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Irrational barbarians' • Army of 'child soldiers' • No political agenda • No support by Acholi population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex political, religious and spiritual motives • Army of abductees and volunteers; fewer 'child soldiers' than commonly assumed • Political agenda, which reflects, to some extent, the grievances of many Acholi

Table 1: Summary of the Contrasting Argumentative Frameworks

CHANGING HEGEMONIES OF INTERPRETATION

Since the beginning of the war, discourses and interpretations have repeatedly changed to accommodate recent events. Hegemonies of interpretations have also changed due to changes in discourse coalitions and societal power structures. In the early years of the war, and for quite a long time thereafter, the official discourse was the only one which resonated in national, international and even in academic discourses. This was due to the widespread image of Museveni as the ‘savior’ of Uganda after the troubled years under Amin and Obote, which made his rhetoric on the war sound credible. It was further affected by chaotic events in Northern Uganda in the mid-1980s, which were hard to comprehend for outside observers, and the gruesome reporting of the crimes that the LRA began to commit, particularly after the failure of the 1994 peace talks.

In recent years, the counter discourse has gained more influence and has begun to challenge the dominant interpretative schemes set by the official discourse. This is partially due to efforts by prominent and influential Acholi politicians like Olara Otunnu (President of the UPC) and Norbert Mao (President of the DP) to change the image of Northern Uganda and the Acholi in national discourses. Furthermore, Gulu is increasingly becoming an important economic centre and is no longer seen as the capital of a war region. Another contributing factor is that the general political atmosphere in Uganda, and also attitudes among the international donor community, have become more critical of the Museveni government (ICG 2012; Vorhölder 2012:303–304). In academic circles, the counter discourse has, in fact, become the hegemonic line of interpretation.

Nonetheless, as my introductory references to Engelhardt’s recent book and the film *Kony 2012* show, the official discourse is still widely recited in international media and political circles. In an article about the video, Finnström (2012:127) notes:

“The global success of the film KONY 2012 by Invisible Children, Inc., manifests far greater magical powers than those of Joseph Kony and his ruthless Lord’s Resistance Army, which it portrays. The most prominent feature of the Invisible Children lobby is the making and constant remaking of a master narrative that depoliticizes and dehistoricizes a murky reality of globalized war into an essentialized black-and-white story. The magic of such a digestible storyline, with Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony as a global poster boy for evil personified, not only plays into the hands of the oppressive Ugandan government but has also become handy for the US armed forces as they seek to increase their presence on the African continent.”⁴¹

Even the Ugandan government, generally a stern promoter of the official discourse, has criticized the video for its misrepresentation of historical facts and its patronizing attitude. A press release states:

⁴¹ On this latter point see also Titeca & Costeur 2014:18–19.

“[W]e note with concern the gross misrepresentation created by the documentary. The documentary is in essence, an erroneous attempt to rewrite the history of Uganda regarding the conflict in the Northern part of the country. (...) The documentary is also patronizing in as far as it portrays Uganda as helpless in the face of the conflict and cuts out Ugandans as people incapable of solving their own problems” (Okurut 2012:28).

Internationally, there have been mixed reactions to the video. While the extreme emotional and patronizing measures the film adopts to convey its message, and the motives behind the film and the organization Invisible Children have been widely criticized, few of the uninformed viewers of the film are capable or willing to challenge the story behind it. As is well-known from other examples (e.g. Schomerus 2010), the international media and its consumers are generally reluctant to accept less sensationalist accounts of the war and its main actors because the video fits too well the common notion of Africa as the dark, dangerous and irrational continent. As a columnist in the Daily Monitor writes:

“International media has long perfected the reductive art of trying to explain a complex, foreign story to an uninterested domestic audience in the traditional 90 seconds or three minutes of a television news clip. (...) The biggest concern shouldn’t be the inaccuracies or the lack of context in the video – that is to be expected – but that there are few, if any, alternative realities to correct them. We are simply not telling enough of our own stories. *Mzungus* [common Swahili term for white people] have written most of the books I have read on the LRA war. (...). Fifty years after independence, one can count less than that number of good, insightful books written by Ugandans telling the story of our nation and the men (and women) who built it” (Kalinaki 2012:11).

Thus, while *Kony 2012* certainly achieved to put the conflict in Northern Uganda (back) on the international agenda, at least briefly, its portrayal of the war, its root causes and its main actors was one-sided to say the least. The video is therefore a manifestation of the official discourse on the international level, and it remains to be seen whether critical commentators will be able to correct the interpretative scheme it has established.⁴² Unfortunately, recent publications like the one by Engelhardt, suggest that this is not the case.

⁴² Some weeks after the release of the first video, Invisible Children published a second video *Kony 2012 – Part II. Beyond Famous* (2012b), in which they try to react to some of the criticisms voiced against the first film. They make clear that Northern Uganda is no longer a war zone and focus more on the actions of the LRA in the DRC and the CAR. Generally, however, the film is just as patronizing as the first.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have demonstrated how different historical realities are constructed in different discourses on Ugandan history. At different times, different social actors have had different degrees of success in establishing their version of history as the dominant interpretative scheme in public and/or academic discourses (cf. Keller 2006:121,124). I have further shown how, once established, dominant interpretative schemes of key events in Ugandan history (such as the Luwero war) and their consolidation in coherent story lines have had a profound effect on subsequent historical developments and their interpretations.

My aim, more specifically, was to analyze different narratives of the war in Northern Uganda. On a macro level, two major opposing discourses can be singled out: one official discourse, which takes a very moralizing approach in its conflict analysis, blames the war primarily on the LRA and its ethnic and spiritual fanaticism, and favors a military solution to the war; and a counter discourse, which acknowledges the LRA as a political actor, points to the devastating effects not only of LRA violence but also of the government policies on the war and the complicity of the international community, and calls for a long-term political solution to overcome the root causes of the conflict. Each of the two discourses interprets historical events before and during the war in different ways, and builds different story lines to legitimate its interpretation of the war.

As the respective discourses become reproduced and accepted as truths by their respective audiences, the origins of their claims are no longer questioned and they become extremely hard to challenge. This is one very simple explanation for why certain narratives, such as the media narrative on the so-called LRA war which I referred to in the introduction, are so resistant. There are also more complex reasons, of course. As has been demonstrated, among others by Allen (2015) and Titeca & Costeur (2014) in their recent articles, different actors usually have particular interests for supporting and maintaining a specific account of the past. This seems to be the case, for instance, for most of the humanitarian organizations which operated in Northern Uganda during the war and which still support the pro-government narrative. For such organizations, rewriting this account of the past would involve the – highly undesirable – task of having to critically reexamine their own problematic role in the conflict.

Thus, despite the plethora of research that has been published on the war in Northern Uganda – which, in theory, would enable quite a complex and nuanced historicization of events – in practice, most (groups) of actors adhere to and reproduce their established narratives. At this point one may think back to Ian Hacking's (1995:243) statement that "we rewrite the past, not because we find out more about it, but because we present actions under new descriptions". In other words, how we choose to rewrite or, as in the case above, *not* rewrite the past is related more to events in the present (and future) than to the past itself. Some present events, like the recent LRA activities in the DRC and CAR, may simply

not be discussed in relation to the war in Northern Uganda at all. Others, like the upcoming trial of Dominik Ongwen before the ICC, may spark new debates on how to understand the past and may even lead to new readings, as actors who have hitherto remained largely silent on the war speak out, especially survivors of LRA attacks in Northern Uganda who have been consulted and promised compensation by the ICC if Ongwen is convicted (Okot 2016).

In the end, the debates and varying representations connected with the events in Northern Uganda are telling examples of the 'wars' fought to define history, and the power inherent in the capability to do so. Bernard Tabaire (2012), columnist for the Daily Monitor, captures this idea very well when he writes:

"But, finally, here we are – in the twenty-first century. Africa is pushing back in real time on (somewhat) equal platform. Everyone is free to define and redefine Africa in his or her own image. That definition, however, shall no longer go un-interrogated. Swiftly and robustly. The fight is fully joined."

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