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## **Nostalgia and Home in the Oral Narratives of Ugandan Women Formerly Abducted by Lords' Resistance Army Rebels**

### **Abstract**

For more than two decades (1986-2006) different groups of rebels forcefully recruited children from Northern Uganda into their army. Later, when the war ended some of these children returned home but the home they returned to was never the same as the one they left. The girls returned as women and so called wives, boys as men or some as 'husbands'. This chapter explores the experiences of some of the formerly abducted women who returned and settled in Lira District in Northern Uganda to show the different ways in which they are coping with the return home. From nostalgia for home, to the hard realities of the return home, some of these women have been reincorporated into their societies while some have faced rejection or indifference. To such women, home remains a place of nostalgia a place which may yet have to be rebuilt based on current realities than a place to be lived in based on the memories of the past. The article explores to a large extent therefore how home has been conceptualized.

*Key words: Nostalgia, Home, Oral Narratives, Ugandan Formerly Abducted Women.*

### **Introduction**

*"Then I sat and told my father; 'Me, am going to die here. I escaped death, but now my brother wants to kill me. Let me go and get my level wherever I can find it. Even if I die there and they do not bury me in a coffin, it would be as if I had died in the bush where the hawks would eat my flesh. Right now, am leaving home.'" Acio*

*"I reached home; people just stared at me like a mango which had been bitten into." Ajok.*

When home becomes a place of rejection how does a woman who was abducted as a child, who had fond memories of home as a place of comfort, a place of longing, a place of return deal with that rejection? When such women are welcomed and integrated properly into the community, how does the welcome impact on them? Women who were abducted when they were children, who were abused and forced to grow up in the worst circumstances possible by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) rebels continue to suffer a sense of double loss when they find that the home they had longed for so much has become a place of repulsion, a place where they are rejected and constantly reminded that they do not

belong, contrary to what they had known, imagined and dreamt of. Nostalgia for the home turns into disillusionment for some of these women who were captured by the rebels when they were innocent girls, who returned as grown up women. Memories of home that were positive are replaced with the negative reality of the present home like the memories of Acio and Ajok cited above. Interviews with these “returnee” women revealed how much they had longed for home but the home they returned to brought a new reality of rejection to some of them forcing them to escape from it yet again.

On the other hand, there are also women who returned from the bush<sup>1</sup> and were warmly embraced by their families and welcomed home. These categories of women were welcomed by their families, counseled and rehabilitated, and made to feel that they were still an important part of the family. Some of these women were sent back to school or connected to jobs which helped to take their minds off the past experience of the abduction by the rebels. The parallel narratives of rejection and acceptance characterize the narratives of women who were kidnapped as children and who returned home as adults after abduction by the LRA.

This chapter analyzes the nostalgic recollections of such women who were kidnapped by the LRA and HSM rebels during the more than 25 years of rebel war in Northern and North Eastern Uganda to show the different ways in which they remembered and experienced home before and after their abduction. The analysis focuses on nostalgic recollections and memories of home before, during and after abduction as a way of understanding the meaning of home in this context.

Formerly abducted women’s oral narratives challenge conventional ideas about home as unchanging, as static, as a happy place where people return to. The notion of home being the perfect abode for family and children has dominated much of the western as well as African theories that speaks about the family as a social unit that breeds unity among its members (Boym 2001; Young 1997). Feminist theoretical perspectives about home have been divided, with some radical feminists proposing that home is a place of enslavement for women where women are domesticated and made to work to satisfy patriarchal demands (Young 1997), and others arguing to the contrary that home is a resting place that brings comfort for women especially given that home is not only about place and individuals but rather about place and individuals living within a community (Oyewumi 1997). The findings question the danger of having a single narrative about the happy ending for women who returned from war, and provides a more complex narrative of different and sometimes negative experiences of home by the women who were abducted by the LRA and HSM at the peak of the war in Northern Uganda. It also destabilizes further feminist perspectives of home by exposing how diversified the narrative of home should be in feminist theorization.

## **Background**

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<sup>1</sup> The bush in this context refers to the place where Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA rebels operated his rebel activity. Being from “the bush” came with a stigma attached to it because there were assumptions that those who were in the bush with Joseph Kony were as morally corrupt as him. In other words, they were rebels, whether they had just been forcefully captured or not. In this study the terms, those who returned from the bush, those who returned from captivity and returnees are used interchangeably to mean the same thing- the formerly abducted.

In order to understand the conceptions of nostalgia and home in the narratives of these formerly abducted women of Northern Uganda, there is need to provide some socio-historical context. The rebel activity in Northern Uganda started in 1986, when the National Resistance Army (NRA), took over power from the Government of Tito Okello Lutwa and his soldiers fled to the Northern part of Uganda where most of them originated from. These fleeing soldiers were the ones who later formed first, the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) which was led by a woman called Alice Auma Lakwena in 1986. Alice Lakwena fought the NRA from August 1986 up to November 1987 and was defeated in Jinja district in Eastern Uganda as she and her group headed for the capital, Kampala. The remnants of the HSM group disintegrated. Some fled into exile in Kenya. Those who had remained in the north particularly in the Acholi sub-region, regrouped and one of those groups became the LRA rebels led by Joseph Kony (Dolan Chris 2009; Finnstrom 2008). From 1988 up until 2004, the LRA rebels operated in Northern Uganda and parts of South Sudan<sup>2</sup> until they ebbed their way into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic (CAR) where they continue to operate underground with minimum attacks on Northern Uganda but still creating regional insecurity in those places.

The LRA war will be remembered in history as one of the wars where children suffered the most in Northern Uganda. Hundreds and thousands of boys and girls were abducted from their homes and forcefully recruited into the LRA ranks as luggage carriers, looters, spies and baby sitters. They were also used as killing machines, 'wives' and 'soldiers'. Eighteen years after the guns have gone silent (2022), it remains unclear whether or not the LRA war has really ended because the rebel leader Joseph Kony and some of his few remaining soldiers have not yet come out of the bushes of the DRC and CAR where they remain lodged without making any political demands to the government of Uganda like they used to do before.

### **Methodology**

Many studies that focus on the LRA/ NRA war in Uganda have been done in the Acholi sub-region and few in the Lango sub-region and yet the war affected the whole of Northern Uganda where there are more than seven ethnic groups (see for example Akello, 2010; Ochen, 2012; Edmondson, 2005; Blattmann and Annan in Mugabi eds., 2008; ). Many children, women and men were also kidnapped and forced to fight by the LRA rebels from the Lango sub-region but little focus has been on the Lango sub-region (Apio, 2016; Atim, 2018) and that is what stirred the motivation for this research. Lira district was therefore purposely chosen as the area of study to complement and present information about the experiences of formerly abducted women who returned home from the Lango sub-region.

Data was collected from ten formerly abducted women using in-depth interviews and observations. Six Key Informants were also interviewed. The Key Informants were drawn from stakeholders who were either parents or those who worked with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), or schools that were associated with the formerly abducted women. These included members of Concerned Parents Association (CPA)<sup>3</sup>, the current leadership of St. Mary's College Aboke, a former

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<sup>2</sup> At that time South Sudan was still part of the main Sudan. South Sudan became a nation on July 9<sup>th</sup> 2011.

<sup>3</sup> CPA is a Non-Governmental Organization that was formed in 1996 by parents of girls who were abducted from St. Mary's College Aboke by the LRA rebels.

Teacher of St. Mary's College Aboke who followed the rebels and negotiated for their return and some of the people who provided counseling to those who returned from rebel captivity.

The study used snowball sampling to identify these women who were living in Lira district at the time of the study. Snowball sampling proved to be a very effective method of identifying the women because it helped to build trust among the women who were interviewed. Because of the experiences that they had gone through in captivity, the respondents did not trust just anybody but were more comfortable when they were approached by someone whom they shared similar experiences with. The study used the services of a guide who was also one of the formerly abducted women and a survivor of the LRA atrocities. The sampling revealed a flaw in one of the assumptions that had guided the study. The study had wrongly assumed that all formerly abducted women who would be residing in Lira would be Langi women who would have returned home to the Lango sub-region. To the contrary, the sampling ended up with women from three different ethnic groups from Northern Uganda and these were; Alur, Acholi and Lango all living in Lira at the time of the study. To them Lira had become home, the place of safety and return.

Each interview took between one to three hours. Because of the painful memories, sometimes the interviews had to be paused and continued later especially when the respondents were overwhelmed by emotions and needed a break. In addition, because of the sensitive nature of the research, in this article pseudonyms have been used in order to protect the respondents' privacy.

### **Conceptual framework**

The study uses Svetlana Boym's theory of nostalgia, and interrogates the different types of longings that respondents expressed in relation to their past and what motivated them to return home from the LRA captivity. It also interrogates feminist theoretical perspectives about home to provide context to the understanding of the formerly abducted women's longings for and perceptions about home. Boym defines nostalgia among others as a sad mood originating from the desire to return to one's native land (Boym, 2001). Originating from the Greek word *nostos*, Boym explains that nostalgia was at first narrowly used to express a kind of psychological sickness, a feeling that needed to be cured by returning home (7). It was associated with Swiss soldiers who had a sick feeling of longing and yearned to return to their homeland (See also Anderson J. 2011). In other words, nostalgia always conjured a need for a return to a place of childhood; "... nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time- the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams." (Boym, 8)

Other scholars like Fodor, N. 1950, Batcho, K. I. 1995, 1998; Sedikides, C. et al 2004; Davis 1979 and Bassin, D. 1993 emphasized the aspect of the physical return more than the psychological return. In this way nostalgia becomes a historical emotion; a longing for a physical return not just a psychological return.

Nostalgia was also conceived to be sharing some symbols with nationalism and patriotism because of the desire to return to one's roots. This idea fits well with the notion of nationalism as propounded by Benedict Anderson (1983) where the nation is an imagined community brought together by aspirations and love for a place of origin.

Boym explains that there is the third angle of nostalgia i.e. modern nostalgia. Modern nostalgia involves mourning for the impossible mythical return, mourning for the loss

of an enchanted world with clear borders and values. In this way nostalgia becomes an incomplete mourning process, that can hinder development (Volkan, 1999) until the affected person returns to that place of longing that caused the nostalgic feelings to arise. The returning place is usually a homeland, a place of abode or a familiar, safe and protected boundary.

While nostalgia may refer to a sense of longing, an emotional attachment to the beauty of a past that is more communal, associated with the love of a nation, of nature or of the countryside of one's origin, Boym also emphasized the futuristic / modern aspects of nostalgia advancing the less emphasized aspect of a future longing, which in essence may not even be tied to a past tangible reality. The futuristic modern nostalgia, can either be restorative or reflective.

In restorative nostalgia the person makes a trans-historical attempt to reconstruct the lost home almost creating a binary plot where there is a return to or a rebuilding of the original home that one is longing for. Reflective nostalgia on the other hand stresses on the longing for a future home, a wishful thinking that does not emphasize the need for the future home to necessarily be a physical returning point. Reflective nostalgia is multidimensional and this is the concept that I borrow and use in this article to analyze the sense of longing that characterized the narratives of these women who returned home from abduction after several years of captivity. For them home has been several places, the home they were kidnapped from, the home they lived in while in captivity, the home that they built when they returned from captivity and the home of their dreams i.e. what they imagined home to be as they returned from the captivity. Nostalgia therefore links well to the concept of home because of its emphasis on a return to a past, a home whether futuristic, physical, psychological or historical.

Home remains a loaded concept because it has been theorized in many different ways in legal, feminist, anthropological, economic, and sociological studies. In addition there have also been several debates that influence the study of home for gender scholars, and this debate centers on what home means for men compared to women and also the positions of women versus men in the home. There are those who view home positively as the place and space where women are in control. Such conceptions trigger the nostalgia for a return home for women because the home is visualized as a safe space for them. On the other hand, there are those who view home as a place of enslavement for women, as the place where men oppress women particularly wives and daughters away from the public gaze. There are others who view home as a place of in-between; neither a place of safety nor of insecurity. All these definitions inform the conceptions of nostalgia or the lack thereof for home for women. On the side of men, most studies have shown that men do not consider home to be the place for men to stay and work. Whether this is a colonial mentality or not, there seems to be a common trend for African men to want to get out of home and work in order to return and bring money or food home. Whether the comfort levels the women and men feel are the same, is debatable but their return home are motivated by different perspectives.

O'Mahony (2007), defines home in legal terms emphasizing its physicality. In this context, home is defined as a house where there is a physical structure with an investment value of property. The legal concept of home seeks to represent the value of home to its occupants irrespective of gender. In the legal definition, home is a gender neutral space and the neutrality of the definition has the danger of ignoring the different experiences of home based on the gendered experiences of individuals.

The second definition of home has to be understood within the discursive context of the private and public binaries. There is the debate gender and feminist studies that puts women and men in a binary where women are presented as belonging to the private sphere and men as belonging to the public sphere. This debate has generated concern about the way spaces can be used to explain women's subordination versus men's domination in the home- a private space. In Marxist feminist perspectives for example, the home falls within the realm of the private sphere where women are confined to domestic labour without pay. Men on the other hand are seen to belong to the public sphere where they go out to work and earn cash. In this way home is viewed negatively as the 'women's place'- the place of unpaid labour. This is the space where women are 'confined' where they suffer enslavement from patriarchy (Young, 1997; O'Mahony 2007). Earlier scholars like Dalla Costa and Selma Jones (1975) had expressed similar Marxist feminist ideas like O'Mahony and Young. They explain the oppressive nature of home in Marxist feminism by elaborating that the work that women do in the home 'frees' men and allows them to go out and work longer hours for capital thus increasing the rate of surplus value. In this way the ruling class, which is mostly composed of men, control the reproduction of the labor power indirectly. This is how patriarchy dominates women. It should be noted that this explanation has also been contested by some who argue that in abject poverty, men are equally confined to the private sphere- to the home and therefore it would be wrong to think that home is a place of confinement for women only because even men who are part of the lower class are also confined at home. The class inequality defines the experiences of such men and women more than the gender inequality, according to the latter's rather socialist feminist argument.

Others Post-Freudian Marxists have argued that male dominance is a result of ideology and culture that helps to discipline the working class by imposing an 'authoritarian' character structure that is needed for capitalist production and this authoritarian structure flows from the macro to the micro; from the factory to the household; in other words, from the public to the private. In all this the idea of the women's place being in the home becomes a problem because it offers the perfect excuse to exclude women from the market (Allison Jaggar 71).

Other than the idea that home is a place of drudgery where women are confined to housework, there have been other socialist feminists that have looked at home as a place of sexual confinement where women are sexually abused (Young in O'Mahony (2007); Jaggar (1983)). In relation to this, Radical, Marxists, Socialist and Post-colonial feminists have argued that women experience extreme forms of sexual abuse and gender based violence in the homes and therefore home is not a safe place for women.

All women are liable to rape, to physical abuse from men in the home, and to sexual objectification and sexual harassment; all women are primarily responsible for housework, while all women who have children are held primarily responsible for the care of those children; and virtually all women who work in the market work in sex-segregated jobs. In all cases, women have less money, power and leisure time than men (Jaggar 77-78).

In the above context, home becomes a dangerous place for women other than a place of safety. It becomes a place where women are left vulnerable to abuse without access to power (O'Mahony 367).

All these negative conceptions of home ignore the significance of home as a place of identity, as a place where men and women alike retire to rest. Home is also looked at in very individualistic terms, as if home is completely isolated from the community.

Home in the context of Northern Uganda where this research was done is part of the larger community where family is surrounded by other families, by neighbors and by other members of the clan and neighboring clans in the village. Thus, some of the literature that revealed the positive aspects of home were essential to the holistic understanding of home and why there was nostalgia for a return to it.

Home has also been used as a symbolic religious expression as seen in African American Baptist hymns and in the slave narratives which emphasized freedom from slavery as both spiritual and physical (Gates, Henry Louis Jr. and Charles T. Davis 1985). Home has also been viewed psychologically as the place of dreams by Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud. Black feminists like Bell Hooks (2000) view home as a site of dignity and resistance. Hooks identifies home as a site of resistance for Black women and men because it offers restorative space for those who experience oppression outside the home to enjoy their 'dignity, satisfaction, safety, privacy and opportunity to develop their identities' (O'Mahony 372). For Black feminists the oppressions vary based on class, race and gender; all the Black people who face these forms of oppressions tend to find respite at home where they feel a sense of belonging and solidarity.

Other scholars have emphasized the affective value of home. O'Mahony explains the affective value in this way; "Home represents a complex and multidimensional amalgam of financial, practical, social, psychological, cultural, politico-economic and emotional interests to its occupiers" (376).

Some women scholars from Africa have defined home as the space where women have status as wives, mothers, in-laws and therefore not an oppressive space to women. Scholars like Gwendolyn Mikell, Obioma Naemeka, Oyeronke Oyewumi, and Ifi Amadiume have all shown that home is rather a site where both women and men, marginalized or not, come together collectively in order to achieve an objective. Home is therefore communal, not individual. Oyeronke emphasizes the aspect of the African, particularly Yoruba family whose characteristics are not necessarily that of the Western nuclear family. To the Yoruba, family and home are much more communal than individual. Obioma Nnaemeka re-echoes the same sentiments about home and communality for African women by arguing that the African woman's identity is communal where she is surrounded by her family within the space of home (358). These are the same sentiments echoed by Langole Stephen whose study of the conception of home in Acholi shows that home is. A place of identity, a place of ancestry and the place where one gets buried so any town home cannot adequately replace the village home. Home is the village home (Langole 2016).

Home has also been conceived as a place of recovery (Fox 2016), as a place of origin. Fox goes on to explain that home is that place which people take for granted, where they find peace and comfort. It is the place where people feel a sense of belonging, where they feel wanted. It is this idea that O'Mahony expands when she says;

Home represents solace, peace and quiet, warmth, love, acceptance—it's 'a place to hang your hat'. Thoughts of home open onto vistas of pride and remembrance—of family, country, homeland, childhood, heritage, lineage, and loyalties of various sorts (such as patriotism), (O'Mahony 3).

In all these definitions and debates about home, the ideological perceptions of home informs the inter-connection between home and nostalgia. Nostalgia for home is usually influenced by the positive aspect of memory and imagination where the return home is viewed as the return to the ideal space of love where one is valued as part of

the family. When positive nostalgia about home influences people's return, the shocking reality of rejection becomes difficult to handle and those were characteristics of some of the experiences that the women narrated. It is therefore important to discuss both the positive and negative experiences of home. This study analyzes the nostalgic recollections of the formerly abducted women to understand the effect of homes on their lives.

The chapter shows that it is impossible to return to a pure past which is the same as the one that was left behind. The temporal nature of home, and feelings associated with it begin to be fleeting dreams that live in the imagination as reflected in the narratives. When the women came back, they had their own nostalgic conceptions of the home they were returning to, but these recollections were different from what they experienced upon return.

To the formerly abducted, home wasn't just a romanticized place; it was their place of origin, the place where their families lived, where they lived as children before they were abducted. Home was a place of identity, stability, a place that gave them a sense of belonging that was why they struggled to live through the hardships of the bush always hoping they would one day escape from captivity and return to the safety of their homes. Home was indeed a place of return, a place where everybody returns to dead or alive, in thoughts or in action.

These theoretical perspectives about home and nostalgia were relevant to the study because the experiences of the respondents showed a common form of nostalgia for home. From the bush, all of them desired and longed to escape and return home as was evident in their oral narratives. Their experiences of home, were however different, posing a need to appreciate what each experience was and how differently they inform the current livelihoods of these formerly abducted women.

### **Home as a Place of Return**

In Leblango, *Jo odwogo i lum* is the descriptive noun used to describe the people who returned home from rebel captivity which literally translates as 'those who returned from the bush.' In short *Jo odwogo ilum* were referred to as *returnees*. Being labelled a *returnee*, implies that there is a past or a place to which the returnee returns. That place is the old home, known and familiar. Home, the place of nostalgia.

The findings showed that much as home was indeed the place of return, the feeling of comfort, love and welcome that was there before the abduction had been destabilized. Time had passed and changes had occurred, and the changes affected the returnees as much as it did the people who remained behind at home. Some of the families who had anxiously waited for the return of their children welcomed them and were very happy to see them back even though they had been changed by the war. There were those who were not happy to see their children because of the changes the children had gone through as a result of the war. Those who were unhappy felt that the *returnees* were not the same children they lost to the war. Because of this some of the *returnees* were labeled rebels instead of being seen as victims and survivors of the LRA or HSM abductions. It is such stories that makes one question the discourses that present home as a place of comfort which psychologically beckons those who have left it and makes them yearn to return to it.

### **Home before the war**



Most of the women were abducted from their homes; either as they were sleeping or as they were moving from home to school or vice versa. All the four narratives below show how the abduction took place from the different homes.

They found me sleeping in the house with my parents. Then they got us. I tried hiding under the bed, but it was impossible. They got the bed and threw it upside down, then they got me. Then they asked me that ‘where are your clothes’? Then they picked the clothes from the wire and gave it to me. Then I put on my clothes and then we started moving. (Akot)

I was at home at my grandparents place... We were sleeping at night. During the day the UPDF had come. Then at 4:00 am the soldiers (meaning LRA rebels) came and opened the door. (Ajok)

People came at night at around midnight. Then they opened the door and found me asleep with one of my young siblings. When they opened the door I got up ... Then I started shouting telling him not to shoot me. Then I started pleading with them telling them that I didn’t know it was them. After I pleaded, they led me out, then I came and found many people in the compound, they were all tied up in one rope. ... so, they also took me and tied me up saying that I was a difficult person. (Enume)

It was October, 9<sup>th</sup>. I had gone to the market, come back and we were seated at the fireplace now. Then some people came running. Those people told my father ; ‘You are still seated there with all your children at the fireplace, Kony’s people are coming.’ My father started saying there is nothing that I can do now. As Father was still saying this, we noticed that it was actually Kony’s people chasing those people who had warned us. They arrived immediately and surrounded us. They surrounded us, we were six boys and three girls. Among the three girl they picked me first. Then they picked one of my brothers. Then they picked my Aunties daughter. Altogether they took four of us and went with us on their way. (Acio)

All the women’s narratives showed longing for a return to this home where they were snatched out of under the various circumstances. They talked about how they missed home, especially how they missed their mothers, fathers, siblings and friends. It was the nostalgia for home that gave them courage to persevere through the torturous life in the bush.

When we reached Sudan, there was hunger in Sudan! There was Cholera in Sudan! But I thank God and I gave my promise to the King. I told God that , ‘I used to pray and I used to serve in your church, and I was a warden; so, if you want this to happen because of the sins of my ancestors, let it happen. But if it is your will prevent it.’ Now when I had prayed, and I promised Him, that ‘... me I will do your will. I want to go back to our home when nothing has touched me’. And nothing ever touched ... until I came back. Nothing, no bullet ever touched me. But I went through hardships! “ (Ajok)

The above extract is an example of the nostalgic recollections of home and the promise of the divine. Ajok in the above extract was nostalgic about home and how

she used to serve in the church. She yearned for home and kept hope alive by praying and hoping for the return. In this case home symbolizes not only the place but the religious activities that were performed in the privacy of the home.

The respondents narrated how they longed for the freedom of home, for the education that they had left behind. Others talked about how they missed the social life at home where they felt loved and taken care of by their families compared to life in the bush where they were always on the run hiding from attacks by the NRA soldiers on the one hand and on the other hand being beaten and harassed by the rebels on suspicion of wanting to escape.

After the kidnap, the longing for home forced many of the children to risk and try to escape from captivity. Whenever those who tried to escape were caught, the newly abducted ones would be forced to kill them. These forced killings of children caught attempting to escape served to instill fear. The women who were interviewed said they quietly promised not to escape until an appropriate time. Their will to stay in the bush was based on the hope that they would one day escape and go back home alive. Nostalgia for home was therefore evident in the narratives as a memory of the past. Some of the narratives were specific about what or whom the women missed most after being abducted. Because they were taken when they were children, they missed their parents especially their mothers.

When I was abducted I kept on missing my mother because we did not have a father. We were the ones who used to help her so I would keep on worrying that since I had now been abducted, my mother must have also died already because there was no one to help her. We were living at our maternal home and the people there did not like us so much. I worried about my mother and wished I was with her. I knew I had been abducted and my brother who should have helped her had also been abducted and killed. (Enume)

Responses from parents of the formerly abducted children who were part of the Concerned Parents Association (CPA) showed that they too missed their children. They had nostalgia for a past where there was no war, where they were happy together as a family with their children. Key Informants from Concerned Parents Association (CPA) explained how one of the parents died as a result of worry, stress and depression only for two his daughters to be released after he had passed away. One daughter remains unaccounted for and it is not clear whether she is alive or not. The above experiences shows that both the respondents and their parents had a strong desire for the old home based on their nostalgic recollections of a beautiful past that they shared.

### **The bush as ‘home’**

However, this sweet conception of home does not capture all the experiences and notions of home as experienced by the women who were interviewed. When the notion of home is used to promote abuse, it leaves a painful reality for women as was the case of how the respondents felt in the rebel- ‘homes’ that they were forced to construct and live in, while in the bush. The bush homes provided contrasting negative memories for the women. Some scholars have explained the origin of the bush homes in relation to the attempt by Kony to create and isolate a group that would be faithful to him and carry his legacy of fighting against the NRA soldiers. According to Baines, Joseph Kony, the LRA leader was driven by the ambition to create a new family, a so called ‘pure race’ as a strategy to sustain the rebellion (Baines, 2018: 34) In relation to this philosophy, respondents explained that children

who were abducted were assigned to male headed households to establish those new bush homes.

LRA commanders lived inside a compound that resembled a village life in Acholi. Within each Brigade, there was a senior level commander's compound, including his hut (*gang madit*, main home), the huts of his wives, a hut for *ting ting*, a kitchen (*ot keno*), a bathing room and a toilet, a central yard where social life took place, and a garden. They were in turn, surrounded by new recruits who lived in *adaki* (low lying huts that surrounded the perimeter of each high commander's compound, as well as the perimeter of the Brigade. (Baines, 37)

Respondents confirmed that the above structure existed and that they lived in such family units in LRA bases in Sudan. Baines gives details of the time and places in Sudan where such settlements were and these were Gong, Luwudu and Palateka (1993-1994); Aruu (1995-1997); Nicitu (1997-2002); Rubangatek (1998-2001); Jebelen (1997-2002) (Baines, 38). According to respondents, each household was headed by a *Ladit*, who was usually a rebel commander or a soldier of some high rank in the LRA. *Ladit*, is the noun used to refer to an elder of the male gender, while *Megu*, refers to the female elder in the Acholi household. The power relations between *Ladit* and *Megu* in Kony's enclave was not the same as those that existed in the traditional Acholi household. *Ladit* was in total control of all the wives even though the first and usually older wife- *Megu* would have a relatively higher status compared to the other younger women who came after her. Kony's hierarchical gendered household borrowed heavily from the Acholi households where the Father- a man, is in most cases the head of the home and the women's seniority are ranked according to who got married into the clan first, especially in polygamous relationships. The sad adaptation was that, Kony forced all the other women into sexual relations with the *Lodito* (plural for *Ladit*), and the women had no choice to get out of the relationships even if they wanted to; something which was not entertained in traditional Acholi society.

According to respondents, once a young girl is abducted, she is given to one of the households to work as *ting-ting*. As *ting-ting*, she is expected to do domestic chores like washing, fetching water and cutting grass for re-roofing homes. Once she begins to menstruate, colloquially referred to as 'seeing OP,' she is considered mature enough to be given to a man as a wife. She is given to any of the commanders and she had no right to object to such a union. All the women who were interviewed for this study who were abducted as children first served as *Ting-ting* in the larger households before they were distributed as wives. Only two who were abducted when they were adults did not work as *Ting-ting*. These narratives about how *Ting-ting* were abused in the households of rebel commanders correspond to the autobiographical narratives by women who were abducted by the LRA and who were able to write about their experiences like Evelyn Amony (2015). Baines (2018) has also written about how pre-pubescent *Ting-tings* were used as baby sitters and house girls in the homes of rebel commanders until Kony's spirits would direct him and he would order the girl to be taken as wife by one of his men, in worse cases by the same men who had acted as heads of these households where the *Ting-tings* were like their children.

Respondents narrated different experiences of the moments when they were given to men as wives. Some of them refused to have sex with the men which resulted into severe beatings. Others did not attempt to fight at all for fear of the consequences of

refusal. The consequences for refusal ranged from severe beating to being killed. One of the respondents narrated how she survived a firing squad for refusing to have sex with a man whom she was given to the first time, because he was old enough to be her grandfather.

The first person they gave me to, I rejected him because he was old. We never met (had sex). I kept on crying whenever he would come to me. May be God listened to my crying, then it made him go and die. Because him and I were not staying together well. Even people were scheduled to discuss our issues that day when he died. Then fighting started in the morning. Because Kony had said that if I was behaving like that, even after people had helped me to make me live, people should take me and tie me to a tree and shoot me dead. That morning fighting started, then he went off to the front. When they brought me the report, instead I made an alarm. I would go and make an alarm inside the house, then come outside and pretend that I am crying. I was so happy because that night he was supposed to meet with me. But that morning, fighting started at 5:00 am. For me I got up and went out. He also heard that there was fighting then he went. Because that fighting was very fierce.” (Enume)

From such narratives as the above, it can be seen that the women experienced oppression in the so-called homes they were allocated to in the bush. It was an early morning raid that saved Enume from the first rape by the man whom she had been given to as *ting-ting* and who had now started demanding for her body because he considered her old enough for sex. Through the alarm she was able to hide her emotion of joy because no one could tell whether it was out of joy or pain. In this way she was free to express her innermost feeling and get relief, while fooling everyone who was seeing her. The LRA abused the concept of the family to enslave and domesticate all the girls and women who were abducted and forced to stay in such homes. Boys were subjected to hard labor and hunger following the patriarchally influenced gender stereotype that boys and men should be strong and do more physical work. Women became victims of their biology in these bush homes. The LRA homes were places where women and girls were objectified as sex objects. Women and girls experienced sexual violence in forms of rape and defilement. There was physical, emotional and psychological violence as well. Because of the sexual violence, some of the women came back with children who were products of this violence. Kony’s claim that he wanted to create a pure Acholi race who would one day overthrow the Museveni government (Baines, 2018; De Temmerman, 156) becomes ironical in the face of these happenings. In this way, the non-traditional experimental homes that Kony created in the bush did more damage than good to girls, women and the family structure in Northern Uganda as a whole. In those circumstances, home became a place of enslavement where women were treated as sex objects and this relates to what Iris Young and Allison Jagger expounded in their arguments which placed home as the place of sexual exploitation of women. Within Kony’s re-constructed militarized space, home promoted suffering for the defenseless abducted girls and boys, women and men.

### **Home as the place of return**

All the suffering and mistreatment in the bush made the abductees nostalgic for a return home. However, the home of return also presented contrasting realities for each of the women. The gender dynamics within each of the respondent’s homes

influenced how they were either welcomed, or shunned upon their return from captivity. Sometimes home presented a stark contrast to what they remembered and imagined- and at other times, it brought back some positive illusions of the old past which was good. The study situates this part of the discussion of nostalgia for the home and the actual return, within the dynamics of gender relations within individual households because those impacted differently on the returnees.

In all the narratives there were differences in the gender relations; the way the women who returned related with the opposite sex, whether the men were their fathers, brothers, or husbands. There were also differences in the way women related with fellow women whether daughters, sisters, cousins, mothers or mothers in law. From the findings, the daughter - father relations were more amiable before, during and after abductions. There were also some good relationships between mothers and daughters before, and after the return from the bush. However, sibling relations were for the most part constrained and that ruined the joy of return of some of the returnees. One of the respondents recalls her return home by invoking the imagery of heat, implying that the condition at home was unbearable in this way;

When we reached home, home was hot. Home, you see us here, home is hot. No one wants you. For me when I had just come back, all my relatives rejected me. No one tells you what they are thinking. Thinking that I would kill them? Why would I kill them? I reached and all my sisters rejected me. Even one of my sisters even up to now doesn't speak to me, (Ajok)

Discussions of gender power relations within households have often focused on the relationship between men and women which usually translates as that between husband and wife and forgotten the internal dynamics within the African households i.e. sibling and other extended family relations. In all the theories about gender relations in the home that O'Mahony discusses there is no discussion of women to women or men to men relations in a home. This breeds the assumption that in the home, the power dynamics that influence gender relations is the one between men and women, precisely put- husband and wife. Even Hooks, Jaggar and Young focus on gender household relations as that between husband and wife. The focus on husband-wife relations also wrongly assumes that all households are heterogeneous with men as heads of households and women and children constituting the family. Perhaps it is Oyeronke and Obioma who decode the dynamics of the relationships in the household beyond the husband and wife by discussing status and entitlements for Yoruba and Igbo women within the households. In the above case, why did a sister reject her own sister - a fellow woman? When this question was posed to the respondent she said “ No one tells you what they are thinking. Thinking that I would kill them? Why would I kill them? “ (Ajok). This shows that there is uneven power dynamics even among women. Sisterly/ sibling jealousy and disagreements exist. For Ajok it was her sister's rejection that hurt her the most. Because of the sister's rejection, Ajok decided to leave the paternal village home where her sister lived and relocate to Lira town where she felt more at home amidst strangers. Home is therefore not defined by the familiarity of relations, but can be any place where one is made to feel welcome and at peace.

In the Lango and Acholi sub-regions, sibling rivalry has greatly influenced the stability of homes in the post war era as is evidenced in this research. Lango is a patriarchal society where land is communally owned but passed on from father to son. Wives own land through their husbands by virtue of a valid marriage where the ownership is limited to access and use but they cannot transfer it to another person if

they wanted to. Land is passed on to sons who are culturally entitled to inherit land from their fathers. Daughters are supposed to marry and get land through their husbands' families. Daughters who remain unmarried are entitled to access and use land from their parents but this is where it becomes unsafe if the family has selfish brothers. The brothers will want to chase their sisters away so that they- the boys of that household inherit the land and divide it among themselves. In all these, seniority plays a role in entitlements and allocation of land. The senior siblings feel a sense of entitlement to property (such as land in this case) and do not want to share that property with their younger siblings. In most cases therefore, male siblings are not happy to see their sisters remaining unmarried and sharing property with them thus the rivalry and the bad reception at home for women such as Ajok. In this case, it is her sister, a fellow woman who is not happy that she has come back home because her coming home with several male children means that they as sisters will have to share the land with the children whom she came with.

Since most of the respondents were abducted before they were married, their return home meant a return to their paternal homes. In Lango culture such unmarried women are supposed to be given some land to use for farming so that they can take care of themselves and their children. Unmarried Langi women belong to the paternal home. In this case, the behavior of Ajok's sister shows that even female siblings mistreat each other when it comes to jealousy over property. Ajok had returned from the bush with three children and produced two more children with another man upon return. Two of Ajok's children were boys. Her sister, who was also unmarried did not want to share their father's property with Ajok since she had returned with boy- children who would be part of the clan and would need land.

One of the respondents who originates from Acholi sub-region faced a similar rejection, this time it was from her brother.

For me I have a problem with my brother even up to now. When I came back from the bush we had problems with him. When I came back and stayed home, if he drinks alcohol, he keeps abusing me that I am *Ototong*. That I should go away from their home, (Acio).

Acio's brother rejected and chased her away from home. He called her *Ototong* - a derogative noun meaning a rebel who murders people brutally by chopping up his/her victims. Because of the constant emotional and physical abuse, Acio fled to Lira. She recounted several incidents where she suffered physical abuse.

When he started making my life hard, I first left in anger and went and stayed with some Aunt of mine. But then my father went and got me and brought me back home. When I stayed home, this arm (*showing the arm*), he chopped it with a machete, that I am *Ototong*, so he will also just cut and cut me with a machete. (Acio)

Acio's wound is visible and recalling the incident made her burst into tears. It is now nine years since she left home and found a home in Lira. Acio's story speaks of a bigger problem that the war has brought upon the family as a social unit. There was no proper counseling offered to the families who lost their children to the war. Even the returnees themselves, few got any form of counselling at all.

There is need for counseling families of formerly abducted people on how to handle those who have returned from abduction. The formerly abducted women ought to be counselled, accepted and integrated into the families as survivors of the war and not be blamed for what they were forced to go through.

The findings showed a consistent pattern of who was quick to reject the returnees within each household. The fathers and mothers in majority of cases did not reject their children. In all the interviews, all respondents agreed that their parents were very excited about having them back and promised to support them. It was usually the brothers and sisters who rejected the siblings when they returned. This brings a different perspective to the analysis of intra and inter-household gender relations since gender relations has for the most part been discussed as spousal; husband -wife relations. The dynamics of sibling relations have for the most part been left out and yet this is important too.

In other instances, rejection came from the home community, not the individual paternal/ maternal homes. Another respondent narrated how someone locked her up from outside and set her house ablaze when she and the children were asleep inside the house. The timely intervention of neighbors saved their lives. She lost property worth millions in the fire including capital for the business which she had started. She had to flee home to the anonymity of the town where she lives in hiding. It is also fascinating how urban environment becomes “home” and help to nurture a secure environment, when it is often depicted as dangerous when contrasted with the rural one which offers the comfort of familiarity.

Beyond the family unit, the extended clan was also broken down by the war. In the past, the clan supported its members and was the solid foundation behind the homes. If a girl was not married, she was given land by her father and her children belonged to the paternal family and clan as earlier mentioned. In this case, home ceases to be a location or a household where people of the same family share a meal. Home is community and the women who returned home needed to feel welcomed within the communities where their class, their uncles and their relatives lived. However, in some cases, sibling rivalry extended from the uncles to the nephews and nieces where uncles would deny children born out of wedlock land and try to chase them to go and look for land on their biological father’s side. One of the women suffered this kind of rejection.

For me I don’t go home. Because, first of all, when I had just come back, they even fired a gun at me when I was inside the house. Those people did not want me to come back. They were jealous of us that we are helping our mother, (Ename).

Some of the women also narrated how their children are othered by peers, neighbors and other members of the community. The children who were fathered by rebels are also called ‘*Ototong*’ The abuse is a constant reminder to the women and their children that they don’t belong and are not trusted within their communities. A few of the women returned from the bush to no homes. In the process of abduction, people had been displaced and they lived in Internally Displaced People’s Camps (IDPCs). But for some of the respondents from the Acholi sub-region there were no relatives to return to and in essence no home to return to as narrated by one of the respondents;

When I came back, I found I didn’t even have any home to go to. When I was abducted, they collected nine people from home and killed them. I had nowhere to go. And those are not even my relatives; they are relatives of the husband to the sister of my mother. Up to now, my children don’t know anyone. When I sit with my children, my neighbors ask me where I am from. (Akwero)

In the above case, the absence of home brings in a bigger dilemma of the loss of identity. Akwero feels a sense of loss that she does not have any relatives left, and

therefore has no roots for her and her children to anchor on. For women like Akwero, their hope is to buy land, build and make new homes for their children. Thus, home is never always about place only, it is about a host of things that makes up the place to be called the place of abode.

Not all narratives were bleak though, there were narratives of acceptance where some of the women were warmly welcomed home and supported by their families as a whole. Home indeed became a symbol of salvation. According to Ajok she believes she survived all the dangers in the bush because she comes from a good home and her mother is a good Christian. She narrates that when she returned home she told her mother that; "I thank you for the holiness and glory that you kept in our home. If you had gone to the witchdoctor or done something unjust about me, I would have been dead by now but our home is a good home and a home of people who know God." The belief in God's protection kept these women alive and they lived with the hope of returning home one day.

As the women returned home, there were parent led organisations like CPA that welcomed and supported them. Other women were supported by families who shared resources with them. One of the respondents mentioned that she got support from her sister in law who sometimes even pays her rent when she doesn't have money. More than half of the women who were interviewed were involved in some kind of petty trade or business in Lira town. The anonymity of urban life provides a cushion for these women and hides their identity. Respondents felt that staying in Lira town also provided more opportunities for business and protection. It also provided cushion against the stigma of being singled out as returnees which easily takes place in the villages where everyone knew who was who within the communities. This is in line with the literature from Langole who argues that women who have relocated to the urban centers are seeking anonymity of the urban centers which hides them from public scrutiny. One of the issues that came out clearly in the research was that the urban setting was preferred as the place in which to build a home after the return from the bush, more than the ancestral, paternal homes because of its relative cosmopolitanism, diversity and anonymity. Home becomes in this case more of a community than just the ancestral place of origin like Oyeroke and Amadiume echoed. In this case town become home disrupting the ideas proposed by scholars like Langole who argue that the real home is more of the village home than the town home.

### **Coping strategies**

Re location requires re-creation and re-starting of new homes and new families. Respondents divulged that they have a silent understanding and solidarity among themselves as formerly abducted women and men. This sisterhood and brotherhood has been built on the rock of suffering in the bush and the common experiences of torture that they went through. These women have a form of solidarity among themselves, a new kind of sisterhood bonded in a shared past of suffering. Some of the respondents talked about being undermined by the community. Because they were abducted, the community thinks they are not capable of doing anything to the extent that if there are job opportunities, the offers will be given to other people first and they *returnees* are left out. The assumption is that dealing with *returnees* is difficult. Respondents explained that they have been described negatively as militant, as people who will not listen to reason but just want to fight once something goes wrong. In relation to this, the women have developed coping strategies of lobbying



for jobs and opportunities by linking up with like-minded organisations and individuals whom they know will be sympathetic to their causes.

Finally, marriage has been one of the coping strategies adopted by some of the formerly abducted women as a way of building new homes. In a culture where marriage is viewed as the means to an end for girls and women, these women feel pressured to get husbands. The lesser the education, the more the pressure is upon women to marry with the assumption that the husband will provide for the family. Out of the ten women who were interviewed, five were married, two were cohabiting and three were single. Of the three single women, two had children and one had no child. The two single women with children had tried relationships and gotten men but the union did not work out, instead they were left with additional mouths to feed.

Reflecting on her life and children Ajok had this to say;

They are five now. I came back with three from the bush. I delivered two from here. I even separated from their father in 2012. He left the little one in the womb at three months. I am alone. But even, when he was there he never paid rent, never thought people ate. I don't know if it is jealousy, he doesn't agree to anything at all. So I said, instead of paying rent for you since 2009, I prefer you leave me alone to rest and stay by myself. These kids I will keep. Because boys when they become of age and you want them, then you can come and get them to go and see their family land. But, am confirming that those children will stay with me because we have enough land at my home also. My mother's children are not there, so there is no one to keep the land there. (Ajok)

From the above, we realize that some of the women who come from families with enough land opt not to suffer in marital unions where men do not provide for the family after their return. The social support and family resources especially land can help such women to get out of abusive relationships. Unfortunately for Ajok, her sister had even spurned her and didn't want her because she didn't want to share the land with her and her children. Much as in her earlier narrative she was complaining about a sister who did not want to speak to her anymore, she is comforted in the knowledge of tradition which provides for the children born outside marriage, and she knows that her sister cannot do anything to her beyond being jealous.

One of the women decided to remain single she nearly got killed by her partner confirming that gender based violence remains rampant in these marriages. The man she was co-habiting with almost poisoned her out of jealousy. He accused her of planning to leave him for her rebel husband whom he thought was coming out of the bush soon and would be given more privileged. She had to involve the police to chase him away and from that time onwards decide to remain single.

While marriage seems to be one of the coping strategies for most of these women to retain a semblance of the lost homes, the struggle to survive amidst scarce resources makes it still difficult for them to enjoy these new homes. The war has changed the dynamics of care and provision in the homes. Women are now earning from businesses that they are doing outside the home- in the public sphere to feed the families. While some of the husbands to these women also work in the public sphere as *bode bode*<sup>4</sup> riders, preachers and casual workers, they seem to earn little from their jobs compared to the women. The war has brought women out of the privacy of the homes, it has changed roles and duties and added additional responsibilities and

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<sup>4</sup> *Boda Boda* riders are those who ride motorcycles, *Boda* is the main mode of public transport in most Ugandan towns.

burden to their already burdened lives in the home. There is need for men to embrace some of the roles at home to ease the burden from their wives who are already doing double work in and outside home.

### **Conclusion**

To return to a past assumes that there is a past that is stable, frozen in time and waiting - immobile. Can a return to the past be possible when the past is not static, when the past feels like a fleeting memory? Boym seems to argue otherwise when she observes that "... even the most classical western tale of homecoming is far from circular; it is riddled with contradictions and zigzags, false homecomings, misrecognitions" (6). The impossibility of a pure return dogs the experiences of the *returnees* because whenever they return, the past glory, the past love and the past abodes remain mere memories. The current realities have changed and for some, new homes have to be built based on just memories of the good old homes. The return where possible, was to a historical, physical space which satisfied the historical emotion of coming back to a physical location. Beyond that, the psychological nostalgic emotions weren't quite satisfied for most of the *returnees*.

These narratives are significant in making us appreciate the challenges that still lie ahead for those women who were abducted and who returned home. It enables us to understand the dissipating value of nostalgia especially childhood memories and how they fade in the face of hardships. Memories of the LRA war and its effects of the women remain alive years after their physical return home.

These narratives enable us understand the struggles that formerly abducted women are going through after returning home and how they are rebuilding their lives. Their experiences in the bush continue to structure their lives in many ways, denying them opportunities, and posing challenges that need to be exposed and given context. The narratives destabilize knowledge forms that present homes as stable places of abode showing how gender relations and intragenerational relations in homes present different dynamics for women and men in the context of post conflict Lira.

The affective value of home continues to influence these women's desires to marry and build new homes because the marital home is perceived to provide financial, social, economic, psychological and emotional support and comfort to its occupants. The nostalgia and longing for a proper home, for a return to the home where love and family values were kept still remains alive for these formerly abducted women.

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