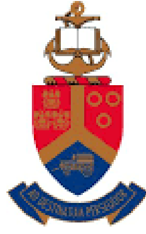

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LOCAL CONCEPTIONS OF CHILD AGENCY IN POST CONFLICT REINTEGRATION

By

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I declare that this thesis is my own original work and has not been previously submitted for another degree at a different university. Where secondary resources were utilised, these have been appropriately acknowledged and referenced in accordance with departmental requirements.

I understand what plagiarism is and am aware of the University's policy in this regard.

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 ABSTRACT

Due to the emphasis on notions of innocence, dependency, and vulnerability, coupled with normative expectations surrounding children and their 'agency,' former child soldiers/returnees are often treated more as aid recipients than active participants in their own reintegration. This study explores the complexities of child agency in post-conflict environments, examining returnees' nuanced realities and participatory experiences beyond traditional wartime narratives, thus redefining 'child' and childhood in the aftermath of prolonged conflict. By challenging conventional understandings that drive reintegration programs for 'child' returnees, it emphasises alternative pathways for participation and reconciliation rooted in local contexts. The research investigates how local norms, values, and practices shape agency, posing the question: 'How do alternative conceptions of child agency and participation unsettle pre-existing structures and approaches towards the post-conflict reintegration of children?' Centred on the LRA insurgency in northern Uganda, this research employs a qualitative, informed grounded theory approach integrating a critical literature review, alongside semi-structured focus groups and interviews conducted in Gulu. Participants include former child soldiers, communities, child mothers, children born in captivity, and organisations dedicated to children's rights and post-conflict reconciliation. Through open, axial, and focused coding of data, the study illuminates how local contexts shape children's roles, self-determination, and reciprocal relationships post-conflict, proposing a contextual and inclusive model for their reintegration and reconceptualising child agency in this context. This research thereby contributes a normative understanding of child agency in post-conflict settings, advocating for the incorporation of local insights to foster meaningful participation and holistic reintegration for former child soldiers long-term.

Word count: 249

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACRWC:	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
AU:	African Union
CAAFAG:	Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups
CAAG:	Child Associated with Armed Groups
CBOW:	Children Born of War
CPC:	Child Protection Committee
DDR:	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
FCS:	Former Child Soldiers
GCRCS:	Global Coalition for the Reintegration of Child Soldiers
GT:	Grounded Theory
GUSCO:	Gulu Support the Children Organisation
HSM:	Holy Spirit Movement
IDP:	Internally Displaced Persons
LC1:	Local Council Leader 1
LRA:	Lord's Resistance Army
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRA:	National Resistance Army
OAU:	Organisation of African Unity
REC:	Research Ethics Committee
UCRNN:	Uganda Children’s Rights NGO Network
UN:	United Nations
UNCRC:	United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNCST: Uganda National Council for Science and Technology

UNLA: Uganda National Liberation Army

UPDA: Uganda People's Democratic Army/Movement

UPDF: Uganda People's Defence Force

WAYA: War Affected Youth Association

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1. CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

1. Introduction: Background to the Research Theme/Phenomenon

Child soldiers may not be a new phenomenon, but the nature and impact of their roles, once the guns are put down, has only recently garnered attention and further exploration. Further than simply the recognition of these roles, it is important to recognise how formal reintegration programmes engage former child soldiers in a manner that upholds a so-called 'Western' ethos and accompanies traditionalist normative assumptions of the child. These assumptions portray 'the child' as vulnerable, needing adult protection, and typically favour psycho-social approaches, to the exclusion of local and culturally informed avenues. It is this exclusion of the informal arena that prompts the direction of this research, for it is within this arena that we can unpack the nature of child agency as it is nurtured within the community, post-conflict.

The purpose of this study is to move beyond solely recognising the roles and experiences of child soldiers, particularly those fostered in post-conflict contexts by established reintegration practices, to acknowledging their informal participatory roles that are largely unmentioned in the academic literature. This study will illustrate how agency is contextualised and informed by local norms and values at a community's core. From this departure, this study offers an original contribution to theorising child agency in the fields of Security Studies, International Relations and Childhood Studies, as well as in the formulation and execution of reintegration programmes that target former child soldiers (FCS).

Exploring child agency through new normative conceptions has thus both theoretical and practical implications in the realm of Security Studies and International Relations. Firstly, it could unsettle pre-existing accounts of the array of actors who "both affect and are affected by" reintegration programmes, as well as contribute to new narratives surrounding the nature of war, solutions of peace, and agency (Watson 2006: 250). Secondly, this redirection away from traditional normative conceptions, to include the informal and local dimensions, could inspire reforms of reintegration programmes towards more reciprocal avenues within the community. Additionally, this shift will enable recognition of the cultural norms and values that likely inform the nature of child agency and participation exhibited by returnees[1] (Beier 2015: 11; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 365, 369; Fernandez 2011: 487; Kaufman 2016: 1500; McMullen 2011: 743, 760; UNSC 2000; Watson 2006: 245 - 250).

[1] The term, returnees, refers to the former child soldiers who escape and pass-through reintegration centres prior to their return and reunification with their families and communities.

Lastly, this focus on the local and informal avenues would contribute to knowledge debates in the realm of the emerging local turn in peacebuilding with its emphasis on bottom-up approaches.

All in all, contextualising the conceptions and engagement of children, and youth, in reintegration and post-conflict societies would not only instil a greater sense of social and cultural cohesiveness, as well as local ownership, of reintegration programmes, but could also unveil the broader web of actors that are, or could be, involved in their framing and execution. By employing this direction, the study will seek to advance the notion of reintegration as a long-term, strategic investment towards sustainable peace and development that necessitates an acknowledgement of the vast interactions and commitments of actors across multiple levels and spheres, including children and their communities.

Serving as a practical reference, the case of northern Uganda will be used to depict the inherent top-down nature and emphasis of the 'vulnerability' of children within existing reintegration programmes. While programmes target psychological and social reintegration, they continually lack designated outlets for participation that account for the altered identities amongst returnees and their desires to "contribute to peace" (Akello *et al.* 2006: 230, 240; Maina 2009: 118; Russel & Gozdziak 2006: 63 - 64). Further, this case presents the dilemma of importing international norms and values into a local context with pre-existing norms and values of their own. Not only does a normative conflict ensue between the rights given to children by international conventions and the local perceptions of the rights *and* duties of 'the child,' but the reciprocal avenues for children's participation within the community are neglected.

2. Literature Review

Guiding the literature review in chapter two of the thesis is the interconnection between current debates surrounding childhood and agency, and their relation to the formulation of participatory post-conflict reintegration programmes. Drawing upon a statement by Stables (2008: 1), "how we think about children does affect how we deal with them" (Archard 2004: 96). The traditional body of knowledge that provides the foundation for discussions on the nature of the child and childhood can be dated back to vital historical pieces of literature. While in their totality these academic contributions serve as the formative base of the traditional, Western conception of 'the child,' they are anything but homogeneous in nature. Nevertheless, the various 'truths' that have evolved throughout history have come to represent a universalised normative conception of children's recognition, nature, capabilities and relationships within an adult world (Ariès 1962: 125; Jenks 1996: 63; Kehily 2009: 43; Rose 1990: 142 cited in Kehily 2009: 98).

Two diverging standpoints emerge historically: Locke's idea of the child as a blank slate with Hobbes' counter position of a child as innately evil and needing to be corrected, and the Romantic outlook following the Enlightenment of the 18th century where children were seen as entering the world with a 'natural innocence' (Freeman & Mathison 2009: 2; Kassem *et al*. 2010: 9, 19; Rousseau 1979). To follow was Philippe Ariès' (1982) insight into children's distinguished nature, the early 20th century influences of Jean Piaget's psychological and developmental approaches to children's rationality, narratives of an "infantilised childhood," and the subsequent relegation of children to spaces deemed suitable for their development (Ariès 1982 quoted in Norozi & Moen 2016: 77; Arce 2012: 388; Hart 2008: 28; Hogan 2005: 30; Kehily 2009: 18, 27; Kassem *et al*. 2010: 19; Scott 2008: 87; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 253).

Towards the late twentieth century, the seminal works of L.S. Vygotsky and James and Prout (1990, 1997) and their counter paradigm of the "new sociology of childhood," provided a socio-cultural approach that regarded the child as a "product of culture" (Hart 2008: 282; Norozi & Moen 2016: 77; Woodhead 2005: 11). These contributions inspired the recognition of context in inter-subjective processes, and the acknowledgement of children as social actors, participants, and "social communicators and meaning makers," as opposed to solely passive participants (Kehily 2009: 29; Woodhead & Faulker 2008: 27).

Regarding children's agency, a trend exists where the normative assumptions inherent in understanding childhood results in a conflation of child agency as a factor solely experienced by "children-at-risk" (Abebe 2019: 12; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 367, 414; Robson *et al*. 2007: 138). Studying child agency during conflict in an ambiguous or quantifiable manner makes it easy for this agency to be attributed to merely the responses undertaken by victims (Eickelkamp 2010; Bordonaro & Payne 2012; Lund 2007; Van der Burgt 2018; Honwana 2009; Moncrieffe 2009; Elder-Vass 2008). This victimised notion of child agency transcends into post-conflict environments, to the detriment of any recognition of the agency of returnees to participate in their reintegration.

While the discussions of agency amongst child soldiers during conflict are increasing, McMullin (2011: 744-745) notes that the discourse is "strangely silent about child and youth agency after war," a consideration echoed by Watson (2006: 241). The work of Verma (2012) stands out as one of the few contributions that focus on the moral framing of the idealised home-bush-home transition for returnees from their abduction to their reintegration. She emphasises that this perception of the home as the next step in this linear process of reintegrating FCS, creates a post-conflict environment that aids in the silencing of former child soldiers. Verma's use of interviews with returnees in reintegration centres is formative in illustrating the contradictions between the narratives mentioned in the presence

of the reintegration centre workers, versus those that are left to the confines of late-night stories between returnees. Furthermore, Verma's contribution forges a new area of academic endeavour, whereby children's authentic perspectives and voices are heard, rather than moulded to fit a particular children's rights narrative of vulnerability and protection.

Reintegration programmes have been a target of harsh criticism in the literature by authors who highlight the bias behind their psycho-social focus. Despite broader calls for children's participation to feature alongside their protection and provision, formal reintegration programmes have favoured the latter (Angucia 2009: 78; Fernandez 2011: 489; Lee 2009: 12; McMullin 2011: 752). A growing recognition in the literature is that many of these participatory engagements with children fall outside of formal reintegration practices, and feature, mainly, as considerations after the fact (Chawla 2001; Tabyshalieva & Schnabel 2013; Feinstein & O'Kane 2008; Davis 2013; Anderson *et al*. 2004; Mason & Hood 2010). Notably, Bordonaro (2012), Bosco (2010) and Vanderbeck (2008) put forth that children's activities in the more mundane contexts of life in their community hold sufficient promise in promoting their citizenship, as well as amplifying their voices in a manner that aligns with cultural norms and values.

Decentring children's participation to avenues within the community constitutes a burgeoning area of literature, within which this research lies. Lee (2009), Bordonaro (2012), Bosco (2010) and Ruiz-Casares *et al*. (2017) assert that by assessing the various participatory avenues present for children to be engaged sufficiently in a post-conflict environment, we begin to move beyond their tokenistic inclusion in formal processes, to their meaningful engagement in culturally relevant spaces.

It is within this reignited emphasis on the stories of returnees that the works of de Boeck and Honwana (2005) are given a new light. Storytelling as an agentic avenue to overcome the boundaries of the old and the new forges a newfound recognition of agency as moving beyond individual action to being an equally reciprocal action between children and their communities. Lund (2007: 137), Moncrieffe (2009: 7) and Barandiaran *et al.* (2009: 3) add a refreshing perspective to the nature of children's agency by arguing that its cultivation will differ depending on the spaces children inhabit, as well as the "relationships, values, norms and experiences" they encounter during their socialisation.

In the context of post-conflict reintegration, the provision for avenues where children can participate meaningfully is still heavily geared to the confines of formal programmes. However, Cheney (2007) asserts that there is promise within informal, cultural avenues that could be more effective in sensitising the community to the children's return and enabling children to navigate "adult spaces" and open an exploratory place for negotiations to take place. It is within this informal dimension that

Cheney (2007) believes children's agentic influence will thrive in a post-conflict environment, while still respecting both traditional and local normative conceptions.

It is through these later transformative contributions and the sufficient need for further academic inquiry into the nature, promise and impact of children's agentic influence in informal spaces for reintegration that the problem, questions, aims and objectives of the research arise. Further, it is from this basis that the research seeks to contribute to, and challenge, existing knowledge.

3. Conceptual Framework

Crucial to this study is the belief that the best way to engage with the phenomena to be studied is through an acknowledgement of the conceptual origins and normative biases surrounding the key concepts of 'the child,' childhood, and agency. Every concept has a history and plays a particular ontological and epistemological role in the particular problem that it is supposed to resolve or clarify (Deleuze & Guattari 1991: 21; Jabareen 2009: 50 - 51). Bringing these conceptual backgrounds into discussion are conceptual frameworks. Conceptual frameworks are more than simply the "collection of concepts" but, rather, a construct that provides further understanding of the factors, variables and relationships embedded within a concept (Miles and Huberman 1994: 440). Providing an interpretative approach to social reality and a "soft interpretation of intentions" (Levering 2002: 38), conceptual frameworks enable a researcher to identify and construct his/her worldview in relation to the particular phenomenon under investigation (Adom, *et al*. 2018: 439; Grant & Osanloo 2014).

At the basis of this research is this battle between concepts, norms, and their applicability to different contexts. In the case of the reintegration of FCS in northern Uganda, normative conceptions of children, childhood, and what constitutes a child soldier, have upheld a very particular notion of agency and have structured reintegration programmes in support of these classifications. How these concepts are framed influences practical realities. Therefore, the role of the conceptual framework in chapter three of this thesis is to highlight the complexity and diversity of conceptualisations of the 'the child,' childhood, child soldier, (child) agency, and reintegration to substantiate the need for a new normative conception of child agency that is embedded in the informal/cultural norms and context of its execution.

The term 'informal' in this thesis is used to delineate norms, interactions, and mechanisms of participation that occur within the everyday sphere, outside of structured, policy-driven initiatives. Often contrasted with 'formal' processes embedded in reintegration programmes or guided by international frameworks like the UNCRC, the 'informal' is characterised by its adaptability and responsiveness to local cultural practices, social norms, and the realities of post-conflict communities.

This does not imply a lack of structure; rather, the 'informal' refers to a flexible and contextually embedded approach, shaped by the fluid and dynamic nature of life in these settings. It is important to distinguish between the two, as 'formal' typically refers to those programmes and norms contained within reintegration centres and the policies that inform them from the international sphere, whereas 'informal' encompasses the actions that take place beyond these centres, engaging with the everyday realms of being, belonging, and practice. In chapters five through seven, this distinction is crucial when examining reintegration as more than just a procedural return. Instead, it reflects a complex negotiation of identity and acceptance within transformed 'home' environments, where traditional values and community expectations intersect with the lived realities of those navigating life after conflict.

4. The Research Problem and Articulation of the Problem Statement

The problem guiding the research stems from an underlying dominance of traditional Western-centric assumptions of childhood, 'the child' and agency that heavily informs the formulation of legal conventions and policies regarding reintegration practices with children. As reflected in the literature review, these assumptions stem from a normative tug-of-war between various interpretations of the child, their capabilities and their place in relation to other actors. Nevertheless, as the more recent and critical contributions of authors within the realm of post-conflict reintegration and child agency suggest, the traditional, Western conceptions and norms surrounding children have emerged on top, especially in relation to the execution of post-conflict reintegration programmes targeting former child soldiers. Resulting from this influence, reintegration adopts formal practices, with informal/local avenues only forming a small part of their execution and structure. Consequently, these informal practices, as well as the customs, norms, and values that drive them, are overshadowed under the formal umbrella of reintegration. Under this umbrella, children in conflict/post-conflict situations are cast with a protectionist lens, with only minimal recognition of their agency. These perceptions, drawn from Western norms, are often contradictory to those present on the ground. As such, a conflict ensues between practices and views brought into formal reintegration practices and those present within the informal sphere. Acknowledgement of local norms of reciprocity, which regard children's capabilities and duties in a different light, would not only bring nuance to reintegration programmes as an accompaniment to formal programmes but would engage the community of the child in the process of their reintegration.

The dominance of a particular perspective in the literature and its application in practice reveals a research problem that is deeply intertwined with both academic and practical spheres. As such, the gaps that are present in both spheres illustrate how the practical and societal problem of post-conflict

reintegration in this context is intertwined with the academic problem of a lack of conceptual understanding of child agency as it manifests in a post-conflict context. It is this problem nexus that thereby inspired the problem statement of this research.

Therefore, the problem statement guiding the research is as follows: Due to the nature of recognition and normative prescriptions surrounding the child and their 'agency,' reintegration processes targeting former child soldiers (FCS) are executed based on formal practices that are divorced from local norms and values. What ensues is a normative conflict between local and international prescriptions that inhibits child agency and participation to be expressed in a manner that is appropriate in both regards. Further, it clouds any true understanding of what this agency looks like, or would look like, in a post-conflict environment.

Accordingly, this overarching problem prompts questions that examine the causal, exploratory and evaluative nature of the research. The primary focus will be the agency of former LRA child soldiers in northern Uganda as the unit of analysis, particularly with regard to the nature of their engagement within both formal reintegration and informal participatory avenues. Therefore, the scope of the study will include their experiences during and after their post-conflict transition back home from 'the bush'. The key concepts to be examined are that of child agency, 'the child' and childhood, child soldiers, participation, and reintegration.

5. The Research Question(s)

The main question to be asked is, "How do alternative conceptions of child agency and participation unsettle pre-existing structures and approaches towards the reintegration of children post-conflict?"

In support of the main question, this research includes the following sub-questions:

- How do local northern Ugandan cultural norms, values and conceptions of 'the child' inform avenues for children's participation?

- Why should informal avenues of children's participation be harnessed as an important avenue to include children as actors during the reintegration process?

- What does a reimagined concept of child agency look like within this post-conflict environment?

These questions illustrate the necessity of evaluating the culture and contextual nature of child agency, as it could inform new practices within the execution of reintegration. The unique academic

contribution of this research is the illustration of how the nature of reintegration experiences of former child soldiers in northern Uganda could inform greater normative understandings of child agency, as it is exhibited within both the formal and informal avenues.

6. The Research Aim and Objectives

The study aims to contribute a normative understanding and conceptualisation of child agency that moves beyond traditional assumptions to recognise the saliency of cultural and local normative conceptualisations. The research seeks to utilise this new normative lens of child agency to prompt a reimagined understanding of reintegration that acknowledges informal dimensions of child participation, alongside formal reintegration practices. To achieve these aims, the research employed five objectives:

1) To explore the conceptual and academic foundations of the key concepts inherent within the study, namely 'the child,' childhood, child soldier, agency, and reintegration.

2) To utilise the case study of northern Uganda's former child soldiers and their experiences during both formal reintegration processes and informal participatory avenues to critically examine the applicability of the concepts to the reality of what is taking place.

3) To engage directly with returnees and their communities to draw upon their perspectives, realities, and actions to comprehend the nature of child agency and participation within a post-conflict society.

4) To examine how local conceptualisations of agency could shape the design of reintegration programmes for children, particularly through the integration of informal participatory practices and local cultural norms within broader DDR processes.

5) To unpack the broader impact of the findings on the long-term sustainability of approaches to reintegration at a societal, regional, continental and international level.

6) To formulate a new normative framework and conceptualisation of child agency in post-conflict reintegration based on the findings drawn from fieldwork conducted in northern Uganda.

7. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, informed grounded theory approach. Data will be collected through a critical literature review and the use of semi-structured, purposively sampled focus groups and interviews conducted in Gulu, northern Uganda. The analytical process will involve open, axial and focused coding, as well as the integration of memos/field notes to deepen data interpretation.

Further details regarding the research methodology will be outlined here and explored in greater depth in chapter four.

7.1. Research Approach

A clear and substantiated research approach is essential, as it outlines the "plan, structure and strategy of investigation" necessary to address the research question while also "controlling variance" (Ackoff 1953: 5; Blaikie 2010: 37; Kerlinger & Pedhazur 1973: 300). This research employs a qualitative research approach, which aims to "locate the observer in the world" and seeks to "understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem," aligning with the study's overall objectives (Creswell 2007: 37; 2014: 4; Denzin & Lincoln 2005: 3). It will examine how dominant conceptions of 'childhood' and 'the child' shape perceptions of child soldiers and child agency, thereby influencing the structure and implementation of reintegration programmes. Particular attention is given to how these normative frameworks position former child soldiers as recipients rather than active participants, often leading to an overemphasis on Western-influenced practices that are disconnected from local cultural norms and values (McMullin 2011: 745-752; Moncrieffe 2009: 3).

This study adopts a critical lens rooted in the concept of mind-world monism, which asserts that perceptions and ways of thinking about the world, or topics within it, actively shape how these issues manifest in practice (Babbie 2007: 31 – 32; Guba 1990: 7; Merriam 2002: 4). Accordingly, the study does not aim to quantify or perceive the world 'as is,' but rather encourages a qualitative exploration of how contextualised understandings of 'the child,' childhood, and agency can inform the design of post-conflict reintegration programmes.

Grounded Theory will be employed to bring the qualitative research approach into conversation with the researcher's paradigmatic stance. Rather than adhering strictly to the tenets outlined by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, this study draws on the constructivist contributions of Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Kathy Charmaz (2006), as well as Adele Clarke's (2005) situational analysis, to incorporate a more nuanced and contextually relevant approach. This adaptation aligns with the study's abductive methodology, where abduction is understood as "a way of capturing the dialectical shuttling between the domain of observations and the domain of ideas" (Atkinson *et al.* 2003: 149). Thus, the research aims not only to allow the data to 'speak for itself,' but also to engage it critically with existing traditional normative conceptions. Applying Grounded Theory in this manner facilitates the development of a new normative and conceptual framework for child agency in a post-conflict

reintegration context, while simultaneously recognising local cultures, norms, and traditional pathways for participation within communities.

7.2. Research Design and Methods

The research design and methodology of this study are divided into two parts. The first addresses the conceptual foundations of the research problem, while the second focuses on the practical manifestations of child agency within the northern Ugandan context. This study adopts Thornberg's (2012) notion of "informed grounded theory," which challenges the practice of "delaying a literature review" to avoid its encroachment on perceptions, arguing that such a delay risks "doing theoretical studies," where research can become outdated and rely on lose knowledge (Flick 2019: 11; Dunne 2011: 117). While maintaining caution, this study asserts that engaging with pre-existing literature is crucial to understanding the problem, identifying research gaps, and justifying the study's aims, objectives, methods and participant selection.

7.2.1. Literature Review

The research commenced with an extensive critical literature review as its initial methodological approach. Hart (2001: 13) defines a literature review as the systematic selection and analysis of existing documents relevant to the topic of study. An effective literature review establishes a "firm foundation for advancing knowledge" (Jesson *et al*. 2011: 74) and generates new insights into the field (Samnani *et al*. 2017: 635). The study acknowledges that research and knowledge do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are continually constructed through engagement with both established and emerging findings (Jankowitz 1995: 128-129; Samnani *et al*. 2017: 635). Therefore, the literature review aims to 'tell a story' that both advances "our understanding of what is already known" and identifies areas for further exploration (Jesson & Lacey 2006: 139; Jesson *et al*. 2011: 87; Samnani *et al*. 2017: 637; Saunders & Rojon 2011: 156-157).

This critical literature review will employ a purposive sampling method to present, analyse, and synthesise sources from Security Studies, International Relations and Childhood Studies (Grant & Booth 2009: 93; Samnani *et al*. 2017: 637). The review will focus on secondary sources, encompassing both traditional and critical perspectives on 'the child' and childhood, and their implications for understanding child soldiers, agency, and post-conflict reintegration. Further, it will incorporate texts on reintegration practices and peacebuilding literature that advocates for bottom-up, locally driven approaches. By engaging with these targeting sources, the study critically evaluates the relevance of existing arguments to the case study.

7.2.2. Data Collection in Northern Uganda

Fieldwork was conducted in Gulu City, the "commercial and administrative centre" of the Gulu District (Cities Alliance 2020). Gulu has a population of 275,613 within Uganda's broader 34.6 million, where 70% are under the age of 30 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2017: 4, 13). The district, predominantly inhabited by the Acholi, was deeply affected by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict (Obika 2008: 22). Over 90% of its residents experienced displacement, leading to severe economic and social disruption, including the breakdown of agricultural production, family structures, and increased poverty and hunger (Aguto 2012: 14; Republic of Uganda 2007: 73, 78). The conflict also resulted in a rise in child-headed households and orphaned children, increasing from 25% to 28% (Aguto 2012: 14; Republic of Uganda 2007: 25). Although Gulu city largely escaped the "massive devastation" that ravaged the countryside (Branch 2013: 3152), its significance lies in being the birthplace of the Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO) reintegration centre, among many others, making it a critical site for examining reintegration processes.

Founded in early 1994 by a group of local women/concerned parents,[2] GUSCO was the "first of any organisation attempting psychosocial support" for returnees (Ochen & Okeny 2011: 17; Aguto 2012: 20–21; Obika 2008: 1, 4). Its core services included "counselling, skills training, and family support programmes," which were central to the centre's reintegration strategies (Veale & Stavrou 2003: 36). However, these approaches increasingly aligned with external, Western models. By 2010, 80% of relief organisations had left or shifted focus to broader recovery and resettlement, with GUSCO being one that is no longer operational in Gulu (Spitzer & Twikirize 2012: 75). Other centres central to reintegration processes, such as World Vision and Caritas Gulu, remain active (Caritas Gulu 2021; World Vision 2021). Members of these organisations were interviewed, alongside former GUSCO staff, to explore prior and ongoing reintegration efforts.

To secure access, the researcher began by collaborating with Makerere University's Department of History, Archaeology and Heritage Studies, whose partnership provided initial contacts in Gulu for the fieldwork. Subsequently, local research assistants facilitated further entry by securing approval from the local district, assisting with engaging with organisations through email and phone communication and coordinating with local council leaders (LC1s) to identify participants within their communities. In cases where participants were difficult to locate, additional contacts from researchers previously working in the same field and area were utilised. The fieldwork was carried out over two in-person visits, as well as digital communication between November 2022 and October

[2] Further context of the role of these women under the Concerned Parents Association in the formation of GUSCO will be provided by a research participant in section 5.6. of chapter five.

2024. The first visit focused on facilitating entry into Gulu, gathering contacts and beginning ethical procedures, while the second was dedicated to finalising ethics procedures and engaging participants through focus groups and interviews for data collection.

In line with the qualitative nature of the research, focus groups guided by semi-structured questions were employed to capture experiences and perspectives on child agency among former child soldiers in a post-conflict reintegration context. Focus groups offered a means of accessing insights on social settings, past events, and their impact on individuals who are often viewed as "closed or unreachable" (Mikėnė et al. 2013: 51). They facilitated the exploration of "collective views" and the "group norms, meanings and processes" that underpin them (Gill et al. 2008: 293). Semi-structured questions included "key questions that help to define the areas to be explored" while allowing flexibility to pursue unexpected but relevant themes in greater depth (Gill et al. 2008: 291; Merriam 2002: 13). This approach enabled participants to share insights the researcher might otherwise have overlooked, enriching the overall findings (Gill et al. 2008: 291).

7.2.2.1. Sampling for Focus Group Participants

The research used purposive and theoretical sampling to select focus group participants based on their capacity to provide relevant "information, and consequent theory development" for the study (Horsburgh 2003: 311). The strength of purposive sampling, as Patton (2002: 230) notes, lies in selecting "information-rich cases" that offer insights into "issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry." In this study, such cases are represented by returnees and their communities. To achieve sufficient data or until saturation was reached, the study conducted eight focus groups, encompassing 134 individuals.

The research included children in discussions of their agency without targeting them directly through individual interviews. This approach aligns with the academic call to conduct research *with* children, rather than *about* them (Christensen & James 2008: 1). However, the inclusion of children avoided reinforcing their separateness from the community, given that individualised treatment contradicts local norms of reciprocity, communal needs, and shared responsibilities (Cheney 2007: 44, 58–60; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 257). Thus, children's rights were balanced against their responsibilities within their communities. To respect these communal notions while ensuring inclusion, culturally relevant informal focus groups were held in intergenerational spaces where families naturally gathered. This setting enabled children's participation in ways that respected local norms of agency and collective responsibility, facilitating meaningful engagement without compromising ethical considerations.

The research draws on the extensive fieldwork of Baines (2007, 2012, 2015), prioritising local knowledge, traditions, and agency as central to its structure. Additionally, the focus on capturing the nuances of relationships, norms, and values, and their influence on narratives and agency formation, is informed by the works of Verma (2012), Lund (2007), Moncrieffe (2009), and Barandiaran et al. (2009). The decision to employ informal focus groups instead of structured interviews stems from Cheney's (2007) observational approach, which emphasised informal cultural settings outside formal reintegration centres, and from De Boeck and Honwana's (2005) use of storytelling as a key means to connect traditional and emerging community insights. Consequently, to contribute to a new, contextually grounded understanding of child agency and inform future reintegration strategies, it is essential that data be gathered and analysed within both formal reintegration centres and the informal participatory spaces that exist within the wider community.

7.2.3. Interviews with International and Local NGOs

To supplement the insights gained from focus groups, 11 individual interviews were conducted with experts from international and local NGOs, where circumstances permitted. These interviews aimed to capture perspectives on the role of children and communities in reintegration processes and the impact of cultural dynamics on programme formulation and implementation. The data gathered facilitated comparisons between participants' insights and the reintegration of former child soldiers in northern Uganda, as well as in other contexts.

Interviews followed a similar semi-structured format as the focus groups, with guiding questions but the flexibility to explore unanticipated topics (Gill et al. 2008: 291; Merriam 2002: 13). This adaptability allowed participants and the researcher to delve into areas of interest that may not have been recognised initially, providing depth to the data and ensuring the resulting analysis captures all dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation (Gill et al. 2008: 291). The intention was to let the participants' viewpoints emerge naturally, with minimal intervention. Each interview lasted one hour, scheduled at the participant's convenience, and conducted either in-person at their workplace or online via Zoom or Google Meet. Interviews were recorded, with permission, to authentically capture responses and ensure that the analysis was not solely reliant on brief notes. Strict confidentiality protocols, consistent with those used in the focus groups, were applied to safeguard participant identities and statements.

7.2.3.1. Sampling for the Individual Interviews

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling identified individuals based on their ability to provide relevant information for the area under investigation,

while snowball sampling facilitated access to further participants and members of NGOs. Initial contact was established via email correspondence, followed by online meetings through Google Meet or Zoom, and phone calls to build rapport. The researcher collaborated with prominent local nonprofit organisations, local assistants, and contacts at Makerere University, who knew members with the appropriate expertise in reintegration, to identify suitable participants.

7.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis involves bringing logical order, structure, and interpretation to the collected data to derive meaningful insights (Marshall & Rossman 1999: 150; Schwandt 2007: 6). For the literature review component, a critical analysis approach was used to examine the relationships between power and knowledge, aiming to challenge and propose alternative perspectives that contribute to "theory-building and even social reality" (Holland & Novak 2017: 2). This analysis scrutinised pre-existing literature and conceptualisations to highlight how dominant notions of 'the child,' childhood, and agency have shaped practical outcomes (Fairclough 2012: 9; Holland & Novak 2017: 3).

The methods used to interpret and analyse the fieldwork data stemmed from open and focused coding, supported by memo-writing and field notes. Coding involves labelling data segments to "identify themes, topics, problem areas, similarities, and differences" (Fossey et al. 2002: 729; Sutton & Austin 2015: 228-229). Open coding was used to "look for patterns, surprises, meanings and intentions," while focused coding served to "refine, define, and unpack codes using memos" (O'Reilly 2012: 5). Conceptual processes that explored "meanings, patterns or connections among data" relied heavily on insights documented through memo-writing and field notes (Fossey et al. 2002: 729; O'Reilly 2012: 5; Sutton & Austin 2015: 227). Such qualitative coding supported the study's conceptual and theory-building objectives by "opening up avenues of inquiry" and facilitating the development of new analytical insights through "close examination of and reflection on data" (Emerson et al. 1995: 151; Aspers & Corte 2019: 151).

The analytical contribution of this research emerged from transcribing and synthesising themes gathered from the fieldwork in Gulu to formulate a conceptual and normative understanding of child agency as it manifested during post-conflict reintegration. Throughout this process, coding and memo-writing as data-collection methods were interwoven and conducted simultaneously with data analysis (Aspers & Corte 2019: 151; Merriam 2002: 14). The intention to inspire reforms, albeit within the limited scope of a thesis, reflected the researcher's transformative and emancipatory knowledge interests.

8. Ethical Considerations

It is important to note that all secondary literary sources used in this study are within the public domain and are appropriately referenced to distinguish the ideas of others from the researcher's interpretations. Similarly, all personal interpretations are clearly differentiated from any direct quotes extracted from the fieldwork data.

To address ethical concerns surrounding the involvement of children and to respect local cultural dynamics, the research adopted focus groups that included both community and family members, holding informal discussions in locations where communities naturally congregate. This approach mitigated risks associated with engaging children as sole participants.

All participants were fully informed, both in writing and verbally, about the nature of the research, provided with informed consent forms, and briefed on their right to withdraw at any time. They were also assured of the privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of their contributions. To ensure comfort and support, a local counsellor was present during all sessions, assisting with moderating discussions and providing debriefing to participants after each session, regardless of whether sensitive topics related to the conflict arose.

To address language barriers, all communications, consent forms, and focus group proceedings were translated and interpreted into participants' preferred local languages. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, no direct questions about the conflict were asked during fieldwork. Instead, the focus remained on post-conflict roles and activities undertaken by children within their communities. Where discussions around the conflict have emerged, the researcher arranged for free follow-up sessions with the local counsellor to be available.

Following national guidelines for conducting research with communities in Uganda, participants who travelled to interview or focus group locations were compensated for travel costs and provided with light refreshments to acknowledge their time and participation. These steps were undertaken following consultation with Makerere University and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) to ensure alignment with Uganda's ethical standards. Furthermore, as the research was conducted in a post-COVID-19 context, all sessions were held in well-ventilated areas or outdoor settings to minimise health risks.

All data gathered will be securely stored in accordance with confidentiality and anonymity principles, either in a password-protected folder on the researcher's laptop, in a personal safe for hard copies, or

within the University of Pretoria's storage facilities for up to 15 years. Access will be restricted to the principal investigator and the local research assistant, who assisted with translation and transcription services. All members of the team signed a confidentiality agreement detailing the handling and safeguarding procedures for the data. Upon completion of translation and transcription, all data was returned to the researcher, and any remaining copies were destroyed following specified procedures to ensure data protection.

9. The Structure of the Research

The research encompasses a total of seven chapters. The introductory chapter outlines the core foundations of the research, namely its thematic origin, contribution and purpose, alongside the methodological means through which this thesis will tackle the research problem, key questions, aims and objectives, and ethical considerations.

The second chapter, *Literature Review*, provides a further comprehensive and critical assessment of the core arguments, debates and pertinent literature to the study. It traces the origins, conceptual limitations, and biases surrounding the concepts of 'the child,' childhood, and agency, highlighting how these normative formations influence the structure and execution of reintegration programmes targeting children. The chapter emphasises the dominance of Western perspectives and underscores the need for more inclusive frameworks that reflect local realities.

The third chapter, *Conceptual Framework*, guides, supports, and rationalises the strong focus on the conceptual origins and normative biases surrounding 'the child,' childhood, and agency. It deconstructs these key concepts through Western and non-Western lenses, analysing their influence on post-conflict reintegration. The chapter ultimately advocates for a reimagined, context-specific framework that addresses the limitations of existing models.

The fourth chapter, *Research Methodology*, outlines the research design, methods, and ethical considerations guiding the study, emphasising the importance of a participatory approach that includes children's voices. It expands on the use of grounded theory, detailing data collection and analysis methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and coding to capture the complex realities of returnees and their communities. The chapter justifies the use of these qualitative methods in its aim to explore sensitive themes like identity, agency, and reintegration from multiple perspectives and build a contextually grounded understanding of child agency from this basis.

The fifth chapter, *Case Study of Northern Uganda's Child Soldiers*, examines the recruitment and socialisation of children by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) within the broader context of

Uganda's north-south divide and its historical legacies. It discusses how the LRA used coercion, violence, and spiritual manipulation to sever abductees' ties to their communities and establish new identities as child soldiers. The chapter concludes by analysing the complex reintegration challenges returnees faced, framed by contrasting social norms and expectations.

The sixth chapter, *Researching with Children: Acknowledging Everyday Domains of Agency and Participation After Social Rupture*, presents findings from fieldwork that centred children's voices alongside those of communities and returnees, highlighting the nuanced perspectives on childhood and reintegration. It challenges dominant narratives by revealing how former child soldiers/returnees negotiated agency and belonging amidst community expectations. Through their accounts, the chapter underscores the need to recognise the dual roles of victim and agent in understanding their post-conflict experiences.

The concluding chapter, chapter seven, *Everyday Conceptions of Reciprocal Agency With and Between Returnees and Communities Post-Conflict,* synthesises the research findings, offering a conceptual foundation for a reimagined understanding of child agency within post-conflict reintegration. It emphasises the active role of returnees in shaping their own reintegration experiences, navigating both stigma and altered community dynamics. The chapter concludes by addressing the broader implications for reintegration policies and proposing areas for future research and practice.

10. Study Timelines

The timeline of the research was four years. Following the signing and submission of the MOU in February of 2021, upcoming milestones included the submission and acceptance of this research proposal in 2021, followed by applications for ethical clearance at the University of Pretoria, Makerere University and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology between October of 2021 and March of 2023. Upon receiving ethical clearance, the research proceeded with data collection, analysis the submission of a full draft document of the thesis by September of 2024. Throughout 2021 and 2022, discussions and arrangements pertaining to the fieldwork took place, with two visits being carried out between December of 2022 and May of 2023. A notice of submission form was given to the department in June of 2024, to indicate a final draft submission of mid-October. Revisions were then completed in January 2025, with the hope of meeting an April 2025 graduation.

In early 2024, a book chapter was derived from the findings of a Master's mini-dissertation and this thesis. In addition to this, two articles will be drafted from the thesis with an anticipated completion by early 2025.

11. Concluding Remarks – Setting the Wheels in Motion

This chapter outlined the core factors and methodology through which the thesis will critically explore local conceptions of child agency within a post-conflict reintegration context. Understanding how agency manifests in reintegration is essential for capturing the complexities on the ground, as current programmes often reinforce top-down approaches that undermine meaningful child participation. It is therefore crucial to critically engage with the sources of these perspectives to understand why certain practices persist. The following critical literature review addresses this need by examining how these frameworks have historically evolved from Western sources of knowledge and how they shape the reintegration of former child soldiers. By linking conceptual history to post-conflict realities, the literature review situates the research problem and objectives within a broader scholarly discourse, establishing the foundation for the study's contribution.

2. CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

Behind every action taken, every policy put in place, and every programme formulated is a complex set of normative assumptions in academia that have, over-time, evolved and fluctuated in tandem with our practical world. This theory-practice nexus is crucial for understanding how approaches to children's agency are shaped by ongoing academic debates. As Stables (2008: 1) aptly puts it, "how we think about children does affect how we deal with them," with actions being confirmation of these thoughts (Archard 2004: 96). Knowledge is rarely ever a static, context-devoid discovery but, rather, the product of a particular time and place, whereby its articulation is influenced by the conditions of its creation and use (Huttunen 2010: 14). This perspective is central to the debates examined in this literature review, as it underscores the need to situate these narratives within their contextual emergence. The aim here is to trace the evolution of concepts like 'the child,' childhood, and agency, demonstrating how critical debates intersect with the post-conflict reintegration of FCS.

While being the topic of discussion, it should be made clear that children are typically not the story-tellers; this is a position overwhelmingly fulfilled by adults. Adult worldviews drive the plots, character traits, and lessons conveyed. Childhood, despite being a universally experienced 'phase,' is deeply contested and shaped by adult biases. Historical constructions of childhood reflect what adults have wanted children to be, shaping notions that best suit adult needs rather than children's realities (Selmer-Olsen 2007: 534). Consequently, academic debates about childhood often reinforce adult control over the narrative, portraying idealised notions of 'the child' rather than real experiences. Therefore, the engagement with literature and its intersection with practice will guide the study's methodological approach and underpin its original contribution—formulating a normative understanding of child agency that moves beyond traditional Western assumptions. The study will emphasise the importance of recognising cultural and local perspectives, thereby offering a more nuanced and contextually relevant conceptualisation of child agency.

This chapter outlines key shifts in the literature concerning childhood and 'the child' that have shaped children's rights discourse, covering Western historical and modern approaches, childhood as a distinct developmental stage, socio-cultural perspectives, and how these conceptual shifts have influenced practice. It will also highlight gaps in the literature, focusing on how Western ideals have dominated the discourse, often sidelining non-Western perspectives and alternative participatory approaches.

A central argument in Sections 2.5 through 2.6.3, reiterated throughout the thesis, is that the socially constructed nature of 'the child' has led to a Western-dominant view that marginalises non-Western insights. The prioritisation of psychological and psychosocial approaches has overshadowed socio-ecological perspectives that consider broader contexts shaping child agency. These limitations are evident in reintegration programs targeting former child soldiers, where agency is often seen as static rather than dynamic and context-specific. This chapter argues for a shift to a socio-ecological model that embraces the complexity and diversity of children's lived experiences, paving the way for a more inclusive and contextually grounded approach to understanding child agency. A comparison between these findings and the case of former child soldiers in northern Uganda will conclude the chapter, setting the stage for the analysis to follow.

2.2. Historical Approaches to Childhood

This section begins by exploring Western historical accounts of childhood that have, over time, come to dominate the understanding of what defines a child and childhood. Perspectives on children and the ways they are treated have always evolved in response to the social, economic, and political realities of their time, highlighting the context-specific nature of these concepts. While these historical accounts have significantly shaped how these concepts are framed in international discourse and policies, it is not to suggest that their origins are exclusively Western. Rather, unpacking these accounts highlights how they have influenced the global normative frameworks, often eclipsing alternative conceptions of childhood, particularly those rooted in non-Western contexts. The dominance of these Western perspectives not only overshadows this conceptual diversity but also prioritises a universalised view of childhood over localised, context-specific understandings.

Childhood has not always been a period to be revered, praised, or necessitating additional attention. Tracing Western history back to Roman and Greek antiquity, we see that children were often cast as "little imperfect adults" (Elias 1967: 452). Their 'distinct' nature had yet to be sectioned out against the identity of adults; evident in the scattered remarks within foundational historical texts. Children were mainly studied peripherally through other actors and institutions. Beginning with Aristotle's (1905) *Politics,* children are discussed alongside slaves and women where, despite possessing a deliberative element, are still seen as incomplete.

A similar notion is found in John Locke's concept of children as a "*tabula rasa*" or blank slate (Kehily 2009: 5). While Locke addressed children indirectly, his ideas shaped the foundation of a Western conception of childhood (Archard 2015: 1-2). He argued that children are "blank sheets filled by experience" (Archard 2015: 2) and, through an "ideal" upbringing, develop into "citizens in the

making" (Archard 2015: 2). This view introduced the idea of childhood as a developmental process leading to adulthood, with education serving as the bridge to transform children from their "imperfect, incomplete versions of their adult selves" (Locke 1689 cited in Archard 2015: 2). Children are thereby deemed inherently separate from adults due to their lack of the knowledge and moral sense to reason (Archard 2015: 3-4). Locke (1693: 81, 120) asserted that children are separate from adults due to their lack of reason and moral sense, describing them as "travellers newly arrived in a strange country" whose capacity for reason must be awakened to prevent them from maturing into "creatures of mere natural proclivities" (Archard 2015: 3 – 4, 8).

For the Puritans, a child's natural proclivities were not just something to be 'avoided' but were inherent from birth (Archard 2015: 46; Peddle 2001: 5). Influenced by Thomas Hobbes and sixteenth-century sermons, children were viewed as "innately evil" (Freeman & Mathison 2009: 2) or "wicked" (Kehily 2009: 5). As "sinful beings," their will needed to be broken through strict discipline, punishment, and denial of pleasure" (Kassem *et al.* 2010: 6), grounded in Christian values (Kehily 2009: 41 – 42) to curb their "wild and unregulated" proclivities (Woodhead 2005: 5). Families took on the responsibility of their upbringing, believing it was essential for both family and child salvation (Kassem *et al.* 2010: 9). This view of children as ticking time-bombs to be controlled and corrected continues to resurface in contexts where childhood deviates from the 'ideal.'

With the Age of Reason and Enlightenment of the eighteenth-century, religious influences and 'sinfulness' fell away to prioritising intellectual support and educational development (Freeman & Mathison 2009: 2; Kassem *et al.* 2010: 9; Kehily 2009: 56). Two diverging standpoints emerged: Locke's view of the child as a *Tabula Rasa*, and Romantic outlooks of children's 'natural innocence' (Freeman & Mathison 2009: 2; Kassem *et al.* 2010: 9, 19).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1979) was foundational to the Romantic discourse, shaping Western normative assumptions about children's role in human nature (Jones *et al.* 2005: 42; Kassem *et al.* 2010: 19). The key proponent of Rousseau's work is the ascription of spirituality to the child, placing them "close to God, nature, and all things good" (Kehily 2009: 5). This Apollonian view emphasises purity, natural innocence, and curiosity, with children seen as vulnerable to contamination by a "corrupt outside world" (Archard 2004: 46; Beier 2015: 4, 8; Kehily 2009: 5; Freeman & Mathison 2009: 2). Adults thus became protectors of this innocence, guiding children's development within an environment that fosters pleasurable experiences of the natural world (Cassidy 2012: 60; Hoffmann-Ekstein *et al.* 2008: 6; Kehily 2009: 5; Woodhead 2005: 5); free from "adult oppression" (Kassem *et al.* 2010: 9, 19). Despite differing approaches, these views agreed on one principle: children's socialisation should nurture values and reason.

Post-Enlightenment debates focused on human versus animal nature where deviations from the 'ideal' human norm were viewed as savage-like, chaotic, and dangerously "other" (Kehily 2009: 115). Crucial to these debates was whether such "others" could be civilised. Accordingly, childhood development environments distinguished those meeting the ideal from those cast as lower on the "evolutionary scale" (Kehily 2009: 115). Thereafter, children's roles were framed in relation to the nuclear family and education, reinforcing a rigid child/adult divide (Cassidy 2012: 58).

Rousseau departed from the notion of the "child in the child" (Archard 2015: 13), regarding children as "*sui generis*" (Elias 1967: 453), possessing unique ways of "seeing, thinking and feeling" (Jenks 2005: 3) rather than being mere "adults to be" (Archard 2015: 12-13). He argued that adults often misinterpret childhood by seeking to find the adult within the child, asking "what a man ought to know?" and not "what a child is capable of?" before becoming a man (Rousseau, quoted in Jenks 2005: 3). This approach, he warned, distorts the natural order, producing "premature fruits which are neither ripe nor well-flavoured, and which soon decay" (Rousseau, quoted in Jenks 2005: 2).

To prevent this, Rousseau pioneered child-centred education, premised on respecting the 'natural order' and stages of a child's development (Archard 2015: 30; Woodhead 2005: 10). Education was seen not only as *what* is being taught but *when* it is taught (Archard 2015: 30). This marked a shift toward progressive pedagogy, emphasising natural phenomena and the potentialities of child achievements (Archard 2015: 30; Jones *et al*. 2005: 43).

2.3. <u>Modern Western Conceptions of the Child</u>

Historically, what has changed is not a newfound awareness of the child but the structural form and architecture of childhood in everyday life (Archard 2015: 21; Qvortrup 2009: 645). In *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), Philippe Ariès asserts that modern childhood, as we know it, emerged only from the late seventeenth/eighteenth century (Archard 2015: 19; Cheney 2007: 11-12; Matthews 2007: 325). Ariès argues that modern childhood, a "social construction," centres on an awareness of its "specific nature" that distinguishes the child from the adult, a distinction absent in medieval studies (Ariès 1982 quoted in Norozi & Moen 2016: 77). The difference in past ideals of childhood lies in how children were recognised, represented, and related to – standards that have since evolved into the modern Western standard (Ariès 1962: 125; Jenks 1996: 63; Kehily 2009: 43).

Today, children's worlds are predicated by innocence and are institutionalised to protect their welfare emotionally, physically and financially (Guldberg 2009: 48). Previously, childhood was seen as "something to get through on the way to something better," but now, its quality is scrutinised more intently (Cunningham 2006: 15). Ariès identifies three sources behind this shift: the "changing

emotional economy of the family" (Prout 2005: 9) toward innocence and protection (Norozi & Moen 2016: 77), childhood becoming an "immature period," requiring extended discipline and training (Prout 2005: 9-10), and childhood's institutionalisation through age-graded institutions and schools (Prout 2005: 9 – 10; Norozi & Moen 2016: 77). These changes redefined the child's world into spaces where they "properly belonged" (Prout 2005: 10).

Ariès' work, though foundational, has faced criticism for its reliance on paintings as historical evidence, its ambiguous and generalised claims, and its essentialist value-laden nature (Archard 2015: 22; Norozi & Moen 2016: 77). The term "presentism" highlights his tendency to "interpret the past in light of present-day attitudes, assumptions and concerns" (Archard 2015: 22). Two critical aspects underlie this presentism. First, is the use of contemporary society as a benchmark to reveal what was absent in the past (Archard 2015: 22). Ariès sought to show a "dissimilar presence" (Archard 2015: 23 - 25) rather than an absence, painting the Western standard as universal (Kehily 2009: 45). Modernity did not "invent or discover childhood," but created a framework of meaning distinct from earlier ones, reflecting a complex historical social construction (Prout 2005: 10).

Second, is the assumption that modern conceptions of childhood are the moral benchmark for its nature and how children should be treated (Archard 2015: 23). According to Ariès, recognising what children are "really like" necessitates learning the "moral sensibility" to treat them "properly" (Archard 2015: 23). This paints a black-and-white binary: assimilation to the morally right standard or a deviant, "no childhood" category – a familiar narrative in literature discussing the "disappearance of childhood" (Prout 2005: 10). Ultimately, "modern" conceptions of childhood are social constructions, shaped by the meanings and assumptions of specific social groups at particular moments in time (Kehily 2009: 45).

2.4. Childhood as a Separate Stage of Development

The evolving nature of perspectives and actions taken towards children are, without a doubt, an embodiment of the environments, economies, and politics of the time. Surging capitalist competition, urbanisation, and liberal economies of the nineteenth century, with their concomitant industrialisation and child labour, provided fertile soil for romantic ideas to flourish (Arce 2012: 388). Objectives of producing an engaged citizenry of rational adults out of a "mob, mass or herd," set a standard for many across the board (Kehily 2009: 114-115). Resurging once more is the correction and concealment of undesirable behaviour to produce these citizens out of children (Kehily 2009: 115). However, children working hand-in-hand with adults under industrialisation did not support this goal and, thus, a wave of initiatives challenging their place as labourers emerged.

This new sympathetic social climate bred a mindset of “save the children and put them in school” (Arce 2012: 388), prepping them for working in liberal societies and protecting them from the “scourges of labour and disease” (Kehily 2009: 18). A narrative of “infantilised childhood” emerged, upholding a culture of neediness within child-adult relations and quarantining children from the world of adults through family and school as the two primary domains of social control (Arce 2012: 388; Hogan 2005: 30; Kassem *et al*. 2010: 19; Scott 2008: 87). The dominant view was that “the child should know no other endeavour but to be at every stage of development wholly what this stage calls for” (Froebel quoted in Woodhead 2005: 11). Not only did this portray what was deemed ‘normal’ for a child at a certain age, but it enabled universal assumptions about the “normality of any child” (Rose 1990: 142 cited in Kehily 2009: 98).

Notable in this regard are the influential twentieth-century psychological theorists, most notably, Jean Piaget (Hart 2008: 28; Kehily 2009: 18, 27; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 253). Piaget’s developmental approach regards rationality and intellectual growth as accrued through stages of socialisation and enculturation by structures of thinking in our environment (Fattore *et al*. 2007: 7-8; Jenks 2005: 21; Kehily 2009: 96, 116; Podder 2011: 143). More than being chronological, these stages are hierarchically arranged from “low-status infantile ‘figurative’ thought” to “high-status, adult, ‘operative’ intelligence” (Jenks 2005: 22). The cornerstone of Piaget’s research is that “*all* children acquire cognitive competencies through a universal sequence” (Piaget cited in Archard 1993: 65-66), which gained traction globally in academia and practice (Archard 2004: 93; Kehily 2009: 96).

Whilst noting a child’s active engagement with the social world, these social and emotional realms are confined to being merely influencing factors as opposed to constitutive for development (Scourfield *et al*. 2006: 21). The developing mind is “analytically distinct” and separate from the outside/social world, which serves the sole purpose of being the occasion for/the scene of personal change (Archard 2004: 43), or “something to be controlled” and quantified (Scourfield *et al*. 2006: 7, 21). The natural attainment of reason thereby serves as the linear goal of development and not a factor determined by culture (Scourfield *et al*. 2006: 23). Before acquiring the capacity for advanced thought, children possess a “tenuous grasp on moral judgment” (Boyden cited in Hart 2008: 281) and require adult guidance in regulating behaviour away from “mindless atrocities” (Hart 2008: 281-282).

Archard (2004: 94) asserts that it becomes easy to cast children in a light where they are deemed cognitively incompetent when evaluated against a culturally specific, Western perspective. By pushing a “universal” standard to childhood development, Piaget decontextualises children’s actual lives, rendering them “opaque” (Fattore *et al*. 2007: 7-9; Scourfield *et al*. 2006: 23). Nevertheless, these orthodox perspectives have either implicitly or explicitly supplied the ontological roots of

humanitarian action concerning children. Child-focused humanitarianism, alongside the infamous United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), exhibits universalist norms derived from Piaget and his intellectual progeny. This is clear with the straight-18 standard's criminalisation of child involvement in activities deemed antithetical to an 'innocent childhood' (Hart 2006: 223-224; Podder 2011: 143). Prioritising "universal truths about 'the child,'" as stipulated by Mayall (1994: 1180), "blinds us to the personhood of children" and favours a comfortable view of children being the same, regardless of where they live.

Despite good intentions of promoting a child's 'best interests,' these approaches can also be seen as sources of oppression, segregation, and enforced exclusion (Archard 2015: 23, 71; Cheney 2007: 12). Moreover, propagating a moral ideal for children and childhood disregards critical socio-cultural variations of childhood which may not fall squarely along this 'neat' trajectory.

2.5. Socio-Cultural Approaches – Childhood as a Social Construction

The late twentieth century marked the beginning of the contemporary period of childhood studies, spanning until present day. Reflexivity is given attention with questions pertaining to how we come to know what we know, as well as how the subjects of these inquiries are engaged. This inclusion sought to break academics out of the disciplinary confines deemed the norm for centuries (Kehily 2004: 7). New academic inquiries fostered an alternate version of 'the child,' with its requisite form of childhood. Fundamental to this period was the adoption of sociological perspectives, viewing childhood as simply not universal, but rather "a product of culture," varying across time and place (Kehily 2004: 7).

The work of L.S. Vygotsky reframed childhood development and cognitive competence to be equally based on culture and natural determinants (Hart 2008: 282; Norozi & Moen 2016: 77; Woodhead 2005: 11). This perspective coincided with recognition of children as a "social group," placing greater emphasis on the context of socialisation, inter-subjective processes, and how children become members of their societies (Kehily 2004: 7-8). Children were now being recognised as participants, "social communicators and meaning makers," as opposed to solely passive throughout their development (Kehily 2009: 29; Woodhead & Faulker 2008: 27). This new approach redirected attention away from the prioritisation of a singular deterministic pathway towards rationality by introducing more dynamic and multi-faceted examinations of children's mobilisation (Hart 2008: 282; Smith 2002: 77; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 253).

Borne out of this sociological turn was the "new sociology of childhood" with parameters set out through the work of James and Prout. Initially, work in this field during the 1980s stood as a "counter-

paradigm" to the conceptual and literary foundations of the past. However, through being interrogated more critically, bodies of knowledge became more "rich, nuanced and diverse" (Tisdall & Punch 2012: 251). Foundational to this field is the basic proposal by James and Prout that "the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life, but the ways in which it is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture" (James & Prout 1997: 7). A variety of key features and mantras have come to be associated with this emergent paradigm and would go on to redefine conceptualisations of children and childhood as equally embedded in context and culture as through biological influences (Kehily 2004: 8).

The first feature of six representing the paradigm is childhood as a social construction, requiring contextualised interpretations that account for societal beliefs and other aspects of culture. Childhood, being distinct from biological immaturity, is constituted as neither natural nor universal. Moving away from common-sense reasoning of 'naturalising' the child enables acknowledgement of their particularities and cultural differences (James & Prout 1990: 8-9; James & Prout 1997: 3; Kehily 2009: 93 - 94; Norozi & Moen 2016: 78). Furthermore, James and James (2008: 122) maintain that social constructivist views recognise how different realties arise from varying interactions and relationships that people undertake in a social environment and how these interactions shape our perceptions (Crotty 1998: 58; Freeman & Mathison 2009: 13; Morrow 2011: 4). Childhood, being socially constructed, is thereby not universally experienced in the same fashion everywhere (Kehily 2009: 94).

The second feature of the new paradigm is that childhood is not divorced from aspects, like gender, class, and ethnicity. Jenks (2004: 78) expresses that "childhood cannot be seen in isolation," as it is deeply intertwined with circumstance, as it is on context, time, and culture (Norozi & Moen 2016: 79). Upheld in this view is a multiplicity of childhoods, varying in their particularities (Åkerström 2014: 36; James & Prout 1990: 8-9; James & Prout 1997: 3 - 4; Jenks 1996: 121; Kehily 2009: 93; Matthews 2007: 325; Norozi & Moen 2016: 78). Although prior narratives saw children as fixed and passive within overarching structures, latter approaches further engage with structure versus agency, as seen in Latour's (1993) 'actor-network' model (Hanson *et al.* 2016: 605). By acknowledging variations in childhood experiences and well-being, it becomes meaningful to differentiate children as a social group (Åkerström 2014: 36-37; Alanen 2009; Qvortrup *et al.* 1994).

The third feature acknowledges the deficit of children's independent perspectives of childhood, irrespective of the concerns of adults. The argument is that their perspectives, relationships, and cultures should be studied "in their own right," as opposed to under the broadest of umbrellas of other actors like women (James & Prout 1990: 8-9; James & Prout 1997: 4; Hoffmann-Ekstein *et al.* 2008:

11; Kehily 2009: 93, 105; Norozi & Moen 2016: 78). The work of Charlotte Hardman (1973: 87) similarly states that children are "worthy of study as any other section of society." Adopting a focus that brings children's perspectives to the forefront could reveal aspects of social life that conventional ethnographies overlook. In doing so, we begin the process of recognising their status as international actors in and of themselves (Watson 2006: 237).

The fourth feature regards children as active social agents/participants in creating knowledge, determining their own lives, and constructing society. No longer are they seen as "passive subjects of structural determinations" (James & Prout 1997: 3) enculturated by adults and awaiting their protection (James & Prout 1990: 8-9; Kehily 2009: 94; Matthews 2007: 324; Morrow 2011: 15; Norozi & Moen 2016: 78). Building on this point, Corsaro (2005: 24) argues that "children do not simply imitate or internalise the world around them." In fact, they are active co-creators, meaning makers, and shapers of the environment which subsequently shapes them (Alanen 2009: 12; Freeman & Mathison 2009: 4; Hartung 2017). Agency, according to Prout (2005: 65), has been "glossed over" and "taken to be an essential, virtually unmediated characteristic of humans, particularly by adults." This new paradigm moves beyond the binaries of being versus becoming, with agency being an end-goal acquired through adulthood (Abebe 2019: 1). As such, new frameworks have emerged to conceptualise children's agency along a continuum by accounting for its interdependent nature (Abebe 2019: 1).

The fifth feature advocates for ethnography as the ideal method in studying childhood and giving children a platform to have a more direct voice and participate in the production of data (Freeman & Mathison 2009: 3; James & Prout 1990: 8-9; James & Prout 1997: 4; Kehily 2009: 94; Norozi & Moen 2016: 78). By researching *with* children, instead of solely *about* them (Matthews 2007: 328), children are recognised as possessing legitimate knowledge of their experiences and circumstances, as opposed to 'becomings' that lack rationality (Freeman & Mathison 2009: 14; Matthews 2007: 327).

The final feature is that researchers move beyond rhetoric to "engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society itself" (James & Prout 1990: 8-9; James & Prout 1997: 4; Kehily 2009: 94; Norozi & Moen 2016: 78). The emerging discipline, the Geographies of Childhood, echoes this view by advocating for understandings of how adult conceptions of childhood impinge on the spaces, places, and daily aspects of children's lives (Morrow 2011: 17). Therefore, it is not enough to reconstruct childhood in theory if these new statements and conceptualisations continue to lack follow-through in practices involving children (Matthews 2007: 325).

2.6. Theory-Practice Nexus

During the 1980s and 1990s, alongside the rise of the new sociology of childhood, the close affinities between policies, practices, and theory gained recognition – better known as the theory-practice nexus (Tisdall & Punch 2012: 249). This period marked a broader critical shift in Security and International Relations discourses, where new referents of analysis and a rapidly ascending human rights regime, created a niche where children gained prominence, not only in theory but in initiatives concerning their rights (Beier 2015: 10). New narratives challenged the idea of children as vulnerable and needy, instead presenting them as citizens with rights (Hoffmann-Ekstein et al. 2008: 3; Mayall 2006). The UNCRC, published in 1989 and enforced in 1990, became the normative framework for promoting and protecting the 'best interests of the child' (Fernandez 2011: 487; Franklin 1995: 16; Honwana 2009: 743; Watson 2006: 237).

The UNCRC outlines 54 articles for children's well-being, covering civil, economic, social, and cultural rights, divided into the three Ps - protection, provision, and participation rights (McMullin 2011: 743; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 250). Core principles include non-discrimination (Article 2), survival and development (Article 6), and respect for children's views (Article 12), balanced with their evolving capacity for participation (Articles 13 and 15) (Abebe 2019: 4; Ben-Arieh 2010: 16-17; Cassidy 2012: 69; Hart 2008: 279-281). The UNCRC's positive portrayal of childhood recognises children as social actors with their own rights, balancing welfare with participation and agency.

However, academic interest in 'new wars' and 'irregular conflicts,' without clearly defined state actors or spaces of warfare, fostered a 'politics of pity' within academia and humanitarian practice (Angucia 2009: 80; Beier 2015: 2; Honwana 2009: 63). Participating in the "moral project of childhood," the UNCRC dictates how children's well-being should be engaged and protected by adults (Hart 2006: 220; Kaplan 1994: 44, 76; Lee 2009: 12-13; Rosen 2007: 298). The child became an "integrative symbol," "unifying moral force," and "instrument" for addressing crises involving children (Lee 2009: 7; Machel 1996: 89; Pupavac 2001: 99).

Depictions of the 'global child' juxtaposed with images of children affected by conflict reinforce narratives of vulnerability, victimisation, and lost childhoods (Hart 2006: 220; McMullin 2011: 752; Podder 2011: 145; Rosen 2007: 296). Scenarios like child soldiers are framed as antithetical political problems, where childhood must be restored (Angucia 2009: 79; Beier 2015: 7 – 9; Lee 2009: 26; McMullin 2011: 752; Verma 2012: 444). The political realm, particularly in war, becomes a space that children should not inhabit, nor participate in (Lee 2009: 3; Rosen 2007: 298).

This preoccupation with protection and provision, habitually to the detriment of participation, transcends into reintegration programmes for child soldiers/returnees. They are framed under "universal truths" as traumatised victims in need of care, leading to a paternalistic and reactive "fire-brigade" approach to reintegration (Angucia 2009: 78-79, 91; McMullin 2011: 744, 752; Verma 2012: 452).

2.6.1. Applicability of Reintegration – Are Programmes Missing the Mark?

Despite numerous studies examining child soldiers and DDR programmes, Haer (2017: 452) notes a persistent gap between scholarly findings and DDR practices. The literature not only outlines the phenomenon of child soldiers but critically analyses how its occurrence impacts policies, programmes and the reintegration process after their return 'home' (Chawla 2001; Tabyshalieva & Schnabel 2013; Feinstein & O'Kane 2008; Davis 2013; Anderson *et al*. 2004; Mason & Hood 2010). Notably, issues identified in studies from twenty years ago remain prevalent in recent research, indicating that despite being acknowledged, these challenges persist. This ongoing disconnect raises concerns about the continued relevance of reintegration programmes if they fail to incorporate these long-standing insights.

One such issue that is continuously reiterated, and alluded to in earlier sections of this thesis, is the dominant narrative within DDR programmes of victimhood as a signifier for children, whose childhood is disrupted and replaced with a stark reality of being a child soldier. Drumbl ascribes this image given to child soldiers as "the *legal fiction* of faultless, passive victimhood" - a term that they drew upon from the legal philosopher, Lon Fuller. Fuller utilised the term of the *legal fiction* as a means to unpack a reality where "neglective fictions," or "abstractive fictions," serve to constitute examples of processes where "our minds simplify reality" (extra reference 41 in Drumbl 2012: 19). In the case of child soldiering, the legal fiction that emanates out of the architecture of various conventions and legal prescriptions surrounding children's rights and their protection, fulfils a variety of purposes, namely the marshalling of resources and ensure a coordinated condemnation of the act (Drumbl 2012: 19). While these two purposes can both be seen as gains in one respect, they can also be regarded as producing "operational shortcomings" (Drumbl 2012: 19). Nevertheless, at the basis of all of this is identity – a factor that ultimately forms the cornerstone of the child soldiering experience and how the aftermath of this experience is navigated in a post-conflict environment.

Entangled with the normative ideals of innocence, vulnerability and the victim-perpetrator binary, the identity ascribed to FCS has a strong impact on reintegration programmes. In particular, this identity ignores the interplay between these conceptions and those of responsibility, agency and

accountability (Haer 2017: 458). It is only through moving beyond the victim-perpetrator binary and the perception of universality with conceptualisations of childhood (Mukasa 2017: 355) that Derluyn et al (2015: 1) believe will truly enable the complexity of the child soldiering experience to be grasped.

The capacity to integrate FCS and to develop a sense of coherence, with particular attention being given to their psychological well-being, is an important element of the approach undertaken through reintegration programmes. Typically, to achieve these goals, it is perceived that returnees should break away from the "rebel" identities that they have acquired during the war, and disavow the past in the process to support a process that will maintain their well-being. The prioritisation of the civilian identity over what is constituted as a "rebel identity" presupposes that these two are clearly distinguishable, as well as separate from one another (Preston 2015: 432; Shanahan and Veale 2018: 1 – 2, 7). Unpacking and documenting this process, research literature has provided an insight into the sheer complexity that surrounds the return of FCS, as well as the challenges that typically arise and impede upon the ability for research programmes to achieve a true sense of coherence between FCS, or CAAGs, and their communities (Verma 2012; Shanahan and Veale 2018: 1).

Tackling this relationship between the child soldiering experience and identity directly are Honwana (2006), Shepler (2014) and Preston (2015) - three notable authors that unpack both the concept of child soldiers, as well as its impact on the identities that returnees adopt and embody by virtue of this experience. Honwana (2006) argues that those classified as child soldiers, "exist in a liminal space between 'child' and 'soldier, wherein they negotiate multiple and conflictual identities." The argument that multiple identities are acquired is shared by Shepler (2005; 2014: 90), who through discussions held with FCS in Sierra Leone, highlighted that their reintegration is achieved through social practices that take place across a variety of contexts, and within which these FCS strategically adopt various identities. This element of a degree of intentionality, continuity and coherence in the identity construction of FCS further aligns with the work of Preston (2015), who finds that despite aspects of the FCS' pre-abduction playing a role in their life narratives, the development and experiences behind their accrual of a rebel identity results in a strong dissociation between this newly acquired identity and that of their civilian identity. Goins et al, (2012) concerning the context of FCS in Sierra Leone, delve further into this matter by exploring the self-constructions of FCS through the use of a repertory grid method, whereby participants were asked to rank personal constructs and meanings to determine how they rate their self "before the war, their self now, their ideal self and a future self" (Shanahan & Veale 2018: 1). In doing so, the authors were able to gather data that suggested that many of the FCS viewed their current identity in the present as being closer to their

perceived "ideal self" than their pre-war selves. What these findings suggest, as well as the arguments made for FCS possessing multiple identities, is that the home-bush-home transition- a phenomenon that Verma speaks to in her work, is a much more complex and inter-connected process that makes any clear dissection of the present self with the past a very tricky goal to achieve, nor ideal for some.

The work of Verma (2012) stands out amongst the literature that discusses the complexities surrounding the identities of FCS and how these identities conflict with the overarching narratives of the child as innocent, vulnerable beings that many reintegration programmes depart from. With her focus on the moral framing of the idealised home-bush home transition that returnees embark on from the point of their abduction to their reintegration, Verma emphasises that the assumption of this being a linear process feeds into the perpetuation of a post-conflict environment that is predicated on the silencing of FCS. Through her interviews with FCS, particularly within spaces where the presence of reintegration centre workers were not present, the contradictions between narratives presented by returnees in the presence of the workers, and within the confines of late-night stories with other returnees, accentuate the fact the authentic perspectives and voices of returnees are not typically heard within the spaces of formal reintegration programmes.

Speaking to this same phenomenon, Akello (2015:1, 6), through her ethnographic fieldwork within northern Uganda, acquired data to suggest that the trauma-focussed rehabilitation angle of reintegration led to a "neglect of behaviour change among former child soldiers" within local and international strategies; a factor that, in some cases, "perpetuated a cycle of atrocity and criminality" by returnees in the period following their return. Within discussions held during Akello's fieldwork, it was even suggested that some FCS expressed that they do not perceive themselves as "entirely innocent, immature and traumatised victims" (2015: 1). While this particular aspect of their criminality upon return is not the focus of this thesis, these findings are certainly crucial in comprehending how the imposition of a particular identity and reality upon FCS may foster resentment, and even further issues in the long-run upon their reinsertion into their communities. What is truly crucial, both as an area to be explored within the literature and as a component of this thesis' analysis, is how FCS navigate this transition back into their communities, as well as what was successful in facilitating their reintegration in this process.

These overarching narratives and perceptions of the child that paint the image of children as innocent, vulnerable beings, as well as drive the extreme images given to the child soldiering experience, "occludes, flattens and conceals details" (Drumbl 2012: 11), details that are crucial to moving beyond the sensationalised accounts of what the child soldiering experience, as well as its aftermath, truly entails. In fact, Drumbl (2012: 25) argues that it is easier to express outrage surrounding the oxymoron

of the “child soldier” than to “interrogatively theorise” this phenomenon and utilise this knowledge to enhance “preventive and remedial policies.” Policies that cater to the “convenient” and idealised answer may simply be “poor policy,” according to Drumbl (2012: 25). In fact, Akello (2015: 4) argues that with a legal framing of FCS as “innocence and traumatised victims” above a true essence of the identities that they truly possess, there is a hindrance to the adoption of any alternative discourse of “engagement and meaningful dialogue” between FCS and their communities, especially concerning the needs and notions held by the community regarding accountability and retribution.

Especially salient within this expression of the importance of dialogue is the need to ensure that the community is not only present throughout the process of reintegration but also sensitised regarding the true nature of the changed behaviours and norms that FCS possess; a matter that should certainly not be downplayed when the long-term social reintegration is the goal. This lack of attention being given to these reciprocal avenues is one criticism made by Akello (2015: 4) concerning the priorities given during the structuring and execution of reintegration programmes. In essence, Akello (2015: 8) advocates for the harnessing of acceptance, non-discrimination, responsibility and agency as more effective avenues to not only draw FCS out of past habits but also to encourage community engagement in this process.

Framing reintegration programmes within the guidelines of childhood as an innocent period, void of culpability and necessitating protection may be done with the best of intentions, but the impact that this approach has, particularly with its individual-oriented structure, only accounts for the short-term challenges and not the longer-term, day-to-day realities of what these FCS return to. The driving factor behind humanitarian interventions to “repair these children” from the unspeakable evils and traumatic experiences they encountered whilst in the bush further perpetuates this short-term focus of addressing these seemingly immediate concerns upon their return and reunification, as opposed to fostering any long-term reintegration (Derluyn *et al*. 2015: 6). While this alludes to a practical dilemma with the execution of programmes, Parker et al (2021: 1) makes a comparison of this tendency to know more about the short-term challenges than the longer term, day-to-day realities with what has been written by scholars on the subject of the reintegration of former child soldiers. Similarly, Wessels (2017) emphasises the difference between studies that merely unpack the issue of child soldiers and those that bring focus to the long-term trajectory beyond their return. The argument is made that scholarly evidence concerning the sustainable impact of interventions is purely “embryonic, at best” (2017: 8).

Bringing focus to enduring legacies of warfare in a post-conflict environment, Wessels (2017) speaks to how international humanitarian interventions and enterprises, through bringing in external support,

ultimately foster an environment of dependency. The widespread use of top-down approaches to reintegration, whilst forming part of a process that is typically deemed a "long-term" affair, holds no grounding within local, natural supports. As such, the imposition of interventions provides a breeding ground for dependency; a factor that Wessels (2017: 9) regards as the "enemy of well-being, local empowerment and sustainability," all of which are factors that would align with a successful reintegration outcome. Nevertheless, even with the attention and aid brought in through DDR programmes, Allen et al (2020: 680) highlight how long-term follow-up research has revealed that interventions failed to foster long-term social inclusion, leaving many FCS, as well as their communities, to become more vulnerable, and even invisible, as a result. While this factor of vulnerability can be attributed to the impacts that come with the destruction of the war, credit is also being given to the orientation of reintegration programmes, whereby FCS become recipients of targeted assistance, unlike the other children and members of the community that do not fall within the category of a child returnee. Not only does this recognition speak to questions of who should be included as targets for these interventions, as well as stakeholders to their execution, but also the scale and breadth that reintegration programmes should endeavour to cover.

In essence, the individualisation of interventions fosters an atmosphere where there is an "individualisation of problems;" a matter that Vindevogel (2017) goes as far as to say can result in non-interventionism. To counter this, Vindevogel (2017: 76) emphasises the value of future directions where the significance of transactions at multiple socio-ecological and macrostructural levels of one's social environment are harnessed and resilience moves beyond the neo-liberal notions of "*self*-determination, *self*-responsibility and *self*-help," to acknowledge collective processes of resilience and the resources and supports that contribute to this resilience.

Additionally, the framing of reintegration around the notion of the self and the need for forgiveness and acceptance back into the community, feeds into a broader contradiction and discrepancy between the manner in which NGOs approach the reintegration of former child soldiers, and how communities perceive the circumstances surrounding their return (Akello *et al.* 2006: 233; Huttunen 2010: 34). Not only is there argued to be a lack of preparation for communities concerning their role and perceived "responsibility" to receive these children/young adults back, but there is also a disregard for the compelling need of these FCS and their communities to come to terms with the matter of "accountability, and feelings of guilt and revenge" (Akello *et al.* 2006: 230). The unwillingness of communities to receive and welcome these FCS upon their return has deeper routes than merely their perception of the wrongs they have committed in the war; these sentiments often have undertones that relate to the impact that the LRA has had on the community's well-being, livelihoods and safety,

as a whole. Therefore, acknowledgement should be given to the fact that the conflict not only impacted the lives of the FCS but also severely disrupted the livelihoods, supports and general well-being of those within the communities (Huttunen 2010: 34). In this manner, actions and experiences are ultimately tied to notions of responsibility and collectivity. The notion of the self, even following the instance of war, appears to continue to be intertwined with that of the community, demonstrating how identity, in as much as responsibilities, is relational in nature.

2.6.2. From Psychological versus Psychosocial Approaches to a Socio-Ecological Framing of Reintegration – Bringing in the Local Domain

Bottom-up perspectives that account for indigenous theorisations and recognise realities on the ground are growing advocacy in academia (Tisdall & Punch 2012: 259). Beyond merely their inclusion as a counter to the traditional, Western discourses of childhood, agency and analyses of reintegration, the scholarship that emphasises the potential of traditional African knowledge and the promise that lies with bringing focus to child protection systems and practices that operate at the local, community level have contributed substantially to these discussions. Among the authors that champion this advocacy is Ochen (2012: 1193), who notes that traditionally, the diversity and richness that lies within African cultural systems has, in many instances, been "bypassed in favour of untried Western Eurocentric models and ideas" that are ultimately difficult to apply within a local context. This prioritisation of the Western sources of knowledge not only bears influence on the scholarship that is produced surrounding the topic of childhood, child soldiers and reintegration but also has a direct influence on the development and implementation of interventions and activities (Ochen 2012: 1193). Therefore, with the inclusion of the voices and scholarship that include African sources of knowledge and practices, Francis (2008) and Shepler (2005), among others, raise the additional concern of how this broadening of knowledge will impact how reintegration is conceptualised, particularly as the philosophies that underpin how reintegration, as well as childhood, are conceptualised differ depending on the context, culture and positionality of the author.

This variance in the conceptualisation of reintegration and childhood and its impact the manner in which interventions and approaches to reintegration are actualised has led to a distinction being made between international and local approaches to reintegration (Lederach 1997). Emerging out of this distinction are two dominant perspectives within the literature – those that support an individual FAC-focussed model, which emphasise psychological and psycho-social approaches, and those that take the position that reintegration interventions should follow a community-focussed model (Ochen 2012: 1197). The premise behind the argument for more community-based reintegration interventions is that interventions targeting FCS should not be delinked from "broader community recovery

programmes," and that reintegration should build on local capacities, as well as ensure local ownership is fostered for long-term sustainability to take place (Wessels 2017: 4; Ochen *et al.* 2012: 89; Annan et al. 2007). This advocacy for a shift in focus of interventions away from targeting children as individuals to acknowledge their embeddedness within a broader communal network that equally requires support gives further credence to the arguments made by Newman (2014), Suarez and Baines (2022), and Veale *et al* (2017). The overarching consensus within the arguments of these authors is that familial relations and the informal local dimension, in which these relationships operate, are crucial factors that influence the successful social reintegration of FCS.

Echoing these sentiments, Derluyn, Vindevogel and De Haene (2013), contributing to an under-explored area in social reintegration literature, argue that reintegration interventions, typically those of a psychosocial nature, "need to act in relational spaces at the intersection of individual and collective experiences" (Derluyn *et al.* 2013: 869, 872, 876; Veale *et al.* 2017: 59). This advocacy for interventions to operate within these everyday spaces, in-between spaces, opens the conversation to how and where reintegration programmes should be undertaken, as well as who should be involved in their execution. With this suggestion, the authors also put forth reconciliation as a necessary component of interventions that should operate within these individual/collective spaces (Derluyn *et al.* 2013: 877). Drawing upon these insights, Veale, Worthen and Mckay (2017: 58) delineate three nodes of individual-community relations, including the intersection between individual emotional experiences and the emotional climate, individual agency and public engagement, and individual and community resilience, which could serve as possible transformative avenues to be harnessed within reintegration programmes. These nodes form the basis of a proposal by the authors that interventions should capitalise upon the individual and collective resources within these dynamic, fluid and changing spaces, and incorporate them within psychosocial intervention programming to bring about "greater reintegration" (Veale *et al*. 2017: 59).

Further, calling attention to the broader emotional climate within post-conflict contexts, Lykes, Beristain and Pérez-Armiñan (2007) unpack how this climate ultimately frames the collective response taken towards individuals. This emotional climate is understood to entail the "collective attitude or mood that determines behavioural responses to individuals" (Lykes *et al*. 2007). Increasingly noted within the field of peace and conflict studies, is the potential for the emotional climate to become a challenge to tackle within post-conflict environments, particularly with there is evidence of underlying attitudes to be accounted for (Veale *et al.* 2017; Snyder & Dwyer 2011).

Exploring the meaning behind resources from the perspective of former child soldiers who drew upon them to support their reintegration, Vindevogel, Broekaert and Derluyn (2013: 2415. 2422) unpack

the value behind encompassing resources in various forms to give an insight into the processes adopted by former child soldiers who sought to "break with their child soldering past and forge a future to which they aspired." Understanding the meanings ascribed to resources by individuals themselves gives perspective to what is perceived as being truly helpful (Annan *et al.* 2009; Veale and Stavrou 2007; Hobfoll 2002: 307; Vindevogel *et al.* 2013: 2415; Shanahan and Veale 2018: 2). In many ways, the meaning given to resources is typically "framed in relation to others," with some FCS utilising the resources at their disposal to conceal their child soldier past to avoid mistreatment and stigmatisation (Vindevogel *et al.* 2013: 2422). One of the themes that emerged within the study conducted by Vindevogel *et al.* (2013: 2423 - 2424), is that resources serve a valuable purpose in enabling FCS to survive and feel empowered to confront the challenging circumstances they are returning to, and, ultimately, to learn how to "be" in their environment.

Seeking to expand these findings of the boundaries of agency within highly constrained environments, Shanahan and Veale (2018: 15) additionally explore the manifestation of agency of FCS in the ways that they harness resources within the symbolic and imaginative realm. Understanding this realm of symbolic resources and the role that they could play in the assisting in facilitating the reintegration of FCS necessitates further research (Shanahan and Veale 2018: 15). Contributing to this discussion, Gillespie and Zittoun (2010: 50) suggest that these symbolic resources are particularly useful during times of "rupture and transition," particularly when a society is facing a situation of unfamiliarity and great need. While depletion of the familiar and habitual modes of action within a society is often a common side-effect of conflict and times of disruption, cultural elements that remain could be used for multiple purposes to enable "developmental transition and adaptation" (Gillespie & Zittoun 2010: 50). In particular, the use of songs and stories have been found to be useful in mediating reintegration back into civilian life, as well as the experience of shared experiences. In Gergen's terms, coming together in this way signifies a form of world-making that is neither focussing on the past or present, but, rather, creating "stories about a new life" (2015: 294). This shift, according to Gergen (2015: 294), is what is needed for "a future forming orientation" that could foster the creation of "new practices."

What this research brings to the fore, is an insight into aspects of the social reintegration of FCS that has yet to be sufficiently understood. These aspects particularly speak to the perspectives of reintegration as being located in "formal interventions" and processes that are then transported into family and community relationships with returnees, to an examination of "informal private activity" enacted by FCS within this post-conflict environment (Shanahan & Veale 2018: 13). Significant to this side of the discussion is the takeaway highlighted by Shanahan and Veale (2018: 14) that with a

departure of former reintegration programmes to encourage FCS to “disavow the past,” there is a real risk in overlooking the depth of opportunities and experiences that former abductees and returnees harness and leverage “through their own resourcefulness and adaptive coping.” With an exploration of symbolic resources, research is opened to an understanding, not only of the actions undertaken by FCS within this post-conflict context but also of agency and its manifestation within “highly constrained contexts” (Shanahan and Veale 2018: 14; Honwana 2006: 40; Utas 2005: 413).

Additionally, further insight is given into the “creativity and imagination” behind the nature of adaptation to adversity, as well as how FCS are not solely dependent upon the resources and avenues provided through external interventions (Shanahan and Veale 2018: 15). While child literature has made strides in seeking to expand understanding of agency, particularly that of the gendered nature of agency, these contributions of the informal, communal interface behind the resources and avenues adopted by FCS, expands knowledge of agency into the symbolic and imaginative realm. Further, this research gives credence to arguments behind local coping strategies existing outside of the formal and exogenous provisions of interventions and, rather, manifesting within the everyday contexts that FCS navigate upon their return (Shanahan & Veale 2018: 15).

Critiquing liberal peacebuilding’s focus on formal institutions and its marginalisation of young people within peace processes, Lesley Pruitt and Helen Berents argue that youth agency is not a new discovery, but is evident in their everyday resilience and ability to navigate exclusion (Berents & McEvoy-Levy 2015: 119). Advancing the concept of “everyday peace” as a lived, embodied experience, Berents (2015: 1 – 3), as well as Pruitt (2011: 207, 215; 2015: 158), highlight how young people harness informal, creative practices – such as storytelling, relationship building, and even dancing – to foster dialogue, reimagine and (re)negotiate identities, and rebuild social cohesion, particularly in post-conflict contexts where this becomes crucial. Further, taking into account the “contextually-specific roles” young people adopt, influenced by intersecting factors like gender, age, class and race, there is also a need to broaden peacebuilding to recognise and engage “notions of equity” rather than merely attempting to “fix” exclusion – a factor that becomes especially salient when unpacking the gendered and diverse reintegration experiences of returnees (Pruitt 2015: 157; Berents & McEvoy-Levy 2015: 123). As Pruitt aptly asks, “What can we learn from them if we listen?” – recognising young people’s agency as embedded in relational, embodied practices could not only enrich peacebuilding efforts, but also deepen our understanding of how localised, everyday actions can transform the process of recovery and reintegration.

2.6.3. Agentic Practice Beyond Warfare - The Localisation Shift

Inevitably, the normative manner in which agency is regarded within the literature pigeonholes children's agency as needing to align with the established ideas of childhood, primarily based on the moral and social ideas of what constitutes the right kind of behaviour that children should exhibit, the nature of activities that are acceptable for them to engage in, as well as the spaces that are deemed "appropriate for them to inhabit" (Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 368; Edmonds 2019: 201). Agency thereby becomes an avenue through which normative assumptions not only guide narratives within the literature on children but also serve as an analytical tool to help "understand, evaluate and act upon places around the world," chiefly within the "Majority World" through the execution of policies and programmes (Edmonds 2019: 201; Panelli et al., 2007; Punch 2003; Esser et al. 2016). In fact, the currently and largely normative manner in which agency is theorised and operationalized as a tool to "understanding human experience universally," signifies more of a "description of a particular discourse" than serving as a frame of reference that truly enables one to "understand and make visible" the actual nature of children's socio-culturally grounded "agentic practice" at a particular place and time (Edmonds 2019: 201 – 202; Rudnick et al. 2019).

The consequence of this narrow and universalistic approach to agency is that it blinds us to the "actual social and cultural phenomenon" that influences and shapes children's agency and the actions they take in their day-to-day lives (Edmonds 2019: 202; Rudnick et al. 2019). This invisibility of child agency from a socio-cultural frame of reference fosters problems at both a conceptual and a practical level. This is especially prevalent where the development of "appropriate, effective, responsible and impactful policies and programmes in local contexts around the world" is concerned (Rudnick et al. 2019**;** Edmonds 2019: 202; 206 - 207).

Within critiques of these traditionalist preoccupations, child agency during war has become a popular theme, but the nature of agency beyond war remains vague and underdeveloped (McMullin 2011: 755, 757, 761). The nature of agency, how it is displayed, where it falls within existing social structures, and how it can be included within reintegration programmes of FCS, lacks conceptual and practical clarity. This gap not only shows how academic assumptions impact practice, but also where room for improvement lies in truly understanding child agency.

The growing call for further academic inquiry, as well as practical exploration of decentring children's participation, and recognising their agency as it manifests within the more mundane contexts of everyday life, emphasises the importance behind framing agency, as well as executing practice, through the lens of culture, norms and values (Bordonaro 2012; Bosco 2010; Vanderbeck

2008; Lee 2009; Ruiz-Casares *et al.* 2017). As illustrated in the literature overview within chapter one, there continues to be sufficient promise within the latter transformative contributions of authors who advocate for this broadening of the literature and practice surrounding children's participation and agentic influence within the informal, cultural avenues that lie within society. Storytelling, in this context, is suggested as a participatory tool that children themselves can use to express and reshape their experiences, as well as a communal practice that can be integrated into reintegration programs to engage both returnees and community members in reconstructing social narratives and bridging generational divides. This approach to everyday storytelling sees it not merely as an individual act, but as a reciprocal exchange between children and their communities, enhancing both relationality and the shared construction of meaning.

Resonating with de Boeck and Honwana's (2005) emphasis on storytelling as an agentic avenue, Cheney (2007: 217) similarly looks to the model of Acholi campfires, *Wang'oo,* in northern Uganda, as a platform to bridge the "old and the new," whereby "people of all ages can speak, be heard, and receive respect." What this brings to the discussion of agency, not only in a general sense but particularly within the framework of post-conflict reintegration, is the understanding that the nature and cultivation of children's agency is ultimately dependent upon the spaces children inhabit, as well as the norms, values, relationships and practices that bear influence upon their socialisation (Lund 2007: 137; Moncrieffe 2009: 7; Barandiaran *et al.* 2009: 3). In essence, agency is regarded as constituting more than a pathway through which returnees can participate and be "empowered," in a sense. Children's agentic influence through the avenues of the informal, cultural sphere will, according to Cheney (2007: 217, 263), open an exploratory space for negotiations to take place and thrive. What emerges critically from the work of Cheney (2007) and de Boeck and Honwana (2005) is the centrality of informal, everyday spaces as crucial sites for the expression and negotiation of agency. This will become even more apparent in the subsequent analyses of this study, especially when examining the dynamics of post-conflict reintegration in northern Uganda.

Understanding agency beyond the frame of warfare to include the post-conflict domain furthers calls within the literature to localise and expand knowledge of agency-related theory and practice. Agentic practice through the lens of socio-cultural domains of being and knowledge, challenges narratives of agency to move away from the tendency to privilege certain cultural premises and expectations in relation to children and the agency that is deemed acceptable for them to possess, to acknowledge the actual complexity and varied nature of agency and its perception within different contexts and cultures (Edmonds 2019: 208; Carbaugh (2007). This advocacy for localisation, while crucial to the aim of this thesis, does not seek to impose a cultural relativist proposition that local conditions and

perceptions are immediately at odds with the norms and assumptions that are prevalent within traditional conceptions of the child, childhood and agency (Edmonds 2019: 207). Moreover, localisation does not imply that there merely needs to be an "adaptation" of externally-derived interventions to local socio-cultural contexts (Edmonds 2019: 201). The crux of a localisation approach is to address the matter of how responses are "reflective of the socio-cultural systems in which they will be enacted," and whether new approaches should be created to appropriately tackle the nature of challenges present in a particular context, whilst being cognizant of the norms, values and practices that operate within them (Edmonds 2019: 201; Rudnick *et al.* 2019).

Rudnick and Boromisza-Habashi (2017: 3) paint this kind of change as necessitating a "fundamental shift in perspective," where we move away from narrowly viewing security through the lens of "universally agreed set of conditions" and, rather, as a "socio-cultural phenomenon." As such, it is pertinent that an acknowledgement of context from the onset of policy and programme design takes place, as opposed to this contextual framing being a consideration at the implementation phase. This brings to the fore the importance of asking questions, such as "What kind of agency is in the 'best interests' of the child and according to whom?" during the framing and execution of child reintegration policies and programmes (Edmonds 2019: 204). This question has two key implications: first, it shifts attention away from universal benchmarks of 'children's best interests' by addressing the interests behind policy framing; second, it highlights how assumptions about children's best interests can vary, advocating for approaches that consider what is locally relevant and impactful, rather than adhering to a universal standard (Edmonds 2019: 205; Edmonds and Cook 2014; Rudnick *et al*. 2019). The consideration that emerges out of this localisation shift is not only how to recognise children's agency in its various forms and contexts of execution, but also how to forge a path towards making children's agency more visible within reintegration programmes targeting them, namely FCS.

Therefore, it becomes about more than simply generating situated knowledge about child agency, but also forming the basis for situated practice and actions that draw upon these insights. As argued by Edmonds (2019: 208), the most important factor in generating research on children's agency and addressing the persistent gap/tension between the discourses of studies on childhood and the realm of practice and policy (Punch 2016: 352), is to move beyond preoccupations of solely harnessing children's own perspectives without a "sufficient grounding of these perspectives" within the socio-cultural systems that inform their lives, and which experience the effect of this agency in practice. It is for this reason that the research prioritises not only the need to include FCS and children within the discussions of childhood and agency but also the families and communities as key parties to this conversation.

2.7. Conclusion – Creating Space for Localised and Contextually Grounded Understandings of Childhood and Agency

What becomes clear in tracing back discussions concerning children is that academia has been in a constant state of flux about various 'truths' about children throughout history. Consistently present, however, is the strong influence that assumptions have in defining 'the child,' their capacities, and their 'place. Implicit in these assumptions is a common treatment of the child as a peripheral factor to be guided, controlled, and moulded to an adult society's needs. Despite the progress made in recognising the agentic capacity of children, particularly in uncontroversial roles and contexts, a continued gap exists in understanding the post-conflict nature of agency amongst FCS.

This chapter has argued that this gap is primarily the result of the dominance of Western-centric frameworks that construct childhood through narrow, universalistic ideals, leading to the exclusion of non-Western understandings and localised perspectives. The dominance of psychological and psychosocial approaches in reintegration programming has further marginalised socio-ecological models that take into account broader relational and communal contexts within which FCS return. This lack of contextualised accounts of norms and realities on the ground depicts an incomplete story of childhood and reintegration. As a result, reintegration programs tend to conceptualise agency as a static attribute, overlooking the dynamic and context-specific realities of former child soldiers post-war.

Nevertheless, addressing these gaps does not mean replacing current narratives entirely. What is needed is the coexistence of Western academic conceptions with those that encompass local norms, values, cultures, and lived realities that fall outside of, or challenge, current norms. By drawing on socio-ecological perspectives, this chapter calls for a rethinking of the present frameworks to better capture the diverse realities of childhood and child agency. This shift is not intended to reject existing frameworks but to broaden them, promoting a more inclusive understanding that resonates more closely with the everyday lived experiences of former child soldiers. The chapter to follow will undertake the task of balancing these narratives through a conceptual framework that incorporates a variety of vantage points, including non-Western insights.

Drawing inspiration from Edmonds (2019: 200, 202) and the new directions required in research and practice to "localise agency," this chapter, and those to follow, address three central factors: the present problems emerging from the current state of how 'the child,' childhood, and agency are conceptualised, the challenges these conceptualisations pose when mobilised in practice, and what

future directions for reintegration practice could arise from a locally grounded conceptualisation of agency.

3. CHAPTER THREE: Conceptual Framework

3.1. Introduction

While a Western locus of enunciation–that which emanates from academia and policy frameworks rooted in European and Northern American contexts - undeniably shapes norms and understandings attributed to the child and childhood, these influences are not the only interpretations that exist. Grosfoguel's (2011: 5) emphasis on the "locus of enunciation" – a term coined by Mignolo (2007) - becomes critical here, as it highlights that that knowledge production is inherently situated and shaped by the geo-political and body-political position of the knower. Western epistemologies often obscure the subject's positionality, creating an illusion of universal truth. In contrast, recognising non-Western perspectives foregrounds the relationship between identity, location, and knowledge, which is particularly relevant in post-conflict northern Uganda, where diverse epistemic and cultural realities intersect.

Drawing critically upon the complex history of childhood, as unpacked in Chapter 2, Liebel, Nieuwenhuys, and Masson and Smith uphold notions of the colonial legacy of childhood. This legacy illustrates how Eurocentric ideals historically constructed childhood through a Western-centric lens, legitimising imperial hierarchies that portray childhood—and by extension, colonised societies—as dependent and deficient (Liebel 2019: 41; Masson & Smith 2019: 14; Nieuwenhuys 2010: 294). This binary logic continues to shape modern conceptualisations of childhood, reinforcing assumptions of innocence, vulnerability, and dependency while obscuring diverse realities and cultural nuances (Liebel 2019: 46–47; Nieuwenhuys 2013: 5). These universalised depictions marginalise non-Western perspectives and hinder the recognition of alternative forms of agency, particularly among children whose lived experiences defy Western norms. Broadening our lens to include localised conceptions offers a critical avenue for challenging entrenched assumptions and fostering more inclusive frameworks for understanding childhood and agency.

Given the focus of this case analysis, it is thereby critical to acknowledge how on-the-ground realities reflect an interface between Western conceptualisations and those of an African nature, also referenced as non-Western. The reintegration of FCS in northern Uganda illustrates how post-conflict environments not only involve transactions between various actors but also engage with their cultural and normative realities.

To critically analyse the nature and manifestation of agency amongst FCS in post-conflict reintegration programmes, this chapter deconstructs the key concepts that influence engagements with children both in humanitarian interventions and at a local level. These include 'the child' and

childhood, child soldier, agency –specifically child agency – reintegration, and participation. Interpretations of these concepts are far from universal. Thus, this framework aims to provide an overarching construct that highlights the complexity within the normative conceptions and biases shaping their understanding and execution in practice. In line with Grosfoguel's (2011) critique of Western "ego-politics of knowledge," this study makes visible the situated nature of the knowledge claims underpinning reintegration practices in northern Uganda.

The conceptual framework will, therefore, encompass traditional, critical and African insights, drawing on examples from northern Uganda to illustrate how local conceptions of childhood may differ from Western interpretations. In doing so, the framework will incorporate aspects of a multitude of diverse vantage points. These insights will be further substantiated through fieldwork conducted in Gulu in later chapters, where local perspectives on childhood and agency post-conflict become central to the analysis.

To reiterate Levering's (2002: 38) point, these constructs do more than provide a conceptual basis; they serve as a "soft interpretation of intentions." It is the intention behind these foundations and their influence on practice that this research argues is crucial for the structuring and execution of reintegration programmes. Hence, the purpose of constructing this conceptual framework is not merely to outline the diverse interpretations found in the literature. Rather, it seeks to evaluate the applicability of pre-existing conceptual foundations to reintegration and agency of FCS in a post-conflict context - or to consider whether a new normative conception of child agency, embedded within local norms, would be more suitable.

3.2. What is a Child and How Do We Understand Childhood?

"The child" is a term that we have all intimately experienced as both an identity and an existence that moulded our relationships, environment, and being. While we undeniably gain skills and undergo physical development after birth, the designation of childhood as a separate stage from adulthood is a human construct with diverse interpretations. The literature review traced the origins of certain normative understandings of the child and why they evolved as they did. These norms have since been rendered as universal truths, influencing policies and approaches towards children today.

From these interpretations, a few factors stand out: children are defined by age, by what they lack in terms of attributes and capabilities, by the spaces and relationships guiding their transition to adulthood, and by an apolitical stance. To avoid collapsing alterity and assuming a homogeneous view of children, this framework will acknowledge multiple perspectives.

3.2.1. Age-based conceptualisations

With a concept as complex and contested as 'the child,' the simplest definition is based on age-grades, which attribute identity, engagements, capabilities and spaces to specific ages. The UNCRC, the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), and the Uganda Constitution (1995, revised 2005) define children in this manner, as anyone under the age of eighteen (Angucia 2009: 80; Archard cited in Mastey 2017: 42; Lorey 2001: 9-10; McIntyre 2003: 1; OAU 1990). Thus, 'the child' broadly signifies a developmental phase of life from birth to adulthood.

However, childhood is not uniform, comprising overlapping stages, like adolescence and youth (Mastey 2017: 42). Adolescence, signifying older children (10 – 18 years), marks the transition to adulthood (Lee 2009: 14-15). The classification of youth is more contested. The World Bank's Development Report (2007) begins youth at twelve, while the UNCRC's range starts at fifteen, and both end at twenty-four (Del Felice & Onyeigwe 2018: 12-13; Lee 2009: 22). The African Youth Charter, however, extends youth from fifteen to thirty-five, adding over a decade to other frameworks (Del Felice & Onyeigwe 2018: 12-13; Maina 2012: 9, 12). The significance of these designations is the particular rights, expectations, responsibilities, and accrual of accountability that stem from them (Mastey 2017: 42).

3.2.2. Attributes and capabilities

The depiction of childhood as a distinct stage from adulthood implies connotations of Apollonian innocence, immaturity, and irrationality due to their physical, mental, and emotional development. This perceived vulnerability necessitates adult protection until children naturally transition to independent, rational adults capable of informed decisions and accountable actions (Maina 2012: 94-95; Archard cited in Mastey 2017: 42-43; Podder 2011: 144). Competencies here are seen as natural, evolving in accordance with developmental stages, mediated by enculturation and socialisation (Hoffmann-Ekstein *et al.* 2008: 12; Podder 2011: 143). Thus, children are conceptualised by what they lack in attributes and capabilities and are separated not only conceptually, but spatially, from adults (Mastey 2017: 43).

Alternatively, cultural relativist schools of thought and the new sociology of childhood see childhood as a cultural construct, with competencies shaped by history and cultural contexts (Hoffmann-Ekstein *et al.* 2008: 12; James & Prout 1997: 10-14; Podder 2011: 143). Culturally-informed conceptualisations enable the recognition of heterogeneous meanings and capabilities attributed to childhood, often defined more by social roles than by chronological age (Lee 2009: 14). Social conceptions of childhood challenge the applicability of universal frameworks like the UNCRC.

Notably, many developing nations did not participate in its drafting, raising concerns about imposing a Minority World view of a 'global child' onto Majority World societies with distinct norms and conceptions (Cheney 2007: 57-58; Hart 2006; Norozi & Moen 2016: 79; Plante 2008: 27; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 250, 254-255, 257).

In response to this backlash, the OAU (1990) adopted the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (Tisdall & Punch 2012: 257). Unlike the UNCRC, which focuses on adult duties to children, the OAU Charter emphasises African values of responsibility, reciprocity, and community belonging for the child (Cheney 2007: 58). Consequently, children are not just vulnerable, passive recipients but are seen as competent persons bearing "social, economic, and political responsibilities for their families and communities" (Lee 2009: 14), especially those in the older stages of the childhood (Åkerström 2014: 48; Holloway *et al.* 2019: 463; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 257-259).

Stages of adolescence and youth illustrate how different social realities shape notions of status. In affluent Western societies, adolescence is seen as a "period of liminality, lack of responsibility, and education" (Lee 2009: 15), making it easy to collapse this age group into a "single category of children" (Lee 2009: 15). In contrast, other societies view adolescence as a "period of responsibility" shaped by lived realities that foster alternative considerations during childhood (Lee 2009: 15). For instance, in northern Uganda, where child-headed households, poverty and multi-generational living arrangements are common, particularly following decades of conflict, children take on greater responsibilities not just for themselves, but for others. Here, eighteen as a marker of adulthood is less relevant; status is defined through roles and obligations. Similarly, the AU's Agenda 2063 sees youth as a force for change, using terms like "potential, empowerment, transformative leadership and innovation" (Del Felice & Onyeigwe 2018: 11; McIntyre 2003: 1-2). Therefore, conceptualising all children as vulnerable and innocent disregards lived realities and perpetuates a paternalistic outlook (Cheney 2007: 64; Lee 2009: 15).

In a global rights discourse, the child as a sovereign individual, imbued with rights and growing capabilities, contrasts with the OAU Charter's emphasis on collectivity over individuality. Alternatively, children are viewed as potential 'persons' with limited competencies who grow into 'full personhood' (Cheney 2007: 58-59; Kilbride & Kilbride 1990: 84-85; Morris 1994; Wells 2009: 166; Valentin & Meinert 2009). The use of "personhood" rather than "adulthood" underscores community and belonging. The ideal person is defined socially, not developmentally, as one rooted in their group and oriented towards social responsibilities (Cheney 2007: 58).

As “social persons” children are raised to align with the needs and values of their community, becoming an “extension of their parents’ social personhood” (Harris 1978: 79; Kilbride & Kilbride 1990: 84-85). In Acholi traditional society, emphasis is placed on collective action, respect and adherence to “long-established traditions and institutions.” Norms governing child upbringing and family/communal relations are seen as essential to sustain across generations. To transmit these values, traditional Acholi social events like *Wang’oo* – “evening fireplace discussions” – play a crucial role. Embodying “communal responsibility for children’s socialisation,” *Wang’oo* provides a space where “cultural values, conventions and norms were passed from elders to the future generation” (Ochen 2014: 244). As Ochen explains, this ensured children were informed of

> Social expectations, cultural demands, acceptable behavioural practices and other issues that were deemed important for the preservation of the society foremost and the protection of children generally (Ochen 2014: 243 – 244).

Community discipline ensures children adhere to expected behaviour even when not with their parents. This collective approach reflects the Acholi society’s emphasis on social hierarchy, authority and social organisation, all mediated by cultural traditions and practices (Ochen 2014: 243 – 244). Though this power could be misused to harm a child, it also reinforced shared values and norms.

Wang’oo applied even to orphans, who were “fed via the *Wang’oo*” since “food would be served outside at the *Wang’oo* and all people would eat together” (Ochen 2014: 244). No one was excluded, as noted by the Council of Elders Ker Kwaro Acholi (cited in Ochen 2014: 244). Yet, these practices were significantly eroded during the war, leaving few “cultural safety nets” for orphans (Ochen 2014: 244). As a council elder framed the situation to Ochen during a focus group at the Palace of the Paramount Chief,

> Before the war, and in spite of the advent of modernisation and Western ways of life, Acholi’s culture was very strong. The socio-cultural institutions regulated everyday life, with men, women and children aware of what was required of them. Children were taught at the *Wang’oo* and knew their roles as looking after the compound, supporting their fathers in home management and farming and for the girls helping their mothers in the kitchen and weeding. What Acholi culture instilled in children is respect, discipline and obedience (Ochen 2014: 245).

Children’s socialisation and development thus became a by-product of communal interactions. Local views of development, as Hansen and Twaddle (1998: 232) explain, depict it as a “continuous and creative interaction” across the “universalist, the individualist, and the familial.” Achievements are not separate from family or community growth (Cheney 2007: 58-59; Reynolds & Whyte 1998: 237). ‘The child’ is not just an individual identity but one continuously shaped by relationships and

contributions within the household and community (Afua 2005; Angucia 2009: 79; Cheney 2007: 58).

3.2.3. Spaces and relationships

In many ways, the context and spaces of childhood shape the possibilities available to a child navigating this phase. As conceived by UNICEF (2005) and the UNCRC, childhood should entail a safe space and family environment, fostering an "atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding" (UNGA 1989; Lee 2009: 26). This creates a unidirectional relationship where adults provide care, protection and an enabling environment, while the child is free to "grow, play and develop" (Angucia 2009: 79).

However, as discussed in the literature review, the idea of a 'normal childhood' in safe spaces like school and home assumes all children have access to such environments. In many African contexts, family circumstances dictate whether a child can engage in activities outside of these domains, such as their capacity to "combine work and school" (Abebe 2019: 11). This interdependency is central to child-adult relationships, making them reciprocal, rather than one-sided (Abebe 2019: 11; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 257). Reciprocity, though underrepresented in children's rights literature, is crucial for understanding relations in African contexts and can bridge the gap between dominant rights discourse and values like "responsibility, respect, and entitlements," especially in post-conflict reintegration (Twum-Danso 2009: 430).

Reciprocity is central to the "responsibilities of the child" in Article 31 of the ACRWC (Tisdall & Punch 2012: 257). Article 31 (OAU 1990) stipulates that *every child* has responsibilities towards their family, society, state, legally recognised communities, and the international community. These responsibilities, subject to their age and abilities, position the child not just as someone to be nurtured, but a person with accountability (OAU 1990; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 257).

This accountability is reflected in the local concept of *mpisa* from Bagandan society, a large ethnic group in central Uganda, which refers to customs and proper conduct in child-adult relations. Kilbride and Kilbride (1990: 89) explain that *mpisa* emphasises obedience to authority, requiring children to refrain from interrupting adult conversations, greet others properly, and fulfil social expectations. *Mpisa* thus illustrates the complex interdependencies between children and adults, portraying children as integral members of a broader social identity (Cheney 2007: 59).

Viewing children solely through their rights can conflict with how societies engage with them. Cheney (2007: 60), recounts that Virginia Ochwo, a trainer in the Ugandan Child Rights NGO

Network (UCRNN) in Kampala, noted that many local languages lack a term for 'rights.' The closest term she could link to rights was one from the local Lugandan language, "*ddembe,*" which loosely translates to "you are free to do what you want," clashing with values of responsibility, reciprocity and accountability. As will be further explored in Chapter 6, fieldwork conducted in northern Uganda revealed similar tensions surrounding the concept of 'rights' in Acholi culture. The local Luo term *twero* conveys a meaning that conflates rights with possessing unchecked authority, highlighting the challenges of aligning external rights-based frameworks with local understandings of responsibility and social obligation. Against this backdrop, Cheney (2007: 60) suggests a need to balance seeing children as both rights bearers and persons imbued with responsibilities.

This brings one to ask: how do children in these interdependent relationships transition to adulthood? The answer is through various rites and practices, shaped by social and biological factors (Lee 2009: 14; Maina 2012: 93). According to Maina (2012: 92-93), adulthood in traditional African societies was historically reserved for men with social status and wealth, while others remained "perpetual minors," irrespective of age. Societies addressed this through rites and rituals to elevate youth (Maina 2012: 13, 93). Therefore, adult spaces and roles are socially constructed, earned, and ritualised statuses that connect individuals to their community, reflecting negotiations of "positions of power, authority and social worth" (Christiansen *et al*. 2006: 12; Maina 2012: 92-93).

3.2.4. Children as outsiders in politics

While there is no singular construction of childhood, the conceptual tug-of-war often gets overshadowed when concerns about children's security elevate the image of the 'ideal child' above all others. This "iconographic symbol of what is to be protected" (Podder 2011: 144) has carved out a 'kindred space' for children in international politics, subjecting them to "sympathetic interventions" (Mastey 2017: 39) under a "moral project of childhood" (Cook 2017: 4-5). This project rooted in "varied efforts over time by various parties" to define and control childhood, shapes what is deemed appropriate or inappropriate for children (Cook 2017: 4-5). Therefore, when children's lived realities challenge legal norms, the resulting tensions expose contradictions in defining right and wrong (Abebe 2019: 3-4).

The UNCRC (UNGA 1989) embodies child rights through the three P's: protection, provision, and participation, guided by the principle of "devotion to the best interest of the child," which is both ambiguous and culturally shaped (Åkerström 2014: 50-52). Often, these 'best interests' are influenced by stereotypes and norms unpacked in the literature review. Moreover, pursuing these interests centres on protecting children from perceived worst-case scenarios, situating childhood in a "peculiar

political space" outside of politics (Cohen 2005: 221; Bosco 2010: 384). Reflections from the field in northern Uganda will reveal the practical manifestations of these assumptions and highlight the conflict between these frameworks and the lived realities of returnees post-conflict. Failing to acknowledge the changed realities of both returnees and their communities becomes central, as these factors critically inform how returnees are perceived and treated upon their return, while also revealing how childhood itself has evolved as a consequence of the war and subsequent interventions.

The shift from interstate to civil wars has brought new responses, with impacts often involving children. Childhood, once seen as innocent and apolitical, has become a new battleground (Angucia 2009: 80). Children are now "pawns of conflict," proving Clausewitz's view that "war is politics by other means" still relevant today (Angucia 2009: 82). Yet, apolitical stances persist, viewing children in spaces "outside of childhood" as a "moral affront and social crisis" (Bosco 2010: 384; Hart 2006: 220; Rosen 2007: 298). Consequently, defining childhood as a "period of happiness and innocence" excludes those whose experiences do not fit this ideal, rendering children in political spaces as "unchild-like" (Cheney 2007: 17; James 1993: 29).

3.3. Child Soldier – Victim or Perpetrator?

Regarding the conceptualisation of the child above, the concept of a child soldier contradicts notions of childhood innocence, protection, and apolitical roles, challenging classifications of age, competencies, spaces and relationships. Following Graça Machel's United Nations (UN) Study on the "Impact of Armed Conflict on Children" in 1996, the issue of child soldiers gained prominence within frameworks of children's rights, humanitarian law, and the UNCRC (Lee 2009: 6-7). The UNCRC's legal stance against underage recruitment reflects a broader normative backlash, portraying the use of children in war as morally unacceptable (Lee 2009: 3-4, 7). According to Child Soldiers International, there is no justification for using children to fight adult wars (Keairns 2003: 2).

The current 'child soldier crisis' did not arise from a new phenomenon but reflects shifting perceptions of its morality and legitimacy due to historical, political, economic, and social developments (Lee 2009: 3-4; Rosen 2007: 304; Ryan 2012: 4). During World War I, underage soldiers were celebrated as brave young men, with slogans like "only a boy but a hero" and "o so young & yet so brave" (Lee 2009: 3). After World War II, the global discourse on children's rights began criminalising child involvement in warfare (Lee 2009: 4, 7, 12). Seen as symbols of innocence, children are often pigeonholed as victims, diminishing any agency they may exhibit, even in post-

conflict settings (Beier 2015: 6; Cheney 2005: 36; Jenks 1996; Lee 2009: 12; Schwartzman 2001: 28).

3.3.1. Straight-18 position and legal prescriptions

The shift described above is rooted in policies that assume the "universalised and naturalised vulnerability of under-18s" (McMullin 2011: 751). The straight-18 position stipulates that due to childhood being viewed as a "period of innocence, dependency and immaturity" (Lee 2009: 14), any political or military participation by a child under eighteen is unacceptable (Rosen 2007: 296). This stance disregards variations within the under-eighteen group, often "infantilising older children" involved in armed conflict (Hart 2008: 281). The aversion to children's involvement in war, derived from the conceptual foundations of childhood, illustrates how political agendas, such as age politics, shape cultural norms (Honwana 2009: 64; Plante 2008: 31; Rosen 2007: 296-297).

3.3.2. Child soldier – 18 and below

According to the Cape Town Principles and Save the Children's "Child Soldiers: Care and Protection of Children in Emergencies" field guide, a child soldier is "any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity" (cited in Lorey 2001: 3; Lee 2009: 3). This definition includes not only those carrying arms but also children serving as cooks, messengers, porters, wives or used for other sexual purposes (Brett & McCallin 1996: 17; UNICEF 1997: 8). As a result, advocacy now favours the term "children associated with armed groups," (CAAGs) to reflect the diverse roles they undertake beyond combat (Wessels 1999: 514). Although often used interchangeably, CAAGs emphasise the broader spectrum of children's involvement compared to the narrower focus on combatants.

Gates (2011: 31) further highlights that children's participation occurs within armed groups that systematically and strategically use violence in various ways. This violence, either physical or emotional, shapes their experiences and socialisation, thereby complicating reintegration after war. Instead of classrooms, these children develop in "war rooms," where new norms disrupt any smooth return to "normality" (Mastey 2017: 45).

3.3.3. Murphy's model of child recruitment

The various ways children enter into child soldiering are clarified through Murphy's detailed analysis of four types of recruitment (Angucia 2014: 357-358; Murphy 2003). First, the *coerced youth model* involves violent coercion, with children forcibly conscripted (Murphy 2003: 64). Second, the *revolutionary youth model* depicts children as "revolutionary ideologists," motivated by a desire to

change their society (Murphy 2003: 64). Third, the *delinquent youth model* involves street children seeking military involvement to escape their circumstances, often exploiting the "spoils" of conflict (Murphy 2003: 64). Finally, the *youth clientelism model* highlights children who serve commanders in exchange for protection, managing dependency through their agency (Murphy 2003: 65). Despite these distinctions, all are still grouped under the same "child soldiering" label (Lee 2009: 8).

3.3.4. Child *or* Soldier

The term "child soldier" is highly contested as it conflates two opposing identities: a vulnerable child and a skilled adult soldier (Angucia 2014: 364). Moreover, it merges the notion of 'victim' with that of 'perpetrator.' Child soldiers neither fit traditional views of a child nor the typical identity of a soldier capable of making life-and-death decisions (Weyns 2012: 547). Honwana (2008: 10) describes these children as occupying an unsanctioned position that places them outside the conventional realms of both childhood and adulthood.

This complexity is heightened by additional labels accompanying the "child soldier" in northern Uganda. Chrobok and Akutu (2008: 12) emphasise the nuanced distinctions—such as child vs. rebel and victim vs. perpetrator—embedded in these terms. The "child soldier" label aligns with the straight-18 standard, categorizing those under eighteen as children. Once past eighteen, they are more likely classified as "rebels" (Huttunen 2010: 29). "Rebel" implies a political agenda and rationality behind actions (Jareg 2005: 9), whereas "child soldier" suggests a lack of agency, with children viewed as exploited victims forced to commit atrocities on behalf of others (Jareg 2005: 9). This perceived lack of agency aligns with the "innocent victims discourse" prevalent in NGO rehabilitation (Huttunen 2010: 29).

Another distinction is the use of "abductor" to describe LRA members (Chrobok & Akutu 2008: 12), differentiating fighters from those abducted and shaping who is seen as victim or perpetrator. Interestingly, "soldier" is reserved for government combatants, not LRA fighters (Chrobok & Akutu 2008: 5; Huttunen 2010: 29). Thus, the label "child soldier" for LRA abductees not only distinguishes them by age, innocence, and culpability but also underscores who is deemed a victim. Calling them "child soldiers" and not rebels conceptually and morally separates these children from their actions in the bush.

3.3.5. The child soldier as a deviation from the norm

International law frames child soldiers as deviant products of adult abuse, portraying them as powerless victims of dependency and exploitation (Rosen 2007: 297; McMullin 2011: 751). These

themes feed into humanitarian narratives that emphasise Murphy's "coerced youth model," overshadowing any depiction of competence, resilience, or agency (Murphy 2003: 64; Rosen 2007: 298). Children are viewed through a lens of emotional and rational deficiency (Hart 2008: 281; Lee 2009: 9), perceived as acting on belief and senses because they "do not know, understand, judge, or decide" (Rosen 2007: 299). This narrative casts child soldiers as dangerous, raising fears that they could become "sleeper agents ready to be activated into violence at the flip of a switch" (Machel cited in McMullin 2011: 752; Maina 2012: 130; McMullin 2011: 760; Verma 2012: 443).

Moreover, the challenges for former child soldiers (FCS) do not end once the guns are laid down. Upon returning, they encounter strong protection-first efforts aimed at restoring an "ideal childhood" (McMullin 2011: 752; Verma 2012: 446), which simply replaces one extreme with another, ignoring the complexities in between. This binary view of child soldiers as either innocent victims or senseless perpetrators fails to capture the varied realities of abductees, especially the circumstances of their return. Gender is a crucial factor here, as former child soldiers' experiences and their reception by families and communities differ significantly based on gender (Eleke 2006: 1). Understanding these distinctions is key to grasping the full scope of the 'child soldier experience' and the varied implications of this label depending on the individual.

3.3.6. Child Mothers and the Children Born of War

While young girls under 18 giving birth is not unique to conflict, the implications are shaped by the specific context and culture. Mukasa (2017: 355) defines child mothers broadly as "girls who give birth before the legally accepted age of 18," but distinguishes war-associated child mothers—also termed "forced mothers" or "young mothers"—as those "forced into marriage, raped, and sexually violated by men in the armed forces." This category is further divided into three groups: those abducted and returning with "pregnancies of LRA forces," those returning with children, and those not abducted but raped or sexually exploited by LRA rebels, resulting in pregnancy (Mukasa 2017: 355). The outcome in each case is children born from war circumstances, known as children born of war (CBOW). Alongside child mothers as a distinct group of former child soldiers, CBOW are now recognised by the UN Security Council as a vulnerable group requiring stronger normative protection frameworks (Oliviera & Baines 2020: 440).

The victimhood of CBOW is tied to the circumstances of their birth and shaped by perceptions of the "victimization of their mothers and the acts perpetrated by their fathers" (Oliviera & Baines 2020: 440). This framing influences the dynamics between mother, father, and child. The language used by Oliviera and Baines (2020) emphasises victim and perpetrator, aligning perceptions with principles

of protection, vulnerability, and innocence for both the mothers and their children. The fathers, who may also have been abducted children elevated within the LRA ranks, complicate these narratives, as they straddle the categories of both child and rebel. This is further complicated by cultural norms that a man's status is tied to being "formally married" and becoming a father, which confers social standing, especially as his family network grows (Suarez & Baines 2022: 16). Thus, the realities of marriage, 'rape,' and childbearing in the bush add layers of complexity to the identity of 'child soldier' and create tension with community perceptions when reintegrating child mothers, their children, and the fathers.

Identity in a post-conflict context shapes the nature of assistance former child soldiers need, particularly from a humanitarian perspective, while revealing the disconnect between these identities and the reality of their return. This disconnect highlights how the child soldier experience not only contradicts normative and legal ideals of childhood but also disrupts the norms, values, and cultural practices surrounding social life and identity in a communal context. Mukasa (2017: 363) discusses how communities view child mothers and their children upon return, emphasising that gender expectations shape their reception. Because purity is considered a "virtue of marriage" (Mukasa 2017: 362), female child soldiers returning with children, or as "rebel wives" to commanders or soldiers, are seen as violating traditional Acholi customs around marriage and bride wealth. This perceived illegitimacy of "bush relationships" disrupts kinship and lineage, making identity and belonging crucial to the post-conflict experiences of both child mothers and their children (Mukasa 2017: 364).

Children born to female child soldiers and their bush husbands face a unique identity crisis, often excluded from their father's clan and stripped of support, property rights, and paternal identity. This is evidenced by being given a "maternal name" instead of their father's, further distancing them from the paternal family (Mukasa 2017: 362). This exclusion is linked to the stigma of "bush relationships," seen as illegitimate, despite some returnees stating otherwise. Both mothers and children are viewed as "cursed," bearing the "shame of blood and death in the war" (Mukasa 2017: 364; Apio 2007), and labelled as "damaged goods," unsuitable for new marriages (Mukasa 2017: 364; Apio 2007). Although some receive support from the mother's family, the disconnect from the father's side leaves child mothers and their children in a vulnerable position regarding long-term socio-economic security (Mukasa 2017: 364).

This scenario highlights the complexity of how returnees and communities must navigate new social terrains, as the conflict disrupted natural societal progress and identity formation. Thus, the impact goes beyond a mere violation of childhood ideals, permeating relationships at all levels of society.

p'Bitek (1986: 19-20; Baines & Gauvin 2014: 286) emphasises the relational nature of identity and belonging in Acholi society, where individuals are "human by their connections to others," and humanity is defined by responsibility, not freedom (*ibid* 1986: 68). This ties to the Acholi concept of *ano adana*—a "real human being" who understands their duties and embodies Acholi morality and sociality (Apoko 1967: 49). Similar to the ACRWC's emphasis on the rights and duties of the child, Acholi personhood hinges on the idea that "individuals do not exist within themselves, without their relations and responsibilities to others" (Baines & Gauvin 2014: 286). For child mothers and CBOW, their identities and reception are shaped by these values of personhood and belonging. Thus, the return of child soldiers not only clashes with the constructs of child vs. soldier but also unsettles norms around motherhood and marriage, which conflict with typical normative 'ideals' of childhood.

Additionally, the realities of child mothers, CBOW, and male returnees require recognition of the roles, responsibilities, and challenges they face as actors in a post-conflict environment. While children have long been relegated to spaces governed by security practices, this narrative is slowly evolving (Beier 2015: 10).

3.4. Child Agency – A Fundamental Development or a Pipe-Dream?

As Lee (2009: 24) notes, war compels people to "constantly negotiate, adapt and strategise their options and relationships, however difficult their circumstances might be." Yet, when it comes to children, their capacity to negotiate and adapt is downplayed to fit a protection narrative (Beier 2015: 4). Although academia increasingly recognises the child as an actor, it often stops at providing "evidence of agency" among "at-risk children" (Abebe 2019: 12; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 367, 414; Robson *et al.* 2007: 138). More attention is needed to understand the nature of their agency, its manifestations, and how different contexts shape it (Abebe 2019: 6; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 423; Durham 2011; Holloway *et al*. 2019: 459; Watson 2006: 243). While it is crucial to engage with these meanings as they are understood in the literature, as will be explored in this section, the practical side of these concepts is equally significant. Through fieldwork conducted in northern Uganda, it became clear that the agency of children—both those of today and the generations shaped by the war—was not merely theoretical but actively demonstrated in their interactions. This nuanced understanding of child agency, particularly among those abducted, born in the bush, or raised at home, will be given due recognition in later chapters, specifically chapters five through seven, where these practical realities are explored in depth.

3.4.1. Agency and what it means to be an agent

Due to developments in academia and practice, children have gained recognition as competent social actors with a right to be involved in decisions about their lives (Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 365; Fernandez 2011: 487; Holloway *et al*. 2019: 459). However, being an actor does not equate to having agency. Mayall (2002: 21) differentiates the terms: an actor is “someone who does something arising from a subjective wish,” while an agent is “someone who does something in relation to others” (Abebe 2019: 6). Agency is relational, involving negotiations with social and cultural constraints and processes, while actions of the actor are performative (Abebe 2019: 6; Asad 2000: 35; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 255). A social agent’s actions bear an impact not only on their own life but also on the lives of others (Åkerström 2014: 40). Therefore, understanding the socio-cultural context is as crucial as identifying the agent and the nature of their actions (James 2009: 41).

Taking the conceptual classification further, Ansell and van Blerk (2007) and Panelli *et al*. (2007) stress that agency involves both thinking and doing. Along this line, Asad (2000: 29) and Moncrieffe (2009: 4) define agency as the capacity to act consciously and make purposive choices in navigating one’s environment. Agency encompasses capacities and competencies that enable individuals to engage with contextual factors in their lives (Abebe 2019: 8; Robson *et al.* 2007: 135).

An additional factor at the basis of classifications of agency is individuality and autonomy, which are strongly regulated through normativity (Asad 2000: 30; Barandiaran *et al*. 2009: 1-2; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 366). The normativity condition stipulates that the agent informs their actions and agenda from a particular set of goals, values, and norms (Barandiaran *et al*. 2009: 1-2, 5; Christiansen & Hooker 2000: 133). Norms shape structures, as illustrated by Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory (Eickelkamp 2010: 502-503; Elder-Vass 2008: 455-456; Maina 2012: 128). Each individual’s agency—the “ability to deploy a range of causal powers in decision making”—interacts with structures defined by “rules, norms, resources…and power” (Maina 2012: 128). In their agential moment, actors can either reproduce or transform these structures. However, agents are still influenced by environmental conditions that can either enable or limit their agency (James 2009: 43; Moncrieffe 2009: 3-4; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 255).

Confronted by these conditions, agency is often linked to “positive moral goals” like “resilience, resourcefulness, and constructive action” (Bordonaro 2012: 422; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 366-367; Jeffrey 2012: 246). Consequently, agency is viewed as inherently good, while its absence is seen as negative, complicating how ambiguous actions “go against the grain” (Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 367; Gigengack 2008: 205).

3.4.2. Ambiguous agency

Ambiguous agency is a term used to signify the nature of agency employed by children in contexts that defy normative moral and social ideals of childhood (Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 366). Such children are often labelled at risk, true victims, unchild-like, or out of place, existing in a liminal "in-between social space between childhood and adulthood" (Abebe 2019: 7; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 368; Durham 2000: 116). This agency contradicts global childhood norms and is seen as an obstacle by NGOs and state actors in their interventions (Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 366; Holloway *et al.* 2019: 462).

Designing policies and interventions in response to "ambiguous agency" is a "delicate activity" (Edmonds 2019: 204). Concealment and correction are typically employed to restore children's behaviour to a morally acceptable state (Bordonaro 2012: 423; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 368). Children's agency must be of the "right kind" to be praised and meet social and behavioural standards in programmes (Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 368; Durham 2008: 151 - 152). Only actions meeting these moral standards are considered "unconstrained agency" (Bordonaro 2012: 422; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 370; Holloway *et al.* 2019: 462). Agency that deviates from these socio-cultural ideals is labelled problematic, or seen as an indication of being "incapable of agency" (Edmonds 2019: 203). Such classifications reveal not just judgement, but also the potential theoretical distance that can take place between external cultural preferences and local understandings of agency (Edmonds 2019: 203).

3.4.3. Quantitative ideas of agency

An added layer in this moral tug-of-war is the ethical conundrum of recognising agency without undermining vulnerability, support, and protection. To address child agency without creating this conundrum, "quantitative ideas of agency" have emerged (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin 2007; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 369; Durham 2008: 152; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 255-256). Even children in similar contexts can display varied manifestations of agency. Thus, agency is fluid, cultivated along a continuum through continuous engagements with material conditions, norms and values (Abebe 2019: 8-9; Moncrieffe 2009: 6-7). Positive wartime agency – resilience, resourcefulness, and resistance – is seen as a natural response to restrictive circumstances (Bordonaro 2012: 422). From this lens, child agency in these contexts is categorised under tactical, thick and thin labels, emphasising its limitations.

3.4.3.1. Tactical agency

These limited classifications revolve around influence, position, autonomy, and power, which shape tactical agency and distinguish it from strategy. De Certeau (1984: xix) defines strategy as the "calculation or manipulation of force-relationships, which requires a defined physical and social space, where the actor has autonomy to generate relationships." In contrast, a tactic, through a calculated action, is carried out in a "space of the other," where the actor lacks autonomy (de Certeau 1984: 37; Honwana 2009: 65). Therefore, tactical agency deals with one's immediate circumstances, seizing available opportunities, and relying on chance (Abebe 2019: 8; Honwana 2009: 63, 66; Langevang & Gough 2009: 752). It is the "art of the weak" and "agency of victims," lacking an independent power base or locus to act autonomously (Honwana 2009: 66; Utas 2005: 403).

3.4.3.2. Thick and thin agency

To understand how constraints shape child agency, Klocker (2007) introduces "thick and thin agency." Thick agency involves a "latitude to act within a broad range of options," while thin agency pertains to everyday actions made in "highly restrictive contexts," with limited choices (Klocker 2007: 85), Abebe 2019: 6; Tisdall & Punch 2012: 255). Tisdall & Punch (2012: 256) explain that by constraints in childhood environments and the "spatial limits of their action spaces," children may have thick agency locally but experience thin agency at macro and policy levels. Hence, thick and thin agency are not mutually exclusive, just as a person can be both dependent and independent in different circumstances.

3.4.3.3. Circumscribed Actorship

Providing a bridge between thick and thin agency, circumscribed actorship – a concept used to "reimagine child soldiers in international law" – suggests that circumscribed actors exercise discretion in navigating and mediating "constraints around them" (Drumbl 2012: 98; Derluyn *et al.* 2015: 4). Although their abilities are "delimited, bounded and confined" by their environment, circumscribed actors are not "flattened." As Drumbl (2012) explains:

> Affected by conflict, they also affect others. Threatened and harmed, they may, in turn, threaten and harm others (Drumbl 2012: 98).

Conceptually, this framing challenges the victim-perpetrator binary often upheld in children's rights law concerning child soldiers' abduction (Derluyn *et al.* 2012: 4), highlighting the tension when understandings of agency contradict this narrative.

3.4.4. Assumptions pertaining to child agency

Like the concepts of child and child soldier, assumptions about child agency have been subject to intense questioning. The first is the view of child agency as a universal condition of an autonomous agent (Abebe 2019: 5). This assumption ties notions of autonomous agency and the responsible liberal citizen to "the child" (Abebe 2019: 5). Viewing agency as universally inherent implies that "behaviours and actions in the here-and-now are not good enough" (Abebe 2019: 5-6). This leads to the second assumption of incremental agency, countered by arguments that agency is multifaceted, contradictory, and context-dependent. Rather than being quantified, agency should be understood qualitatively, grounded in context (Abebe 2019: 5-6).

The third assumption - Western Individualism – overlooks the significance of community by portraying agency as "tied to an independent selfhood" (Abebe 2019: 5), presenting the individual as separate from, yet still capable of resisting structure. The individual-versus-community debate calls for contextualized understandings that account for cultural differences and lived realities. In cultures where agency is interconnected, with community valued over the self, a reconceptualisation is necessary (Abebe 2019: 5).

3.4.5. Interdependent agency

Interdependent agency considers the communal aspects of participation, framing child-adult relationships through interdependencies, reciprocity, societal obligations, mutual needs, and familial care (Abebe 2019: 10-11; Åkerström 2014: 54-55). In many African societies child agency involves the capacity to "attract and support dependents" (Abebe 2019: 10), developed through creating interdependent support networks within an ethics of care and meeting familial expectations over time (Abebe 2019: 11; Åkerström 2014: 54-55; Crockburn 2007; Durham 2011). It goes beyond individual competence, recognising agency as a "strategy of collective existence through which social reproduction is sustained" (Abebe 2019: 11).

Viewing agency through interdependency shifts the focus from individual actions to communal entanglement within the "web of human relationships" and their governing norms. Aligning with this view, Ian Burkitt (2016: 322) reconceptualises agency as relational rather than individual, challenging the Western view of agents as autonomous, independent, and reflexive. He argues that agency emerges from manifold social relations, where individuals act as "interactants," simultaneously influencing and being influenced by others, with capacities for action practised solely through joint efforts and responsive interaction (Burkitt 2016: 322). Reflexivity, far from being isolated, is

embedded in the relational fabric of emotional connections, shaped dialogically through bonds like trust, attachment, and ambivalence (Burkitt 2016: 325, 335).

Rather than confronting social structures as isolated actors, individuals are always embedded in relational networks, such as those of family, work, and peer relationships, which shape their actions and choices (Burkitt 2016: 331). Critiquing perspectives that treat "structure" and "agency" as distinct entities, Burkitt argues that social relationships do not merely constrain or enable agency but constitute its very form and structure (Burkitt 2016: 336). Through this relational ontology, agency is “always already co-authored,” fostering a deeply dialogical and polyphonic dynamic, whereby individuals remain both active and passive, acting with a mix of power and vulnerability in their navigation of the wider relational fabric in which they live (Burkitt 2016: 335 - 336)

In the context of wartime violence and post-conflict environments, Baines (2015: 1–2) argues that agency in such spaces is grounded in “actions, words or gestures that contest one’s status as a person or a nonperson.” Here, agency is closely linked to responsibility, which in Acholi culture is socially diffuse, reflecting collective rather than purely individual obligations. This view challenges the applicability of individualist agency frameworks to post-conflict settings. Baines (2015: 2) further highlights how transitional justice mechanisms often “reiterate a victim-perpetrator binary,” framing the “ideal victim” as passive and the perpetrator as having “unbounded agency that must be disciplined” (ibid 2015: 2). This binary oversimplifies the complexities of agency, reducing it to a tool for framing objectives and roles within these processes. Understanding situated knowledge and cultural perspectives is thereby essential to grasp the dynamics of post-conflict actions and relationships.

3.4.6. Situated Agency – Recognising the importance of context

Understanding agency requires acknowledging how an agent’s context can “open or foreclose possibilities for meeting their current and future needs” (Holloway *et al*. 2019: 463). Holloway *et al*. (2019: 464) argue that personal agency is “always constrained within a larger field of social forces and power relations.” Context is thus more than a backdrop – it shapes agency itself. When external normative assumptions guide intervention design, programmes risk becoming “out-dated” and misaligned with local realities, neglecting the “locally perceived and felt impact for children” and potentially causing harm (Edmonds 2019: 204 – 205).

Edmonds (2019: 205) uses this argument to critique the universal benchmark of “children’s best interests” in programme design. It is essential to ask: whose perspectives shape these best interests? Guay and Rudnick (2017: 18, cited in Edmonds 2019: 201) contend that the “localisation of problems

and solutions created to address them" should be "explicitly informed by, if not actually derived from, local systems of practice and meaning." Recognising context brings us closer to understanding how post-conflict programmes can either promote or constrain agency (Abebe 2019: 12) and reveals spaces where 'everyday agency' can be harnessed as part of reintegration.

3.5. Reintegration– Fit for its Purpose or Lacking in Depth?

Reintegration is a central element of this study's case analysis, positioned within the broader scope of post-conflict peacebuilding and following Disarmament and Demobilisation initiatives led by the UN (UN 2018). The purpose of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) is to secure peace and prevent a relapse into conflict (Muggah 2009: 1). The Paris Principles and former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan emphasise that reintegration is a long-term process requiring an open timeframe and sustained commitment from multiple actors, both internal and external. A key objective is to integrate reintegration efforts into a country's broader development, building local and national capacities on a continuous, long-term basis (Mels *et al*. 2012: 16; Porto *et al*. 2007: 18; UNGA 2005). While this study explores whether reintegration efforts are fit for purpose or lacking in depth, a full unpacking of these dynamics will be addressed in chapter seven through findings drawn from the field, providing a more conclusive assessment based on the lived realities of those affected.

3.5.1. Three stages of reintegration

As a mandate-driven process, reintegration is typically conducted as a "set of sequential steps," based on the perceived needs of a "quantitative caseload of children that are released through a formal process" (GCRCS 2020: 5). It addresses economic, psychological and social dimensions of children's return and follows three stages. The first is the *reinsertion phase,* where FCS spend up to 48 hours at a reception centre/demobilisation site to receive once-off packages and, if possible, be reunited with family (Lorey 2001: 24-25). The second stage occurs at *interim care centres* where daily routines and responsibilities are re-established (Lorey 2001: 25), including needs assessments, education, health care, psychosocial support, vocational training, and other services to ease the transition 'home' (Angucia 2009: 90; Cheney 2007: 28; Lorey 2001: 26-27; Mels *et al*. 2012: 17; Özerdem & Podder 2011b: 321; Plante 2008: 23; UNDPKO 1999: 5-15). The final stage is *long-term reintegration* where "family reunification and re-establishment of emotional bonds" are vital for "effective social reintegration" (Lorey 2001: 30). Reintegration is thus an "inherently communal process of creating social acceptance and reconciliation through social justice" (Machel 1996: 73). However, despite advocacy for children to re-enter meaningful roles, not all receive acceptance or identify with these

post-war roles (Lorey 2001: 31; Mels *et al.* 2012: 17). Furthermore, what constitutes "meaningful roles and identities" remains vague, complicating assessment of this goal (Newman 2014: 358).

3.5.2. Return to a "normal childhood" – Deficits Approach

A core aim of reintegration programmes is to transform FCS back into children and, ultimately, citizens (Muggah & Baaré 2009: 229; Porto *et al.* 2007: 20). This process is driven by traditional conceptions of 'normal childhood,' viewing rehabilitation as a means to restore the child's pre-conflict state. Approaching reintegration as a way to "reproduce him/her according to a specific norm," perpetuates binary oppositions – "childhood/adulthood, innocent/culpable, victim/perpetrator, passive/active" – commonly upheld by NGOs (Huttunen 2010: 37). Such oversimplification leaves little room for alternative interpretations, minimising the profound changes child soldiers have undergone and the challenges they face upon return (Huttunen 2010: 37; Porto *et al.* 2007: 20).

These approaches often overlook the realities of the environments to which children return. Rather than safe, welcoming communities, returnees often face socially and economically deteriorated settings, still grappling with the conflict's aftermath (Castelli *et al.* 2005: 1). As Chrobok and Akutu note, a returning child in a community already in crisis is an "an extra child that needs to be fed, clothed and sent to school" (2008: 25). Thus, the child soldier crisis extends beyond the abductees; it is a "crisis of social reproduction" that permeates all levels of society. Efforts to 'restore normality' must consider the new realities created by decades of conflict.

Rehabilitation and reintegration, therefore, require more than mere reunification; they demand a broader understanding of long-term social repair. Baines and Gauvin (2014: 282 – 283) emphasise that children's return is a "day-to-day processual negotiation of relationships" and involves not just physical displacement but also dislocation from "where they socially 'belong.'" Belonging and re-establishing social networks become the new end goals of reintegration, extending beyond standard reunification.

Short-term, "one-size-fits-all" DDR priorities, obscure the holistic, contextual, and long-term processes needed for genuine reintegration, which goes beyond a "quick return to the 'normality' and childhood lost to war" (Douglas *et al.* 2004: 65; Lee 2009: 26; Porto *et al.* 2007: 20-24; Verma 2012: 444). Local norms, values, and informal practices, which accurately capture the agency and roles of children in everyday contexts, must be incorporated to fully understand reintegration in a post-conflict context.

3.5.3. Child Reintegration and Reconciliation

Child reintegration, as defined by the Paris Principles under Article 2.8 is

> the process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation (UNICEF 2007; GCRCS 2020b: 9; War Child 2019: 15).

The focus on reunification and reconciliation between returnees, families and communities highlights the significance of informal interactions during reintegration. Acceptance and belonging are key, as reunification alone does not ensure successful reintegration. Thus, reconciliation depends on the context, norms and perceptions shaping these interactions. Lederach (1997) captures this, describing reconciliation as both a "perspective and a place;" a "focus and a locus." Recognising community processes where the reintegration of FCS occurs underscores the need to include reconciliation as a component of DDR (Derluyn *et al.* 2013: 877).

3.5.3.1. Stigmatic Shaming vs. Reintegrative Shaming

Perceptions of former child soldiers permeate all aspects of their return, shaping reintegration programmes, labelling, and community reception. A prominent challenge in this post-conflict environment is shaming and stigmatisation. Stigma, according to Pescosolido and Martin (2015: 91), is the "mark, condition or status that is subject to devaluation," whilst stigmatisation is the "social process" through which this mark "affects the lives of all those touched by it" (*ibid*: 91). This social process is crucial in understanding community perceptions of the return and reintegration of FCS. As Newman (2014: 378) notes, "rehabilitation and reintegration can only work if the communities are willing to accept and value returnees."

While stigmatisation brings with it a negative connotation, Braithwaite (1989: 100) distinguishes between "stigmatic shaming" and "reintegrative shaming." The former excludes and degrades, while the latter "communicates shame" with the goal to "reintegrate them back into society" (Braithwaite 1989: 100; McDonald & Kerali 2020: 783). Stigma is embedded within the "local worlds, moral modes and relational networks" of society (Mcdonald & Kerali 2020: 769) and, when framed as reintegrative shaming, can function as a tool for re-socialising individuals after wrongdoing (McDonald & Kerali 2020: 768 – 769).

Drawing on Kleinman's (1998) framework, McDonald and Kerali (2020: 767) argue for embedding understandings of stigmatisation within the "moral experience of post-war social suffering and repair." Moral experience here refers to the "inter-subjective flow of 'practices, negotiations' and contestations' among those 'whom we are connected" (Kleinman 1998: 358 – 359). Stigmatisation

thus becomes part of these "everyday arrangements," rooted in social and cultural practices that seek to "(re)construct and (re)imagine a sense of normality" (McDonald & Kerali 2020: 767). It arises in response to a "perceived gap between the virtual social identity and the actual social identity," where the former aligns with idealised norms and the latter represents the individual's real attributes (Goffman 1963: 12; McDonald & Kerali 2020: 769). This begs the question: What does normality look like within the Acholi context in northern Uganda?

McDonald and Kerali (2020: 774 – 775) explore this question using insights from a group discussion in July of 2018. Here normality was painted as peaceful co-existence in the community – *bedo maber*; good relations with others in society – *ngeyo bedo I kin dano*; a lack of societal issues with other members of the community – *pe ki ayella mo ki keken*; and, crucially, the ability to live well with others – *kwo maber*. This understanding underscores the importance of relationships and communal responsibilities, which are complicated by a history of violent conflict.

In a post-conflict context, stigmatisation reflects the complexity of social navigation, where people redefine themselves and their relationships in a landscape marked by conflict narratives. Beyond identity, this process serves as a form of coping, regaining control, and "social accountability" (McDonald & Kerali 2020: 772 – 773).

Acknowledging stigmatisation and shaming within reintegration highlights how perceptions influence the success of reunification between returnees and their communities. While the dominant reintegration narrative frames returnees as innocent children, this may not align with community views due to crimes they may have committed whilst in the bush. Stigmatisation introduces accountability, implying that returnees – though perceived as victims – bear some responsibility for their actions in the bush, contradicting dominant portrayals of them as passive, innocent victims (Huttunen 2010: 30). Thus, reintegration must incorporate everyday reconciliation, community norms, and local perceptions to address these nuances in practice.

3.5.3.2. Everyday Reconciliation

After conflict social structures become increasingly complex. Understanding how informal relationship networks in the everyday sphere function is crucial for facilitating social order, integration, and reconciliation for returnees and their communities. Collins & Pancoast (1976: 28 – 29) describe these networks as "vital bridges" between "the individual and their environment."

The everyday, according to Audra Mitchell, encompasses a

> Set of experiences, practices and interpretations through which people engage with the daily challenges of occupying, preserving, altering and sustaining the plural worlds that they occupy (Mitchell 2011: 1624; Kent 2018: 148).

Mitchell frames these practices through "worldbuilding," oriented towards managing daily challenges, including interactions among family, friends, and community members (Mitchell 2011: 1624 – 1625). In conflict settings, Mitchell (2011: 1641 – 1642) refers to these as "threatworks," defined as "practices, institutions and customs" used by actors to "exchange, acknowledge, evade, manoeuvre their context and otherwise resist perceived threats to their existence." These acts, emerging within the everyday informal sphere, are attempts by actors to regain control.

De Certeau (1984: xi) sees these practices as "tactics" that individuals use to "carve out spaces for themselves," amidst institutions of power. His distinction between tactics and strategies is key to understanding everyday actions. Strategies are "concerted actions towards desired goals," while tactics are subtle, small and adaptable to shifting contexts (de Certeau 1984: 37). Strategies belong to the "domain of the powerful," whereas tactics are the "art of the less powerful." (de Certeau 1984: 37)

The everyday is framed within academia as both a "site of resistance, agency, transcendence and the enhancement of life," and a space "vulnerable to control, domination and manipulation by powerful external actors, both domestic and international" (Mitchell 2011: 1630 – 1632; Kent 2018: 150). Kent (2018: 147) views it as a place where the limited power "makes do" with available resources, tactics and possibilities. Although power dynamics can be manipulated, actors still capitalise on what is at hand to exert some "degree of control" over their circumstances.

The complexity of reintegration and everyday reconciliation in post-conflict settings is illustrated by Theidon's (2006) concept of "intimate enemies," where people who have committed violence must learn to coexist. This results in a scenario where "everyday people are forced to live in anything but everyday environments" (Baines 2010: 412; Theidon 2006: 456). In the context of the LRA conflict, this concept is critical to understanding micro-level interactions in communities deeply affected by mass violence. Baines (2010: 409 – 411) emphasises that analysing informal, socio-cultural processes outside the "purview of the state" reveals how local cosmologies are used during a "moral crisis" to rebuild relationships on personal and spiritual levels. The Global Coalition for the Reintegration of Child Soldiers (2020b: 22) supports this by noting the need to understand pre-conflict elements that gave communities cohesion.

Ager and Metzler (2017: 68) concur with Baines (2010), calling for a focus on "adaptive processes and capacities" within the socio-ecological nesting of individuals, communities, and societies. Their multi-systems analysis approach shifts reintegration from "protective" to "pro-motive factors" that prioritise resilience, adjustment, and child "well-being" (Ager & Metzler 2017: 68). War Child's ideal reintegration model, tested in the Central African Republic, aligns with this by contrasting NGO-driven reintegration with a community-led, locally-defined approach (War Child 2019: 28). War Child advocates for a strengths-based approach, centring on community-identified capacities to "strengthen children's reintegration" (War Child 2019: 28).

Strengths-based approaches invest in existing community systems, focussing on the "resilience and capabilities of children, their families and communities." This contrasts with deficit-based models, which are driven by outsiders and address "what children lack." War Child's "Voice More" programme, used in Jordan, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq and the Central African Republic, bridges participation gaps by engaging children to identify their own needs, embedding participation within the reintegration process (War Child 2019: 32).

3.5.4. Successful Reintegration – Sustainable and Holistic for All

Reintegration, both as a process and a long-term goal for those being targeted by programmes, is increasingly framed in accordance with principles of sustainability. The Global Coalition for the Reintegration of Child Soldiers (GCRCS) highlights the Agenda for Sustainable Development as an "important entry point" to reframe child reintegration (GCRCS 2020a: 6). Sustainable reintegration aims to address shortcomings in current child reintegration programmes by integrating the SDGs, providing a "harmonised way of working" that meets the needs of affected children while reducing risks and vulnerabilities (GCRCS 2020a: 20 – 21). While reintegration services should offer "individualised support" for CAAFAG, long-term success requires embedding these programmes in the broader protective environment for children (GCRCS 2020a: 6). Preventive programming should:

> Support and enable inclusive, community-based reintegrative programming, where the child is *seen* and *served* in the context of the community into which he or she will return or settle; and assistance to the child is enmeshed into assistance for the community as a whole (GCRCS 2020a: 6).

In essence, holistic and inclusive reintegration interventions are seen as beneficial for *all* children, as they "reduce stigma and division," and promote an environment where children and youth can become "stakeholders" in their own reintegration and rehabilitation process (GCRS 2020a: 6).

3.6. Participation

Returnee participation is often overlooked in reintegration. Participation, both as a means and an end, is essential for bridging the contributions of all actors: individual, community, and external (Lund 2007: 140). While child participation is increasingly emphasised in programme design, what does it look like in practice? Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to engage and voice their views in all decisions affecting them (UNGA 1989). Similarly, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009: 5) defines participation as an "exchange between children and adults" in shaping policies, programmes, and measures relevant to their lives (Åkerström 2014: 52). These definitions provide a broad overview, but three guiding questions are crucial: *who* is participating, in *what* and for *whose* benefit? (Cornwall 2008: 269). Thus, participation can take on varied meanings across different people and contexts.

3.6.1. Typologies of Participation

Illustrating these dynamics are typologies of participation, notably Sherry R. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, Jules Pretty's (1995) typology of participation and Sarah White's (1996) typology of interests. Arnstein's (1969) ladder ranks participation based on the citizen's role in the process, focusing on the intentions of those initiating participation (Arnstein 1969, cited in Cornwall 2008: 270). The ladder moves from *citizen power* at the top, through *tokenism*, to *non-participation* at the bottom, indicating a decreasing level of power and engagement for citizens **(see Table 1).**

Citizen Control Delegated Power Partnership	Citizen Power
Consultation Informing Placation	Tokenism
Therapy Manipulation	Non Participation

Table 1

Pretty's (1995) typology shifts focus to the user of participatory approaches, categorizing participation into seven types, transitioning from 'bad' to 'good' forms **(see Table 2).** *Manipulative* and *passive participation* involve token representation where individuals are told what has been decided for them by external actors, without consultation, making participation merely a "pretence" (Pretty 1995; Cornwall 2008: 272).

Next, *participation by consultation* and *participation for material incentives* involve information-gathering or labour contributions, but without decision-making power. Consultation allows individuals to provide input, yet decision-makers are not obliged to consider it (Pretty 1995; Cornwall 2008: 272). Similarly, in *participation for material benefits,* individuals provide resources in exchange for material provisions, but have no stake in the process one's incentives cease (Pretty 1995; Cornwall 2008: 272).

Moving downward, we get to the categories of *functional participation, interactive participation* and *self-motivation*. *Functional participation* involves people participating to meet pre-determined objectives more effectively, usually after decisions are made by external agents (Cornwall 2008: 272). Shifting towards a learning process, *interactive participation* equips local groups with more control in decision-making and resource management, viewing participation as a "right" rather than a means to an end. At the highest level, *self-mobilisation* involves people initiating change independently, building external contacts, and retaining control over resources (Pretty 1995; Cornwall 2008: 272).

Type	Characteristics of each type
Manipulative participation	Participation is simply a pretence, with 'people's' representatives on official boards, but who are un-elected and have no power.
Passive participation	People participate by being told what has been decided or has already happened. It involves unilateral announcements by an administration or project management without any listening to people's responses. The information being shared belongs only to external professionals.
Participation by consultation	People participate by being consulted or by answering questions. External agents define problems and information-gathering processes, and so control analysis. Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision-making, and professionals are under no obligation to take on board people's views.
Participation for material incentives	People participate by contributing resources, for example, labour, in return for food, cash or other material incentives. Farmers may provide the fields and labour, but are involved in neither experimentation nor the process of learning. It is very common to see this 'called' participation, yet people have no stake in prolonging technologies or practices when the incentives end.
Functional participation	Participation seen by external agencies as a means to achieve project goals, especially reduced costs. People may participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project. Such involvement may be interactive and involve shared decision-making, but tends to arise only after major decisions have already been made by external agents. At worst, local people may still only be co-opted to serve external goals.
Interactive participation	People participate in joint analysis, development of action plans and formation or strengthening of local institutions. Participation is seen as a right, not just the means to achieve project goals. The process involves interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systemic and structured learning processes. As groups take control over local decisions and determine how available resources are used, so they have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
Self-mobilization	People participate by taking initiatives independently of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used. Self-mobilization can spread if government and NGOs provide an enabling framework of support. Such self-initiated mobilization may or may not challenge existing distributions of wealth and power.

Table 2

Sarah White's (1996) typology focuses on how people utilise participation based on interests rather than a hierarchy. Her four forms – nominal, instrumental, representative, and transformative – are defined by the interests of implementing agencies and those on the receiving end **(see Table 3).**

Nominal and *instrumental participation* empowers the initiators to achieve their goals, while *representative* and *transformative participation* give more power, voice, and stakes to the people (White 1996; Cornwall 2008: 273). *Transformative participation* especially aligns with developmental objectives, where individuals are empowered to "make their own decisions, work out what to do, and take action" (White 1996; Cornwall 2008: 273), making it both a means and an end in an ongoing dynamic.

Form	What 'participation' means to the implementing agency	What 'participation' means for those on the receiving end	What 'participation' is for
Nominal	Legitimation – to show they are doing something	Inclusion – to retain some access to potential benefits	Display
Instrumental	Efficiency – to limit funders' input, draw on community contributions and make projects more cost-effective	Cost – of time spent on project-related labour and other activities	As a means to achieving cost-effectiveness and local facilities
Representative	Sustainability – to avoid creating dependency	Leverage – to influence the shape the project takes and its management	To give people a voice in determining their own development
Transformative	Empowerment – to enable people to make their own decisions, work out what to do and take action	Empowerment – to be able to decide and act for themselves	Both as a means and an end, a continuing dynamic

Table 3

3.6.1.1. Capacitate

The concept of "capacitate" –meaning "participating actively for change" (Lund 2007: 134), aligns with self-mobilised and transformative participation. Here, participation includes any formal or informal action that actively contributes to change. Moreover, what empowers today may not always empower tomorrow (Lund 2007: 145). Therefore, participation and agency should be continuously reassessed to reflect the evolving continuum of agency in different contexts (Ruiz-Casares *et al.* 2017: 3-4, 6).

3.6.2. Participation, Power and Context

A key takeaway from White's typology, as well as Arnstein (1969) and Pretty (1995), is the need to understand the context of participation and the actors involved to discern the purposes and demands placed on different forms of engagement. As Cecile Jackson (1997) notes,

> Participation as praxis is, after all, rarely a seamless process; rather it constitutes a terrain of contestation, in which relations of power between different actors, each with their own 'projects,' shape and reshape the boundaries of action. While a frame might be set by outsiders, much depends

> on *who* participates and *where* their agency and interests take things (Cecile Jackson 1997; Cornwall 2008: 276).

In post-conflict reintegration, this highlights how assumptions shape how children and communities are engaged and at what stage. Thus, understanding *who participations, who is excluded,* and *who excludes themselves* is essential.

Unpacking participation reveals that mere involvement does not equate to having a voice. Voice, one of four key elements in participatory engagements, must be complemented by considerations of space, audience, and influence for genuine impact (Lund 2007; Cassidy 2012: 67). Particularly, the distinction between invited spaces and self-created spaces shifts power dynamics – where the latter allows participations to set their own agendas rather than accommodating those of others. As Gaventa and Robinson (1998) express:

> Translating voice into influence requires more than simply effective ways of capturing *what* people want to say; it involves efforts 'from above' and 'from below' (cited in Cornwall 2008: 278).

Therefore, to ensure participation is empowering, any tokenistic or superficial involvement of children should be avoided. If not voluntary, mutual exchange, participation becomes another source of manipulation (Ruiz-Casares *et al*. 2017: 4). Reflected on the "chequered history" of participation, Oakley (1995: 4) argues that participation should be situated contextually and viewed not as a technique, but as a political process accounting for complexity and diversity. This is crucial as the "participatory sphere," includes both institutional and more traditional forms of exercising voice (Cornwall 2008: 282).

The concept of space becomes relevant here, notably Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of "communities of practice," defined as "socio-culturally organised places of shared knowledge," characterised by "evolving membership." Newcomers gradually transition to expert participants through "legitimate peripheral participation," where they learn through engagement in group activities and eventually acquire "cultural knowledge" and achieve "fuller participation" as "skilled and knowledgeable actors" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 110 – 115). Participation here is linked to evolving identity and goes beyond simply internalising cultural norms (Lave and Wenger 1991: 115).

However, participation is shaped by power dynamics and structures. Holland et al. (1998: 127 - 128), emphasise that power, status and rank within everyday activities are "inextricably linked to positional identities in communities." Similarly, Hodges (1998) notes that structures promoting participation can also constrain it. Non-participation arises when individuals engage in community behaviours yet feel excluded from full identification with its practices. In this lens, non-participation is presented to

refer to a "conflict in the space between activity and identification, when there is a moment of multiplicitous identifications or identificatory possibilities" (Hodges 1998: 273). This dis-identification involves rejecting the identity linked to the practice while reconstructing a new one amidst conflict and exclusion (Hodges 1998: 273; Veale & Stavrou 2007: 277 – 278).

Recognising the influence of context, norms and spaces on participation helps us understand the identities child abductees may have adopted during conflict, compared to their original roles. This understanding is crucial for navigating participation both within formal reintegration programmes and the informal, traditional practices of a child's community post-conflict.

3.6.3. Right to Participation

Viewing the concept of participation through its various typologies and context of its manifestation is fundamental to comprehending and unpacking the nature of participation undertaken by various agents during the reintegration process, namely former child soldiers. Simply utilising the term participation as a blanket statement provides very little insight into what participation entails, especially in particular contexts with different actors. The same can be said with the other concepts mentioned in this chapter. The sheer complexity of these concepts warrants further clarification, namely clarification that accounts for the locus of their enunciation.

3.7. Conclusion – Where to From Here?

In conclusion, the key concepts of this study all trace back to how children are viewed and defined, with significant variations emerging depending on the sources of these definitions. Crucial to these views are the sources of definitions, as different conceptualisations depict contradictory standpoints. While Western frameworks often centre the individual as the basis of concepts like childhood, agency, and participation, non-Western frameworks, in contrast, decentre the individual, placing them within a relational network of family and community. This divergence, particularly between the individual versus communal focus, emerges not only in the tension between children's rights and responsibilities—as seen between the UNCRC and the ACRWC—but also in how childhood is conceived and enacted differently across contexts. The conceptual divergences between Western and non-Western perspectives have critical implications for how child soldiers are framed, how agency is understood both during and post-war, and how these shape the approaches to reintegration. Concepts are thereby tied to the norms, values, and practices of a particular space, group, and time, and should be understood as such. The insights from this chapter underscore the evolving, deeply contextual nature of these conceptualisations, which are not universal truths but reflections of the cultural, temporal, and normative contexts from which they arise.

While this conceptual framework brings these ideas into conversation, these conceptualisations still reflect an external design that can only capture a part of what takes place within a post-conflict reintegration environment. What remains missing are the bottom-up conceptualisations that emerge from the lived experiences of those directly affected. These localised understandings are essential for acknowledging the complex nature of reintegration. Conceptualisations derived from practice become more than normative constructs; they become reflections of real-life experiences. Recognising this subjectivity and diversity is the cornerstone of the methodological approach that will be undertaken in this study, as unpacked in the chapter to follow.

This chapter further reveals that frameworks constructed in academia often reinforce a notion of universal reality, overshadowing local perspectives and everyday realities. By focussing on universalised understandings, much of the discourse is a continued reiteration of a particular set of problems that have been identified throughout decades of literature, with little indication as to whether these problems are being addressed practically. Forming concepts divorced from context reinforces an 'idealised truth,' overshadowing the nuances of lived experiences on the ground. The Acholi people and returnees clearly depict how normative frameworks of childhood fail to sufficiently capture the cultural and normative diversity of their society and the complex history that shaped the lives of children, families, and communities across the continuum of time—before, during, and after the war. This local reality reveals how children's participation in communal spaces reflects nuanced agency, often overlooked by Western frameworks. While these frameworks capture elements of this agency, they frequently miss the central role of norms around childhood in shaping that agency. These local realities, as explored in chapters five through seven, provides critical insights into how these concepts are understood and practiced by those most affected by the conflict. The aim, therefore, is to move beyond assumptions of universality and instead promote an understanding that embraces contextual diversity and lived experience.

These points resonate with arguments raised in chapter two, particularly the need to challenge Western-centric frameworks that tend to universalise childhood and agency. While these frameworks hold value, solutions cannot be fully effective until they engage with the local norms, values and realities that shape the everyday lives of returnees and their communities and elevate localised socio-ecological realities to address the gaps left by universal models. This chapter sets the stage for these discussions, which will be further developed in subsequent chapters.

4. CHAPTER FOUR: Research Methodology

4.1. Introduction

The past two chapters explored the scholarly and conceptual foundations of the core concepts and subject area of the thesis, those being the ‘child,’ childhood, child soldier, child agency and reintegration. The knowledge that was acquired through this engagement with the literature reified the argument being made by the thesis that there remains a disconnect between academic suggestions and their implementation in practice and programme development. Despite decades of literature identifying recurring issues, there is little evidence that these problems are being addressed practically, with many solutions left as mere suggestions without follow-through. This highlights the lack of translation of academic knowledge into policies, practices and programmes that can effectively harness and apply these insights.

A related concern is the nature of what is being executed in practice. Reintegration programmes are often embedded in specific discourses, assumptions and normative conceptions. Both chapters spoke to the various ‘truth’s that have evolved throughout history concerning ‘the child’ and childhood and their influence on discourses about child soldiers, child agency and formal reintegration programmes. To provide a balanced perspective, non-Western and critical insights were considered alongside traditional insights. This revealed new debates on how to conceptualise these key terms and their impact on the solutions proposed for the post-conflict reintegration of FCS.

A key aspect of this critical turn in the literature is the advocacy to situate knowledge and practices within the context of their execution. Known as the ‘turn to the local,’ this shift seeks to move beyond propagating “knowledge about a place” to developing knowledge “of a place,” crucial for understanding perspectives beyond our own (Geertz 1983: 5; Edmonds 2019: 205). This call to ground research and interventions in a local cultural frame resonates with Rudnick and Boromisza-Habashi’s (2017) Local Strategies Research, which advocates localising both problems and the solutions created to address them. The goal is for knowledge and solutions to be “explicitly informed by, if not derived from, local systems of practice and meaning.” Carbaugh’s (2007) model of cultural premises[3] further supports this socio-cultural approach in relation to child agency, emphasising key components of human experience related to

> Premises of being and personhood (identities), premises of acting (communicative action), premises of relating and sociation (social relations), premises of feeling or emoting (experiencing and

[3] Cultural premises, according to Carbaugh and Boromisza-Habashi (2015: 549), can be understood to entail “formulations of shared understanding about some of the fundamental dimensions of human experience and expression.”

expressing effect) and premises of dwelling (living in a place) (Carbaugh 2007: 175 – 177; Edmonds 2019: 206).

Utilising these premises to explore child agency offers valuable insights into how children's agentic practices manifest in their daily lives (Edmonds 2019: 206). The "everyday agency" (Payne 2012) of the child, along with the interactions and norms guiding it, forms the cornerstone of this thesis' methodological and analytical endeavours.

The methodological approach of this thesis seeks to capture the authentic systems of meaning and practice within the everyday lives of children and returnees. Rather than relying on external frames of reference or normative assumptions "about a people, place or social problem," (Leighter *et al.* 2013; Payne 2012; Rudnick *et al.* 2019; Edmonds 2019: 205) this research aims to illuminate how people conceptualise and interpret 'the child,' childhood, and agency in their own context. As Edmonds (2019: 205 - 206) states, investigating theoretical underpinnings alone limits our understanding to how children respond to external ideas rather than revealing the local components of agency. The failure to recognise these cultural orientations leads to a "stagnation in moving conceptualisations of agency forward" (*ibid:* 206). Addressing local knowledge is essential to fully grasping how children exercise agency and the underlying systems that inform and animate their actions (*ibid:* 206).

Engaging solely with pre-existing academic frameworks assumes that this knowledge is sufficient for analysing a given phenomenon. While this thesis acknowledges the importance of understanding these frameworks to highlight gaps and assumptions surrounding 'the child,' childhood, child soldiers, agency and reintegration, they serve only as a background to justify the aim of this research – to formulate a new normative understanding of child agency in a post-conflict environment.

Building on the need for a localised knowledge of child agency, particularly in everyday contexts of being, this chapter outlines the methodological foundations and tools adopted to achieve the research goal. It answers the key question: "How do alternative conceptions of child agency and participation unsettle pre-existing structures and approaches towards the reintegration of children post-conflict?" Rather than examining child agency through external lenses, this study seeks to capture the genuine systems of meaning within the daily lives of children, their families and communities in northern Uganda. This chapter unpacks the methodological framework, including the adoption of an informed grounded theory approach, and explains how this approach will guide data collection and analysis. It also discusses the fieldwork conducted in northern Uganda, emphasising the ethical considerations involved.

4.2. Background to the Methodological Framework

Enabling the thesis to embed itself within these conceptual and normative debates, both within the existing literature and through the narratives that the fieldwork captures, is the adoption of a qualitative research approach that speaks to this manner of conducting research. A qualitative research approach is especially relevant within this study, as it departs from the objective to recognise and "locating the observer in the world," as well as to truly understand the nuance behind the meanings that "individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell 2007: 37; 2014: 4; Denzin & Lincoln 2005: 3). Yin (2016) regards this approach as providing a more thorough understanding behind the "human condition." In contrast to the positivistic[4] and objective approach of quantitative research, this research advocates for approaching research through the lens of the interpretivist paradigm, whereby the truth behind understanding reality is not seen as objective, but based upon the "interpretation of the knower" (Quinlan *et al.* 2015; Babbie 2011). This lends the methodological approach of this thesis to approach data collection, as well as the analysis of this data, with the intention to go beyond what is seen at face-value to really capture the feelings, experiences and interpretations that participants put forth. By unpacking and giving focus to these inner meanings, a qualitative research approach provides a platform to foster new insights into the social phenomena being studied (Flick 2019; Silverman 2016; Inyang 2018; Quinlan *et al.* 2015; Khan 2014; Kumar 2019).

The way we view the world and the impact that knowledge has beyond the academic space had a crucial role in informing the research design of this thesis. A research design, according to Ngulube (2015: 8), is a plan that a researcher employs to give greater focus to the "how, when and where" of data collection and its analysis (Gaudet &Robert 2018). The structure that a research design brings to a study is thereby a crucial element in determining the most efficient, effective and appropriate manner in which a researcher seeks to address the underlying problem and question(s) (Kumar 2019). Therefore, it becomes important that the choices we make as a researcher with how we seek to "do our research," are made transparent and are justified in relation to our study, because, ultimately, "the process of doing research shapes its outcomes" (Cunliffe 2011).

Whilst determining the research design of this study, the underlying notions of mind-world monism and the critical lens held by the researcher were at the forefront. Mind-world monism, in particular, speaks to the argument being made within this thesis that the perceptions and ways of thinking about

[4] The positivist paradigm can be understood as departing from the notion that human beings "do not influence the view of reality," (Babbie 2011) but, rather, that reality should be viewed as an "objective state that can be universally known to the researcher" (Quinlan *et al*. 2015).

the world, or topics within it, impact how these matters manifest in practice (Babbie 2007: 31 – 32; Guba 1990: 7; Merriam 2002: 4). In tandem with the interpretivist angle illustrated above, it became crucial that focus was given within the research design towards illustrating this interplay between knowledge and its manifestation in practice. As noted by Hay (2011: 474), there is a need to recognise the complex interplay between the material and the ideational, especially with regard to how "material reality" should be given meaning within an "ideational context that is perceived and interpreted by actors" (Blake 2020: 86). The nexus that emerges between these two contexts was a driving factor beyond the critical literature review employed and the breakdown of concepts undertaken in chapter three. The purpose behind the critical literature review and conceptual framework was thereby to tell the story and situate the arguments made by authors, as well as the key concepts of the study, within what is "already known" (Jesson & Lacey 2006: 139; Jesson *et al.* 2011: 87; Samnani *et al.* 2017: 637; Saunders & Rojon 2011: 156-157). In essence, this served to further substantiate the need for a new normative conception of child agency that is embedded in the informal/cultural norms and context of its execution.

Moving beyond simply capturing the conceptual debates and the discussions surrounding how reintegration that targets former child soldiers and children should depart within a post-conflict space, this thesis adopts a transformative and emancipatory knowledge. As such, the research inquiry is regarded as needing to be intertwined with action agendas and reform (Creswell 2014: 9 – 10). The element of this thesis' research design that speaks to this transformative and emancipatory element is the framing of data collection around the tenets of Grounded Theory, particularly the objective to conduct research so as to generate a theory out of the insights gathered from participants. A Grounded Theory approach will thereby serve as a means to not only produce knowledge that provides a new normative and conceptual foundation for child agency but also to speak to the potential reformation of post-conflict reintegration to acknowledge the manner in which child agency can be understood through a cultural lens, as well as its manifestation in accordance with the informal/communal avenues. Therefore, linking back to the importance of reflecting upon the way we do our research, the next section will provide a breakdown of Grounded Theory, as well as illustrate the tenets that this research draws upon for its data collection and analysis.

4.2.1. Grounded Theory – Theoretical Background

According to Suddaby (2006: 633), understanding the central ethos and maxims of Grounded Theory is best done from an understanding of the historical context from which this approach emerged. The origins of grounded theory trace back to the work of Glaser and Strauss during the 1960s; a period of time that characterised an emerging climate of discontent in relation to the dominant "hypothetico-

deductive use of grand theories" in mainstream social research, particularly that of sociology (Thornberg 2012: 243; McGhee *et al.* 2007: 334 – 335). Counter to the empirical testing of existing theories, Glaser and Strauss proposed an alternative programme and methodological venture that would "challenge the status quo in social research," (McGhee *et al.* 2007: 334 – 335) and foster the inductive "discovery of theory from data" (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 1; O'Reilly 2012: 93; Thornberg 2012: 243).

The formulation of this alternative programme by Glaser and Strauss, as encapsulated within "four founding texts" by the authors,[5] spoke to a broader network of theoretical and methodological upheaval that called for new ways of doing social research[6] (Flick 2019: 4). In particular, this alternative programme gave focus towards acknowledging the origins and development of theories, as well as formulating theoretical models and explanations that go beyond merely providing detailed descriptions of a situation, phenomena or field, to ask crucial questions, such as why something happened, and what consequences it had (Flick 2019: 2). As expressed by Glaser and Strauss (1967: vii), Grounded Theory represented "an attempt to bridge the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research." Grounded Theory, in this sense, serves to represent both the by-product – the theory developed out of analysing empirical material – and the methodological process and attitude of conducting research within the field (Flick 2019: 2).

Following the collaboration between the two authors and their ideological split during the 1990s, a variety of different theoretical iterations of Grounded Theory ensued, representing different interpretations of the "philosophies of and behind grounded theory research," as well as the perceived "right way" to undertake this methodological approach (Flick 2019: 5; Dunne 2011: 113). To effectively situate the elements and approaches to Grounded Theory that this research adopted as a methodological basis for data collection and analysis, the section to follow will unpack the theoretical evolution of Grounded Theory (GT), with particular reference being made to six major versions of the approach; the original version by Glaser and Strauss (1967); Glaserian GT (1978, 1992, 1998); Straussian GT – primarily in collaboration with Juliet Corbin- (Strauss 1987; Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1998); Constructivist GT (Charmaz 2000, 2006, 2008, 2009); Clarke's situated analysis and postmodern version of GT; and, finally, informed GT (Thornberg 2012; Dunne 2011).

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[5] The four founding texts mentioned are Glaser and Strauss' The *Awareness of Dying* (1965), the *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), *Time for Dying* (1968) and *Status Passage* (1971). Of particular importance amongst these founding texts was their book from 1967, which would come to be associated as the foundational text behind the discovery of Grounded Theory.

[6] Additional studies to note within this conversation are: Harold Garfinkel's *Studies of Ethnomethodology* (1967); Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966); Thomas Khun's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962); the 1961 and 1963 studies by Goffman.

4.2.1.1. *'Classic' Grounded Theory – Glaserian Approach*

With their divergence into two career paths in the early 1990s, Glaser and Strauss went on to develop two distinct versions of Grounded Theory (GT) – Glaserian GT (1978, 1992, 1998) and Straussian GT, which was developed primarily in collaboration with Juliet Corbin (Strauss 1987; Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1998). This divergence of the approach into these two versions signifies the debate concerning the role of epistemology and methodology within Grounded Theory (Flick 2019: 5). Glaserian Grounded Theory, with its empiricist outlook, holds the conviction that epistemology holds no relevance to the process of collecting data (O'Reilly 2012: 94). According to Glaser (2005: 2), "epistemological discussions are of no potential help to the actual doing of research" as they merely function as a "pet code" that will result in a "preconceived forcing and biases" to ensue (Thornberg 2012: 249). Therefore, the principle behind "developing codes, new theories or new knowledge" is that of induction, whereby "all is in the data" (Glaser 1992; Flick 2019: 5; Thornberg 2012: 249). From an inductive standpoint, the researcher, according to Glaser, should have trust within the process of collecting and analysing data towards the emergence of concepts and theory (Thornberg 2012: 249).

In support of this approach towards data collection, Glaser, despite his scepticism about methodological instruments, developed the tool of coding families to assist in the analysis of codes through their conceptualisation into categories that can later be integrated into a theory (Glaser 1978; 1998; 2005; Flick 2019: 5; Thornberg 2012: 247). Nevertheless, embedded within this inductive process of data collection and analysis are the principles of emergence and discovery, whereby the researcher should approach this process and enter the field with as little prior knowledge as possible to be open to this discovery and to avoid contamination[7] (Thornberg 2012: 244). The result, should contamination take place, would be a "constructed theory," that would merely support what is already known, as opposed to the development of an "emergent theory providing new insights" (Heath 2006: 520; Thornberg 2012: 244). It is from this basis that the Glaserian approach to Grounded Theory upholds that the process of conducting a literature review should not precede the collection of data. (Thornberg 2012: 244). From this basis, Glaser went on to run the Grounded Theory Institute, which is dedicated towards the teaching and defense of the idea of "classical grounded theory"[8] (O'Reilly 2012: 94). The tenets of this 'classical' approach are hereby reflected within the original work by

[7] Contamination in this sense refers to a situation whereby the researcher's prior knowledge and assumptions can result in them trying to "force data into pre-existing concepts," which can result in a distortion of the data to fit criteria that may have no relevance to the substantive area under investigation (Thornberg 2012: 244).
[8] The tenets of this 'classical' approach can be found within the original work by Glaser and Strauss (1967), as well as within Glaser's further publications (1978, 1998, 2001, and 2005). Of particular relevance within Glaser's later publications is his 1978 book, *Theoretical Sensitivity*.

Glaser and Strauss (1967), as well as within Glaser's further publications (1978, 1998, 2001, and 2005) (Flick 2019: 4).

4.2.1.2. Straussian Grounded Theory – Collective Importance of Induction and Deduction within Coding Paradigms

Strauss, in contrast to Glaser, went on to develop his own approach towards Grounded Theory with his publication, the *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (1987). Within this publication, Strauss adapted several of Glaser's additions about the methodological component of Grounded Theory (Flick 2019: 4). The Straussian stream of Grounded Theory was further developed through Strauss' collaboration with Juliet Corbin (Strauss and Corbin 1990), as well as further advancements by Corbin (Corbin and Strauss 2015) following Strauss' passing in 1996 (Flick 2019: 4, 6). Investing further into developing the methodological instruments behind Grounded Theory, Strauss and Corbin regard Grounded Theory as more of a "way of thinking about and studying social reality" (O'Reilly 2012: 94). It is from this standpoint that the authors differentiate between three kinds of coding – open, axial and selective coding- which form the coding paradigm. The intention behind this paradigm was to develop a structure from the observations and material gathered in the material. Induction similarly features within the approach taken by the authors, as they emphasise the need for inductive understanding of the "relation between phenomena and categorization, in particular" (Flick 2019: 6; O'Reilly 2012: 94). However, even with the crucial role of induction, the authors contend that there is a need for deductive reasoning within this process (Flick 2019: 6).

For Strauss and Corbin, the discovery of theories out of a grounded theory approach draws upon more than simply the discovery of data and concepts in the field; it derives from the interplay that takes place between the researcher and the data, particularly with regard to its interpretation (O'Reilly 2012: 94). Unlike Glaser's warning of entering the field with insights from the literature and 'preconceived ideas,' Strauss and Corbin put forth that it is possible to do so, but that the researcher should simply remain sceptical of them until they have "earned their way into the theory" (O'Reilly 2012: 94). Harnessing the standpoint of symbolic interactionism, the authors stress the crucial role that interpretations have within the researcher's analytical process. As noted in their later writings, "theories are always traceable to the data that gave rise to them within the interactive context of data collection and data analyzing," and it is within this context that Strauss and Corbin crucially note that the researcher is also a significant "interactant" (Strauss and Corbin 1994: 278 – 279; Flick 2019: 6). It is for this reason that Strauss and Corbin defend the role of deduction – the "allocation of material to existing categories" – as a follow-up to the inductive development of categories from the data being analysed (Flick 2019: 6).

This broadening of the analytical process away from purely induction towards inductive-deductive analysis, also furthers the belief by the authors that grounded theories can hold more relevance beyond the specific case that they are derived from, as their relation to pre-existing concepts, categories and literature can enable their generalisation and potential to be "acted upon" (O'Reilly 2012: 94). These insights from Strauss and Corbin ultimately laid the foundation for further interpretation of Grounded Theory that would bring its interpretation and methodological understanding into deeper conversation with the notions of pragmatism, relativist epistemology and constructivism.

4.2.1.3. Constructivist Grounded Theory – Pragmatism, Reflexivity and the Abductive Turn

Drawing upon this genealogy of Grounded Theory, particularly the insights put forth by the Straussian interpretation, Kathy Charmaz, a former student of Strauss and Corbin, forged a new turn in the understanding of grounded theories, as well as data, as being "constructed through the researcher's engagement with the world," as opposed to being something to simply be discovered (Charmaz 2006, 2008; O'Reilly 2012: 94 - 95). This orientation of Grounded Theory through a constructivist lens, thereby regards the theory to be developed as capable of adaptation to fit a range of philosophical approaches, as well as theoretical and substantive interests. In this manner, O'Reilly (2012: 95) asserts that grounded theory is affected, but not determined by its roots.

Crucial to Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory,[9] are the underlying notions of pragmatism and reflexivity. Epistemologically, pragmatism is centred upon the premise that "research can steer clear of metaphysical debates about the nature of truth and reality," to rather give focus to the "practical understandings" that emanate from "concrete, real-world issues" (Patton 2005: 153). While there is resonance between this approach and that of the qualitative, interpretive understandings of a "socially-constructed reality," pragmatism places particular emphasis upon interrogating the "value and meaning of research data through an examination of its practical consequences" (Morgan 2014; Kelly & Cordeiro 2020: 1). Speaking to the element of interaction that takes place in the undertaking of data collection and analysis, epistemological reflexivity gives appreciation to the manner in which our ontological and epistemological lenses impact upon the way we study and view phenomena. Harnessing reflexivity in research not only leads one to be more aware of the subjectivity of the researcher and the data but also to ensure that one encompasses a level of 'self-scrutiny,' similar to that which was mentioned by Strauss and Corbin, to ensure that we are conscious and aware of the relationship between the researcher and the data being collected and analysed (Pillow 2003). It is

[9] For further reading on constructivist grounded theory, consult the sources – *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Charmaz 2014, originally 2006) and *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). Both of these sources signify an aim to reintegrate the insights of both Glaserian and Straussian GT within a comprehensive version of GT (Flick 2019: 5).

from this basis that a critique of 'pure induction,' with its attending "tabula rasa approach," emerges (Thornberg 2012: 247).

Central to these critiques of pure induction is the argument that the very idea that a researcher can enter a field, collect data and analyse said data without imparting any prior theoretical knowledge or preconceptions upon this process, perpetuates a "naïve empiricism" that fails to recognise the "embeddedness of the researcher" within their own unique "historical, ideological and socio-cultural context" (Thornberg 2012: 247). As Kelle (1995: 38) asserts,

> Researchers who investigate a different form of life always bring with them their own lenses and conceptual networks. They cannot drop them, for in this case they would not be able to perceive, observe and describe meaningful events any longer – confronted with chaotic, meaningless and fragmented phenomena, they would have to give up their scientific endeavor (1995: 38).

As such, empirical observation can be regarded as never truly being "free from theoretical influence," because "seeing is already a theory-laden undertaking" (Thornberg 2012: 246). With this understanding of the research process as requiring this reflexive acknowledgement, the very idea of pure induction and the promotion of a "tabula rasa approach" is brought into question. In fact, Dey (1993: 229) stresses that it is better to make explicit the ideas and values that one holds, as opposed to "leaving them implicit and pretending that they are not there." Once data has been collected, Bryant (2009) argues that it is no longer necessary to retreat behind the claim that "it is all there in the data" – the basic claim of pure induction – as the interpretation and analysis of the data by the researcher then becomes crucial (Thornberg 2012: 247). From this standpoint, constructivist grounded theorists advocate for "recognising prior knowledge and theoretical conceptions and subjecting them to rigorous scrutiny," as opposed to perpetuating this notion of a researcher as a 'tabula rasa' (Charmaz 2008: 402; Thornberg 2012: 248).

With these insights, the work of Charles Sanders Pierce is brought to the forefront as fundamental to the conversation of moving beyond simply making inferences based upon inductive or deductive reasonings, to acknowledge a third path of abduction that bridges these two together (Flick 2019: 7). Originally introduced by Pierce (1958), abduction serves as a way out of the debate between induction and deduction through a new path of inquiry that adopts a "selective and creative process" through which to examine how data "supports existing theories or hypotheses," as well as how insights drawn from data may suggest/motivate for "modifications in existing understandings" (Kennedy & Thornberg 2018; Thornberg 2012: 247; Flick 2019: 7). The essential function and contribution of adopting an abductive approach is its role as a "search strategy" that enables one to discover "new concepts, ideas or explanations" by identifying ventures that fail to be captured or routinely explained

by pre-existing knowledge (Schurz 2008: 203 – 204; Thornberg 2012: 248). In doing so, abduction prompts the researcher to undertake an innovative and scientifically creative process of collecting, engaging with data and relating this data back to the current breadth of pre-existing knowledge.

This process of abduction, according to Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2003: 149) forges a way in which we can capture the "dialectical shuttling between the domain of observations and the domain of ideas" – a process that is fundamental to the departure of this thesis and the aim to formulate a new normative conception of child agency from the standpoint of the post-conflict reintegration of former child soldiers. The departure of abductive reasoning within this thesis allows for a constant back and forth to take place between the data and the current breadth of pre-existing knowledge, theories and concepts, to not only note the gaps but to also make "comparisons and interpretations in the searching for patterns and best possible explanations" (Thornberg 2012: 247; Bryant 2009). As such, the researcher can remain both open and sensitive to the data being collected, without needing to outrightly reject pre-existing knowledge, conceptions, or theories (Thornberg 2012: 238).

4.2.1.4. Situated Analyses and the Post-Modern Shift of Grounded Theory

The logic of abduction and the criticisms behind delaying the engagement of the literature transcends Charmaz's constructivist approach to Grounded Theory and further speak to the postmodernist contributions by Adele Clarke. Through her 2005 book, *Situation Analysis*, Clarke (2005) undertakes an extensive and exhaustive discussion of the contributions from Foucault's discourse analysis to Latour's actor-network theory, as a basis through which she frames and designs a situated approach to Grounded Theory (Flick 2019: 8). Embedded within Clarke's postmodernist and situated approach to grounded theory is the need to shift the focus away from merely theory development, to account for the embeddedness of data and the research process within network of situations, social arenas and discourses. The implications of departing from a situated approach to grounded theory culminate within a new research interest to account for the "embodiment and situatedness of multiple knowledges," which can be analysed and understood in relation to the particular phenomenon being studied (Flick 2019: 8). As such, a shift ensues from "simplifying normativities" to the acknowledgement of "complexities, differences and heterogeneities" (Clarke 2005: 19; Flick 2019: 8). Resulting from this shift will be more than simply the search and development of formal theories, but the development of sensitizing concepts through theoretically integrated analyses (Flick 2019: 8). Clarke's advocacy for a re-orientation of research that grounds and situates data collection and analysis, connects this version to the more recent methodological developments that constitute a more informed Grounded Theory approach.

4.2.1.5. *Informed Grounded Theory – Problematising Pure Induction and the Delay of a Literature Review*

Thornberg brings these insights and critiques full circle by utilizing them as a departure for outlining his concept of "Informed Grounded Theory." Informed Grounded Theory, according to Thornberg (2012: 250), refers to both the product and the process of undertaking research, whereby both are thoroughly grounded within the data gathered through grounded theory methods, as well as being informed by pre-existing research literature and theoretical frameworks within the field of study. Kelle (1995, 2005) gives further recognition to this grounding of research within pre-existing theories and research findings by painting them as "heuristic tools," whereby "extant concepts, theories and ideas" become the lenses and tools through which the researcher can zero in focus upon a particular phenomenon, nuance or aspect to the data[10] (Thornberg 2012: 250). The intention behind an informed grounded theory approach is to "imaginarily see beyond data," (Kelle 1995, 2005) as opposed to merely taking this data at face value (Thornberg 2012: 250). As highlighted by Dey (1993: 63), and similarly espoused by Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 157), one should recognise the difference between "an open mind and empty head." Critically, Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 157) state that it is simply not very clever to "rediscover the wheel," as a researcher, or student, who is ignorant of the relevant literature "is always in danger of doing the equivalent." The primary contrast that emerges with this departure from an informed grounded theory approach is the crucial role that a literature review plays within the research process, especially with regard to when this engagement with extant knowledge takes place. Therefore, the fundamental is not *if,* or *should,* this engagement should take place, but *when* (Dunne 2011: 115).

Unlike the dictum of delaying a literature review that is espoused within the classic grounded theory tradition, informed grounded theorists note the advantage of not delaying this engagement by advocating that there is value to be gained by departing into the field with an informed understanding of the literature and concepts within the field of study/phenomenon. In this manner, the literature and body of previous research findings within a substantive field are to be seen through a "sensitive, creative and flexible" lens, as opposed to being perceived as obstacles and threats to the research process (Thornberg 2012: 250). A good literature review, according to Dunne (2011: 116), can be crucial in aiding a researcher to develop the rationale and justification for a study, as well as to further contextualise it within the broader conversation of research studies. This will enable the researcher to also acquire a further sense of clarity throughout the coding and theory development process, as

[10] For further studies that advocate for the grounding of research within both the data and the literature, consult the work of Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2010) and Lind and Goldkuhl (2006).

well as enhance their sensitivity "for what they are doing" (*ibid:* 116; Flick 2019: 10). As put forth by Strübing (2007: 587), the fundamental point is "not whether previous knowledge should be used," as the important insight to be taken from this debate lies, rather, in "how to make proper use of previous knowledge."

Crucial to note is that informed grounded theory is certainly not about "forcing data into pre-existing concepts and theories," nor is it about undertaking a "constant comparison and systematic coding with prejudiced and insensitive theoretical interpretations of data" (Thornberg 2012: 244). Rather, the sensitisation principles that guide the approach, according to Thornberg (2012: 250) could work in tandem with the original tenets of Glaser's, as well as Strauss and Corbin's versions of Grounded Theory to ensure the development of theory that emanates from the data to be collected within the field. The only distinction that Thornberg (2012: 250) argues should be made is that with an informed grounded theory approach, the research should reject the idea of pure induction and delaying the literature review, to depart from the logic of abduction throughout the whole research process. Moving forward, to truly comprehend the departure of informed grounded theory from the principle of sensitization, it becomes important to unpack the various sensitisation principles – henceforth referred to as the 4 T's - to be adopted when engaging with, and using literature.

4.2.1.5.1. Data Sensitising Principles – Staying Grounded and the 4 T's

The 4 T's of data sensitization are as follows: Theoretical Agnosticism, Theoretical Pluralism, Theoretical Sampling, and Theoretical Playfulness (Thornberg 2012: 251 – 255). These 4 T's come together to constitute an approach that emphasise the need to be critical, relativistic, flexible and creative throughout one's engagement with the literature. Beginning with *Theoretical Agnosticism*, a literature review should entail an "open, critical and pluralistic conversation" between 3 elements – the researcher, the pre-existing literature, and the data gathered, particularly the "emerging body of concepts and ideas" within this data (Thornberg 2012: 251). A critical stance is thereby crucial to mediate this engagement, especially to ensure that a researcher does not simply subscribe to, or take pre-existing theories, concepts and knowledge for granted (Henwood & Pidgeon 2003: 138; Timmermans & Tavory 2007; Thornberg 2012: 251). Resonating with Glaser's warning of the literature becoming a 'pet code' that holds no relevance to the emerging codes and concepts, theoretical agnosticism upholds that this critical stance is essential to cumulativeness – to crucially distinguish between what is deemed as usable, and that which should be refuted in the pre-existing literature (Goldkuhl & Cronholm 2010; Thornberg 2012: 251). In essence, the literature review process should treat all "extant theories and concepts" as "provisional, disputable and modifiable conceptual proposals" (Thornberg 2012: 251).

With the plethora of choices of concepts and theories that a researcher may encounter within the literature, the principle of *Theoretical Pluralism* ensures that the researcher can draw upon more than one theory or framework to inform the research design and to guide the research process (Thornberg 2012: 252). Drawing upon what Thayer-Bacon (1996, 2003) terms "qualified relativism," which is rooted within pragmatism, theoretical pluralism rejects the idea that "anything goes" (Thornberg 2012: 252). Rather, a pluralistic departure affords the researcher with flexible choices that will help keep their eyes open to "all kinds of observations and aspects," as opposed to confining, or blinding oneself, to a singular theoretical outlook (Thornberg 2012: 252). Speaking to theoretical agnosticism, theoretical pluralism thereby invites an analysis that initiates a "critical, creative and sensitive conversation" between arrays of different, as well as conflicting, theoretical perspectives, as a means to interpret and analyse data to determine their usefulness within the actual study (Thornberg 2012: 252).

In determining which literature is deemed relevant, Glaser (1998) argues that this literature is typically unknown before the study, and that it remains unknown up until data is collected and the main concerns, concepts and grounded theory begin to emerge. The assumption behind this delaying of the literature until this point is to save time by not reading the wrong literature (Thornberg 2012: 253). To avoid being "snowed under too much literature," Glaser proposes the logic of theoretical sampling being employed (Thornberg 2012: 253). Theoretical Sampling, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967: 45) entails a "process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses data" and then, subsequently, makes the decision of "what data to collect next and where to find them" to "develop his theory as it emerges." Theoretical sampling in this manner thus implies a highly interactive process between the initial coding processes and how this leads the researcher back to the literature and then back to his/her tentative codes (Thornberg 2012: 253).

Thornberg (2012: 253) argues against this premise behind delaying the literature review by stating that a substantive field is identified, "even if it is unfocussed and fuzzy in the beginning." The starting point of a study can be related to the concept in ethnography of "foreshadowed problems" – those which are open for "further elaboration, clarification and reformulation" upon conducting fieldwork and undertaking one's analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Thornberg 2012: 253). Undertaking an ongoing literature review, that still employs the logic of theoretical sampling, simply enables the researcher to be more sensitive to the data from the onset of this interactive process (Thornberg 2012: 253).

Finally, there is the principle of theoretical playfulness, which emphasises that qualitative inquiry should draw upon more than simply critical thinking, to create space for creative thinking. Critical thinkers, according to Patton (2002: 513), are systematic, disciplined, and rigorous in their attention to detail. Adopting a critical perspective thereby implies that one questions emerging patterns, as well as "brings evidence to bear in support of them" (*ibid*: 513). While a crucial skill to have, Patton (2002) argues that critical thinking should be combined with creative thinking to create space for generating "new possibilities and creative connection-making" which is particularly important within abductive reasoning (Thornberg 2012: 254). As such, creativity becomes a vital component of the grounded theory method, as it pushes the researcher to "go beyond the box" (Thornberg 2012: 255) of what is already known through extant theories, concepts and assumptions, to "create new order out of the old" (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 27).

This element of theoretical playfulness, a concept put forth by Charmaz (2006: 136), challenges one to view theory as not a mechanical process, but as an engagement of this playfulness where you should be open to the unexpected (Thornberg 2012: 255). Ultimately, the theme that emerges through the proponents of theoretical playfulness, as well as the other 3 T's, is the expansion of knowledge in a way that is open to elaborating upon, challenging and revising what is already known through pre-existing concepts and theories (Thornberg 2012: 255).

4.3. Undertaking Grounded Theory – The Process in a nutshell

The unpacking of the evolution and stream of interpretations behind what Grounded Theory entails, and the manner in which one should harness this methodological approach, served to provide an informed understanding of the truly complex nature of this approach and its intended discovery and creation of theory. Comprehending the history behind Grounded theory and acknowledging the differing approaches that one can take in its execution is crucial, as the adoption of Grounded Theory will look different depending on which version is being aligned with (Dunne 2011: 113). Bearing this in mind, this thesis will be positioning its approach predominantly within the stream of informed grounded theory, with the adoption of tenets of the pragmatic and reflexive angle of Charmaz's (2006, 2008, 2009) constructivist approach, Clarke's (2005) emphasis on situating and grounded data collection and research and, crucially, the abductive and dialectical turn put forth by Atkinson *et al* (2003).

Merging distinct approaches towards Grounded Theory, according to Johnson *et al.* (2001), does not necessarily "compromise methodological 'purity,' but can actually enhance rigour" (Dunne 2011: 113). Therefore, the sections to follow will illustrate how the particular aspects of the various streams

of Grounded Theory identified as pertinent to this study will feature in the manner in which data collection, data analysis and theory development are undertaken.

4.3.1. Sampling

Going back to a statement by Strauss and Corbin (1990: 8), sampling in grounded theory "proceeds not in terms of drawing samples of specific groups of individuals, units of time, and so on," but rather "in terms of concepts, their properties, dimensions and variations." This factor certainly holds true with the approach of this research. While focus is certainly being given to harnessing the narratives of children alongside those of their families, communities and others, the crux of the phenomenon being studied is that of the concept of child agency as it manifests within a post-conflict environment. Therefore, when determining the sampling for this research, both in terms of how participants will be selected for focus group discussions, as well as individual interviews in the case of local or international NGO workers, a purposeful sampling approach was adopted. The intention for this choice of purposive sampling was to truly target those who would be able to speak to this area of importance and provide relevant information for the consequent conceptual and theoretical development to take place (Patton 2002: 230; Horsburgh 2003: 311). For this reason, the research participants that will be targeted for the focus group discussions, as mentioned in the first chapter, will be children, their families, community members, returnees and the targeted participants for the interviews will be local and international NGO workers.

Moreover, the choice of this sampling frame and manner of sampling was further justified through its predominant use within similar studies, such as that of Suarez (2022: 7 -8), Ferreira and Mutiti (2016: 17 - 18) and Newman (2014: 360), who all focus on the topic of post-conflict reintegration: Suarez (2022) primarily unpacks the daily experiences, challenges and insights to be drawn from former child soldiers who became fathers, Ferreira (2016) delves deeper into the presence and role of sustainable community structures and positive social networks for the reintegration of former child soldiers and Newman (2014) crucially looks to the post-conflict reintegration and challenges faced by formerly-abducted child mothers. Purposive sampling, often coupled with snowball sampling in the context of research on sensitive topics, is typically regarded as the most relevant approach towards targeting participants. This is because accessing records of former child soldiers are typically more challenging if not done through organisations and members of the community that have worked with these individuals, as well as with determining which communities are willing to engage within research projects due to the large numbers of researchers that have been present in the region throughout the years. Ensuring that participants are targeted and approached most effectively and

sensitively is of the utmost importance to this study and will continually feature as a consideration throughout the subsequent processes of data collection.

4.3.2. Data Collection and Analysis – Coding and Developing Theory with an Abductive Logic

The processes through which data collection took place within this study were through the conduct of focus group discussions and individual interviews. The focus group discussions and interviews commenced during the second fieldwork visit to northern Uganda from late April until mid-May of 2023 and additionally until late-December 2023. During this visit, we met with the local leaders (LC1s) of various communities around Gulu and worked in collaboration with them to identify research participants, as well as to proceed with obtaining informed consent, child assent and parental permission in accordance with the procedures outlined in chapter one. Facilitating this process through the LC1s is a vital avenue when conducting research in the region as it not only ensures the respect between the researcher and the local council member of the community but also assures the comfort and protection of research participants from being approached by researchers, especially with the large influx of studies that took place in the region in the early 2000s due to the conflict.

Resulting from these engagements, as well as through consultations that took place with organisations for interviews in the months leading up to the second fieldwork visit, a total of 145 research participants – 133 through eight focus group discussions and 12 through interviews – expressed interest and successfully took part in the study. The eight focus group discussions were conducted in and around Gulu, northern Uganda, which included engagements from children, their families and communities, local leaders and different categories of returnees.[11] In the groups of returnees engaged with, differing classifications were evident between the formerly abducted children, both male and female, child mothers, children born in captivity, and former commanders. In most cases, these returnees were present amongst the focus groups conducted in communities, with the exception of two discussions – one with child mothers and one with children born in captivity, being conducted separately at the request of the returnees and their group coordinator. Further, in the case of the former commander, consultation took place with a local contact who advised that an individual interview would be the best platform to ensure the comfort and safety of the participant to participate in the study. Due to this, an individual interview was conducted with the participant, as opposed to their

[11] Out of 145 participants, the study included 42 children, 91 adults in focus group discussions (76 community members and 15 returnees), and 11 adults interviewed from organisations, as well as one former commander, totalling 103 adults. Among the returnees, 7 were children born in captivity (CBOW), 8 were child mothers, and 1 was a former commander. While some individuals identified as former child soldiers/returnees in the community focus groups, they are not included under the returnee figure as they were engaged as community members, per their request. The total number of unidentified returnees in the communities engaged remains unknown.

engagement taking place in a focus group. As mentioned previously, these focus group discussions were approximately one hour long, and guided by four, semi-structured questions.

In addition to the conducting of focus groups, a total of eleven[12] interviews were conducted with members of NGOs working in the field of reintegration and children's rights. These interviews are intended to acquire further insights into the process of reintegration overall and the role that culture, children and communities have during the reintegration process. Additionally, these interviews are also being undertaken to draw comparisons between the insights drawn by the participant(s) and the case of the reintegration of former child soldiers in northern Uganda. The principle behind gathering data from these two sources is to build a conceptual story out of the authentic narratives that participants put forth, and to develop, through this process of storytelling, a new normative conception and framework for child agency, as it manifests within this post-conflict environment. For further insights into the specifics surrounding the processes and structure of the focus groups and interviews, consult section 7.2 in chapter one, which is dedicated to outlining and explaining the research design and methods for data collection.

4.3.2.1. Contextualising Data Collection in the Field – Tailoring the Manner and Avenues of Participant Engagement

Throughout the whole process of deciding upon the methodological approaches and instruments to be employed in executing this research, the intention was always to develop a structure that would not only lend itself towards the aim of formulating a new normative conception of child agency but to truly ensure that the process of data collection drew upon the crucial insights put forth in the literature. The value to be found in the literature goes beyond simply becoming well-versed in the conversations that are being had amongst authors from different vantage points. Engaging with the literature provides an immense amount of depth not only of what has been covered, but also of areas that necessitate further depth and exploration; both in terms of the research we undertake, and how we conduct research.

Within chapter one, a brief outline was provided of the work of particular authors, from which this study draws inspiration. This outline indicated the work of Baines (2007, 2011, 2015), Verma (2012), Lund (2007), Moncrieffe (2009), Barandiaran et al. (2009), Cheney (2007) and De Boeck and Honwana (2005). This list, while certainly not exhaustive of all the authors that this research draws

[12] The 11 interviews conducted for the study included 9 in-person interviews with organisations in and around Gulu, as well as two interviews in Kampala with key NGOs whose work still impacts upon policies and programmes in the North. Out of these interviews, only one was conducted online via Google Meet due to the research participant needing to travel outside of Kampala around the scheduled date for the interview. In this case, the interview was successfully conducted online via Google Meet, as per the suggestion of the research participant. Further details concerning the interviews will be outlined in the chapters to follow.

inspiration, still signifies an area of transformative contributions in the literature that heavily influenced the structure of this research's data collection methods. Captured within this list, is a broad spectrum of arguments that justified the emphasis on truly acknowledging the importance of spaces and how these spaces are guided by culture, norms, values and practices.

Crucial to the matter of space is also distinguishing between formal and informal, everyday spaces. This distinction was certainly a prominent theme amongst this body of literature, especially with the argument being made that in order to truly capture the actual social and cultural phenomenon of child agency within a post-conflict environment, we need to move beyond trying to comprehend its nature within an environment that simply speaks to a brief basis of what it could be in relation to external norms and values. Rather, we need to recognise child agency for how it is shaped and influenced by the actions that children take, within the spaces they inhabit in their day-to-day life. In essence, we need to localise our approach to expanding knowledge about agency by doing so through a lens of the "socio-cultural domains of being." It is for this reason that the data collection process of this study prioritises the conduct of fieldwork within communities in northern Uganda, to truly capture data that highlights and captures this domain of being and knowledge, at its source.

Coupled with the importance of space, the mediums/platforms through which actors within a space engage were also given emphasis. Especially relevant to this study are De Boeck and Honwana's (2005) advocacy of storytelling as an agentic avenue for renegotiation between the traditional and new cultural traditions, and Cheney's (2007) reflection upon traditional Acholi campfires – *Wang'oo* – as a symbolic platform that could bridge the old and the new, where "people of all ages can speak, be heard and receive respect." Merging these two mediums of storytelling and the symbolism of the fireplace discussion inspired the choice to host focus group discussions, where children, their families, and community members could collectively engage in a space where their perspectives are brought into a conversation, as opposed to being treated in isolation from one another. Further, this choice of merging these two mediums also reified the choice to host focus groups within spaces where members of the community would naturally gather. Given that the traditional practice of *Wang'oo* represents a communal space where knowledge, history, and teachings are exchanged, structuring focus groups in this way encouraged a more organic and comfortable dialogue, particularly for participants who might have been more reserved in individual interviews. Open-ended questions allowed discussions to flow naturally, ensuring that contributions reflected the relational and interactive nature of storytelling, rather than being confined to structured responses. Further, this approach was particularly important in engaging community members, as it created a comfortable environment where participants could relate to, expand upon, or challenge each other's insights.

In relation to the interviews, the element of space differs from that of the focus group discussions. While the informal, everyday dimension was a crucial dimension for these discussions to take place, this is not as crucial for the interviews with members from NGOs. Rather, what is crucial for this element of data collection is for the discussions within the interviews to be separate from those that are undertaken in the focus groups. The purpose behind this separation is to preserve the authenticity and distinctness of insights drawn from each group until this data is then compared during the coding process. Moreover, in determining the site from the interviews, there was also a conscious decision being made that the insights from NGO members signify a representation of perspectives that would lie within the formal sphere, as opposed to the informal nature being ascribed to the perspectives drawn from the focus groups. As such, interviews will be given the option to be conducted at the workplace of the participant, or through a formal online engagement via Zoom/Google Meet.

To capture the data from the focus group discussions and the interviews, the study drew upon the use of audio recorders, as well as extensive memo-notes, to ensure that the authentic perspectives and narratives are harnessed, as opposed to the researcher's summarization and interpretation of what is being said. Memo-notes, whilst being used in this fashion to capture the researcher's observations, insights and comparisons during the sessions, were harnessed throughout the data collection and analysis process. With the abductive logic of this researcher's approach to data collection and analysis, these two processes become truly interrelated and are, in many respects, conducted simultaneously. This is evident with how the coding process of this study is broken down into open, axial and then focused/selective coding – each with its own separate role throughout the data collection and analysis process.

4.3.2.1.1. Open Coding

Open coding refers to the interpretive process through which the data collected is subsequently broken down analytically (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 12). During this process, the underlying events, actions and interactions within the data are compared to identify similarities and differences, as well as to move toward developing conceptual labels for the data. In this manner, open coding begins to conceptually group similar events, actions and interpretations to form various higher-level categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 7, 12). These categories are also further broken down to recognise the properties and dimensions within them, as well as to note sub-categories/types that may emerge. Categories, in this sense, become cornerstones for the process of developing a theory from the initial raw data and concepts developed as they "provide the means by which a theory can be integrated" (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 7). Over time, and with constant questioning and understanding of how these categories relate to one another, a theory will be formed.

Through developing preliminary concepts and categories, a basis is also formed for the researcher to go back to the literature and begin the process of analysing the data as it develops with what is already known and conceptualised. Therefore, what becomes crucial to the initial process of open coding is the need to constantly question and ask oneself comparative questions that prompt the principal investigator to "break through subjectivity and bias." By breaking down the data, one is thereby forced to relate any preconceived notions and ideas about a subject area to the actual data that has been collected. Should the researcher place data within a category where it does not "analytically belong," Strauss and Corbin (1990: 13) believe that by embodying a process of constant comparisons, these errors will be easier to locate and the process of re-arranging the data into "appropriate classifications" will be more tangible. Further, simply grouping concepts under a more "abstract heading," does not constitute the formation of new categories. What becomes important to acknowledge is how concepts achieve this status and, in a sense, earn their way into a category through the various ways that they relate to one another and represent various similarities, differences, consequences, interactions and relationships.

This process of open coding will thereby feature in this research as the first analytical tool to be employed upon collecting data from the first focus group discussions, as well as through the online interviews to be conducted.

4.3.2.1.2. Axial Coding

Bridging off of open coding, axial coding furthers this analytical process by relating categories to their sub-categories, to test the identified relationships against the data. In particular, this process adopts a "coding paradigm" where focus is given to the "conditions, context, strategies (actions/interaction) and consequences" behind the relationship of sub-categories to their overarching category. In essence, what is being looked for when undertaking axial coding is to understand the frequency and background behind what is seen in the data. For instance, as explained by Strauss and Corbin (1990: 13 – 14), if we want to test a particular hypothesis, it is not enough to say that since there is only a single instance, that a hypothesis should be discarded, or that an indication of a particular phenomenon over and over again in the data is enough to solely verify and prove a hypothesis. Rather, it is important to understand the conditions through which a particular outcome results in one instance, and how it may differ if the underlying conditions were to change (*ibid*: 14).

Using their case of comfort work, just because one patient may indicate that when they complain of pain and ask for relief from their nurses, nurses respond by giving comfort through x, y, z methods and another patient states that when asking for the same, they are met with nurses that ignore their request and do not respond in this expected manner, that their hypothesis is unsupported (Strauss &

Corbin 1990: 13 – 14). By acknowledging the patterns and variations that can ensue in relation to the original hypothesis and including these variations within an understanding of this phenomenon, we can acquire a more conceptually dense understanding that makes conceptual linkages "more specific" to these various conditions (*ibid*: 14). Therefore, relating to the case given by Strauss and Corbin (1990: 14), one can understand the situation indicated above as "under these conditions, action takes form, whereas under these other conditions, it takes another." This is an especially crucial consideration that this research was cognizant of when unpacking the statements given by the different participants engaged during the phase of data collection, as well as when relating these statements back to what has already been conceptually defined and unpacked in the literature.

Axial coding will thereby follow on from the initial process of open coding conducted in this research. Crucial to note is that this process is not linear and follows on from all data collection having been completed. Rather, what will ensue is an interconnected process where as subsequent focus groups take place and interviews are conducted, the initial concepts and categories that were identified will be re-engaged and built upon.

4.3.2.1.3. Selective/Focused Coding

The final coding process will be that of selective/focused coding, which can be understood as the process whereby all of the categories that have been developed are unified and centred on a core category. This core category, through representing the "central phenomenon of the study," is what truly gives shape to the subsequent theory that will be developed and the analytical phenomenon that it will be based around (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 14). It is during this process of identifying this core category that one will recognise whether the categories already in place within the study have been poorly developed. A poorly developed category can be identified as one where only a few properties have been uncovered within the data collected, as well as when the sub-categories only possess a few explanatory concepts (Strauss & Corbin 1990: 14). As expressed by Strauss and Corbin (1990: 14), for a theory to possess "explanatory power, its categories and sub-categories must have conceptual density." Should this not be the case, the researcher must either return to the field or revisit the data and notes generated from the field.

The process of selective/focused coding will primarily feature during the later stages of the research, particularly once all of the focus groups and online interviews have taken place. Crucial to this final stage is how it forms part of a continuous engagement that speaks to the abductive logic of the research's approach to data collection and analysis, particularly the logic of the dialectical shuttling between the domain of ideas and the domain of observations that Atkinson et al. (2003: 149) put forth. In this manner, the coding processes signify the new domain of ideas that are drawn from the

data collected and it is this new domain that will be brought into conversation with the pre-existing domain of ideas - the existing literature and conceptions present on the subject area – and the domain of observations – the memo-notes to be developed by the researcher.

4.3.3. Memo-Writing – Acknowledging the Researcher's Extant Observations and Associations

In conducting qualitative research, a complex relationship ensues between the process of knowledge production, the context in which these processes take place, and the "knowledge producer" (Alvesson & Skölberg 2009: 8). Embodying the role of a co-knowledge producer alongside their participants, the researcher acquires recognition as not only the party driving the research process, but also the main instrument in data collection and analysis (Thornberg 2012: 256; Dunne 2011: 118; Babbie & Mouton 2001; Creswell 2003). With recognition of the researcher's position, Alvesson and Skölberg (2009: 9) contend that it is crucial to acknowledge that empirical data is "the result of interpretation," and as such, we should pay attention to the theoretical assumptions, pre-existing understandings and language that we bring to the research process.

Speaking to the debates within Grounded Theory about entering data collection with pre-existing knowledge, the element of reflexivity emerges as a key skill to adopt as a researcher. In essence, reflexivity questions the belief that a "component observer" could "with objectivity, clarity and precision," report both their own observations and the experiences of others in their study of a social phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln 2011: 11). As such, act of being reflexive constitutes an awareness of the various ways that a researcher, with their own identity, biases and socio-cultural background, imparts a degree of influence on the research process (Robson 2002: 22; McGhee *et al.* 2007: 335; Dunne 2011: 118; Bourke 2014). As a qualitative researcher, "doing reflexivity" thereby requires one to "turn inwards towards ourselves" and the research practices we employ, as well as to "render one's personal biases visible" through processes of personal disclosure (Alvesson & Skölberg 2009: 9; Macdonald & Schreiber 2001: 60; Archer 2009). The mechanism through which Grounded Theory has incorporated to ensure this element of constant reflexivity is the process of memo-writing.

Memos, according to Glaser – with the assistance of Judith Holton (2004: 61) - are "theoretical notes about the data and the conceptual connections between categories." Further, this process signifies an opportunity for the researcher to unpack their emerging ideas, conceptualisations and analytical insights, thus far. Through memo-writing – "memoing" – the researcher documents their "internal dialogue with the data" at a particular moment in time during their data collection (McCann & Clark 2003: 15). Memo-writing, whether in the form of quick jottings, or more systematic and extensive arguments written in a research diary, signify a "pivotal intermediate step" and "work in progress" between the process of data collection, coding and writing (O'Reilly 2012: 96; Charmaz 2006;

Thornberg 2012: 255). At this stage of the research, reflective memo-writing also serves as a self-monitoring tool, whereby the researcher can reflect on and become aware of "how his or her own concepts are constructed," as well as monitor the influence and manner in which pre-existing literature and theoretical constructions are being used (Thornberg 2012: 255). In this way, memos are crucial to providing clarity of the "multiplicity of influences in the reconstruction of theory" and uphold the tenets of the sensitizing principles outlined above (Mills *et al.* 2006). Further, Strauss and Corbin (1990: 10) uphold that memos should not be regarded as "simply about ideas," but should be recognised for their crucial involvement in the "formulation and revision of theory" throughout the research process. As such, memo-writing should begin with the first round of coding, and end only once the research is complete (*ibid*: 10). With this self-reflective element of memo-writing, Dunne (2011: 118) asserts that there is ultimately no reason why this process could not form "an integral component of an early literature review." Similarly, Lempert (2007) notes that in her own research, she draws upon the ideas and theoretical insights of other authors whilst memo-writing to "sensitise herself to potential patterns" within her data (cited in Thornberg 2012: 256).

For the reasons stated above, as well as its alignment with this thesis' abductive approach to data collection and analysis, memo-writing will thereby feature as a significant tool employed to further deepen the analytical insights to be drawn from the data collected within the field, as well as its relation to pre-existing findings, concepts and arguments made within the substantive literature.

4.3.4. Bringing it all together – The Iterative Process of Writing and Re-Writing

From the onset, the writing process of this thesis has been, and will continue to be, an iterative process of writing and re-writing. In this manner, this thesis resonates with the statement by O'Reilly (2012: 95) that Grounded Theory development is certainly not a linear process. From this standpoint, the writing process is intertwined with all stages of the research process, particularly that of data collection and analysis. Adopting the logic of abduction, the writing process will thereby provide the opportunity to capture the analytical and conceptual insight drawn from the dialectical shuttling of observations (data collection) and the domain of ideas (literature review).

Ultimately, the objective of the writing process is not only to highlight the perspectives and conceptual insights drawn from the participants but to bring this data into a broader conversation with the substantive literature on childhood, child soldiers, child agency and post-conflict reintegration. With this objective in mind, it is thereby crucial to view writing as the medium through which the ideas, conceptual associations and grounded theory that emerge as a result of this abductive process are shared with others and given contextual understanding.

4.3.5. Why an Informed Grounded Theory Approach?

This brings us to the justification behind the choice of this thesis to depart from an informed grounded theory approach as the basis for data collection and analysis moving forward. The intention behind the choice to adopt a locally grounded approach is to promote awareness surrounding the influence that culture, norms and conceptions have in the way we are perceived, the actions we take, and the roles that we employ in relation to others. Even more so, it is critical to understand that interventions and programmes operate amidst these cultural norms, whether we are looking to those from within, or those emanating from external forces. As such, it is important to give credence to the influence that cultural norms, values and conceptions have upon practice and its intended outcomes. While the argument can certainly be made that societies and cultures will differ in their perceptions of what is right or wrong, the purpose of giving focus to the locally grounded conceptions of the child and child agency in this context is not to emphasise its difference to the traditional, normative conceptions that are deemed to be reflective of Western culture. The purpose is to merely bring awareness to the nuances that could exist behind the normative conceptions of the child, how this impacts how childhood is perceived, and the manner in which child agency manifests in practice within these communities.

Therefore, this study does not seek to imply that the normative conceptions of the child, childhood and child agency that emerge through the perspectives drawn from participants in the study should be the only manner in which these concepts are understood in the context of FCS in northern Uganda. Rather, the emphasis upon generating a more grounded and situated understanding of childhood and children's agentic practice is to reflect upon and critically examine all of the cultural norms, systems and practice that come to bear influence upon the manner in which we make sense of the agency employed by FCS in the context of their post-conflict reintegration back into society (Rudnick *et al.* 2019; Edmonds 2019: 207). This examination is not only crucial to the study at hand, but also to future studies that seek to unpack the influence that conceptualisations, culture and the driving of particular narratives can have in the realm of reintegration practice, or that of peacebuilding, in general.

4.4. Ethical Considerations and Protocol

Throughout this chapter, the various details regarding the factors that informed the research study, the prescriptions guiding the process of conducting the research, and the manner in which the data gathered will be analysed to fulfil the intended ends of the research have been unpacked. However, one of the most important aspects of the research process that should not be understated are the ethical

considerations and protocols in place that guide this process and the engagement that the researcher has with both the participants, as well as other individuals who are part of the research process. This crucial element of ethics is one that ultimately informed the choice of the research methods adopted for this thesis, as well as other considerations about how the next step of fieldwork will be done in the most respectful, and culturally sensitive manner. With section 8 of chapter one already outlining the procedures that will be put in place to ensure that the principles of anonymity and confidentiality are ensured throughout the process, this section will focus more specifically on other aspects of the ethical considerations that will impact upon the next phase of the research – that being the entering of the field. In a nutshell, these elements relate to the reasoning behind how questions will be framed, the nature of engagement between subjects, assistants and other personnel required during the fieldwork, and the protocols that will need to be followed to obtain local ethical approval and written permissions at the district level.

The matter of the framing of questions and the nature of the role that the researcher will adopt during the focus group discussions and interviews to be conducted aligns with a statement by Schiltz and Büscher (2018) who, whilst analysing the consequences of the large scale of researcher influx to post-war northern Uganda, state that

> Gatekeepers may reproduce conceptions of war-affected people as vulnerable and of the war-affected context as problem-fraught and in need of intervention (2018: 124).

Captured within this statement is the influence that pre-existing and dominant narratives have within the analyses and conceptions that we both impart upon the subject area being researched, as well as the conclusions that one draws and puts forth within the research outputs that we produce upon conducting fieldwork. Not only is this factor one that drives the underlying research problem of this research, but it also is a fundamental consideration that permeates all elements of this thesis' methodology – from the choice of grounded theory as the primary departure, to the choice to conduct focus groups and interviews in a semi-structured, open-ended manner, with minimal intervention of the researcher being crucial. As explained within chapter one of this thesis, the questions to be asked during both focus group discussion and interviews will be broader, so that there is an avoidance of asking overly specific questions that may have an influence on the answers being given by the participants, as well as to try and steer away from sensitive topics of discussion arising during the session, particularly those relating to the atrocities committed during the conflict in Uganda. By approaching the questions and the sessions in this manner, the intention is to truly showcase the insights of the participants, as opposed to directing conversations in a direction that would address, or further, a pre-determined narrative. A more informal, loosely structured approach will also serve to put participants more at ease to freely express their own views with these engagements being more

of a conversation, than an intimidating, formal process. This type of approach to the framing of questions and the role that the researcher should have whilst conducting focus groups or interviews is also present within the methodologies adopted by Derluyn *et al.* (2013), Oliviera and Baines (2020), and Veale and Stavrou (2007).

Typically, when the ethical considerations of a study are unpacked, these considerations primarily concern the researcher's engagement with research participants. While ethical engagement with the participants should always be a top priority in conducting research, Mwambari (2019) asserts that consideration should also be given to how the researcher engages with local stakeholders, such as research assistants, or translators/transcriptionists, in the production of knowledge. As expressed by Franz Boas, the methods that we adopt will produce "relational ontologies" that will "draw us into conversations and collaborations, at individual and community levels" (cited in Darnell 2017: 7; Finnström 2020: 45). Entangled with these conversations and collaborations, Schiltz and Büscher (2018: 141) highlight are relationships of power that ultimately, for better or worse, "shape the complex mechanisms of knowledge production." Inevitably, while the methodological choices of this study have sought to account for the influence that the researcher may have upon the data gathered during focus group or interview sessions, it is thereby necessary to also pay attention to how one approaches the involvement of research assistants or other personnel, within the study.

In addition to the concerns surrounding research fatigue among communities or participants frequently approached by previous researchers, it is equally crucial to consider the potential for research fatigue among local stakeholders, such as research assistants. Mwambari (2019) underscores this issue, along with concerns about the safety and fair compensation of research assistants. From Mwambari's interviews, it is evident that conversations should take place before fieldwork begins, where guidelines, rationales, and budgets are discussed with research assistants. This ensures transparency and allows time for any questions to be addressed. These practices were incorporated into my own research, where local assistants played a key role in both the practical and relational dimensions of the fieldwork.

The research process was a collaborative effort, with clearly defined roles between myself, as the primary researcher, and the supporting team. I was responsible for all phases of the study, from conceptualisation and pre-fieldwork preparations and communications, to obtaining ethical approvals, leading focus groups and interviews, analysing and transcribing data, and drafting the findings. Lydia, my primary assistant throughout the project, provided indispensable logistical and cultural support across Kampala and Gulu. Drawing on her extensive experience with organisations like the Uganda Bureau of Statistics and USAID, she ensured the smooth progression of the study by

maintaining additional telephonic communication with participants, assisting with ethical approval processes, and providing translation support for key documents, transcriptions, and sessions. During focus groups, she played a crucial role in ensuring accurate audio capture and facilitating real-time translations, which complemented the contributions of my second research assistant, Susan. Based in Gulu, Susan brought valuable research experience from her work with organisations such as UNICEF and Save the Children. Her responsibilities included providing critical district-level support, such as reviewing and translating documents, assisting with the identification of research areas and participants, and conducting real-time translations during sessions to enable effective communication with participants. Additionally, two trained counsellors from Thrive Gulu supported the team by establishing ground rules based on participant suggestions, informing participants of their rights and protections, and offering post-session debriefs and long-term counselling services, free of charge. The involvement of Ugandan team members, deeply familiar with the northern region and the broader cultural context, was pivotal in ensuring cultural sensitivity, fostering trust, and bridging gaps arising from my positionality as an *mzungu* (white person) from South Africa.

As an *mzungu* – a local term used for a foreign, white person - conducting research in Uganda, the role of local assistants was thereby invaluable, not just for logistical support but also for fostering trust and rapport with participants. Their familiarity with cultural nuances, such as how to approach people and respectfully engage them, helped bridge the gap between myself and the communities I spoke with. Small gestures, like greeting participants and saying thank you – "Apoyo" - in the local Acholi language were often met with gratitude and warmth, allowing the team to build stronger relationships and gain more meaningful insights. Therefore, the presence of local team members who understood the culture and language, helped to ensure that the research process was conducted with respect and cultural sensitivity, ultimately enhancing the quality of the fieldwork experience.

Finally, in addition to the ethical approval obtained from the University of Pretoria, it was also important to ensure that ethical approval is sought at various levels in Uganda, namely from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) at Makerere University and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). Obtaining ethical approval at these levels entailed a systematic engagement both online and in-person with ethics committees, and took place between late-2022 and continued throughout 2023. Critical within these engagements was also the need to ensure that the study adhered to the Ugandan ethical protocols for conducting research with human participants, particularly during and following the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on feedback from the University of Pretoria, the Makerere School of Social Science's REC, and the UNCST, the research design and approach were meticulously amended to align with both standard and locally-informed ethics

protocols. This collaborative effort ensured that key considerations such as the correct procedure for approaching communities through the local leaders (LC1s) were followed, adequate participant compensation was provided, and sessions were conducted in the most culturally sensitive manner. Moreover, through these consultations, vital connections were established with trained counsellors affiliated with Thrive Gulu, who played a crucial role in assisting with focus group discussions, particularly in the setting of ground rules, providing post-session debriefing, and offering free counselling services to all research participants involved in the study.

Moreover, upon arriving for the first fieldwork visit in 2023, and prior to any data collection taking place, it was also imperative that the research team report to the local district where the research processes would be taking place to be granted permission. This process resulted in a permission letter being issued for the research to go ahead and take place and is a standard procedure to be followed for conducting research in Uganda. Adherence to this protocol is also evident in various studies where fieldwork has been conducted in northern Uganda with a similar focus on the post-conflict reintegration of former child soldiers; the work of Akello (2015: 3) is a noteworthy example.

It is with these ethical principles in mind and embedded within the research process of this thesis that fieldwork engagements in northern Uganda took place in the period between late-November of 2022, through to September of 2024.

4.5. Concluding Remarks - Critical Insights for Conducting Fieldwork in a Post-Conflict Environment

The insights gained during my initial visit to northern Uganda laid a critical foundation for the research that followed. As an *mzungu* (white person) conducting research in a post-conflict setting, my approach demanded not only adherence to established protocols but also the flexibility to adapt in an environment where unpredictability is the norm. The significance of building strong relationships with key stakeholders and participants became immediately clear, as the research process unfolded as a dynamic engagement, rather than a one-sided transaction. It was vital to approach the field not just as a researcher gathering data, but as a learner, collaborating with those who possess everyday knowledge and working towards solutions collectively. Conducting fieldwork in this manner underscores the importance of respect and cultural sensitivity, emphasising that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to research in post-conflict settings. True preparation began when I arrived in the field, as flexibility was essential—schedules shifted unexpectedly, meetings often adapted to the changing conditions, and sometimes, meaningful encounters took place spontaneously. In this way, networks were at the core of the research experience, making it clear that the process of collecting data was as valuable as the data itself. This was particularly evident in the storytelling

traditions of the Acholi people, which offered a unique way of relaying knowledge that could not have been captured through rigid, predefined methods.

The stories I encountered during my fieldwork were essential to understanding the long-term impacts of the conflict, as they encompass deeply personal experiences from returnees, displaced community members, and parents whose children were abducted. Furthermore, insights from organisation members, many of whom grew up during the war and now work in the humanitarian sector, revealed the complex realities of reintegration. Their roles as professionals are intertwined with personal histories, highlighting the ongoing nature of this transition. The perspectives of these individuals—who find themselves both reliving the trauma of the past and working to support others—illustrate how return, reconciliation, and reintegration are deeply embedded in the long-term recovery process. These narratives demonstrate that reintegration is not a straightforward journey, but one shaped by the evolving nature of the conflict and the community's capacity to heal and move forward.

As I transition into the conflict analysis chapter, it becomes crucial to understand these stories in the broader context of history and the war's long-term impacts. The narratives I encountered reflect the distinctive experiences of those on both sides of the conflict, as well as those whose lives continue to be shaped by it. Despite the years that have passed since the fighting ceased, a linear transition between conflict and peace remains elusive, and the reintegration process is far from complete. A recurring theme during fieldwork was the uncertainty around when, or if, reintegration truly ends. Many participants expressed the belief that the conflict has not ended, but rather evolved, leaving behind a complex legacy that continues to shape life in northern Uganda. This idea of ongoing reintegration will be explored further in the next chapter, where I examine how these stories reveal both the immediate and enduring challenges faced by communities still navigating their post-conflict realities.

5. CHAPTER FIVE: Case Study of Northern Uganda's Child Soldiers

5.1. Introduction

In late-November to early December of 2022, my engagement with northern Uganda transcended beyond the observations and insights of others in literature as I was finally able to make my first visit to the country. On this visit, not only was I confronted with the reality of being in the country that I had read about for so long in preparation for conducting my own research, but I was able to acquire insights of my own prior to proceeding with my fieldwork in the northern region of Uganda. During my first few days in Kampala, the lively capital city of Uganda, my thoughts kept going back to reading about the contrast between the developed southern region of the country, and the underdeveloped northern region, where the impacts of the LRA insurgency are most evident. Bearing this imagery in mind, my first trip to the north of Uganda in late-April to May of 2023 was critical in enabling me to not only confront these images that the academic space had so strongly painted of the north, but to also build my own conceptions of this critical space during my experiences in the region and with the insights given through each interaction I had whilst in the field.

On the drive to Gulu, the heavy traffic and bustling energy of Kampala fell away to the vast fields of green and smaller clusters of homesteads. With the beauty of the landscapes unfolding before us, we were also met with more security checkpoints the closer we got to Gulu. Beyond these checkpoints when entering the city, there was little at face-value to suggest that this place was previously one of the epicentres of violent conflict, abductions and displacement. From the lively market center to the road works on every corner, the area appeared to be just like any other growing urban area in the country. However, the history of the area is intertwined in every corner of the city, from signs at the roadside that identified reintegration centres and other remaining NGOs still in the area, to the more subtle stories that we would hear from each passerby throughout our stay. In this way, the conflict was not just a moment in history that was left in the past, but a cornerstone of the everyday lives of those who live in the north.

It is within these everyday stories and realities of those who have (re)built their lives upon their return, and the communities that received them, that one learns of the long-term post-conflict reintegrative experience in northern Uganda. Providing context to the complex history and unfolding events that characterise the LRA conflict, this chapter sets the stage for the narratives drawn from the field by

giving insight into the deeply historical and long-standing tensions that fuelled conflict in the region for nearly two decades and contributed towards the legacy of the north-south divide.

Further, it examines the procedures and partnerships—such as those between the Ugandan military and local actors like religious organisations, LC1s, and reception centers—that facilitated reintegration. These collaborations helped mediate returnees' transition from abduction back to community life. The chapter then delves into the complexities of reintegration, focusing on identity, agency, and belonging through the lens of community acceptance. Mention is then given to the socio-cultural and psychological challenges returnees face when reintegrating into a transformed reality, emphasising the importance of personal and communal reconciliation. Against this backdrop, the chapter argues that the reintegration of returnees in northern Uganda was shaped not only by the conflict but also by the socio-political and cultural disruptions that followed, particularly the displacement of communities into IDP camps. To conclude, the chapter stresses that reintegration is a long-term, multifaceted process requiring sustained support to foster true social acceptance.

5.2. Legacy of the North-South Divide – One Country, Two Realities

The armed conflict between the LRA and the Government of Uganda in northern Uganda, once depicted as the "worst forgotten humanitarian crisis in the world," illustrates the enduring manifestations of unaddressed tensions and divisions of colonial legacies within the country's post-independence transition. Facing the unique dilemma and difficulties of consolidating not only the state, but the people in its borders, the history of Uganda unfolded along a trajectory that directly drew upon the underpinnings of their colonial experience. Consequently, what emerged in the post-colonial political space was an enduring legacy of ethnicised rule, whereby the north and the south of the country continued to be relegated to the roles of their colonial past, fostering what is now regarded as the north-south divide/fault line (ACCS 2013: ix, 6). In the words of Ugandan historian, A. B. K. Kasozi,

> Inequality has been the main source of social conflict in Uganda, generating the structural violence from which all subsequent political, military and civilian violence would erupt (1994: 7).

State formation in Uganda is, in many ways, entangled with their past as a British colony and the indirect, divide-and-rule tactics of their subjugation. The distinguishment between the civil power, vested in the central state, and the customary power of the local state, laid the foundations for the bifurcated state in Uganda, a factor that would endure long after their independence in 1962.

As a mechanism to avoid the disruptive processes of premature modernisation within the Uganda protectorate the British established in 1894, they capitalised on the involvement of Ugandans as their local agents of colonial administration to supplement their own limited manpower in the execution of collecting taxes and extracting forced labour. In southern Uganda, the British identified the kinds of centralized monarchical political systems and networks of administrative chiefs that would support this endeavour. However, in northern Uganda, particularly in Acholiland, such a centralized system was seemingly absent, according to the British. The British imposition could not resonate with the existing decentralised socio-political order, leading to the creation of chiefs who had no native legitimacy in their appointment. In many respects, as expressed by Mamdani, the colonial state "liberated administrative chiefs" from all methods of "institutional constraint, of peers or people." (Mamdani 1996: 43**;** Branch 2011: 47).

The British appointed chiefs in Acholiland who ruled in the name of a fabricated version of Acholi custom, creating a system entirely alien to the indigenous organisation. The traditional leaders in Acholiland, known as *rwodi-moo*, were part of a lineage-based system where chiefs had limited coercive power and decisions were often the result of reconciling various village interests. In respect of the north, this lack of hierarchical authority also meant that the "pacification" of Acholiland was particularly violent and disjointed. The resistance against this authority later adopted the language of tribal custom, setting the stage for political competition to take a tribal form on a national level (Branch 2011: 48). As northern tribes were incorporated into the Uganda Protectorate as districts and the southern kingdoms were given privileges, a stark divide was established. The British recognised the problems arising from this imposition of unchecked power, fearing that it would provoke opposition from those they ruled.

This colonial legacy persisted into the post-independence period, shaping the socio-economic dynamics of northern Uganda. Despite government efforts to promote economic activities like cash cropping, the Acholi region remained underdeveloped, with many Acholi seeking employment in the south or in government service. This reliance on the state for economic advancement created a class dependent on state resources, contrasting with the more economically diverse and privileged southern regions. Moreover, the Acholi's significant involvement in the military was a direct result of British colonial policies. The British recruited heavily from northern Uganda to fill the ranks of the military and police, leveraging these forces to suppress southern rebellions and maintain colonial order. This policy led to an overrepresentation of the Acholi in the security services, alongside their substantial presence in the civil service. While this military involvement provided the Acholi with certain

privileges and access to state resources, it also sowed seeds of future marginalisation and conflict (Cheney 2005: 25; Ehrenreich 1998: 84; Furley 1995: 233; Kasozi 1994: 7; Martin 2009: 15).

Therefore, the exclusion of the Acholi in recent decades must be understood in the context of the privilege they once enjoyed. The British policy of recruiting northerners for the military and police as a cheap labour source (Acker 2004: 341; Human Rights Watch 1997: 9) and their significant representation in the civil service reflects a complex inclusion in the state apparatus. Thus, the roots of the conflict in northern Uganda are deeply embedded in the specific ways the Acholi were incorporated into and later marginalised by the state, a legacy of the colonial era's divisive strategies (Branch 2011: 50). Further, the nature of their incorporation also speaks to how the "structures, institutions and values" that the post-colonial Ugandan state inherited, were ultimately intrinsically insufficient to represent the population of the country in any meaningful or inclusive manner, thereby rendering them, according to Furley (1995: 224, 228, 232) as practically invalid. This would later become evident amidst the complex and often turbulent political transitions to follow following Uganda's independence from the British in 1962.

5.3. Post-Colonial Political Transitions

The beginnings of a Ugandan state were forged through the ceremonial appointment of a Southern president, the Kabaka, a traditional ruler of the Bugandan people, and a Langi from northern Uganda, Milton Obote, as prime minister by the British (SAHO 2011). This arrangement was intended to balance power between the North and the South, reflecting the ethnic and regional divisions that characterised colonial Uganda. Milton Obote through his appointment, first as prime minister and later president, endeavoured to undo the ethnic political fragmentation that underscored the differential treatment that was endemic to the colonial period through the nationalisation of the local government administration, namely to make it a "tool of national unification instead of tribal particularism (Branch 2011: 54). These aspirations, albeit to a limited degree, led to the creation of national civil service in place of the pre-existing tribal-based institutions forged during colonialism. At the basis of these endeavours would be the requirement of modifying the system of indirect rule that became central to the functioning of the protectorate under British colonial rule. Despite the potential for support for the detribalisation of the state, Obote's deliberate exclusion of the peasantry, use of the central state as a tool for a top-down reform of national and local politics, and creation of a "patronage machine" in northern Uganda, particularly within Acholiland and Lango, inadvertently reintroduced a new north-south cleavage with the north emerging on top. Further, his actions went against the national equalisation that were initially proclaimed and, rather, consolidated tribal privilege and its role in politics (Branch 2011: 55 - 56).

Obote's appointment of those from his own ethnic group, Lango, in key positions of the Civil Service and Armed Forces was a means of ensuring that the Kabaka, and their alliance with the Buganda-educated elite did not overwhelm the positions in government. These appointments did not settle well with the Buganda, as they were then alienated, sparking a deterioration of Obote's relationship with the Kabaka (SAHO 2011). Not long following this power-sharing appointment Obote declared a state of emergency, suspending the constitution, overthrowing the Kabaka, and ascending to the presidency in 1966 (Herbst 1990: 128; SAHO 2011; Temmerman 2001: vii). This set the stage for an ongoing political power-play between the northern and southern political elites (Furley 1995: 233).

Following nine years of Obote's take-over of the presidency, Idi Amin, an army commander, overthrew the president in 1971. This overthrow can be seen to stem from the surges of ethnic violence that exacerbated socio-economic divisions, and an unsuccessful attempt by Obote to impose a system of one-party rule, to 'unify' Ugandans (Human Rights Watch 1997: 9). Amin, from the Kakwa ethnic group, declared to put an end to the ethnic favouritism that the Acholi and Langi enjoyed under Obote's rule, purged them from the army and filled the ranks with troops from the West Nile region (Branch 2011: 57). Amin subsequently sent out death squads, who slaughtered hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and replaced them with those of similar ethnic and cultural linkages as him (Human Rights Watch 1997: 62–63). The distinctive militarised nature of the state under Amin's presidency and the predominant use of military force to displace appointed chiefs in the north and to launch a series of violent political purges of Acholi and Lango districts[13] "descended Uganda into chaos" (Furley 1995: 234; Uganda Rising 2006).

The Tanzanian military, in conjunction with the Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA) and Ugandan rebels, including Yoweri Museveni, led a successful coup against Amin. In the period following the coup, elections were held, and in 1979, Obote assumed presidential power once more and the Acholi were incorporated, once more, into the Obote II government, primarily in the military (Branch 2011: 58). The elections were called into question by Museveni, who felt they were rigged. This led to Museveni going underground to the bush and building what would become the National Resistance Army (Uganda Rising 2006; Human Rights Watch 1997: 9). As a retaliation to the claim by the NRA, that they would "radically change a system of institutional violence," Obote set out on a "murderous cleansing operation," killing approximately 300,000 people (Temmerman 2001: viii).

The cycle of violence and retribution continued as the political landscape in Uganda remained fraught with ethnic tensions. At this time, Obote's Acholi-Langi alliance became fraught with tensions as

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[13] In 1977, the Amin regime committed one of the largest large-scale killings of northerners in Acholiland and Lango, amounting to over 10,000 people (Branch 2011: 57).

Acholi troops accused Obote of favouring Langi within officer positions, while the Acholi were used as "cannon fodder" (Branch 2011: 58). By July of 1985, a successful coup, was led by Bazilio Okello and Obote's own army officer, Tito Okello, who would then rule the country for a subsequent 6 months. Despite peace talks with the NRA and the proposition of the Nairobi Peace Accord, tensions and accusations uprooted the peace, and sparked fights that led to Museveni and the NRA gaining control of Kampala on January 26, 1986 (Human Rights Watch 1997: 9–10; Martin 2009: 16). Due to the long-standing nature of "ethnic purges and reprisals," Okello's rebels, in fear of retributions, either retreated north towards the Southern Sudanese border or towards Gulu and Kitgum. However, with the arrival of the NRA in the north, many UNLA forces in the towns withdrew, with some retreating to their local villages and others joining their commanders in Sudan, leaving the NRA to gain a foothold in the sub-region. Under Museveni's administration, calls for disarmament with the return of weapons to the government took place, with some ex-soldiers complying, and others not. Those that did not comply, joined forces with other opponents to Museveni's administration, creating a new rebel movement, the Uganda People's Democratic Army/Movement (UPDA), and beginning infiltrations into the country in 1986. The NRA soon became the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) (Acker 2004: 339; Human Rights Watch 1997: 10; Uganda Rising 2006).

The ascendance of the NRA to the presidency in 1986 not only marked the end of "25 years of northern rule," but also set the stage for the subsequent internal instability within the north and central place for the north-south divide in national politics (Branch 2011: 58 - 60). The 'Northern Question' – a term coined by A.G.G. Gingyera-Pinycwa – traces the origins of the concern for northern power to the late 1970s and early 1980s, whereby southern Ugandans in exile sought to remove northerners from national power as a requirement to "establish a new national equalisation and end northern military dictatorship (Branch 2011: 60; Gingyera-Pincywa 1989: 53). Serving as basis for the NRA's expansion of support in Luwero and later throughout the south of Uganda, these sentiments provided a foundation for the framing of the upcoming conflict, as a "struggle to throw out the north in favour of the south" (Branch 2011: 60). The Acholi population were thereby cast with the same lens as the Acholi troops, showcasing how the NRA's actions in the region continued to frame the enemy around ethnicity, rather than "a population torn apart by internal conflict" (Branch 2011: 63).

The internal crisis that emerged in Acholiland not only stemmed from the severing of the Acholi's political links and connection to the national state but also drew upon the breakdown of traditional authority within Acholi society. Further, the floods of armed and "undisciplined" young Acholi men from the UNLA forces "threw the internal order into crisis" as their return prompted a significant change to the male lineage-based authorities and elders that guided society (Branch 2010: 25; Dubal

2018: 16). In response, many lineage-based authorities sought to secure their position through appealing to Acholi tradition. As such, many claimed that Acholi tradition demanded that the UNLA returnees should undergo cleansing rituals to rid returnees of the cen that they possessed. As anthropologist Heike Behrend explains, returnees were regarded as the "cause of all evil, alien to those who had remained at home" (Behrend 1999: 2). Their acts of plunder, torture and murder during the civil war rendered them of "impure heart;" plagued by cen - the spirits of those they killed (*ibid:* 2). This dynamic is echoed in the later LRA conflict, where similar cleansing rituals were required for child returnees, highlighting the persistent and deep-seated fears surrounding the return of individuals who had been involved in violence. As the Acholi regard cen as not only bringing harm to the individual but also their community, lineage-based authorities asserted their exclusive capacity to ritually cleanse the returning soldiers, positioning themselves as the principal arbiters of internal power. However, many returnees refused to conform to these demands, introducing explosive tensions into the already fragile internal social and political order (Dubal 2018: 17 - 18).

The disintegration of the UPDA in early 1987, amid escalating violence, internal strife and a breakdown of moral order in Acholi society, paved the way for Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) to emerge as a unifying force against both internal and external threats. Lakwena's HSM, depicted as a peaceful group, led by a "witch of the north," sought to correct the perceived "sins: of the Acholi, restore purity and cure them from cen – evil spirits – due to the violent past in the region (Dubal 2018: 17; Behrend 1999: 2; Human Rights Watch 1997: 10 – 11, 65). Lakwena's spiritual discourse of cleansing not only sought to address the internal crisis of the Acholi region but also challenged the traditional Acholi lineage-based authorities by offering an alternative path to purification for ex-members of the UNLA and UPDA. Despite some initial support from these authorities, who saw her as a means to discipline the errant factions, the alliance was fragile. Lakwena's movement grew by recruiting from War Mobilization Committees and amassing an army of up to 10,000 troops. Her campaign aimed to cleanse and unify Acholi society while combating the NRA. Before going into battle against the government troops, Lakwena would smear oil onto the soldiers' bodies to deter bullets, and they would enter battle with branches and singing hymns. However, internal fractures within the rebel factions and the emergence of other spirit-led movements, including Joseph Kony's, led to increased violence in Acholiland. Despite garnering support in regions disillusioned with the NRA's rule, upon crossing into the south, the HSM was perceived as a northern invasion. This led to its rapid disintegration under the combined assault of NRA forces, local defense units, and civilian resistance (Human Rights Watch 1997: 11; Temmerman 2001: 150).

Following Lakwena's departure from Acholiland, the region saw intensified conflict among the remaining rebel factions, with civilians caught in the crossfire. The NRA's strategy of abandoning the Acholi to rebel violence further alienated the population, creating a leadership vacuum and widespread disillusionment. This chaotic environment facilitated the rise of Joseph Kony, Lakwena's relative, who proclaimed to inherit Lakwena's spiritual direction, aiming to cleanse the Acholi people of evil sins, overthrow the Museveni government, and establish a new moral order based on his Ten Commandments (Acker 2004: 349; Finnström 2008: 5; Human Rights Watch 1997: 10–11, 65). This new order aimed to counter Uganda's post-colonial violence by removing leadership that only plays to the interests of the Southern population (Finnström 2008: 5; Human Rights Watch 1997: 30-31).

Despite Kony's proclamation of operating as a messenger of God and carrying out orders in support of the interests of the Acholi, he faced a significant deficit of volunteers and support. To address this "agency loss," he resorted to blatant violence, coercion, and the forced recruitment of children, abducting over 70,000 to sustain his movement (Branch 2011: 68; Acker 2004: 349; Human Rights Watch 1997: 11). Through being taken by force – *mako tek* - Kony endeavoured to cultivate the "ideal" child soldier out of abductees, believing it was "easier to build strong children than repair broken men" (Uganda rising 2006; Allen *et al.* 2020: 667). As Mr. Ogaba Joseph from the War Affected Youth's Association (WAYA) explains, children were targeted because the LRA knew they could be more easily controlled than elders by corrupting their minds through rigorous training. Knowing this, the LRA targeted children for this purpose as, according to Mr. Ogaba Joseph, they could "get them easily; they can obey them; they can instil fear into them to do whatever they want" (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023). To achieve this, the LRA employed socialisation methods designed to physically subdue the child and compel submission to their new reality, identity, and social space. The government's passive stance to the north amidst these developments exacerbated the situation, leaving Acholi civilians without protection, unable to support either the rebels or the NRA, and trapped in a cycle of violence and instability.

5.4. Forging a New Generation of Child Soldiers – Negative Socialisation Methods of the LRA

Raised a Catholic, Joseph Kony's leadership centred around his role as a messenger and disciple of God, as well as a medium for the various spirits he became possessed by – "Juma Oris, Silli Silindi (a female spirit), Jim Brickey, and Ing Chu, among others" (Dubal 2018: 18; Vermeij 2011: 178 - 179). The nature of these spirits is often one of debate, particularly as to whether the spirits are holy spirits (*tipu maleng*), or a *jok*[14]; one that is often regarded as vengeful and thereby simultaneously

[14] A Jok is a type of spirit that is derived from an important figure within pre-Christian, precolonial Acholi religions. Joks are often attributed as vengeful, immoral and "bad" spirits that many evangelical Christians equate as the

feared and respected amongst the Acholi (Dubal 2018: 55). The conflict in whether Kony was directed by *tipu maleng* or a *jok* is captured in Dubal's engagement with Matayo, who expresses that "Some say Kony doesn't have *tipu maleng*, but I know he does. They say he has *jok*, but that's a lie. Kony has *tipu maleng*." In expressing this, Matayo clearly distinguishes between the two types of spirits and notes the ways in which *tipu* and *jok* inhabit the body. In his perspective, Kony was a 'person filled with heart/spirit/mind' (*dano ma opong ki cwiny*." This is suggestive of the presence of *tipu*, as he did not regard Kony as a person that is "possessed" (*ido*) by *jok* (Dubal 2018: 56). Rather, as is indicative in a conversation Dubal had with Labwor, a former rebel, Kony is still viewed as a human being; a person just like you and me. However, he works "not for himself, but follows the spirit's rules like we do." Therefore, when a commander or rebel dies, their death is viewed as being the result of the will of the spirit, not Kony, because, as stated by Labwor, "Kony doesn't fight in a worldly manner" (Dubal 2018: 18). Kony's spirits thereby informed the actions of the LRA and, in particular, issued the prophecies behind his teachings, directed fasts, and, critically, moulded the manner of socialising recruits/abductees into a new way of being in the bush – *lum* (Vermeij 2011: 46, 178; Acker 2004: 349; Finnström 2008: 5; Gates 2011: 44; Wood 2008: 546).

In the LRA's "army of children" (Zyck 2011: 174), the boundary between childhood as an apolitical space and the harsh reality of warfare is erased (Lorschiedter & Bannink-Mbazzi 2012: 243-244). Socialisation plays a crucial role in preventing desertion and ensuring that children remain loyal to the LRA, serving as the "glue that keeps the LRA together as a cohesive group" (Vermeij 2011: 174-175). Through this process, child soldiers not only learn new roles but also internalise a new set of norms, identities, and behaviours. This fosters their integration, allegiance, loyalty, and sense of belonging within the LRA (Checkel 2005: 804; Gates 2011: 30; Özerdem & Podder 2011a: 13; Özerdem & Podder 2011b: 311; Vermeij 2011: 182).

Socialisation is "the process of inducting new actors into the norms, rules, and ways of behaviour of a given community," with the goal of internalization (Checkel 2010: 12; Gates 2011: 43). This process vacillates between different methods of learning and teaching, primarily targeting "naïve individuals"—those particularly susceptible to outside influence, who can easily be taught "new skills, behaviour patterns, values, and motivations" (Grusec & Hastings 2007: 13; Podder 2011: 176). Child abductees fit this profile (Gates 2011: 45; Özerdem & Podder 2011a: 1; Podder 2011: 176; Vermeij 2011: 27). These intentions behind the abduction of children were similarly captured in a statement made by a participant in the study of Aijazi *et al*. (2019: 3), who noted that children were

manifestation of Satan.

abducted as they could grow and adjust into the system, similar to how "a child starts in the nursery, they grow into primary and secondary school and university." This susceptibility of children to thereby become the soldiers the LRA sought to create, thereby enabled commanders to harden them and replace their "longing for home" with a "loyalty to the movement" (Aijazi *et al.* 2019: 3).

The indoctrination of these children into the LRA is a complex process, employing both formal and informal components, ranging from strategic fear and violence to indirect forms of misinformation, spiritual training, and incentivisation (Blattman 2007: 18; Vermeij 2011: 184). Critical to the LRA's successful socialisation of new "recruits" was their facilitation of a complex renegotiation of their identity, beliefs and belonging through the creation of "behavioural spaces removed from the norm" (Özerdem & Podder 2011a: 13; Özerdem & Podder 2011b: 311). In these spaces, the LRA forged a rebel identity, as well as fostered a network of social relationships that went beyond mere cooperation and compliance to entail a transformation that would endure long-term (Gates 2011: 40, 43).

5.4.1. Initiation into the LRA

The violent nature of abduction marks the harsh transition from life at home to life in the bush—*lum*—serving as the first brutal socialisation process that recruits encounter. The LRA capitalised on ritualized violence, forcing children to kill close relatives and community members, as well as loot and burn their properties to sustain the group's survival. Mr. Ogaba Joseph from WAYA, a former child soldier, explained, "You are forced to kill your momma, your daddy, your relative that you know… And, imagine you kill one, it haunts you. What about if you kill many? And, it's not your enemy, this is a person you know; it's an innocent person." The commanders' relentless coercion to commit such atrocities severed recruits' ties to their former lives, both figuratively and physically. Participation in this violence was not a matter of choice but a necessity for survival within the LRA, as commanders made it clear: "You kill, you are a soldier, you kill" (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023).

This violence was not only directed toward community members but also permeated the dynamic of new recruits as they endured the gruelling and unrelenting marches upon their abduction. Burdened with carrying looted supplies for the group, any defiance or failure to keep pace not only risked violence against the individual recruit but also brought collective punishment upon the group. Other recruits were compelled to administer beatings, and canings, or even kill those who faltered. This practice fostered an environment where individual actions and defiance endangered the entire group, forging bonds rooted not only in fear but in a grim dependency. As their realities became critically intertwined, survival hinged on mutual compliance. As noted by a participant in the study of Aijazi et al. (2019: 4), "In the LRA, you can't just wake up and leave... every decision you make, you factor

in how it will affect you and your life, every decision affects your life as it is confined within the LRA." This insight underscores the profound extent of the LRA's control, revealing how its violence and strictures permeated every aspect of life, rendering escape or rebellion exceedingly difficult.

These brutal initiation tactics were designed not only to physically and psychologically subdue recruits under a blanket of fear but also to ensure that those who survived this initial ordeal were the ones most likely to comply and whose beliefs, perceptions, and morals could be reoriented to align with the LRA's ideology (Høiskar 2001: 343). As recruits progressed through this harsh initiation, they began to adapt to their new circumstances. One former recruit reflected on this shift, saying, "Initially, for the start, I found life very hard there… But then, eventually, I got used to life. Life now got very easy for me there and even I didn't want now to come back, but to stay there, because there obviously you get free things" (Interview Former Commander, Gulu 2023). The perception of life in the bush transformed from one of extreme difficulty to a more manageable existence, where the availability of resources and the relative comfort of their new environment became apparent.

This reorientation was further cemented in the process of 'boot camp,' where intense military training instilled a soldier's identity into recruits (Gates 2011: 44; Vermeij 2011: 176). During boot camp, abductees were trained to acquire the necessary skills to "perform maximally" in their roles as child soldiers (Vermeij 2011: 177-178). These roles extended beyond traditional military functions to include positions as medical personnel, cooks, porters, and even *ting tings*—wives to commanders (Vermeij 2011: 177). Through acquiring these new skills and roles, abductees gained a perverse sense of purpose within the LRA.

The informal socialisation following boot camp, including welcome ceremonies where new members are registered, involves the symbolic "shedding" of the child's prior identity to be "reborn" as a child soldier. This process mirrors traditional coming-of-age ceremonies within one's community, signifying how the LRA sought to create a parallel rite of passage. By doing so, they aimed to instil an alternative set of norms for recruits to live by, reflecting a deliberate attempt to replicate and distort familiar cultural practices (Angucia 2014: 363; Cheney 2005: 37; Gates 2011: 36, 43-44; Özerdem & Podder 2011b: 311; Özerdem & Podder 2011a: 3, 15; Vermeij 2011: 176, 184-185; Slim 2008).

The re-identification process, which includes the smearing of shea nut butter and holy water on recruits' bodies, echoes Lakwena's symbolic rituals designed to locate and protect recruits from bullets (Human Rights Watch 1997: 11; Temmerman 2001: 150; Vermeij 2011: 176-177). After this ceremony, recruits are isolated, guarded, and instructed not to wash for several days—three for boys and four for girls—highlighting a ritualistic cleansing that resonates with spiritual newborn practices

among the Acholi in northern Uganda (Vermeij 2011: 177). These practices underscore how the LRA manipulated traditional cultural values to serve their purposes in the bush (Angucia 2009: 92), aligning with the group's broader use of spirituality and faith as socialisation tactics to bind the recruits through shared beliefs and determine the rules and behavioural conduct to guide themselves by (Acker 2004: 349; Finnstrom 2008: 5; Gates 2011: 44; Wood 2008: 546; Vermeij 2011: 178).

The appropriate behavioural patterns and conduct expected of recruits align with the northern Ugandan principle of *mpisa*, emphasising respect for those higher up in the organisational hierarchy. As recruits or abductees enter at the bottom, they are taught to respect integrated LRA rebels. Any behaviour that fails to meet the expectations of life in the bush is subject to being "reported and punished" (Vermeij 2011: 179-180). This system of social control, enforced by seniors and elders, mirrors the dynamics within their home communities. Thus, life in the bush, though perceived by outsiders as entirely alien and inhumane, often mirrored and distorted the cultural practices of home, challenging the notion that it was wholly divorced from the recruits' previous lives.

5.4.2. Familial and Social Networks of Belonging in the LRA

The LRA maintains cohesion and minimises tension through a strict hierarchical system where new abductees begin at the lowest ranks but can ascend through "correct behaviour" (Vermeij 2011: 179). Successful integration is rewarded with leadership roles, such as mentoring and integrating "their own group of new abductees" (Vermeij 2011: 179), which not only benefits the child but also motivates them to remain with the group and strive for higher ranks (Gates & Nordås 2010: 2). As children navigate and rise through these ranks, they exercise agency by negotiating new "peer pressures and power relationships," demonstrating more than just the thin or ambiguous agency often associated with children "at risk" (Özerdem & Podder 2011a: 13). Their actions become integral to the group's functioning, and they assume responsibilities akin to those of adult soldiers (Høiskar 2001: 342).

This hierarchical and familial structure is exemplified by the LRA's organisation, which operates as a military-familial unit where each commander is seen as a 'father' to the new recruits, and the most senior wife assumes the role of 'mother,' thereby reinforcing the familial bonds and hierarchical relationships within the group (Aijazi *et al*. 2019: 3). These mechanisms foster a sense of belonging within the LRA, with rebels beginning to see the group as a "new family," where comrades treat each other like brothers and sisters, offering protection and care (Vermeij 2011: 179; Wood 2008: 546). The notion of "fighting for your brothers" strengthens comradeship and builds a sense of community (Gates 2011: 41-42), and former abductees often recount their time in the bush using terms like "we"

versus “them,” highlighting their solidarity within the group and disconnect from the “outside” world (Angucia 2009: 93).

Makamoi – a former LA rebel interviewed in Dubal’s 2018 study –brings focus to this deep sense of belonging as he reflects on his time with the LRA, noting how the rebels became his new clan: “I feel as if I’ve left my clan *[kaka]* and am staying far away in a foreign land *[rok],* not in my clan. . . . I still find life hard. If I were to decide again, I would choose to stay with my clan [the LRA]” (Dubal 2018: 173). His words reveal how the LRA, in many cases, usurped the bonds individuals had at home, offering a new kinship system that, for some, replaced the one they had lost. While this was not necessarily the case for all rebels, particularly depending on the time spent in captivity, it highlights the level of dissociation and re-socialisation that took place during their time in the bush (*lum*). Similarly, Musa, who returned in the early 2010s, provides a nostalgic account of the brotherhood and sisterhood that he witnessed in the *lum*. Musa emphasises how people were unified and cared for one another, whereas, in his account, “this doesn’t happen at home – people only care for their own kids… there’s a lot of jealously among people, people aren’t united, and they work on their own” (Dubal 2018: 173). Despite the violent initiation that abductees encountered, the forging of bonds in particular cases became stronger than any biological ties back home (Dubal 2018: 173). It is within this environment that former rebels uphold that it was within the LRA where they learned how to stay with people and socialise with those from different “walks of life” (Dubal 2018: 174).

The forging of these relationships within the LRA was not solely about survival; they were also about control and power hierarchies. Commanders fostered ties with recruits, creating a dependency that reinforced their authority. These relationships, while coercive, provided structure and belonging in an otherwise chaotic environment. The bonds that developed were complex, as recruits navigated a dual reality of being both victims and participants in the LRA’s power dynamics. For many, particularly child mothers, this meant a profound transformation in identity and role as they left children but, often involuntarily, became wives and mothers (Andersson 2007: 4).

The true complexity of LRA belonging, relationships, and identity was more evident away from the battlefield, taking shape within their established bases. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) established well-defined bases in Kafia Kingi – a disputed territory between South Sudan and Sudan, and in the Garamba National Park in the DRC, demonstrating that their operations extended beyond mere guerrilla tactics (Allen 2023: 13, 16; Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative 2013). These bases, equipped with infrastructure and logistical networks, revealed that the LRA was a more organized and strategic force than a transient group moving aimlessly through the bush, reflecting a

sophisticated structure with dedicated homes and operational hubs. In South Sudan, the LRA's bases included Kafia Kingi, which served as a critical stronghold, while the Garamba National Park in the DRC provided a remote sanctuary crucial for regrouping and planning (Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative 2013: 4; Titeca 2020: 5).

With young boys, often from the age of 10, constituting the bulk of the LRA's fighting force, young girls typically undertook the role of domestic servants (*ting tings*) to the commanders' wives; reinforcing the "social norms and gendered biases deeply rooted in the patriarchal structure of Uganda's culture" (Hatcher 2019: 1). The distribution of these girls was managed by high command, often Kony himself. Girls who were premenstrual were typically taken to a commander's home to serve as a *ting ting* and be a caregiver to their children, as well as assist their wives in the home. In this role, *ting tings* were instructed to call the commander 'father.' However, upon reaching menstruation and being capable of producing children, their status in the LRA would shift. The formation of permanent bases, such as those in Kafia Kingi and Garamba, facilitated the parade of these girls before officers, who would select them based on their descending seniority, further entrenching the group's structured and hierarchical system of control (Borzello 2007: 397). Former *ting tings* of commanders could also become their wives after this biological shift, or they would be given to one of his escorts.

Upon becoming a wife, their role within the home changed significantly. They were no longer simply caregivers but entered into a complex social structure as one of the co-wives (*nyeggi*), (Dubal 2018: 162) forming deep bonds not only with the commander but also with the other wives. These co-wives often shared responsibilities, raising children fathered by the same commander, creating a network of relationships that resembled familial ties. This expanded the nature of their relationships within the LRA, reinforcing the idea that they were part of a larger, communal family, bound together by shared roles and experiences within the group's rigid hierarchy.

The allocation of wives, or '*ting tings*,' was a deliberate process to reward loyalty and solidify power. In some cases, male rebels acquired wives through personal relationships, such as falling in love with a caregiver, or by appealing to their commanders for a wife. However, others were simply assigned a wife by command, with no choice or consideration for their personal preferences. Nevertheless, only those considered as "loyal, hardworking and obedient" within the LRA were ultimately given the "right to take a wife," at their commander's discretion (Aijazi *et al*. 2019: 4). Speaking to the application of these rules, Richard, a former Brigade commander, noted that "at times it was like home, depending on status and who you were you were free to speak your mind, and it was respected"

(Aijazi *et al.* 2019: 4). This reflects how personal dynamics could influence the rigid structures of the LRA.

Moreover, the LRA's regulation of marriage also aimed to enforce moral purity and prevent the desertion of soldiers. In particular, sexual intercourse outside marriage was strictly forbidden and was enforced strongly through public forms of punishment, humiliation and even execution of those who violated this conduct. As one participant noted, the enforcement of marriage rules was partly to curb rivalries and maintain morale by reducing the potential for jealousy and discontent among soldiers over women (Aijazi *et al.* 2019: 5). However, beyond this, these rules intended to promote a form of moral purity and the creation of a 'new' and superior Acholi nation, reinforcing the ideological underpinnings of the LRA's control and organisation. In this network of control, the allocation of wives and ting tings further complicated social dynamics in the LRA and entrenched the level of mutual dependency between rebels. Wives were symbols of status and control, and for many young girls, the transition from recruit to wife and mother marked a significant shift in their lives, complicating their sense of belonging and entrenching them deeper within the LRA's social hierarchy. As these young mothers navigated the complexities of forced marriages and motherhood within the LRA, their children—born into a world of conflict and captivity—faced an entirely different set of challenges, growing up in an environment where war was all they knew.

5.4.2.1. Children Born in Captivity – Childhood Forged in Conflict

The realities of children born in captivity under the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda represent a unique and harrowing departure from what is conventionally understood as childhood. For these children, the bush and war were not merely interruptions in their lives but the very foundation of their existence. They were born to abducted girls—often still in their early teens—who had been forced into marriages with LRA commanders and soldiers. This environment shaped their identities, creating a reality where the hardships of war were not just experienced but were normalised to the point where suffering, fear, and instability became the only constants.

One young woman, now a law student, vividly recalls her early life in captivity: "Being a child born in captivity, it's like a wildflower. You just, you're growing in a certain place. So many things become so normal to you, because you have never seen the other side of the world" (Focus Group CBOW 2023). For her, basic necessities such as food and water were luxuries that were often unavailable, and the constant threat of violence was an accepted part of life. "You get into an ambush and you see some of your siblings and your other members dying and that was normal to me as a child," she explains, highlighting the desensitisation to violence that was an intrinsic part of her upbringing

(Focus Group CBOW 2023). The frequent displacement, walking long distances, and witnessing death, including the loss of siblings, were all elements of a childhood marked by relentless survival.

The girl's account reveals how her mother's stories of "home"—a place of peace, plenty, and stability—were a source of both hope and torment. Despite the unimaginable hardships, she clung to the belief that there was a better life outside of the horrors she knew: "As I grew up, I also developed this thing that, 'oh, what we are going through, this is not normal. There's a better place somewhere'" (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This yearning for an unknown home, fuelled by her mother's descriptions, underscores the psychological duality faced by children born in captivity—caught between the brutal reality of their lives and the imagined peace of a world they had never seen.

The identities of these children were inextricably linked to the LRA's social structure, where their parents' statuses, forged through violence and survival, dictated their own. As children of abducted girls and boys who had risen in the ranks, they were born into a hierarchy where survival often depended on their parents' ability to navigate the complex social dynamics of the LRA. Their very existence was a testament to the LRA's brutal reshaping of familial and social bonds, where even the concept of childhood was co-opted into the broader machinery of war.

The lives of children born in captivity under the LRA highlight the deep scars left by a conflict that upended traditional notions of childhood and identity. As these children grew up amidst violence and instability, their experiences were shaped by the harsh realities of a war that seemed endless. However, as the conflict dragged on, efforts to bring about peace and restore a sense of normalcy to northern Uganda gained momentum.

5.5. Toward Resolution – Initiatives to Dismantle the LRA and Restore "Peace" in northern Uganda

Efforts to resolve the conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government were characterised by a series of diplomatic, military, and policy initiatives, ultimately falling short of a comprehensive resolution. The government's approach combined both peace negotiations and military operations, reflecting a strategy that oscillated between dialogue and force.

The peace process began in earnest in 1994 under Ugandan Minister Betty Bigombe, which momentarily reduced LRA atrocities, and aimed to explore reconciliation and reintegration of the LRA into Acholi society (Uganda Rising 2006). However, these early negotiations, as well as subsequent efforts in 1997 and 2000, failed as President Yoweri Museveni, who preferred military solutions, dismissed diplomatic efforts. Museveni asserted, "I know there are those who think you can talk, and the problem just gets solved by talking, unfortunately, I don't agree with that. Sometimes

you may have to use force to solve the problem" (Uganda Rising 2006). By the late 1990s, the Ugandan government, pressured by both civil society and the international community, shifted tactics.

By the late 1990s, the dynamics of the conflict additionally shifted when the Sudanese government supported the LRA, including arms supplies, in response to Museveni's backing of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) (Vinci 2007: 339). In August 2001, Sudanese President Omar Bashir ceased support for the LRA, prompting Museveni to withdraw SPLA funding in January 2002 (Vinci 2007: 340). The ending of the Sudanese Civil War was the catalyst for decreasing Sudanese support for the LRA; a strategic tactic by the government to use the LRA as a proxy tool against the SPLA (Vinci 2007: 340). In the early 2000s, the Ugandan government employed a two-pronged strategy, blending military operations with attempts at negotiation. This shift in Sudanese politics, coupled with the tendency for military solutions, prompted the Ugandan government to launch Operation Iron Fist in 2002 and its follow-up, Operation Iron Fist II (2003-2004). These operations aimed to dismantle LRA strongholds in southern Sudan, leading to the fragmentation and dispersal of the LRA into smaller, more mobile units, provoking intensified cross-border attacks and a surge in abductions as LRA factions sought refuge and continued their insurgency (Smith 2012; Vinci 2007: 340-341).

Concurrently, the Amnesty Act of 2000 was introduced to incentivise defections among insurgents by offering amnesty and resettlement packages, including essential provisions like mattresses and tools (Human Rights Watch 2005), to facilitate their reintegration into society. The Act's promise was articulated as follows: "Any Ugandan wishing to abandon rebellion after participating in combat, collaboration with perpetrators of violence, committing crimes that furthered the war or assisting or aiding the conduct of war will be granted amnesty, without risk of criminal prosecution or punishment in a national court for offences related to the insurgency" (Maina 2011). The Amnesty Act was communicated widely through media campaigns such as Mega FM's Dwong cen Paco ('comeback home'), which successfully encouraged some defection among LRA combatants, including abducted children and youth (Suarez & Baines 2022: 9). By 2005, the Amnesty Act had led to the registration and surrender of more than 15,000 insurgents (Suarez & Baines 2022: 9; Borzello 2007: 399).

The Amnesty Act's focus on demobilisation and its emphasis on restorative justice over punitive measures are subjects of considerable debate. Some critics argue that its execution was inherently top-down, lacking sufficient community consultation and failing to align with Acholi traditional justice mechanisms, which emphasise accountability, atonement, and healing. In contrast, Prime Minister Ker Kwaro Acholi views the Amnesty Act as part of "African ways of life," reflecting

traditional restorative values (Interview Prime Minister Ker Kwaro Acholi, Gulu 2023). Despite these differing perspectives, the Act's implementation fell short in addressing community integration needs (Suarez & Baines 2022). The resettlement packages and certificates provided to returnees offered only a superficial resolution to the profound impacts of abduction and violence. This was compounded by the selective nature of resettlement benefits, which did not adequately address the severe socio-economic challenges faced by communities displaced into IDP camps. Consequently, while the Amnesty Act succeeded in demobilising LRA members, it failed to prepare Acholi communities for the reintegration of returnees, leaving many without adequate support and underscoring the need for a more comprehensive approach to reconciliation and reintegration (Maina 2011: 22; Suarez & Baines 2022: 9).

Amid efforts to implement the Amnesty Act, the escalating violence and humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda attracted significant international attention. The UN Emergency Humanitarian Coordinator, Jan Egeland, described the situation as one of the worst humanitarian disasters globally (Borzello 2007: 388). This heightened crisis led to increased international pressure on the Ugandan government to pursue a negotiated resolution, despite President Museveni's inclination towards military solutions.

The Juba Peace Talks began in 2006, mediated by the southern Sudanese government, and initially resulted in a temporary Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. Reflecting on his involvement during this period, the current executive director of Caritas Gulu Archdiocese, Mr. John Bosco Komakech Aludi, recalls how he personally participated in coordinating the distribution of food and non-food items to rightful beneficiaries within rebels camps in two areas - Owinyu-Kibul and Garamba. Additionally, his critical assistance encompassed psychological support as he provided counselling and sought to build rapport with those in the camps. He would tell them, "Yes, despite the fact that you committed atrocities against your own people, we still love you and we need your life'" (Interview Caritas, Gulu 2023).

Providing insight from within the side of the rebels is a former commander in the LRA, M**,** who was abducted in 1994 and returned home in 2000. M critically chose to return to the bush specifically to engage in the Juba Peace talks. Operating out of Garamba National Park, near the Nabanga stream in the Central African Republic, M notes how he was involved in maintain contact with Vincent Otti and Joseph Kony. His account sheds light on the internal dynamics of the peace process, as he critically asserts, "We were the ones who actually initiated the Juba Peace Talks," a statement that contrasts with narratives portraying Joseph Kony as reluctant to engage in the peace process. These networks of communication and humanitarian aid not only facilitated dialogue but also amplified the

messages of Amnesty, providing incentives for rebels to return home. In the words of Mr. Komakech Aludi, "Reintegration started way back from there" (Interview Caritas, Gulu 2023).

Navigating these dynamics, both within the rebel camps, as well as across the various peace and demobilisation processes underway, was, in many respects, regarded as not a job to be undertaken alone. Reflecting on this period, community members consistently emphasise the collective nature of the peace efforts, highlighting that it was a "joint hands thing" involving multiple actors. As one focus group in Pece Laroo (2023) expressed, "Even the government worked hard because others from the government went up to the bush for peace talks with Kony, which gave the children a lot of desire to escape." This collaborative approach was instrumental in encouraging abductees to return, reinforcing the belief that the peace process, though fraught with challenges, was making progress. However, despite the reduction in violence following the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, it was not a definitive resolution. M, a former LRA commander, echoes this sentiment, noting that the peace talks ended "not in a formal way," underscoring the incomplete nature of the peace process and the lingering uncertainties that persisted even after the cessation of active conflict (Interview Former Commander, Gulu 2023).

The Juba Peace Talks ultimately collapsed when Joseph Kony refused to sign the final agreement, largely due to concerns over the ICC arrest warrants for top LRA commanders (Brown 2009: 175; Eskandarpour 2013: 159 – 160; Martin 2009: 23). The involvement of the ICC complicated the peace process and was seen as a significant deterrent to Kony's participation in negotiations (Borzello 2007). This failure prompted the LRA to strategically relocate its operations to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR), where they continued their insurgency, perpetuating violence and displacement, affecting over 150,000 people (Smith 2012; Vinci 2007). The LRA's strategic movements and continued recruitment highlighted the persistent challenges of achieving a comprehensive and lasting peace.

Despite these setbacks, the period did lay the groundwork for the return and reintegration of many LRA members. However, as the transition from life in the bush to life at home began, it became evident that the reintegration process was complex and fraught with difficulties. The experiences of returnees were diverse, shaped by factors such as the nature of their time in captivity, the support they received from their communities, and the broader socio-political environment. These early demobilisation efforts set the stage for the long and arduous journey for reintegration that many former LRA members would face as they sought to rebuild their lives and re-establish their place within their communities, a process that I will explore further in the following sections.

5.6. (Re)Integration into a Life at 'Home' – Procedures and Initiatives Behind Navigating the Post-Conflict Transition

The reintegration of children abducted by the LRA was a complex process, made possible through coordinated efforts between the Ugandan military (UPDF) and a network of NGOs, and local actors, including religious and cultural organisations, LC1 leaders, and reception centre workers. This section delves into the carefully orchestrated procedures and initiatives that guided these efforts, shedding light on the strategies employed to navigate the challenging transition to life at 'home' after years of conflict.

Arriving at the point of reintegration was a journey marked by diverse and complex realities for each returnee. These individuals faced different paths: some were captured during combat, others escaped, while many were rescued during raids or encountered assistance from community members, UPDF soldiers, or humanitarian workers, even within rebel camps during the peace talks. The intricate and often perilous process of accessing and retrieving child abductees is vividly captured by Mr. D. O., who explains:

> You might ask yourself, how are we getting these children. Those children, some of them were brought by the army personnel…in the course of fighting…because the LRA's fighting forces were mostly children. So, the army, the Ugandan army were fighting basically children. In the course of those cross-fires, and when they [LRA] were overpowered, soldiers were a part of the people who were bringing them in. And then, also, some of them they would be caught in the bush by either hunters, or people who have gone to the garden (Interview D. O., Gulu 2023).

Beyond the circumstances of their return, the experiences of returnees were further shaped by factors such as the length of time spent in captivity, physical health, acquired circumstances like motherhood or marriage, level of command, and current age—whether they remained children or had become adults while in the bush. M, a former commander who was abducted as a child, reflects on the harsh realities of life in captivity:

> Life there isn't easy. You are forced to do certain things you don't want to do. You don't do, you meet your creator. You meet your almighty God. So, indeed, when I was abducted and taken there, being young, initially, for the start, I found life very hard there for that reason (Interview Former Commander, Gulu 2023).

As time passed, M became accustomed to the brutal environment of the LRA, where survival hinged on embracing the violent norms imposed by the group. The LRA's way of life eventually became second nature to him:

> But then, eventually, I got used to life. Life now got very easy for me there and even I didn't want to come back, but to stay there, because there, obviously, you get free things. And, like here right now, everything is money, money, money, money. But there, it's free things. You want chicken, you go around the villages and you just pick. You want to eat maybe goat's meat, they are there. Anything you want, it's free. We only use your machine. For us, we call it a killing machine, the gun. The killing machine is the key to everything there. That is it (Interview Former Commander, Gulu 2023).

This brutal reality, where force was the currency of life, deeply complicated the transition back to civilian life, where basic necessities could not simply be taken by force. The struggle to adapt to a world governed by laws and social norms made reintegration particularly challenging for former child soldiers like M. Unable to reconcile his past with his present, M found himself drawn back to the only life he knew:

> For when I came back, in 2000, life was not all that easy. Life was a bit hard. It took me long to get used to life here. So, that's why it's now normal. The only thing, let me join the army. Yeah, let me join the army. Because, now, where do I start from? My education had been spoiled. I came and even I got both of my parents also dead. My mother is dead. My father is dead. So, now, what do you do? Let me now join the forces. Just now, I am even used to the forces, and I am used to the killing machine. Let me join the power, so I decided to join" (Interview Former Commander, Gulu 2023).

M's decision to join the military highlights how deeply ingrained the practices of the LRA had become, influencing his choices long after he returned home. His story illustrates the profound challenges that former abductees face as they attempt to navigate the complex process of reintegration into a society where violence is not the answer, yet it is the very skill they have been forced to master.

Conversations with both current and former workers reveal the multifaceted approach taken to address the complex needs of returnees like M. These accounts illuminate the procedures adopted to support former abductees, underscoring the diverse angles—military, medical, psychosocial, and cultural—that shaped their reintegration experience. The process typically began with the UPDF, who were "at the forefront" of rescuing children and adults from conflict zones. After rescue, the UPDF conducted a debriefing at a child protection unit in Gulu, where they gathered critical details about the LRA, such as their whereabouts and information about other abductees, as well as personal data like age, name, and family information (Interview K. J., Gulu 2023).

After the initial processing by the UPDF, returnees were taken to reception centres, where they received care and support to facilitate their reintegration back into society. Centres like Caritas provided financial support for medical assessments and treatments, recognising that many returnees

suffered from physical ailments due to their time in captivity (Interview Caritas, Gulu 2023). Making mention of the medical referrals and necessity of clinics within reception centres, D. O. recalls the harrowing condition of many of these children: “In the centre, we received all categories of children; children who were shot, some with legs amputated, children who had killed their own mothers and fathers, some who were raped” (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). This stark reality underscores the severe trauma returnees often endure and the need for comprehensive care that addresses these needs.

By the time returnees arrived at the reception centres, much of their identification and preliminary processing had been completed by the UPDF. This information allowed the centres to classify returnees by age, gender, and personal circumstances, such as whether they were married in captivity or had conceived children. Such classifications were crucial in determining the appropriate placement for care - males often being referred to World Vision, while mothers and their children were typically taken to GUSCO (Interview K. J., Gulu 2023). This method of classification also played a significant role in the varying reintegration experiences of child mothers and their children born in captivity; a topic that will be further explored later in this chapter. Additionally, the identification process was vital in notifying families of their relatives return (Interview K. J., Gulu 2023).

Before the formation of reception centres like GUSCO, which grew out of the efforts of the Concerned Parents’ Association (as detailed in section 7.2.2. of chapter one), the reunification process was quite abrupt. Children were often “paraded” around local market centres, where family members could identify them. However, due to fears of being associated with rebels, many families were reluctant to claim their loved ones, stunting the reintegration process. Recognising this challenge, a group of three women from political, educational, and healthcare backgrounds, initiated the formation of the Concerned Parents’ Association. Their goal was to bridge the gap between the civilian population and the military, ensuring that families could reunite with their children without fear. This led to the establishment of more coordinated and safer reunification processes through reception centres, where families could be properly acquainted with their loved ones, and the reunification could be mediated with proper preparations and sensitisations (Interview K. J., Gulu 2023).

From there, the first initiative was then to brief returnees on life at the centre, explaining expectations and beginning the process of reintegration. This stage, according to K. J. – a former social worker at GUSCO – “was essential in transition them from their experiences in the bush to reintegration,” as it included addressing behaviours shaped by their time in the bush and re-familiarising them with social roles and chores as they transitioned toward returning home (Interview K. J., Gulu 2023). Going back to the manner in which returnees were classified, with the straight-18 standard being applied and a

blanket regard for all returnees, irrespective of age, as abducted children, contributed to a dominant narrative within the centres that emphasised their innocence and vulnerability. With this framing, the perceived end-goal, beyond reunifying returnees with their families, was the need to repair the "lost childhood" of these perceived children, with efforts taken to disavow the past and re-socialise returnees back into the norms, behaviours and roles of Acholi society.

Explicit within this framing of the "lost childhood" is the humanitarian response aimed at countering 'inhumane' violence inflicted on children - the ultimate "victims of conflict" (Dubal 2018: 38, 184; ICC 2024: 14, 19). Denoting this as the "humanitarian economy," Dubal (2018: 184, 197), as well as Branch (2011: 133 – 134), note how the imagery of the child victim, particularly the child soldier, serves as a power symbol – a "charity case" – for mobilising funding and interventions in northern Uganda. In this manner, the entire conflict was seen through the lens of children's rights and the "master narrative" – as coined by Laura Edmondson – fosters this dichotomy of evil perpetrators – "men who abduct, maim, kill, and enslave children – and their innocent, helpless child victims who are in need of redemption through intervention" (Edmondson 2005; Branch 2011: 134).

Children's direct involvement as "traumatised former combatants" and socialisation into violence has thereby necessitated child-focussed reintegration programmes which target their mental, emotional, physical, and psycho-social well-being (Blattman & Annan 2009: 113; Feinstein & O'Kane 2008: 161; Russel & Gozdziak 2006: 58). At their basis, these programmes embody emergency child-saving attitudes where resources are marshalled to prevent children's re-recruitment, enable recovery and healing, and re-build their "identity, self-esteem, self-efficacy" and relationships (Angucia 2009: 78; Fernandez 2011: 489). By focusing on the negative symptoms of war and viewing these behaviours as symptoms to be treated, healing and correction are upheld over a navigation of indicators that may contradict the victim format (Lee 2009: 12).

Reintegration, within this framing, thereby becomes the means through which these children's humanity is restored, and "normal" identities and behaviours re-imparted (Branch 2011: 134; Dubal 2018: 197). The coordinating manager of Eternal Salvation, quoted in Dubal's study (2018: 195), describes the intention to "transform them" as they return from the bush, to "work with them to be whole on the insight again," having been "robbed of their childhood, of school, of their parents, and now they are beginning to live again." This view of reintegration as a process of reclaiming lost childhood and re-establishing normalcy reflects a broader narrative that sharply contrasts life in the bush with life at home, paving the way for a deeper exploration of how these two realms are framed in starkly opposing terms.

Upon their return from the bush, former child soldiers (FCS) enter a discursive arena where they encounter constructions of "morality, time, and deviance" (Verma 2012; Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 370). These narratives determine not only their reintegration processes but also control the stories told about their recruitment, identity, and post-conflict roles (Bordonaro & Payne 2012: 370; Verma 2012: 441-442). The idealised homecoming story, continuously repeated and replicated in spaces like the reception centres, portrays a happy-pre-abduction childhood in a family setting (Verma 2012: 446). In contrast, life in the bush is framed as an "immoral and destructive place," with no meaningful values, rational thinking, or sound forms of relationships (Douglas 1976; Save the Children 2004: 6; Verma 2012: 446). Consequently, any maturation that took place in the bush is perceived negatively and necessitates reversal within a therapeutic setting; "otherwise they are lost" (Verma 2012: 445-446). This narrative reinforced the contrast between the perceived chaos of the bush and the order of life at home.

5.6.1. From Inhumanity to Humanity – Tracing the Origins and Impact of the Lum-Home Divide for LRA Returnees

In the context of Acholi society, the term "*lum*" embodies a stark contrast to the concept of "home" or "gang." *Lum* is a central organizing concept by which Acholi civilians understand space in relation to morality and humanity, being described as a place where humans do not live permanently and are often associated with danger, pollution, and evil acts (Dubal 2018: 84, 85-86). The Acholi term "*lum*" similarly paints 'the bush' as the opposite of the domesticated village. Evident in the phrase "*i tim*," meaning "in the bush," it is juxtaposed as non-Acholi, and thus a foreign territory deemed "out of place" (Girling 1960: 9; Verma 2012: 446). This spatial dichotomy is framed in binaries such as *lum* versus home, animals versus humans, and evil versus good, reflecting a moral and developmental hierarchy that positions the *lum* as a site of inhumanity and chaos (Dubal 2018: 84).

Historically, colonial perspectives further entrenched the negative connotations of the *lum*. Colonial officers and missionaries viewed *lum* as a space of wildness and moral depravity, contrasting it sharply with the so-called order and civilisation of the home (Dubal 2018: 87-88). This perception was evident in colonial accounts such as Arthur Kitching's description of clearing the *lum* to bring order and civilization, illustrating the colonial disdain for the bush and its association with anarchy and heathenism (Dubal 2018: 87-88). As Kitching noted, the clearing of *lum* for their mission station was seen as a transition from "anarchy to order" and a means to dispel "heathen jungle" in favour of new ideas and the Gospel (Dubal 2018: 87-88). Such historical framing contributed to a broader view

of the *lum* as a space of madness and impurity, which was reinforced in local understanding and narratives about the space (Dubal 2018: 90-92).

The LRA's presence in the *lum* was also seen through this moral lens, where their lifestyle was associated with the dirt, madness, and inhumanity of the bush (Dubal 2018: 94-95). The transformation of the *lum* into a space of resistance and survival by the LRA, while challenging, did not fully dissolve the moral boundaries established by Acholi civilians (Dubal 2018: 97). As the LRA adapted the *lum* for their purposes, the perception of the space remained deeply ingrained in Acholi society, affecting how returnees were perceived upon their return (Dubal 2018: 101). Returnees were thereby guided to embrace their new identities and roles as they re-integrated into Acholi society, with counselling sessions emphasising their need to relinquish their past lives and accept new behavioural norms.

5.6.2. Counselling as a Tool to Curb Rebel Identity and Re-Socialise Rebels Towards Humanity

Counselling and daily interactions at the centres thereby served as primary re-socialisation tools to guide returnees toward acceptance of their present roles and identities. In discussions with various organisations that undertook critical programmes in Gulu at the time of reintegration, many took part in providing counselling services to returnees within the framework of reception centres – namely GUSCO, Caritas Gulu Archdiocese and World Vision. Despite being portrayed as a transition space for returnees before their reunion with family members, an interviewee from World Vision noted that the centres were “like a home for them” (Interview World Vision 2023). In this home, former child soldiers were often viewed as “small babies who return naked” and “don’t know anything good” (Verma 2012: 446). Returnees are encouraged to recall being “forced to fight and kill,” but are assured that they have a “right to be children,” to “become free,” and to learn how “somebody should be living” (Verma 2012: 446). By recounting their past violent experiences and acknowledging them as 'bad' (*marac*), returnees could be perceived as demonstrating signs of recovery (Allen *et al*. 2020: 668). Moreover, these statements serve as significant re-socialisation tools used to gear FCS towards letting go of their past experiences and aligning with the expected norms and roles in their communities to be accepted in the present (Verma 2012: 446).

The counselling approach often involved one-on-one and group sessions designed to help returnees process their experiences and re-adjust to life at home (Blattman & Annan 2008: 109; Russel & Gozdziak 2006: 63-64; Akello *et al*. 2006: 230-233). One of the key aspects of these sessions was building rapport between the counsellor and the returnee, as establishing trust was essential in overcoming the deep-seated fears and traumas that many had brought back from the bush. As D.O.

highlights, the process of rapport-building was delicate, particularly because returnees often struggled with issues of trust (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). D.O. recalls how one child could not open up to a counsellor who resembled one of the officers responsible for their torture, demonstrating how even physical likenesses could trigger emotional responses, making it difficult for children to feel safe and begin to process their trauma (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023).

Once rapport was established, psychosocial support took on a two-fold approach—individual counselling and group sessions. The individual sessions provided a private space where returnees could begin to unpack their personal stories, detailing the horrific experiences they encountered in the bush. In many cases, children exhibited symptoms such as withdrawal, anger, nightmares, and hostility, which needed to be addressed on a one-on-one basis. As D.O. explains, these sessions allowed returnees to realise that they had personal resources that could help them recover, thus empowering them to regain some control over their lives (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023).

However, group counselling offered a broader platform for healing through shared experiences. D.O. emphasises how the sharing of stories within a group was often therapeutic not only for the individual speaking but also for the listeners (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). Many returnees found relief in knowing they were not alone. Hearing others recount their own harrowing experiences helped to build a collective understanding of suffering, reinforcing a sense of solidarity. As one returnee noted in a session of group counselling with D.O., “I used to think that I had the worst past, but this story of the other one could be quite compelling,” showing how such exchanges could foster resilience by allowing children to see their pain in the context of others' experiences (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). This dynamic exchange of stories became a powerful tool for healing, setting the stage for themes of resilience and shared agency that will be further explored in the following chapter, particularly in relation to the child mothers who also found communal healing through storytelling.

In these sessions, efforts were made to let go of life in the bush, with facilitators encouraging returnees to focus on their new roles and responsibilities within their communities. To ease this process, psychosocial programmes are supplemented with options for education and vocational training to “give them something to do so as to forget about the past” (Lee 2009: 29). While warfare and the resulting experiences of child-soldiering have no place in this framework (Lorey 2001: 30), the process of healing often required revisiting and acknowledging the painful memories. The emphasis, however, was on acknowledging these past experiences as a means to move forward, and strongly encouraging the children to pursue a future “free” from the shadows of their time in captivity.

However, as will be further explored in discussions with returnees in Gulu today, leaving the past behind proved far more challenging than anticipated. Many returnees grappled with profound changes in their lives—some returned as mothers, others had spent their formative years entirely in the bush, and many had lost the social networks they once relied on. These realities made it clear that the process of reintegration was not just about moving forward, but about navigating a complex and altered sense of self, family, and community.

5.6.3. Two Sides of the Coin – Reflections from Stories Told Within and Beyond Reception Centres

Stories told by Former Child Soldiers (FCS) were often shaped according to the context in which they were shared, illustrating the fluidity of their identities and experiences. As Cecilie Verma explains,

> What the returnees had been through, what they dreamed to achieve, what they feared, and what the current political scene would allow them to identify with – in the present – all played their parts in the making of their stories (Verma 2012: 447).

The narratives that emerged from returnees were frequently adapted depending on the audience. For example, stories recounted in the evenings among peers often differed greatly from those shared in formal settings. Okech, a former child soldier, varied his stories between portraying himself as a "child in need of protection" and a "naturally talented fighter" (Verma 2012: 442). In more intimate, informal contexts, his stories revealed complex layers of experience, including friendships and daily survival in the bush. These accounts suggest that some returnees did not see themselves merely as victims or as children but instead as multifaceted individuals navigating a difficult past (Verma 2012: 442-443).

One of the most striking contrasts between these settings was how children referred to their identities as "soldiers" among their peers during night-time storytelling, while daytime sessions encouraged them to emphasise their victimhood. This duality highlights the complexity of returnees' identities and the tension between the roles imposed on them by reintegration programmes and their personal lived experiences. Bosco, a former abductee, vividly expressed this complexity when he described the truth as "like a coin," where only one side is shown to the public. He explained, "When you turn it over, people will start fearing you. They think you are still someone who wants to fight or kill them … but the other side of the coin is there … the other side of the truth" (Verma 2012: 441).

This "two sides of the coin" dynamic underscores the fundamental disconnect between the goals of reintegration programmes—often focused on restoring a sense of innocence and normalcy—and the

multifaceted realities of returnees' experiences. The contrast between the narratives encouraged within reintegration centres and the lived experiences of returnees reflects the challenges of addressing trauma and reintegration in a manner that fully engages with the complexity of their pasts. This gap speaks to a broader societal fear, as certain aspects of the returnees' experiences are frequently hidden, given the potential for these stories to evoke mistrust or fear from the community (Verma 2012: 441).

The limitations of reintegration processes are further complicated by the experiences of those who bypassed the structured rehabilitation programmes entirely. D.O. - a former volunteer, counsellor and social worker - provided a powerful account of one such case, offering insight into the potential dangers of inadequate preparation for reintegration. He recalled the tragic story of a girl who returned directly to her family without undergoing the rehabilitation process:

> I remember of a case of a girl that decided to join the family and she was not prepared from the rehabilitation centre, there was a time they went, and this is a painful story. They went to the mother, to uproot casava, so now the mother was sitting under a tree, so she was telling her mother stories in the bush, how they were forced to kill. Then, in the process of narrating her stories to the mother, she got a relapse… Then she said, "Mommy, I can even demonstrate to you how we used to like cut people and all that kind of things. It's ok, you can even see." She didn't know the poor daughter had really gone back. She got that hoe. She started cutting her mother. She killed her. Literally killed her mother, cut her until she was dead (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023).

D.O. recounts that after the girl regained her senses, she returned home and instructed her family to go to the garden, saying that "something terrible had happened." Upon their arrival, they discovered her mother deceased (Interview D. O. 2023). This harrowing account underscores the severe consequences of bypassing critical reintegration processes. Despite the profound shock and trauma, the community quickly grasped the situation and sought assistance from civil society organisations, which facilitated the girl's transfer to a rehabilitation centre. D.O. highlights that such incidents were not isolated; many children who missed formal rehabilitation struggled significantly to reintegrate into their communities (Interview D. O. 2023). The lack of proper reintegration left both returnees and their communities vulnerable to unpredictable and dangerous behaviour.

Additionally, the girl's experience reflects the deep-seated fears within communities that returnees, particularly those who did not undergo rehabilitation, are haunted by *cen* (the vengeful spirits of those killed), further exacerbating their social alienation. These fears, coupled with the broader societal disconnect, form the crux of the social challenges returnees face. Despite the acceptance of the girl

in this case, the broader perception of returnees—particularly the fear of the violence they encountered in the bush—often leads to stigmatisation and rejection. This highlights the complexities of return and genuine acceptance when those receiving returnees have themselves experienced violence. Consequently, family and community reunification emerges as one of the most critical stages of the reintegration process, though it is frequently portrayed as the final step. As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, reunification is, in many ways, only the beginning of a longer journey towards reconciliation and social repair.

5.6.4. Reunification – Navigating the Physical and Spiritual Breach Between Returnee and 'Home'

The transition from bush to home for returnees encapsulates a profound binary that shapes their reintegration process. This transition affects not only how they are treated within reintegration centres but also their eventual re-connection with their communities. Reunification and reintegration are often portrayed as a linear process where the return of abducted children to their families marks the end of their ordeal. However, as previously discussed, this return is just the beginning of a complex journey towards full reintegration. The following statements from various interviewees who partook in the reintegration process, including the Prime Minister, K.J., and D.O., shed light on the multifaceted nature of this transition.

According to K.J., a former social worker for GUSCO, "Then after tracing their family, we could visit the family, discuss with them and let them know that they have their children at the reception centre. Then later invite them at the reception centre and then we try to initiate to them the processes of reintegration" (Interview K. J., Gulu 2023). This approach emphasises a collaborative effort with the district's probation office, LC1 leaders, and community members to prepare families for the return of their children. The reintegration process involves a series of steps designed to ensure a smooth transition: "On the day of reintegration, normally a social worker from the reception centre, that is GUSCO, and then an officer from the district…information is circulated to the community where the child will be reintegrated" (Interview K. J., Gulu 2023). Upon settling at home, follow-up visits – around 3 to 4 – would then take place over a year to ensure that the child is faring well in terms of their integration. During this time, the child is connected with community service providers who would be available within their area to take over the responsibility from the centre (Interview K. J., Gulu 2023).

K.J.'s insights further illuminate the challenges of reintegration, focusing on the necessity for families to adapt to the return of their loved ones. K.J. highlights the importance of ensuring that families are adequately prepared for the return of abducted children. This preparation involves addressing the

emotional and social dynamics that come into play once the returnees are back home. The statement "we know the reception centre is just a transit centre and the home is the basic place where they are supposed to stay and get fully reintegrated" reinforces the notion that while the reception centre's assistance with physical return is significant, the real work of reintegration occurs within the family and community setting. The home environment, therefore, is not merely a backdrop but an active space where the complexities of reintegration unfold. K.J.'s emphasis on family preparedness highlights the need for continuous support and intervention to facilitate this more nuanced transition as returnees navigate and adapt to their roles within their family and community (Interview K.J. 2023).

D.O. emphasises the importance of family interaction in the healing process: "In the course of their stay in the centre, we would then request the families to come and pay a visit…A child seeing the father, for those who had their parents, seeing the sisters, seeing the father, was quite, in itself, it was healing" (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). This interaction not only fosters hope but also prepares the family for the psychological and emotional needs of the returnee, including guidance on appropriate communication and language use to prevent relapses (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023).

D.O.'s contribution underscores the role of preparing families for the return of their abducted members. The language used by D.O. reflects an understanding that reintegration is not simply about the return of individuals but involves a comprehensive approach to preparing families to receive them. D.O. notes, that preparing the family for return is crucial as it helps in easing the transition and addressing potential psychological and social challenges conflicts that may surface once the returnees are reintegrated into their homes (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). This insight is crucial for grasping the broader framework of reintegration within the Acholi context, especially when considering the roles of forgiveness and amnesty during this transition. The Prime Minister's account to follow offers a profound understanding of what occurs beyond mere physical reunification. It highlights the significance of Acholi norms, values, and practices, illustrating how traditional rites of reception in conflict resolution processes extend reintegration beyond formal mechanisms to include essential stages that occur within the community.

5.5.4.1. Acholi Rites of Reception – Reflection of Restorative, not Retributive Justice

At the core of the Prime Minister's insights is his emphasis on the significance of norms, values and practices in defining Acholi identity. In his statement, he emphasises, "So, whether you like it or not. Whether it is a deliberate initiative, or not. It is part of what we should always have to do. You see, we have so many protocols as a people. Of don'ts. Do and Don'ts" (Interview Prime Minister Ker

Kwaro Acholi, Gulu 2023). This assertion stresses the centrality of traditional norms and practices in guiding not just individual conduct, but collective relationships. The Acholi norms and values serve as a moral code that shapes how conflicts are managed and resolved. Further, this cultural framework provides a context within which justice mechanisms are applied and highlights the importance of aligning conflict resolution practices with cultural beliefs.

Reflecting this intersection between cultural beliefs and conflict resolution processes is that of Amnesty, which, according to the Prime Minister, "is a part of our life" (Interview Prime Minister Ker Kwaro Acholi, Gulu 2023). He states, "The Amnesty process was integrated in the community practice of/community justice practice" (*ibid* 2023). This integration demonstrates that the formal Amnesty process was not implemented in isolation but was deeply intertwined with traditional practices. At its basis, Amnesty strives "to rebuild broken relationships and then to give second chance to any opportunity that could have affected or hurt the lives and relationships among people" (*ibid* 2023). In this way, the orientation for conflict resolution is restorative in nature. Unlike retributive justice systems that focus on punishment, restorative justice aims to "seek the truth" and restore social harmony rather than impose punitive measures. Therefore, in the words of the Prime Minister, the people regard this form of traditional justice as "pure," and, thereby, "very therapeutic" (*ibid* 2023).

The Prime Minister further explains that the call for amnesty was driven by the community through various leaders:

> The pressure to have Amnesty for the LRA and all those people who had committed atrocities against the people, came from the people, through the different structures – the religious leaders, the cultural leaders (*Rwodi*) (Interview Prime Minister Ker Kwaro Acholi, Gulu 2023).

The need for Amnesty after the conflict goes back to the traditional belief in Acholi society that, "being in the wilderness, or wherever you've been, you will have encountered a number of evils, and those evil are spiritual in nature (cen)" (*ibid* 2023). In the context of the conflict and its disruption of communities and their harmony, whether by an individual or a group, thereby constitutes a spiritual breach – *kir* (abomination) - where this evil has serious consequences that you can't hide away from. As the Prime Minister explains, "The Acholi have two layers of divine beings, one are our ancestors, who are the intercessors, and the other is God, who in Acholi we call it *Jok Jok Jojok ka malo*…So, as humans, we can try to hide, but you cannot hide from the divine beings" (*ibid* 2023). If you try, divine retribution takes over, which "apportions punishments not only to the individual but to the

collective of that individual" (*ibid* 2023). The responsibility for resolving conflict and atoning for offenses thereby extends beyond the individual to encompass the collective. The community thereby engages in rites of reception as a process of healing and reconciliation, reflecting a view that conflict and its resolution are communal affairs rather than isolated incidents of individual wrongdoing. Further, these practices acknowledge that war and captivity inflict spiritual and emotional wounds that must be healed to restore harmony within the community.

The concept of *cen,* as in the context of the LRA conflict, represents the spiritual and psychological burdens carried by returnees in their transition from the bush back into their communities. The traditional rites of reception in Acholi society are designed to cleanse these burdens and restore balance, acknowledging that healing from war and fostering reintegration is a complex process that involves more than just physical reunification. In this manner, cultural, ideological and spiritual frameworks are vital within the context of reintegration, particularly when involving former child soldiers, as they directly address the need to atone for atrocities committed to foster community acceptance and recovery between young returnees and their communities (Gustavsson *et al.* 2017: 299; Ungar 2011). Additionally, the notion of *cen* ties back to the *lum* vs home binary, and serves as a moral framework distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable violence. As Dubal (2018) notes, *cen* is associated with immoral and non-modern violence, often contrasting with state violence which is perceived as legal and modern. This moral framework helps in understanding the complex integration of former LRA combatants within their communities, particularly when forgiveness is intertwined with underlying feelings of impunity.

Traditional justice mechanisms, such as *Mato Oput* – meaning drinking of the bitter herb, Oput – offer one of such alternatives to formal justice systems, whilst still emphasising the importance of accountability despite forgiveness being granted. Additional restorative practices in Acholi society include *Tum* purification, *Nyono tong gwenyo* ("stepping on the egg,") or the "washing away the tears" ceremonies.[15] Allen (2005) and Veale & Stavrou (2007) argue that these mechanisms are crucial for addressing issues of identity and impunity, integrating culturally grounded processes into the reintegration of former combatants. Despite the overall atmosphere of forgiveness – *timo kica* – (Allen *et al.* 2020: 667), promoted, some community members, like J from the Recreation Project,

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[15] For further information regarding these ceremonies and practices, consult Caritas Gulu Archdiocese. 2005. "Traditional Ways of Preventing and Solving Conflicts in Acholi" <https://lluitanoviolenta.cat/files/pdf/caritas_traditional_conflict_solving__in_acholi_2005.pdf> or Ochen, E. A. 2014. Traditional Acholi Mechanisms for Reintegrating Ugandan Child Abductees. Anthropology South Africa, 37(3-4): 246.

who expresses a sense of injustice after losing someone very close to her in the war: "I felt like there was some bit of justice that needed to be done…how would it be for the people who lost their dear ones, and now they are just coming out freely and nothing is being done" (Interview Recreation Project, Gulu 2023c). In their view, Veale and Stavrou (2007: 290) uphold that psychosocial reintegration programmes have largely failed to "adequately confront the difficult issue of impunity." As will become evident in the case of the reintegration of former child soldiers and other LRA abductees, these unresolved tensions, having foundations beyond simply the direct acts of violence but also the broader disruption of the Acholi society throughout the conflict, have persisted far beyond the initial period of return. In fact, they reflect a long-term conflict of social disrepair that has begun to manifest in various new outlets of violence – stigmatisation and rejection being one of them. Navigating these dynamics amidst the reintegration of returnees is thereby an essential foundation for reconciliation, but one that has been fundamentally overlooked within long-term programming in northern Uganda.

In conclusion, the reunification and reintegration of returnees involves navigating a complex interplay of psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. This process requires a nuanced approach that incorporates both formal and traditional mechanisms to address the multifaceted needs of returnees and their communities. The emphasis on traditional cleansing rituals and community-based reconciliation reflects a broader commitment to integrating culturally relevant practices into the reintegration framework, ensuring a holistic approach to healing and reconciliation.

5.7. Legacy of War in Two Worlds – Bush and 'Home'

Despite the reduction in overt violence following the LRA's diminished presence in northern Uganda, the region remained haunted by its troubled past. Deep-rooted ethnic tensions and unresolved historical grievances, some of which date back to the colonial era, continued to fuel insecurities and conflicts. A prevailing narrative, both during the peace process and in subsequent reintegration efforts, depicted the bush—the area controlled by the LRA—as the primary source of violence and insecurity, contrasting it with the expectation that life at home would provide relief, stability and the "happy ending" for returnees by restoring the "things that make childhood meaningful" (Verma 2012: 446). This narrative, however, oversimplified the realities of both worlds. The stark contrast between the harsh conditions in the bush and the assumed safety of home reflects a significant deviation between these two spheres; a reality that both returnees and communities at home had to contend with in the post-conflict transition.

5.7.1. Camps of Contradiction: The War's Impact on Safety, Survival and Culture at Home

In reality, life at home reflected the profound impact of the war on the Acholi population, with the creation of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps which mirrored the insecurity and challenges faced in the bush. Originally established as "protected villages," these camps were part of the Museveni government's counterinsurgency strategy, aimed at dismantling the power of the LRA by denying them food and intelligence (Borzello 2007: 401). However, these so-called protected spaces were frequently attacked by the LRA, as well as subject to dual violence by UPDF soldiers – who were tasked with protecting them (Andersson 2007: 4) – exacerbating the already fragile situation for the displaced Acholi. The UPDF even announced that anyone found outside the camps would be considered a rebel and killed, with the camps functioning more accurately as internment or concentration camps due to the forced displacement and continued government violence used to keep civilians from leaving (Branch 2011: 92). Far from providing refuge, the camps, now referred to as internally displaced camps (IDP), became symbolic of continued violence, inadequate resources, and persistent instability. As Borzello (2007: 388) observes, while informal DDR processes helped thousands of former fighters transition back to civilian life, they were reintegrated into a context not just of ongoing conflict but—according to the UN's Jan Egeland—"one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world" (UN Radio Interview 8 May 2005, cited in Borzello 2007: 388). The dual crises of war in the bush and mass displacement created a situation where both returnees and those who remained in the camps were entrenched in conditions of severe deprivation, insecurity, violence, and disruption (Anderson 2009: 62).

At the height of the war, approximately 1.8 million people were living within these under-serviced, overcrowded camps, representing a displacement of over 90% of the Acholi population (Andersson 2007: 4; Ager & Metzler 2017: 70 – 71; Baines 2010: 409 - 410). Due to the restricted movement imposed by the UPDF, the Acholi were not only severed from their homes but also from their land, livelihood and autonomy – their primary means of survival before the conflict. Families that once relied on expansive lands to grow crops and raise livestock were now confined to small huts shared by multiple households. This forced overcrowding generated a host of insecurities, most notably food insecurity. Compounding these challenges were the LRA raids, which decimated many villages, with homes burnt and livestock stolen. Community members in Unyama recount returning from sleeping in the camp to find that their homes had been destroyed and their livestock "collected by rebels," leaving them with little from their past lives to sustain them in the camps (Focus Group Unyama 2023). During another focus group in Bardege-Layibi, one man remarked that they could no longer just "go and dig," illustrating the loss of traditional means of food production (Focus Group Bardege-

Layibi 2023). Consequently, dependency on food aid, particularly food handouts from the World Food Programme, became essential.

This shift from agricultural self-sufficiency to survival contingent on external assistance marked a profound change in the Acholi's way of life. This drastic change to dependency was additionally exacerbated by challenges, such as malaria, diarrhea, and cholera outbreaks, which worsened due to poor sanitation and crowded living conditions in the camps. Within this environment of a perpetual state of deprivation and insecurity, the camps became, as Dolan (2009) puts it, a space of "social torture" (Allen *et al.* 2020: 665, 679; Baines 2010: 410), where the moral and social fabric of Acholi society increasingly descended into a state of disrepair.

5.7.1.1. Shifting Gender Dynamics: The Erosion and Reconstruction of Roles and Livelihoods in Displacement

The displacement into IDP camps not only transformed the physical and social landscapes of Acholi life but also disrupted traditional gender roles, leading to profound shifts in the lives of both men and women. Before displacement, an Acholi man's livelihood was rooted in agriculture, requiring access to land, a homestead, and the capital to purchase tools and supplies (Anderson 2009: 63). The camp setting, however, deprived men of these resources, rendering their traditional roles unattainable. The militarisation of the region further exacerbated this, as UPDF soldiers became the only individuals in the area with a steady income, intensifying the economic disparity between soldiers and civilians and undermining Acholi men's sense of masculinity. Unable to protect or provide for their families, men faced mounting social pressures, often leading to alcohol abuse, unemployment, and, in many cases, domestic violence (Anderson 2009: 63). The erosion of male authority and the inability to fulfil their patriarchal responsibilities destabilised the traditional family structure, compounding the struggles of daily life in the camps.

With many men either joining armed groups, succumbing to alcohol abuse, or abandoning their families, this left a productivity vacuum (Maina 2011: 30) where women were left to assume the primary responsibility for their households. This breakdown of traditional male roles led to women becoming central figures in managing their families' survival (Branch 2011: 138). The World Food Programme's decision to place women in charge of receiving and distributing food rations further granted them control over household food resources and allowed them to engage in petty trade activities to supplement these rations (Anderson 2009: 64). This shift not only provided women with significant authority within their households but also positioned them as key decision-makers regarding food and other resources. Despite the hardships, many women adapted to these new

responsibilities, developing leadership roles and capabilities that had previously been unavailable to them before displacement.

In addition to their new roles as primary providers, many women were forced to explore alternative means of survival in the camp environment. In the absence of their husbands' contributions, some women engaged in transactional sex with UPDF soldiers to secure food and basic necessities for their families (Anderson 2009: 63). This phenomenon, often referred to as "survival sex," was not viewed as commercial sex but rather as a rational response to the extreme poverty and deprivation they faced (Anderson 2009: 63–64). For many women, these relationships, though exploitative, represented a practical means of fulfilling their caregiving roles and ensuring their families' survival. However, feedback from communities in northern Uganda reveals a darker side to this dynamic. In some cases, these interactions between primarily young girls and UPDF soldiers involved rape and coercion, leading to the rape and impregnation of many girls and the spread of HIV, which continues to impact communities today (Focus Groups Unyama, Awach, and Bardge-Layibi 2023). As one woman in Bungatira noted, the soldiers "spoilt their lives" (Focus Group Bungatira 2023).

At the same time, displacement brought certain unexpected changes to women's lives, with some finding new opportunities amidst the hardship. One woman commuting to the Gwengdiya transition site remarked, "Camp life has changed many women: they have learned to shoulder responsibility amidst poverty and pain" (Branch 2011: 138). The proximity of women to one another in the camps, where they were no longer confined to isolated homesteads, fostered a sense of collective responsibility and solidarity. Before displacement, as a middle-aged woman in Gulu town explained, "We [women] were very far apart in the village. We did not have groups or come together like we do now" (Branch 2011: 138). Displacement brought women together in ways that had not existed before, creating the conditions for women to form new social bonds, share experiences, and organise collectively.

This new communal life allowed for the emergence of women's groups, many of which focused on economic empowerment through rotational work schemes (*kalulu pur*) or loan schemes (*kalulu cente*). These groups often incorporated cultural activities, such as music, dance, and drama, and provided women with a space to discuss their problems and support one another – initiatives that would later resonate with actions taken by child mothers, other returnees and community members in the post-conflict transition. Although some of these groups were initiated by aid agencies or the government, many were formed independently by women in the camps (Branch 2011: 138–139). The rapid multiplication of these groups reflected the dense social environment of the camps, where women's solidarity grew as they faced common challenges. Many women who were not yet part of

a group expressed their desire to join one in the future, demonstrating how these collectives had become an integral part of camp life (Branch 2011: 139).

The contrast between men's diminishing roles and the increasing visibility and productivity of women in the camps underscores a broader reconfiguration of gender dynamics. Whereas Acholi men were often idle due to the lack of work opportunities, women were engaged in cooking, cleaning, caring for children, and selling small goods in the markets (Anderson 2009: 64). This gendered division of labour not only reflected the immediate demands of survival in the camps but also pointed to a more significant transformation of social roles. Women's increased responsibility and leadership in managing households and participating in civil society marked a departure from pre-displacement norms, where men traditionally held authority within the family and the community.

Ultimately, displacement eroded the traditional social order of Acholi society. The collapse of spatial, cultural, and familial boundaries disrupted the structures that had once governed social life and ushered in a new generation divorced from those before the war.

5.7.1.2. Altered Social and Cultural Fabric within Camps – From Communal to Individual Households

The forced displacement into IDP camps during the conflict severely disrupted traditional Acholi social structures and family networks, which had long centred around extended kinship. Before the war, Acholi families operated within a communal framework where child-rearing and household responsibilities were shared among extended family members, including grandparents, uncles, and aunts. The camps fractured these systems, isolating nuclear families within overcrowded huts and eroding the kinship bonds that once held the Acholi family structure together. This shift from communal homes to individual households undermined the social fabric and created new vulnerabilities, particularly in child-rearing and economic support, which were traditionally bolstered by the extended family.

The physical setting of the camps—whether in towns or rural areas—represented a collapse of the spatial ordering that had previously structured Acholi society. Families, once separate with clearly delineated social roles and age-based divisions, were now thrown together in chaotic environments where traditional roles and structures were undermined. Clans were scattered, making it difficult for elders and clan authorities to enforce decisions and sanctions, such as the banishment or stripping of land rights (Branch 2011: 137–138). This scattering disrupted the cultural authority and social cohesion that had defined Acholi life, leaving individuals without the social structures that regulated behaviour and maintained order.

The impact of this displacement was felt most acutely by children, whose education and social development were severely disrupted. As Dolan (2009: 87) points out, the camps produced a generation of children who not only grew up amid conflict but also experienced a breakdown in the transmission of cultural knowledge and values that previously shaped their sense of identity. The loss of formal education and the severing of their connection to cultural practices created a profound generational shift. This new generation knew only displacement and the hardships of camp life, resulting in the erosion of the traditional Acholi upbringing that had once instilled a sense of belonging and social responsibility.

5.7.1.3. Erosion of Cultural Values and Practices

The displacement into IDP camps significantly disrupted traditional Acholi cultural values, particularly those tied to community cohesion and conflict resolution. Key cultural practices, such as the *Mato Oput* reconciliation process, were rendered nearly impossible in the cramped and dislocated setting of the camps. These rituals, essential for mediating conflicts and promoting community harmony, became irrelevant in a context where daily survival took precedence over cultural heritage (Branch, 2010, p. 67).

Additionally, the displacement led to the loss of traditional educational practices. One of the most profound losses was the practice of *Wang'oo,* a traditional cultural ritual where community members gathered around a fire in the evening. This setting allowed elders to impart wisdom, cultural laws, and traditions to children, connecting them with their heritage and previous generations (Baines 2007: 107). As articulated by WAYA, "Me, before coming to the camp, I was a toddler and I was in the rural setting; the village; the rural village. I benefitted from those norms and our forefathers, our elders, were great teachers; they teach you with wisdom. And, the only class was around the evening fire. We called it *Wang'oo*" (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023). This practice was instrumental in the transmission of cultural values and life skills, as D.O. explains: "Normally, in our culture, as part of the child growth and development, we had what we called *Wang'oo*… Children, they go and collect firewood and then they put fire. So, now the family members sit around the fire, you know. That is now where the children get that training" (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). Highlighting the importance of this practice, a woman in Awach notes, "According to our tradition, how we teach our children, we put the *Wang'oo* [fire]. Then we tell stories. If we tell the stories, the child understands" (Focus Group Awach 2023).

However, the forced displacement into the camps rendered *Wang'oo* nearly impossible to maintain. Overcrowded living conditions and security concerns—such as the threat of LRA attacks and UPDF

curfews—disrupted this nightly practice (Baines 2007: 107). The loss of *Wang'oo* not only severed the connection between the youth and their cultural roots but also undermined traditional methods of education and socialisation. The inability to perform these rituals led to a deep erosion of the values and practices central to Acholi identity. Traditional authority figures, such as elders who once presided over cultural and judicial matters, found their roles diminished in the chaotic and displaced environment of the camps (Branch 2010: 67; Finnström 2008: 93). This cultural disruption has left Acholi society grappling with a profound identity crisis, as it seeks to rebuild and recover in the aftermath of conflict.

This led to a crisis of "personhood," as many young people returning to their communities after the war struggled to reintegrate into a social structure that had been fundamentally altered by conflict and displacement (Baines & Gauvin 2014: 287). Furthermore, this generation faced profound economic and psychological challenges, with many left dependent on external aid for survival. Children during the time of the conflict, as well as during the post-conflict transition, lacked the social and cultural grounding that previous generations strongly benefitted from. This reality was certainly not contained to those who were abducted by the LRA or were born in captivity, but similarly afflicted those who experienced a childhood in the camps. Inevitably, this eroded social and cultural fabric, coupled with the challenges of displacement and violence, further complicated the reintegration of returnees into an already strained society.

5.8. Conclusion - Long-Term Challenges of the Conflict on Reintegration and Reconciliation

The conflict in northern Uganda, particularly the war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government, created lasting fractures across the Acholi region. Communities were torn apart by abductions, violence, and displacement, and while efforts toward Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) were introduced, the long-term success of these initiatives remains questionable. As Wessels (1999: 524) argues, the wounds of war are seen through a collectivist lens, where the well-being of the group is paramount. Yet, DDR programmes often focus on individual rehabilitation, neglecting the communal recovery essential for true healing. As Maina (2011: 24) notes, DDR must be approached as an evolving process, not a one-off intervention, and integrated into broader peacebuilding efforts. Without rebuilding the political and psychological environment in northern Uganda, reintegration risks remain superficial.

At the heart of this challenge is the failure of many reintegration programmes to address the profound social, economic, and cultural disruptions caused by the war. The reintegration of former abductees and returnees from the LRA was markedly complicated by these disruptions, particularly the

displacement into IDP camps. In many cases, returnees were not reintegrating into the homes they had left, but into displaced communities that had suffered trauma and upheaval. The shift from communal to individual households, especially in IDP camps, upended traditional social structures and exacerbated tensions within communities. K.J. further highlights this transformation: "Many of their relatives came and they were settling in the camp. It was not their original home... the social relationship that they used to have, they had lost it" (K.J. Interview). This shift from communal to individual household structures exacerbated the difficulties of reintegration, as the reality was one of an individual kind of lifestyle, "where nobody cares for you... you need to try and find your own way" (K.J. Interview, 2023); a sentiment similarly captured within Dubal's study (2018: 107).

Reintegration efforts in this transition also perpetuated this individual-first mentality, as programmes were designed, first and foremost, to provide for the reintegration of the individual back into society, as opposed to being driven by a "whole of society," community-based approach. Derluyn *et al*. (2015: 8) questions the terminology of "re-habilitation" and "re-integration," noting the problematic assumption that life could be "turned back to 'normal' as it was before the conflict erupted." Alternatively, they emphasise that successful reintegration must be linked to efforts that rebuild social networks, highlighting how individual recovery cannot occur in isolation from the broader community (Derluyn *et al.* 2015: 8 – 10). Reflecting upon reintegration from an African perspective, Twum-Danso (2003: 27) thereby regards the process of rehabilitating and reintegrating former child soldiers as "restructuring the wider society," as opposed to an individualised process. Consequently, reintegration requires not just physical return but a thorough reconstitution of social relationships and cultural practices, without which long-term healing remains elusive.

The displacement and violence during the war also fundamentally disrupted Acholi society, creating a disconnect that has yet to be fully bridged. The camps, initially conceived as a counterinsurgency measure, became sites where violence and insecurity persisted, and the erosion of cultural values—particularly those that governed social roles and family life—became widespread. Scholars such as Parker et al. (2021: 1- 2) and Ochen (2012: 1197 - 1198) argue that reintegration programmes have often failed to acknowledge the deeper socio-political and economic challenges returnees face, exacerbating vulnerability instead of fostering a return to normalcy. The Acholi people, already grappling with displacement, poverty, and the erosion of their social fabric, have struggled to reintegrate former child soldiers into communities that are themselves fractured. As Rouhana (2004: 35) and Veale & Stavrou (2007: 289) suggest, reconciliation is far more than physical reintegration; it requires mutual legitimacy and restructuring of social relationships. Without addressing historical

responsibility, truth, and justice, full reconciliation between returnees and their communities remains out of reach.

Ultimately, the reintegration of former child soldiers and returnees in northern Uganda is a reflection of the broader social repair needed in the post-conflict Acholi region. As Baines & Gauvin (2014: 282 - 283) and Eastmond (2006) argue, the process of return involves much more than addressing the physical displacement caused by war. Attending to the day-to-day crucial processes of social repair requires social reconstruction, the repair of family and communal ties, and the re-establishment of a sense of belonging (Eleke 2016: 3 – 4; Gustavsson *et al.* 2017: 699). The disruption of cultural values, traditional conflict resolution practices, and kinship networks in the IDP camps has created generational divides that make it difficult for returnees to reintegrate into a society that has been profoundly changed. As Wessels (1999: 524) observes, the well-being of the collective is often prioritised over that of individuals, and the wounds of war are experienced communally. However, war shattered conventional notions of childhood, requiring a renegotiation of identities, roles, and relationships long after the conflict ended.

As the next chapter will explore, this disruption in social order had a profound impact on the lived realities of childhood during and after the conflict. What emerges is a disconnect not only between the experience of children who were abducted and those who remained at home but also a broader reconfiguration of what childhood meant before, during, and after the war. War not only altered childhood in the immediate sense but also prompted a long-term renegotiation of identities, roles, and relationships in post-conflict northern Uganda. These shifts reflect children's evolving agency in a post-conflict society, which is often lost in formal discourses on reintegration that focus on short-term outcomes rather than the lived, everyday realities of children navigating a transformed social environment.

6. CHAPTER SIX: Researching *with* Children *and* Communities: Acknowledging Everyday Domains of Agency and Participation After Social Rupture

6.1. <u>Introduction</u>

Before our visit to northern Uganda, caution was often given that the communities my research team and I would meet might be reluctant to speak about their past, fearing that revisiting their memories would only bring them harm. However, what we encountered upon entering Gulu and meeting with people in the district was an eagerness to be heard. In sharing their stories and reflecting alongside others, the participants not only made their voices known but also found healing in hearing the experiences of those around them. This process, in many ways, felt profoundly restorative and healing, not just for the individuals involved but for us as a research team, witnessing the power of collective storytelling.

Guided by local leaders, we entered spaces where returnees, families, and community members shared their lives—shaped by war, but also by the realities of reintegration. These conversations shifted our understanding of what it means to return home after conflict. Reintegration, as these stories reveal, isn't simply about coming back to a physical place; it's about navigating relationships, roles, and expectations in communities that have also been transformed by war.

As was unpacked in the previous chapter, the aftermath of northern Uganda's conflict is marked by the lasting fractures left by the LRA war, which continue to shape the lived realities of the Acholi people even today. The disruption of traditional social structures, experiences of violence, and profound loss deeply impacted how both returnees and communities experienced reintegration. In reflecting upon the reintegration efforts that took place in the region, it becomes clear that while a multitude of avenues were pursued in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, and consultations were undertaken with the returnee's families and community, the predominant focus remained on reintegrating the individual back into society. What emerges strongly from conversations with those on the ground is that reintegration is far from complete. Ultimately, the broader socio-cultural and economic landscape within which these returnees had to re-establish themselves after the war from 1986 to 2006 was often overlooked in reintegration efforts undertaken up until, and following, this period.

In this chapter, we draw upon the voices of the research participants to explore the realities of post-conflict transition, not just for returnees, but for the societies and communities into which they were

reintegrated. It raises the question: "Reintegration into what?" Through the interactions we had with participants for the study, it became evident that reintegration in northern Uganda required more than an approach to restore the ‘child’ returnees back to a ‘normal’ childhood. Rather, the process demanded an understanding of how entire communities and social systems had been transformed by the conflict and how to reconcile relationships, roles and senses of belonging for both sides. This highlights the reciprocal nature of reintegration, where both returnees and their communities engage in a mutual task of negotiating and rebuilding roles and responsibilities within the transformed social fabric. Much of the focus on reintegrating returnees often centres on their physical return home and reunification with families and communities, but little is known about what takes place after they arrive ‘home.’ In truth, the real work of reintegration—and reconciliation—as evidenced within the narratives of those we spoke with, lies in these often hidden, everyday spaces that returnees and their communities navigate post-conflict, providing crucial insights into the realities that unfold beyond the initial return.

By showcasing the stories of the research participants, we are thereby not merely speaking to the devastating impacts of war, but to these realities of return. We see how these realities are negotiated daily—how people reclaim agency, reforge relationships, and navigate belonging in a society altered by years of conflict. These are the untold narratives of reintegration, where the complexities of reconciliation unfold, not through formal processes alone, but through the lived experiences of individuals who are redefining what it means to be ‘home.’ In amplifying these voices, we move beyond the idea of reintegration as a linear, one-time event and instead embrace it as an ongoing, dynamic process—one that is shaped by the resilience of individuals and the shifting social fabric of Acholi society.

Building on these discussions, this chapter examines agency not as a fixed trait but as an ongoing process shaped by both individual and collective struggles. Rather than being defined solely by grand or visible actions, agency is found in the everyday negotiations of identity, relationships, and social roles. As the narratives in this chapter illustrate, returnees and their communities continuously reshape their place in society, balancing past experiences with present realities. This process extends beyond reintegration as a singular event, reflecting a broader negotiation of belonging and reconciliation in a society still healing from conflict. Understanding agency in this way allows for a deeper engagement with the complexities of post-conflict transition—one that acknowledges both the visible and more subtle ways individuals and communities redefine themselves in the aftermath of war.

This chapter speaks to that complexity, offering a glimpse into the everyday lives of those who continue to navigate the legacies of conflict. It will begin by addressing the profound disconnect experienced by children before, during, and after the conflict, and will consider the influence of interventions within this environment, particularly through the rising prevalence of the children's rights doctrine and its intersection with the local Acholi cultural context. Within this analysis, an examination of the realities faced by the new post-conflict generation within this environment will be undertaken, with particular reference to the long-term challenges faced by returnees navigating their return and reconciliation. Within these narratives of return, insight will be given to the diverse experiences of returnees through both a general account of their experiences, as well as the gendered particularities around child mothers and their children born in captivity. In this, the reality of divergent forms of childhood and personhood that conflict with local norms and values will be explored. Through this exploration, we seek to understand how these factors shape the agency and resilience of both returnees, as well as communities in northern Uganda, as they navigate their everyday lives in a society transformed by conflict.

6.2. The ‘Child’ through Conflict – Evolving Notions of Childhood Before, During and After War

Amongst almost all engagements with participants, a profound ‘disconnect’ emerged as a recurring theme: the notion of childhood before, during, and after the conflict. This section explores how childhood was experienced and understood across these phases, highlighting the radical transformation of the identity and role of ‘the child’ both during captivity and displacement.

As articulated by Baines and Gauvin (2014: 286), Acholi personhood is relational, with identity fundamentally forged through kinship and social organisation. According to Acholi concepts like *dano adana*, meaning a "real human being" who understands their responsibilities to others—this idea of relationality permeates the cultural understanding of childhood. However, the conflict severely disrupted these kinship structures and the lived experience of childhood, where identity was deeply intertwined with Acholi culture, family, and community. Not only were children forcibly abducted and socialised into the ranks of the LRA, but those who remained in the IDP camps also experienced an upheaval of traditional roles. The disintegration of kin relationships and communal living caused by the displacement altered their socialisation. As the war severed physical, cultural, and social bonds, the traditional pathways for forming personhood, especially through systems of learning such as the *Wang’oo* were dismantled.[16]

[16] For further context and background on *Wang’oo*, consult section 5.7.1.3 of chapter five and section 3.2.2. of chapter three.

The cosmological crisis, as noted by Finnström (2008), and the cultural debilitation highlighted by Dolan (2009) in section 5.7.1.2 of chapter five, exacerbated this disruption, leading to distortions in the pre-displacement values that structured childhood in Acholi society (Okello and Hovil 2007). The breakdown of Acholi relationality meant that the passage of cultural knowledge, morals, and responsibilities to the next generation was fractured. Amone (2013: 571) emphasises that culture forms the conceptual system structuring identity, and when norms, customs, and values are no longer passed down, a significant aspect of childhood is lost. The learned behaviour that traditionally shaped Acholi children's identity and sense of belonging, such as teachings through elders in the *Wang'oo,* was no longer instilled in a generation that grew up in a state of constant insecurity. This rupture in cultural transmission created a profound distinction in the notion of childhood before, during, and after the conflict—one marked by both physical and symbolic dislocation from family and community, reshaping not just the children's roles but also their relational personhood within Acholi society.

Reflections from interviews and focus groups conducted with members of Acholi society in Gulu—including community members, returnees, and organisational representatives—provide crucial insight into these distinctions across the phases of childhood. Many participants recounted the profound changes that the conflict inflicted on the nature of childhood, illustrating how children before the conflict were raised within close-knit kinship structures where identity was relational and deeply tied to communal practices. In contrast, the experiences of childhood during the conflict were marked by both physical abduction and emotional displacement, with children socialised into violence or forced to navigate the constant threat of abduction and insecurity within IDP camps. This sense of childhood dislocation continues to resonate in post-conflict Acholi society, as returnees and community members alike reflect on the lasting impact of the war on how childhood is now understood and experienced. These distinctions reveal how the conflict has left a legacy that reverberates into the present, affecting not only individuals but also the broader fabric of social and cultural belonging.

Utilising the grounded theory methodology in this study,[17] the analysis of key statements and codes first took place through the phases of open and axial coding. Open coding allowed for the identification of general themes and concepts as they emerged from the data, providing a foundation for categorising the childhood phases before, during, and after the conflict. These categories were further refined through axial coding, which examined the relationships between these categories and their sub-categories—such as the long-term impacts of the conflict on culture, identity, life and

[17] For context on the grounded theory methods of this study, consult section 4.3 of chapter four.

livelihoods, and roles and relationships. In this stage, the interconnections between these sub-codes became evident, as well as how the disruption and distinction of childhood in these three phases were mutually impacted by each of these underlying factors.

From this basis, a breakdown will now be provided of these key phases of childhood—before, during, and after the conflict—drawing from the participant statements captured through interviews and focus groups. This analysis will also reflect on the themes derived from the open coding and the relationships established through axial coding under the following codes related to the conflict: 1) 'the child' before, during, and after the conflict, and 2) the long-term impact of the conflict, including sub-codes of culture, identity, life and livelihoods, and roles and relationships. By examining these factors, the discussion will highlight the interdependent and mutually influencing nature of these key elements around Acholi childhood, while also emphasising the long-term impact of the conflict and how it shaped the realities of post-conflict reintegration in northern Uganda.

6.2.1. 'The Child' *Before* the Conflict

The cultural foundation that children in Acholi society were raised within, particularly before the onset of conflict, is deeply rooted in traditional practices, communal teachings, and structured upbringing. As D.O. explained, the *Wang'oo*—an evening gathering around the fire—was central to this process. It was not merely a family activity but a communal space where cultural transmission took place. In this setting, children learned their roles, responsibilities, and the broader history of their clans and the Acholi people through *ododo wa*—the stories told by elders (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). The *Wang'oo* allowed for socialisation into cultural values, such as respect, obedience, and discipline. Children learned to listen, participate in tasks like gathering firewood, and engage with their elders in ways that reinforced their place in society and the teachings passed down through generations (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). These practices were embedded in Acholi notions of belonging and personhood, as discussed in relation to *Dano Adana*, highlighting how the child's role was always connected to the wider community and culture.

Participants in other engagements similarly reflected this, noting the profound difference in children's behaviours before the war. As M, a former commander, succinctly put it, "Children were just real children. Real children. Very calm" (Interview Former Commander, Gulu 2023). Children were seen as calm, respectful, and responsible—qualities instilled in them through traditional practices and expectations. In Bungatira, participants shared how children were attentive during *Wang'oo*: "They sit there at the fireplace. They listen to what the elders are saying" (Focus Group, Bungatira, 2023). This respect for adult authority extended to other aspects of life. For example, in Awach, an older

woman noted how "children before the war... used to go for traditional dances," engaging in cultural practices that also structured their transition into adulthood (Focus Group, Awach, 2023). These roles were clear, and children were disciplined, whether through assisting with chores, participating in traditional dances, or preparing for future roles as adults.

The responsibilities were numerous. Children fetched firewood, cooked, ground *simsim* by hand, and fetched water with large containers—a stark contrast to the children of today, as several participants noted (Focus Group, Child Mothers, 2023). This communal upbringing ensured that children not only listened to their elders but actively contributed to the household and community. They were not merely recipients of care; they were integral to the functioning of their families. The separation of child and adult spaces further reinforced this structured upbringing. As one participant from the Child Mothers' focus group recalled, children respected boundaries: "When children are there, you just put a sign using the eyes and the child goes away" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). Such expectations of discipline and respect underscored the maturity children were expected to demonstrate within Acholi society, as well as the spaces they were allowed to inhabit, contributing to the strong cultural basis on which the concept of childhood rested before the war.

Childhood before the conflict in Acholi society was deeply rooted in cultural traditions and communal upbringing, where children were key contributors to both family and community life. Practices like the *Wang'oo* were vital spaces for passing down cultural values, clan history, and responsibilities, ensuring children grew up with a strong sense of discipline, respect, and communal belonging. This environment shaped children into active participants within their households, taking on tasks such as fetching firewood, cooking, and respecting adult spaces. As participants recalled, the child before the war was seen as the 'real child'—calm, respectful, structured, and fully embedded in the cultural fabric of Acholi society. Through these practices, children were not just recipients of care but integral to maintaining the household and social order, embodying the traditional values that defined childhood in peacetime Acholi.

However, as D.O. starkly noted, "When the war came, it became nasty, and it played a very negative role in their growth and development" (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). The conflict not only shattered the physical structures of the community but also obliterated the cultural and traditional frameworks that had once shaped the upbringing of children. "That was the time when the community structures got totally destroyed," he explained, reflecting on how the war severed the continuity of cultural teachings, practices, and the overall structured environment that had defined childhood in Acholi (*ibid* 2023). The generation that grew up during the conflict was marked by this disruption. "The children that grew up during the war period are totally different from the children that grew up during

the peacetime," D.O. emphasised, highlighting how the war led to a complete disconnect between the traditional notion of childhood and the harsh realities of conflict (*ibid* 2023). The war interrupted the foundational values that once defined a child's development and the Acholi's "cultural ways of doing things," leading to a generation whose experiences were a stark contrast to those of the calm, structured child before the war. This disruption would become clear in how children during the war were perceived and treated—reflecting a reversal of the cultural grounding that once characterised their upbringing, signalling a shift from tradition to survival in a war-torn society.

6.2.2. 'The Child' *During* the War

During the war in northern Uganda, children experienced a drastically altered reality compared to their lives before the conflict. One of the most significant changes was the crowded living arrangements in IDP camps, where entire families were confined under one roof. This was in stark contrast to the communal lifestyle before the war. As one participant described, "The internally displaced camps, it was horrible. You find some families had one or two houses, and then the person has about 12 children or so. You're sharing the same rooms, more or less. And, husband and wives, the nature of things at times.. that started to have a negative cause to children" (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). Children, who traditionally would have been shielded from adult relationships and behaviours, were suddenly exposed to intimate activities that they would have never witnessed in their former homes. Further, the displacement of families into overcrowded spaces stripped children of the social structures and spaces for them to develop naturally, thereby reshaping their understanding of family life.

In addition to the loss of privacy, constant insecurity dictated much of children's existence during the war. They were forced into survival modes, becoming "like animals with their eyes outside" (Focus Group Bardege-Layibi 2023), always alert and prepared to flee. The fear of rebel abductions drove children to sleep outside under verandas in town or hide in bushes, constantly aware that any noise could signal danger (Focus Group Bardege-Layibi 2023; Focus Group Unyama 2023; Focus Group Awach 2023). As one participant recounted, "Children used not to sleep. Anytime you hear footsteps, or maybe someone touching on the door, you just think of where to run" (Focus Group Patiko 2023). Similarly, another woman in Patiko noted how "All the children used to know that I have to protect myself. If I don't protect myself, I will either be abducted or killed" (Focus Group Patiko 2023). This existence, driven by fear and survival instincts featured in many accounts from participants and highlighted how childhoods were far removed from the stable environment before the war, where children were taught cultural obligations and responsibilities in their communities.

The perpetual fear and disrupted social structures also led to changes in children's behaviours—some started stealing, using drugs, or engaging in prostitution to cope with this new reality (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). It is within this unpredictable environment, and the adoption of habits to cope, that Aguu street kids were said to arise – often those children who were left as orphans during the war, or even those who were born in captivity. The reality of the Aguu street kids would become a strong theme amongst many of the engagements with participants due to their existence being associated as a direct result of the conflict in Acholi society.

Additionally, children in the camps were also deprived of essential services such as schooling, healthcare, and proper nutrition, which only deepened their struggles. As one woman in Awach recounted, having been a child raised in the camps and still experiencing the impact of this today, "Even for one week, we couldn't step at school. That is why me even up to now, I don't know how to write my name" (Focus Group Awach 2023). The negative responses fostered in response to this reality were further reiterated by women in Unyama and Awach, who recalled how children would "run to the bush" (Focus Group Awach 2023) and, from there, would engage in relationships, resulting in children who were "of a particular clan, so now people don't want them.. they don't belong to the clan" (Focus Group Unyama 2023). These actions of girls engaging in relationships and conceiving children not only divorced themselves from traditional practices of courtship and marriage but also led to the rise in instances of rape and diseases, namely HIV. Consequently, many participants would regard life in the bush as being devoid of any well-being or peace (Focus Group Awach 2023).

The perception of children also shifted during this period. For some, the war had instilled a sense of discipline in children, but not out of choice—rather, because they had no option but to comply in order to survive. One participant commented, "During conflict, children were more disciplined than these days.. they would wait for what to do, where are we going to run" (Focus Group Awach 2023). Some even argued that children during the war were better behaved than those born after, as the fear-driven discipline continued to shape their behaviour (Focus Group Patiko 2023). Others, however, saw them as "spoiled" and lazy as the camps deprived them of the opportunity to engage in traditional chores, like farming or assisting with household duties. Participants in Bungatira attributed this change in behaviour to everyone being "collected and pushed to be in the camp together" (Focus Group Bungatira 2023). These contrasting views of children's behaviour highlight the profound transformation children underwent during the war. Disconnected from the cultural and societal structures that once defined their roles and responsibilities, they were left to navigate an unstable and often hostile environment. This generational rupture, as noted by participants from Unyama and other communities, ultimately distinguished children raised during the conflict, as they inevitably grew up

in a world disconnected from the traditional Acholi way of life. While the end of the conflict marked a shift away from the immediate turmoil, it did not restore the pre-war realities of childhood. Instead, it ushered in a new set of challenges and transformations that continue to shape the experiences of children in northern Uganda.

This evolving landscape of childhood reflects a complex interplay between efforts to reintegrate traditional practices and the reality of a post-war world that remains marked by the disruptions of conflict. Despite attempts to revive aspects of the traditional Acholi way of life, childhood in the aftermath of the war remains characterised by divergence from both pre-war norms and wartime experiences. As we delve into the lives of children in the post-conflict era, including those returning from captivity, it becomes clear that the legacy of the war continues to impact Acholi childhood today. The war not only severed ties with traditional practices and cultural rites of passage but also fostered a generation of children who, in many ways, appear lost—disconnected from the cultural and social norms that once defined the transition from childhood to adulthood in Acholi society. These challenges faced by families and communities in nurturing children are heightened by these ongoing discrepancies, underscoring the difficulties in maintaining a coherent and supportive childhood environment amidst a backdrop of significant change. This next section will thereby explore how the aftermath of the conflict has continued to shape the realities of childhood in Acholi society, revealing how efforts to re-establish traditional norms intersect with new and evolving circumstances, resulting in a childhood experience that is both distinctly different from the past and reflective of the ongoing impact of the war.

6.2.3. 'The Child' *After* the War

Building on the examination of childhood during the conflict, the post-conflict period presents a stark contrast, marked by a notable shift in the conditions and experiences of children in Acholi society. The harsh realities of war left deep scars on the younger generation, but the end of the conflict has also ushered in a series of positive changes, creating a different reality for children now. While the past was defined by fear, deprivation, and disrupted social structures, participants observed that children today experience benefits that were largely absent during the war years.

6.2.3.1. Positive Improvements for Childhood Post-War

One of the most significant differences is the improved access to education and healthcare. During the war, many children were unable to attend school, either due to the fear of abduction by the LRA or the general breakdown of infrastructure. A participant from Patiko highlighted this change, noting,

"during the war, children like this would not get the opportunity to go to school, even hospitals. These days, children go to school. So, these children, you've got them home because of the holiday...even they are healthy these days because the hospitals are now functioning and everything that is really desirable for a child's life is now there" (Focus Group Patiko 2023). In a similar vein, another participant from Unyama reflected on the broader changes in daily life, explaining that "after return from the camp...there is a lot of changes in our life. Children eat what they want...Children go to school and get released at the time when they say it is time to go back home, but then, children could not even go to school or reach school" (Focus Group Unyama 2023). The ability to attend school regularly and access sufficient food, previously a luxury, is now a norm for many children, showcasing the tangible improvements in their living conditions. This was even a recurring theme in the focus group conducted in Awach.

Moreover, the changes extend beyond education and healthcare to include aspects of daily life such as clothing and overall well-being. A participant from Unyama emphasised this shift, stating, "In the past, things were not easy. If you were to see, even dressing the children, children couldn't dress. They used to walk naked. But right now, children are putting on good clothes. Children are even now respectful" (Focus Group Unyama 2023). This reflects not only improved material conditions but also a restoration of dignity and social structure for children, which was often lost during the war.

Overall, despite the immense challenges posed by the war, the participants' reflections on children now depict a reality where the youth are better cared for, have more opportunities, and experience a quality of life that contrasts sharply with the deprivation and instability of the past. This evolution in childhood experiences represents a key aspect of the post-conflict recovery process in Acholi society. However, while many participants recognised these positive changes, others expressed concern over shifting behaviours and values among children today, suggesting that the aftermath of the war has also brought new social challenges and complexities in their upbringing that make "keeping children" an exceedingly difficult task.

6.2.3.2. Negative Behavioural Changes

In contrast to the positive changes observed in children after the conflict, many participants emphasised the behavioural shifts that have taken place in this period, painting a picture of the "child now" as starkly different from the disciplined and respectful child of the past. According to these views, the behavioural transformation has been so profound that some participants likened today's children to "mad people," a striking metaphor that underscores how dramatically childhood norms have shifted. This characterisation is reminiscent of the stigmatisation returnees faced after the war,

where anyone perceived as deviating from traditional behaviours was seen as outside the bounds of acceptable conduct, often linked to the imagery of madness or animal-like behaviour. Just as the Acholi concept of *lum* was associated with wildness and disorder, so too are children today described in ways that reflect a break from the moral and social values associated with the stability and order of "home."

Participants in Bungatira vividly described this shift, with one woman stating that "When people now returned home, children were now behaving like mad people. Even if you talk to them now, they cannot listen to you. They want to do whatever they want" (Focus Group Bungatira 2023). This sentiment captures the perceived disconnect between parents and children, who are no longer seen as compliant or respectful, making life with them far more difficult. The disobedience and defiance that parents now face is a marked departure from the past, where, as one elder woman in Bungatira emphasised, children would once gather at the *Wang'oo,* the communal fireplace, to listen and learn from their elders. Today, she lamented, "If you call the child to come and sit at the *Wang'oo,* they won't even accept what you are talking about. They will tell the parent that this one is for the old man, that is up to him" (Focus Group Bungatira 2023). This loss of connection to the *Wang'oo*—a critical space for the transmission of cultural knowledge and values—reflects a broader disintegration of traditional practices that once defined childhood and community life before the conflict.

The perception that children today are "wild" or "mad" was echoed by others, including a former commander who drew sharp distinctions between children born before and after the war. He remarked that "Before this LRA war, children were very different. But now, after this war, the children who are right now, are so different from the children who were born before that war. Children right now are very, very wild" (Interview Former Commander, Gulu 2023). This portrayal of the post-conflict child as unruly and disrespectful starkly contrasts with the "real children" of the past, who are remembered for their calmness, respect for authority, and adherence to social norms.

Similarly, participants in Patiko described today's children as hard to keep and manage, with one woman noting that, "keeping them is now difficult" (Focus Group Patiko 2023). The sense of disobedience and defiance was reiterated by another woman from Awach, who stated that "Children of these days are undisciplined...they don't listen to their parents. Even if you talk, the children stand there as if you are not even talking to them" (Focus Group Awach 2023). This disregard for parental authority is seen as a significant shift from the past, where children were expected to obey their elders without question. In the same focus group, an older woman lamented the decline in discipline and the

rise of theft among the youth, stating, "Right now, it gave birth to a lot of stealing...These children are very bad children" (Focus Group Awach 2023).

Participants in the Child Mothers Focus Group also reinforced this theme of defiance and disrespect, noting how children today lack the fear and respect for parents that once characterised childhood. One woman observed, "Children of nowadays, they are not easy. They are very hard and they don't respect even their parents. Long ago, they knew to respect their parents" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). Another woman echoed this sentiment, emphasising that "children of nowadays, they are disrespectful. They have no fear of parents when they respond immediately" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). The repeated references to fear—or the lack thereof—highlight a critical dimension of behavioural change, where children's defiance is not just about refusing to listen but reflects a deeper erosion of the traditional hierarchical relationship between parent and child.

In sum, the behavioural shifts observed in children after the conflict are seen as a profound departure from the past. The disciplined, respectful, and compliant child of pre-war and even wartime Acholi society is now perceived as "wild," disobedient, and disconnected from the cultural values that once defined their upbringing. This transformation is emblematic of the broader societal changes that have unfolded in the post-conflict era, where the re-establishment of traditional norms and structures has struggled to take hold amidst new and evolving circumstances. As we move forward, these behavioural changes will further be analysed in relation to how participants regarded children's navigation of their roles and relationships within this transformed social landscape.

6.2.3.3. Manifestations of Defiance and Disconnection with Traditional Roles and Relationships

In the aftermath of the conflict, a notable shift in the maturity and relationships of children has emerged, reflecting broader changes in Acholi society. This shift has blurred the once-clear boundaries between child and adult spaces and has resulted in children now navigating these realms with unsettling ease. As expressed by a woman in a focus group with child mothers, "Nowadays, children they can get wise very fast when they are still young than those of those days" (Focus Group Child Mothers, 2023). Cultural practices also reflect these changes. Traditional dances that were once a significant part of childhood, such as the communal and ceremonial dances, have been replaced by new forms like "*Gom Kori*" (bending the chest), which participants strongly attribute to children's attendance of discos. Similarly, a former commander regards their inhabitation of discos as troubling, as it has also led young girls towards premature relationships with older men (*mzee's*), further reflecting a troubling dynamic and departure away from customary oversight protocols for courtship and marriage in Acholi society (Interview Former Commander, Gulu 2023). As emphasised by many

participants across different focus groups, girls 'just move anyhow' and the result of these relationships is one of increasing frustration and concern for their families who often have to take up the burden of supporting the mother and her child as traditional practices of children going to their paternal family no longer take place – a dynamic that will be equally as prevalent in the case of female returnees who became child mothers in captivity. This departure from established norms highlights the broader cultural disruptions caused by the conflict and displacement, resulting in a generation of children whose behaviours and maturity are markedly different from those of previous generations.

In the post-conflict period, a marked shift in children's roles and behaviours has emerged, revealing a growing divergence from traditional expectations. Historically, children were deeply involved in household chores and agricultural work from a young age, with tasks such as fetching firewood, grinding grains like *simsim* and sorghum by hand, and carrying large quantities of water using traditional containers known as *nywalber*. Child mothers described how children of the past would work diligently from morning until sunset, assisting with garden work, weeding, and food preparation without complaint. They would even endure the discomfort of cooking over firewood, which caused smoke to irritate their eyes, as part of their daily responsibilities (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). This level of involvement was integral to the family's functioning and survival.

However, contemporary children often resist these responsibilities, viewing them as infringements on their perceived rights. This resistance is reflected in statements from the focus group with child mothers (2023), where they state "Children of nowadays, they don't know how to fetch firewood and grinding... They want it fried with cooking oil," illustrating a situation where current children are unwilling to perform traditional tasks like cooking with firewood or carrying water, and instead demanding conveniences such as fried food. This resistance extends to various chores; a third participant adds, "Children of nowadays, they can argue a lot with the parents... They can even tell you in front of you" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). This defiance in performing these tasks is often justified by children as they state doing so would be "against their rights," a perspective that has become more prominent with the rise of humanitarian interventions and children's rights discourses. As one woman noted, today's children often argue against chores, citing their right to not be overburdened, which starkly contrasts with the more compliant attitudes of previous generation's responsibilities (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). This departure from traditional practices illustrates a broader shift in how children perceive their roles and responsibilities within the household and community.

Further, the emphasis on children's rights has also led to a redefinition of what is considered acceptable behaviour. In the focus group in Bungatira (2023), it was noted that children now use their rights to challenge parental authority, refusing to engage in household work or participate in community norms. This has resulted in a growing presence of street children, or *Aguu*, who are seen as defiant and problematic. As the focus group in Unyama (2023) reveals, these children often turn to theft and violence when traditional support systems fail. The increased visibility of *Aguu* street kids is often attributed to the increasing emphasis on children's rights and the tension this brings between traditional expectations and the new rights-based approach to childhood.

These evolving expectations and behaviours highlight a significant shift in perceptions of childhood, as modern children increasingly assert their rights, often citing these rights as justification for avoiding traditional chores. This shift has led to tensions between traditional expectations and contemporary understandings of childhood. As articulated by a participant interviewed from Watye Ki Gen (Gulu 2023), "We have lost the meaning of a child right now." This sentiment reflects broader concerns about how the protection and rights of children, influenced by humanitarian interventions, have redefined roles and responsibilities in ways that sometimes clash with traditional norms. The section to follow will explore children's rights in the Acholi context, reflecting upon its introduction, principles, and resulting perceptions and actions taken by individuals and communities. This analysis will explore the intersection between children's rights and responsibilities, emphasising how the individual-centred framework of children's rights often clashes with the communal ethos of Acholi society, thereby complicating the reintegration and socialisation processes for children in the post-conflict context.

6.3. Children's Rights versus Local Realities – Navigating the Interface and Tensions between Humanitarian and Traditional Views on Childhood

Children's rights were introduced to the community through various channels, gradually becoming a prominent topic of discussion among both adults and children. Many community members first learned about these rights through schools and the radio. As one participant noted, "We are taught at school, it is children's rights" (Focus Group Pece-Laroo 2023), while others recalled hearing them broadcast on the radio, a powerful tool in disseminating information: "Through radio is where I heard about children's rights" (Focus Group Bardege-Layibi 2023). For some, the government played a key role in this introduction, particularly following the formulation of Uganda's Children's Act on August 1, 1997, after the country became a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990. One woman mentioned, "It is the government that started introducing children's rights to the parents" (Focus Group Bardege-Layibi 2023), reflecting how the state's formal

legislation helped frame the rights within the community. Another participant highlighted how these rights were also heard through meetings with local officials: "For us here we sit for meetings in the home of the LC1, we have people who come and teach parents about the child's rights" (Focus Group Unyama 2023).

In addition to government and local officials, other participants noted the involvement of village Child Protection Committees (CPCs) within the community as being instrumental in spreading awareness (Focus Group Patiko 2023). The central role of CPCs was further reiterated by community members in Bungatria who recounted "Even the child protection, they are here in the community. Those who look at child rights and they share with the community, so that the community know what to do" (Focus Group Bungatira 2023). These groups were crucial in teaching both parents and children about children's rights, particularly in the post-war period as ensuring children's protection and well-being became a vital concern.

6.3.1. Key Categories of Children's Rights Established

In the focus groups and interviews, participants consistently highlighted several key rights that have become central to children's lives post-conflict. The most emphasised right across discussions was education. Many noted a significant shift in how children are now equally provided access to schooling, with both boys and girls being sent to school—an important departure from the past when "mostly boys would be taken to school but now both boys and girls are equally taken to school" (Focus Group Pece-Laroo 2023). This emphasis on education reflects a broader commitment to ensuring that all children, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities for learning and development. As a central theme in discussions, education emerged not only as a fundamental right but also as a crucial platform through which both parents and children view the security and potential of the children's future in the region.

The prohibition on corporal punishment through children's rights doctrine was another significant point, though it often sparked debate among parents whilst children regarded these rights positively, noting in Unyama: "We loved it so much because our parents beat their children" (Focus Group Unyama 2023). While the new law discouraging the beating of children was accepted by some, others saw it as an imposition, with one participant remarking, "They were not to beat children. But for us parents, if a child does something wrong, they beat. So, they thought that maybe the government has brought that law, the child rights, not very favourable to parents" (Focus Group Pece-Laroo 2023). The tension between traditional forms of discipline and children's rights reflects a broader societal shift that not all parents have fully embraced.

Basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare were also frequently mentioned as essential rights. Participants stressed that children should be well-nourished, provided with medical care when sick, and housed in proper living conditions. One respondent noted, "You also have to give them food and never overwork a child" (Focus Group Unyama 2023), while another added, "A child must go to school, a child has a right to food, a child has a right to education" (Interview World Vision 2023). These rights were often linked to the responsibility of parents to ensure their children's well-being, and the importance of providing both tangible support and emotional care was consistently acknowledged.

Protection from abuse, both physical and verbal, was another key right discussed, with emphasis on not overburdening children with labour beyond their abilities. As one woman pointed out, "When they come back home now to do work, don't give them a very big jerry can that they cannot manage to carry" (Focus Group Bungatira 2023). Protecting children from abuse, while encouraging fair work, was seen as integral to their rights, reflecting a balance between nurturing children and instilling responsibility.

Despite these rights being seen as crucial to children's well-being, there was an underlying tension between children's rights and their responsibilities. Some participants voiced concerns that too much emphasis on rights might be "spoiling a child" (Focus Group Bardege-Layibi 2023). As one respondent from the Awach group aptly summarized, while children have the "right to education," they also have the responsibility to "come to school by themselves... wash plates, utensils, and other stuff" (Focus Group Awach 2023). This balancing act between rights and duties reflects the ongoing negotiation between traditional values and modern legal frameworks in Acholi society.

6.3.2. Balancing Rights and Responsibilities – Tensions and Interventions around Children's Rights

While the provision of children's rights has been largely seen as beneficial for protecting and supporting children, a recurring theme across focus groups and interviews is the tension between these rights and the traditional responsibilities that guide relationships between children and parents. These tensions were one of the most frequently coded themes in transcripts, particularly during discussions about childhood today after the conflict, reflecting how childhood today is often intertwined with everyday navigation between rights and responsibilities. Therefore, whilst many participants acknowledged the positive impact of these rights in terms of improving children's well-being, they also highlighted significant challenges and misunderstandings that arose from their implementation.

In reflecting on the shift towards children's rights in the post-conflict environment of northern Uganda, D.O. underscores that this transition has been fraught with difficulties and is central to understanding the current negative parental perceptions of children. He noted, "Looking at community perceptions towards the children today, it has not been good.. From the community, they feel that the culture is now being overridden by the Western kind; cultural style of doing things" (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). D.O. expressed that the war had disrupted traditional norms and with the introduction of Western-style rights doctrines, there were clashes with local cultural practices. This disruption subsequently led to a sense of disorientation within the community, where traditional methods of child-rearing, such as corporal punishment, were once normalised but are now viewed through a new lens of rights and respect.

The abrupt introduction of children's rights by various NGOs was also criticised for its lack of clarity. One participant remarked, "Some NGOs used to come and they don't explain it well to the children, even to the parents" (Focus Group Awach 2023). This lack of effective communication often led to confusion, with children exploiting their newfound understanding of rights in ways that conflicted with traditional responsibilities. Another participant noted, "That talk that they keep singing on the radio is what right now children held in their ears tightly" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). Similarly, a former commander expressed concern about how children have misunderstood the concept, stating, "These organisations that are dealing with children's rights could be even also one way that has contributed to children getting spoiled... Children's rights, children's rights, children's rights… Now, the children are mistaken by what it means by children's rights" (Interview Former Commander, Gulu 2023). He elaborated further, highlighting children's use of rights as a platform to let them "do anything they want. That is it. Whether bad or good. It's now their right" (*ibid* 2023). Therefore, despite the initial intentions behind children's rights for their protection and well-being, its authoritative use against parents by children has become a key factor in strained parent-child relationships, as well as the proliferation of *Aguu* who leave home in pursuit of independent lives on the streets (Focus Group Bungatira 2023; Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

Adding to this, D.O. emphasised the cultural clash inherent in this shift: "But, of course, when you talk about rights, also, a right is contextual and this is where now, I think as Africans, as a continent, we have had issues with the Western kind of, you know. My understanding and what I've seen with our community is that we look at rights from the communal aspect of it. You know, while the Western ideologies look at rights from the individual aspect and all that. This has, in a way, conflicted" (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023). This misinterpretation of children's rights highlights a crucial challenge in reconciling the intended protections with the actual behaviours of children and expectations within

the community, reflecting the broader contestation between the individualistic focus of rights and the communal, reciprocal values traditionally emphasised in Acholi culture.

The cultural clash and misinterpretation of children's rights, as highlighted by D.O., reflect deeper tensions between the Western conceptualisation of rights and traditional Acholi values. As Eleke (2016: 4) points out, the challenge lies in reconciling the rights-based framework with local understandings of reintegration and child-rearing practices. Ochen (2012: 1198) further elucidates that while international frameworks, notably the UN's CRC, have driven global policy interventions, the implementation has often faced resistance in local contexts where such rights are perceived as conflicting with traditional norms. This discord is compounded by the absence of vernacular terms for rights, leading to potential misuse by children and further strain on parent-child relationships (Ochen 2012: 1198). To address these issues, there has been a growing recognition of the need to harmonise international rights agreements with local socio-cultural practices. As Ochen (2012: 1204) notes, effective child protection requires bridging the gap between global rights discourse and local worldviews, ensuring that interventions respect cultural contexts while promoting the well-being of children.

In response to these tensions, various participants and organisations have undertaken efforts to navigate and mitigate the clash between children's rights and traditional responsibilities. These interventions aim to find a middle ground, integrating rights discourse with local values of reciprocity and responsibility, to better address the needs and expectations of the community as a whole, and not just children. In Bardege-Layibi, a participant noted the need for moderation in the implementation of children's rights to foster responsible behaviour in children. The participant emphasised, "Sometimes, some of these rights need to be toned down a bit for ones where the child grows up into someone who is responsible" (Focus Group Bardege-Layibi 2023). Evident in many of the interventions taken by participants, children's responsibilities became a driving factor for how rights were renegotiated and amended across Gulu.

Beginning with the Child Mothers focus group, there was criticism of the rigidity of legal frameworks and the perceived disconnect between these frameworks and parental authority. One participant argued, "Children's rights, as a parent, they are the ones that did not put it in place... As a parent, if you are now to handle your child, how you teach your child, and when the child does something which was wrong, and even, as a parent, you should refuse that very hard" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). This reflects the struggle of parents who find themselves constrained by laws they feel were not designed with their realities in mind. However, in response to the perceived need by

mothers to educate children properly about their rights, efforts were taken not only to clarify their intention but also to delineate where a child's rights begin and end. In this manner, mothers ensure that their children understand the boundaries of their rights; a factor that becomes crucial when considering the dual role of their responsibilities in their communities.

In Awach, similar themes emerge, with focus group participants discussing how the rights discourse was initially poorly understood and led to problematic behaviours among children, namely teenage pregnancies and Aguu street children. As an elder remarked, "At the beginning, we heard it in a negative way... But now, they have reworked/redefined on it and now the parents around us have understood, even the children have understood it now" (Focus Group Awach 2023). Through coming together in groups to discuss resolutions for these issues, parent were able to reimagine what children's rights meant in their community. This need to bring clarity to children's rights, especially locally, was further unpacked by the local headteacher who noted that in Luo – the local language – the direct translation for rights is *twero.* However, "if someone says I have *twero*, that person is now untouchable. Nobody can now touch that person, because they have *twero.* That is how children received the right, and even, that is how the community received their right." Therefore, in bringing children's responsibilities alongside their rights, community members in Awach were able to counter the unlimited power that *twero* was seen to bring.

Actions such as those seen in Awach were not limited in recognition to community members but were similarly emphasised by organisations, such as World Vision. In our discussions with a representative of World Vision in Kampala, a similar renegotiation of rights became evident. In particular, it was mentioned that despite it being crucial to emphasise the universality of children's rights, as enshrined in the UN CRC, it was equally as important to ensure that when engaging children on their rights, they are also spoken to about their responsibilities. In fact, as stated in the interview, "We put more emphasis on responsibilities so that our children can grow into responsible people who respect elders and respect society" (Interview World Vision 2023).

Contestation around the local Luo word for 'rights' – *twero* – and its connotations of unbounded authority and power is a phenomenon that was similarly captured by Branch (2011: 139), who highlights how the implications of this term for rights equally transcends into the "rights of women" in Acholi society. Often accompanying discussions of rights, as was equally seen in engagements I had with participants in and around Gulu, was that while they often express a positive support for rights, this is often followed by complaints of its misuse, which Branch also indicates for women. As such, the need to account for the association of *twero* with authority and the actions taken to mediate

this becomes vital, not just in terms of children's rights, but rights in general within Acholi society. As explained by Acholi women within Branch's study, "tradition is not a closed, petrified set of customs and practices, but rather is open to constant contestation and renegotiation from within." Therefore, what is seen within both my engagements, as well as those of Branch (2011), is this active negotiation of these concepts amidst these cultural distinctions to best fit their reality.

Therefore, at the basis of all of these interventions, the importance of context in the execution of children's rights becomes clear – a point further reiterated by the Children Rights and Violence Prevention Fund in Uganda. As stated in an interview with a member of the organisation in discussing the importance of culturally relevant manuals and training on rights, "You give people the manuals and work alongside them, picking out what speaks to their culture and speaks to their norms. Most of the things are almost related, but we try as much as possible that the context is spoken to" (Interview Children Rights and Violence Prevention Fund 2023). In this manner, working with people in a contextually respectful manner should not just be the exception, but the standard in aiming to ensure that rights frameworks are adapted to fit local cultural contexts.

The tensions between children's rights and their individual-centric approach conflict with the communal basis of Acholi society. The themes highlighted within the interventions taken by participants to ensure the applicability of children's rights within their local context speak to a broader distinction—one that reveals underlying conceptions of childhood itself. These conceptualisations are not only vital to understanding the nature of relationships, identity, and belonging within post-war Acholi society but are essential for comprehending the long-term realities of reintegration. The interconnection between these factors has played a key role in shaping the reconciliation between returnees and their communities. As Stark et al. (2009: 4–5) caution, the risk becomes an underestimation of the "importance of culturally constructed meaning and interpretation of war-related events" when Western measures and concepts are applied without contextual understanding (Mukasa 2017: 355).

This highlights the themes of communal responsibility and reciprocity, which are central to how the ideal child and childhood are conceived in Gulu today. These notions have deeply influenced how communities sought to reinstate a sense of "normality" following the conflict and disruption. The interactions between communities and children today not only reflect this post-war renegotiation but also the undercurrents of relationships, shaping who falls within the redefined norms and values of society, and who, like the returnees, remain on the fringes. A deeper, contextually-based understanding of childhood—one that considers the centrality of responsibility and the reciprocal

roles children occupy within their everyday lived realities—is essential. Therefore, unpacking childhood in the relational space not only illuminates the backdrop against which these interventions operate but also provides critical insight into how both returnees and the communities receiving them navigated the post-conflict reality.

6.4. Childhood on the Ground – Local Conceptions of Children's Roles, Capacities and Reciprocal Relationships in a Post-War Environment

In the aftermath of the conflict, childhood—once central to abductions and violence—became a focal point for funding and interventions aimed at restoring 'normality' and mending what was perceived to be lost, not only for the abducted but also for those who remained at 'home.' However, as discussed in chapter five, the reintegration process was far from straightforward. Attempts to restore childhood to its pre-war state often neglected the profound disruptions caused by abduction and the re-socialisation that took place in captivity. This oversight also extended to the persistent disconnect between children and their socio-cultural networks across Acholi communities. Reintegration programmes often focused on the visible trauma of physical separation from abductees' communities but failed to account for the more subtle, yet equally significant, changes to the nature of childhood during and after the war. The dual realities of childhood—one shaped by life in the bush, the other by life at 'home'—became deeply intertwined in the post-conflict period, complicating efforts to create a unified, 'ideal' childhood experience. Communities and families, too, found themselves renegotiating their roles as they grappled with the complexities of reintegrating children who had lived vastly different experiences during the conflict.

During the early stages of my research, a recurring question arose: why focus on conceptions of childhood today, and why include children as research participants if they were not directly impacted by abduction, captivity, or displacement? This question—"Why children now?"—emerged consistently in conversations with community members, returnees, and local organisations in Gulu. On the surface, it could be argued that childhood today bears little relevance to the reintegration process, which many assume concluded years ago. However, this assumption overlooks the profound and lingering impacts of the conflict, impacts that continue to permeate every level of society. The war and its aftermath created a generational ripple effect, influencing not only the relationships between returnees and their families but also the broader interactions between children and their communities in northern Uganda.

When asked whether reintegration has been successful, hesitation often accompanied any affirmative response. In reality, many of the deep-seated issues from the war remain unresolved, particularly

those related to identity and belonging. One of the most pervasive challenges was the disruption of social relationships and how individuals, especially returnees, could re-establish a sense of belonging *within* their communities. Northern Uganda's 'post-conflict' environment, far from being a seamless reintegration, can more accurately be described as one of uneasy coexistence. This is especially true for returnees and those born in captivity, who often found themselves entering into a new and unfamiliar social dynamic. Amid this complex separation, identity—and specifically, what it means to be a 'child'—emerged as a crucial factor in determining one's place within this post-conflict landscape. Identity is not merely a label; it is deeply interwoven with one's relationships, cultural adherence, and sense of belonging. Therefore, to fully understand the reintegration of returnees, we must first explore the nature of childhood itself and the social relationships they were expected to return to. This exploration will not be based on universal academic or policy conceptions of childhood, as discussed in chapter three, but will instead consider the perspectives of those on the ground in northern Uganda. Through this lens, additional coded themes that emerged from the research, such as what constitutes a child in this context, the duality of children's rights and responsibilities, and the complex reality of childhoods on the fringes of society, will be examined.

6.4.1. Who, or What, Constitutes a Child in northern Uganda?

In discussions with participants from Gulu and surrounding areas, the definition of a child generally aligned with Uganda's legal framework, where anyone under the age of 18 was considered a child. This 'straight-18 standard' was the most frequently mentioned classification, underscoring a formal, age-based understanding of childhood. Comments such as "a child is someone who is less than 18 years" (Focus Group Pece-Laroo 2023) and "a child is someone from 0 to 18 years" (Focus Group Awach 2023) reflected this widely accepted view. This legalistic definition carried weight, particularly in institutional settings like schools, hospitals, and government programmes that structured access to resources based on age.

However, while this classification was the most common, it coexisted with more complex and nuanced interpretations of childhood within Acholi society. Beyond the formal age limit, participants highlighted cultural and relational dynamics that challenged rigid age-based definitions. For instance, a more fluid understanding emerged in several interviews, which framed childhood not only as a developmental stage but as a role defined by an individual's relationship to their family and community. As one participant described, "I remain a child… my elders will call me a child… because my role relative to theirs is still classified as a role of a child" (Interview Prime Minister Ker Kwaro Acholi, Gulu 2023). This quote emphasises that even after surpassing the age of 18, individuals may continue to be regarded as children within Acholi society.

This cultural nuance becomes particularly significant when considering the reintegration of returnees, especially children abducted by the LRA. The organisation Watye Ki Gen, which works with returnees, has highlighted the difficulties in classifying returnees within these age-bound or relational frameworks. Some child returnees, having lived through years of violence, forced labour, and adult responsibilities, might return physically and emotionally more mature than their age peers, highlighting the different nature of socialisation and "reasoning in the bush" that these children encountered (Interview Watye Ki Gen, Gulu 2023). This creates a tension between their lived experiences as child soldiers and the cultural or legal categories that seek to define them. Additionally, a staff member from Watye Ki Gen further notes the complexities that arise around childhood when considering a childhood experienced in captivity: "There are circumstances if the children go to captivity where you have not experienced your childhood as a child" (Interview Watye Ki Gen, Gulu 2023). Childhood in this environment, due to the violence and need for survival, thereby introduces a reality where those who return from the bush are still regarded as children due to this experience. This dynamic reflects the challenge of reintegrating returnees who occupy a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, given their exposure to war.

Other focus groups also touched on the distinction between the legal classification of a child and the cultural recognition of an individual's developmental or relational status. For example, in a discussion with Mr. Joseph from WAYA, he emphasised that the Acholi concept of a child extends beyond biological age. As Mr. Joseph noted, "A child is someone who has not yet taken up their place in the family, even if they are older" (WAYA Interview 2023). This highlights the Acholi perception of childhood as linked to one's roles and responsibilities within the family structure, rather than a fixed age – a point emphasised by the Prime Minister of Ker Kwaro Acholi when he said "That's why in Africa, numbers don't matter" (Interview, Gulu 2023).

The notion of responsibility plays a significant role in defining adulthood; until an individual takes on responsibilities like marriage, parenthood, or property ownership, they are still seen as children in a cultural sense. This was further captured in an interview with an employee from the Recreation Project who mentioned that "When they are already parents, they don't consider them as young people already. They look at them like adults" (Interview Recreation Project, Gulu 2023c). This relational approach to defining childhood contrasts with the legal definition and demonstrates a deeper cultural nuance in how Acholi society views growth, maturity, and status. Yet, when unpacking the realities of abducted children, their reintegration becomes fraught with contestation as many performed adult tasks in the bush, but these tasks were seen as being undertaken outside of

culturally recognised procedures, resulting in a complex reality where their newfound identities and circumstances leave them on the frays of both childhood and adulthood.

Further complicating these distinctions is the perception of childhood as a state of ignorance and innocence. This view, which was prominent but less frequently mentioned than the age-based classification, sees children as inherently dependent and vulnerable. In this manner, being able to provide for oneself is the defining factor of whether one is considered a child, as "even a big person can be called a child because there's that limitation that person has" (Focus Group CBOW 2023). Coinciding with the element of dependency, the focus group with children born in captivity highlighted that "A child is innocence. It's living in ignorance… but not in a bad way. When you are supposed to know something, but you don't know" (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This quote reflects a traditional understanding of childhood as a period marked by a lack of knowledge or experience, particularly in areas of adult decision-making. It also emphasises that children are not held accountable for their ignorance, reinforcing the protective nature of childhood within Acholi culture.

Overall, the dominant classification based on age existed alongside more culturally nuanced interpretations that extended childhood into adulthood depending on social and familial roles. The least common, but still significant, perspectives recognised the deep impact that the war had on children's experiences, reshaping cultural understandings of what it means to be a child in Acholi society. These perspectives illustrate the evolving yet persistent concept of childhood in Acholi society, where legal definitions of childhood coexist with more fluid, relational understandings that tie a child's identity to their familial and societal roles. The notion of dependency and innocence forms the core of how children are perceived, suggesting that even beyond adolescence, individuals can still be considered children based on their social relationships and responsibilities. Moreover, this fluidity in definitions underscores the complexities of reintegrating child returnees, who must navigate a world where their legal, social, and cultural identities as children are constantly in tension with their wartime experiences.

6.4.2. Children's Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships

The intricate relationship between children and adults in Acholi society revolves around reciprocity, mutual responsibility, and active engagement, not merely a top-down model of care and guidance. While adults are positioned as caretakers, guiding children through moral, cultural, and practical lessons, children are expected to contribute to the household and community, demonstrating an evolving sense of duty. This interconnection between adults and children is essential in understanding how roles are shared, emphasising that children are not passive recipients but active participants in

this relationship. This became evident through the persistent emergence of coded themes relating to how children are “kept,” the “small work” they are expected to undertake in the home and compound, and the overarching expectations to act morally, help parents, bring happiness, respect others, and adhere to cultural norms while not engaging in adult responsibilities before the age of 18.

The respect that children must show towards adults forms the foundation of this dynamic. A recurring theme in the focus groups in Unyama, Bungatira, and Pece-Laroo (2023) signifies that "a child should know that they should respect their parents and elders," with many noting the importance of greeting elders first thing in the morning and “growing with respect.” This respect extends beyond mere obedience, creating space for children to learn, internalise, and eventually reciprocate through their own responsibilities. Leading children to this role, parents and elders emphasise the notion of children "being kept;" a practice that underscores how adults are tasked with providing care, advice, and practical support to children. This was highlighted by a mother in the Bardege-Layibi who explained: "A child is someone that you just keep from childhood until he or she becomes big" (Focus Group Bardege-Layibi 2023). Similarly, in Awach they stressed the responsibility of parents to guide children through life’s challenges, as they “are not aware of anything” (Focus Group Awach 2023). In this manner, participants consistently describe children as individuals who require guidance and support until they mature and can assume more independent roles.

However, the relationship is not purely one-sided. Central to this dynamic is the expectation that children should uphold their role within the family and community, such as through performing chores, helping their parents, and seeking knowledge to allow them to contribute meaningfully to society. As described in focus groups in Patiko, Bardge-Layibi, Pece-Laroo and Bungatira (2023), there is recognition that children have a “lot of work” that they do in the home and within their compound, reflecting their integral role in supporting both household and community functions. This sets up a dual responsibility framework where the respect children owe to their elders is complemented by their roles in aiding and assisting others in their everyday lives.

This responsibility that children bear in this everyday domain is thereby best understood through acknowledging this “small work” – a characterisation commonly used by participants. For instance, in practically all focus groups, when asked what children ‘do’ in society, responses unanimously outlined how children help parents by performing essential duties like fetching water, digging, sweeping the compound, and participating in community work. These chores are not simply assigned by parents, but also expected to be driven by children as their capabilities grow. In this exchange, the structure of everyday life becomes centred around this reciprocal care, which binds families and communities across Gulu. As captured by a woman in Pece-Laroo, children have “a responsibility to

relate with their family members and even the neighbours around them," signifying how their responsibilities are not contained to their immediate family, but the whole of society (Focus Group Pece-Laroo 2023).

The interconnectedness of these themes shows that the relationship between children and adults in Acholi society is one of mutual obligation. While adults care for children and provide them with advice and protection, children reciprocate by actively participating in household and community life. This active participation and socialisation is something that those in Bungatira view as beginning as early as children first "learning how to walk," when they are told to assist in fetching water or calling on family members (Focus Group Bungatira 2023). This marks the beginning of children's participation in the family's functioning. While in many cases these responsibilities are painted as vital to children's role, caution was also expressed around children being overworked, as they are often tasked with increasing responsibilities with age, as well as taking up 'heavy work' when their parents are absent or unwell (Focus Group Patiko 2023). These tasks, though physically demanding, ultimately serve as rites of passage, gradually transitioning children from dependence to interdependence with their family and community.

The process of cultural instruction in Acholi society also plays a crucial role in shaping children's identities, roles, and responsibilities, reflecting the community's emphasis on transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. This teaching is largely based on practical engagement, where children are not just passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in their own socialisation.

One of the clearest insights into this is the role of elders in preparing children for adulthood, as highlighted in the Bardege-Layibi focus group. Boys are taught how to be "good husbands" by male elders, while girls receive instruction from their aunts and grandmothers on how to become future wives and manage their households (Focus Group Bardege-Layibi 2023). This instruction is gendered and anticipatory, laying the foundation for children's future social roles within their community. Importantly, this preparation isn't merely about performing tasks; it is about imbuing the children with the social and moral values needed to maintain their roles in a culturally cohesive way. This process illustrates a core feature of the Acholi socialisation system—children are expected to internalise their responsibilities and understand their future roles within the household and the broader community.

Further, the teachings provided to children extend beyond mere functional tasks to encompass moral and cultural values, as emphasised by the Awach focus group. Children are taught practical skills such as how to clean, dress, cook traditional food, and build houses, but this practical instruction is

deeply intertwined with moral expectations (Focus Group Awach 2023). The emphasis on traditional dress, for example, underscores not just aesthetic choices but a larger cultural framework. Girls are taught not to wear short clothes, and boys are instructed to avoid "damaged jeans" because proper attire reflects one's respect for cultural values. Such teachings enforce discipline and embody cultural pride, ensuring that children not only know how to fulfil their roles but also understand how these roles reinforce a social order.

This moral and cultural moulding of children is a reciprocal process, where adults take an active role in shaping children's development, while children are expected to learn, embody, and perpetuate these values (Focus Group CBOW 2023). As Ogaba Joseph from WAYA notes, children must become "a child in a particular culture," learning and embodying what it means to belong within the framework of Acholi society (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023) - an assertion that participants in Awach shared. This sense of belonging, reinforced through guidance and "gaining understanding from elders," (Focus Group Bardege-Layibi 2023) is central to a child's identity formation through socio-cultural ways of knowing and being. A culturally moulded child, who understands their role, stands apart from those who have not been instructed. This moral instruction is not passive; it requires children to actively learn and embody these values, further enhancing the reciprocal nature of their relationships with adults. The focus group in Bardege-Layibi, however, also touches on the challenges children face today, where traditional values are often seen as a sign of backwardness, with youth dismissing them as relics of the past (Focus Group Bardege-Layibi 2023). This dissonance between traditional teachings and modern sensibilities underscores the struggle to maintain cultural continuity in a rapidly changing world, where youth are caught between respecting traditional ways and navigating contemporary life.

The complexities of this process are further unpacked by the Prime Minister of Ker Kwaro Acholi, who highlights the erosion of traditional roles due to the formal education system. He notes that girls today, despite their academic accomplishments, often lack the skills needed to manage a home, a deficiency he attributes to the absence of traditional tutelage (Interview Prime Minister Ker Kwaro Acholi, Gulu 2023). As he put it, "In my culture, they say, "*itingo caro ma iot pa meni ni ikelo wa gangwa*." You have carried the lack of knowledge about your responsibilities from your mother's house and brought it to your mother-in-law's home" (*ibid* 2023). The traditional model combined education with practical life skills taught by family members, ensuring that by the time a girl was ready to marry, she was well-equipped to run a household. The Prime Minister's critique emphasises the importance of this traditional form of education, which was not merely about task mastery but about cultivating a holistic understanding of one's responsibilities within the family and community.

His reflection on teenage pregnancies further illustrates this point; without being imbued with cultural values and the responsibilities that come with maturity, young girls are more vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviour, suggesting that the loss of traditional guidance has tangible consequences for social order (Interview Prime Minister Ker Kwaro Acholi, Gulu 2023).

In addition to preparing children for their future social roles, the teachings passed down also aim to maintain cultural continuity. The Awach focus group elaborates on how children must learn essential cultural knowledge, such as clan history, traditional songs for different occasions, and the use of instruments like the *Bila* - a traditional horn used for communication (Focus Group Awach 2023). This transmission of cultural knowledge is vital for preserving Acholi identity and ensuring that future generations remain connected to their roots. Learning traditional dances like *Bwola* and *Otole*, as one respondent explained, begins at a young age, with children being taken to the *rwodi's* (chief's) royal court to practice (Focus Group Awach 2023). This structured approach to cultural education demonstrates how deeply embedded these practices are in the social fabric of Acholi society. The dances are not simply performances but expressions of communal identity, embodying the historical, emotional, and social realities of the people.

At the same time, the Recreation Project interview offers a critical perspective on the limitations of traditional gendered roles, particularly for girls. While it acknowledges that girls are often trained from a young age in their motherly roles, there is concern that this rigid confinement to domestic responsibilities can limit a girl's mental development and independence (Interview Recreation Project, Gulu 2023a; 2023b). This critique calls for a more balanced approach that nurtures both practical and intellectual growth, allowing girls to engage in broader life experiences while still learning the skills necessary for their roles in Acholi society. This tension between traditional expectations and modern aspirations is reflective of the ongoing negotiation between preserving cultural values and adapting to the changing social landscape.

The overall analysis of these teachings reveals that Acholi children are embedded within a complex system of cultural education that prepares them for their future roles while fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility. The process of learning is both practical and moral, deeply intertwined with cultural values and expectations. However, this system is not static; it faces challenges from contemporary forces, such as formal education and modernity, which can disrupt traditional methods of socialisation. Yet, despite these challenges, the emphasis on maintaining cultural continuity through the teaching of traditional skills, values, and knowledge remains central to Acholi identity and the socialisation of its children.

Moreover, the mutual nature of the child-adult relationship in Acholi society underscores a balance of care, responsibility, and reciprocity. Children are not merely passive recipients of guidance but are expected to contribute to the household, embody moral values, and engage actively with their elders. This dual responsibility reflects an interconnected social fabric where children grow into their roles through both instruction and action.

6.4.3. Western versus Non-Western Classifications – Need for a Dual Approach

In analysing the interface between Western and non-Western frameworks in post-conflict environments, it becomes clear that there is a delicate negotiation between traditional Acholi conceptions of childhood and the more universalised, Western frameworks often embedded in reintegration programmes. As the Prime Minister of Ker Kwaro Acholi emphasised, there was a conscious effort to resist the dominance of Western classifications when defining societal understandings of concepts such as childhood. He highlights the complexity introduced when former abductees, having lived through entirely different realities in captivity, return to traditional society only to encounter Westernised models of rehabilitation and reintegration. This creates what he terms a “complex scenario,” where returnees, upon leaving reception centres, are faced with dissonant experiences of life—one shaped by modern, institutional approaches, and the other rooted in traditional values (Interview Prime Minister Ker Kwaro Acholi, Gulu 2023).

The Prime Minister’s statement, "We need to see how we intellectualize traditional knowledge and make it part of our [education]," adds a critical layer to this dialogue. He stresses the importance of finding a synergy between traditional and Western systems to avoid further rupturing the societal fabric. He critiques the adversarial stance often created between the two, which hinders productive integration, resulting in two systems that run parallel but rarely intersect (Interview Prime Minister Ker Kwaro Acholi, Gulu 2023). This tension is mirrored in the reintegration of children, as the cultural context often gets overshadowed by Western ideals of childhood enshrined in international conventions like the UNCRC. The result is a failure to acknowledge the holistic experience of the child in the Acholi context, where roles, responsibilities, and relationships are deeply embedded in community structures. As Mr. John Bosco Komakech Aludi of Caritas explains, while international frameworks influenced the design of reintegration programmes, there remained significant respect for traditional practices, as these communities were fundamentally rooted in their cultural settings (Interview Caritas, Gulu 2023). This "mixed" approach illustrates the need for balance between honouring traditional cultural practices and acknowledging the globalised frameworks that shape child rights and reintegration processes.

Importantly, the interface between these systems does not suggest a prioritisation of one over the other. Instead, the reality is one of mutual influence, where both frameworks shape the conceptualisation of childhood in the post-war environment. The necessity of a dual approach is highlighted by the tension between Western notions of children's rights and the Acholi emphasis on children's responsibilities. The reintegration process, therefore, must be culturally sensitive while recognising the undeniable impact of universal conceptions of the child. By navigating both avenues, reintegration programmes can be more effective, addressing the broader needs of returnees without negating their socio-cultural identities.

This balance between rights and responsibilities is central to understanding how returnees are received and reintegrated into society. The perception of children upon their return, whether viewed through the lens of traditional Acholi classifications or Western ideals, played a crucial role in determining their ability to re-assimilate. Some returnees were able to reconnect with their communities, while others encountered significant challenges and stigmatisation. The classifications of the child that were at play during reintegration, including the "ideal" child victim, fostered a dual complexity between amnesty and atonement. As noted in section 5.5.4.1. of chapter five this complexity reflects the ongoing struggle of reconciling returnees with communities that had undergone displacement.

Through experiencing a childhood ‘outside’ the traditional Acholi social fabric, returnees often undergo a profound rift in their relationship with the communities they return to. This separation from traditional structures makes it difficult to reconcile their place within society upon their return. As such, returnees frequently find themselves on the fringes of these communities, navigating "new communities" formed around shared experiences, identities, and their agentic negotiation of post-war realities. Moreover, many returnees face a dual reality of being both pitied and scorned, as they not only grapple with the violent rupture of their social fabric due to their abduction but also navigate a new identity as former ‘rebels.’ This tension between innocence and guilt complicates their return, exposing a significant gap in their social reintegration. These challenges are especially evident for child mothers and their children born in captivity, who will be the focus of the following section.

6.5. Childhoods on the Fringes of Society – Complex Realities of Return and Stigmatisation

The experiences of returnees in northern Uganda offer a window into the intricate and multifaceted realities of post-conflict reintegration. For many, the journey home was not just a physical return, but a profound negotiation of identity and belonging, marked by rejection and stigmatisation for many returnees. Reintegration was not merely about the returnees’ capacity to reconnect with their families

and communities but also about the willingness and ability of those communities to receive them. Returnees often confronted the dual challenge of rebuilding their lives while carrying the burden of being labelled as 'rebels,' and in the case of children born in captivity, as "Kony's children." These social markers shaped their acceptance—or lack thereof—within their families and broader communities.

By exploring the stories of former child soldiers and children born in captivity, this section highlights the tapestry of shared struggles as well as the diversity in their post-conflict experiences. The nature of each returnee's experience was deeply shaped not only by their time in captivity but also by the environment they returned to—an environment still healing from the war's trauma. Particular attention will be given to both male and female returnees, revealing the gendered dimensions of both captivity and reintegration. Similarly, the children born out of relationships in captivity must also navigate complex identities, confronting the societal stigma tied to their origins. Ultimately, the reintegration process illustrates how the scars of war continue to shape the social fabric of Acholi society, with the legacies of conflict deeply embedded in the everyday realities of those on the fringes.

6.5.1. Recollections of Reconciliation – The Varied Experiences of Acceptance

The complex realities of return for former abductees in northern Uganda highlight the deep challenges faced by individuals attempting to reintegrate into communities that have often been profoundly scarred by the violence of war. Identifying as a returnee was, for many, fraught with difficulty and shame, with that identity often carrying the weight of stigma and suspicion. In many communities, returnees concealed their pasts, only revealing their experiences after building trust with others. As some returnees shared with us, this trust was not always easily attained. For instance, in some communities like Awach, returnees openly discussed their pasts as it was clear that there was an environment of acceptance of their past. This reflects the unevenness of acceptance, as returnees contended with the societal perception of them as 'rebels' and as the embodiment of the violence wrought by the LRA.

One male returnee from Awach recounted his experience of being abducted in 2003 and subsequently rehabilitated through the support of organisations like Action Against Hunger and GUSCO. He reflected on how his abduction disrupted his life trajectory, but upon returning home, it was his parents, rather than external organisations, who provided the ongoing support needed to reintegrate and resume his education. As he stated, "It was my parents who took me," acknowledging the role of family in re-establishing some semblance of normalcy after years in captivity (Focus Group Awach

2023). However, this experience of parental support was not universal, as many other returnees faced ostracism and struggled to reintegrate without such foundational family ties.

Similarly, a female returnee from the same focus group revealed the inner turmoil that accompanied her return. Abducted and exposed to the violent life of the bush, she developed a mindset where she believed that everything was acquired by force. Her eventual change of heart came through the teachings and counselling provided by GUSCO, as well as conversations with fellow returnees, but she still admitted to lingering aggression. “If something bad happens to me up to now, I can be very rude and aggressive,” she shared, highlighting the long-lasting psychological impact of the bush experience (Focus Group Awach 2023). Her reflection also speaks to the underlying tension many returnees felt between their past actions in the bush and the societal expectations they now face. The stigma of their past as former combatants coloured every aspect of their return, complicating their ability to fully reintegrate and be accepted.

This theme of rejection and stigmatisation was echoed in an interview from WAYA, where a male returnee described how difficult it was to mix freely with others in the community. He expressed the burden of being labelled as a rebel and being blamed for the violence that the LRA inflicted on others, saying, “They are the ones who killed their relatives…cut their legs.” Such accusations, rooted in the community’s trauma, compounded the returnees’ isolation and emotional struggles. He explained how the label of 'Kony’s child', in particular, made it hard for returnees to re-integrate, especially in public spaces like schools and community centres. “You come back and you are denied a table, a seat here in the school because I don’t want to sit; you are isolated because you are Kony” (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023). The reality of being seen as ‘Kony’s child’ not only stifled their ability to reconcile with the community but also triggered fights, particularly in community centres and schools. Evident in these exchanges between communities and returnees was the tension between amnesty and impunity, where the label of the child victim was often not enough to curb the need for accountability that many community members held, thereby shedding light on how fragile the post-conflict social fabric continues to be.

Additionally exposing this fragile social dynamic, the interview we held with a former commander in the LRA notes how for many returnees, coming home to a ‘spoiled’ education and death of family members – at times by their own hand during their violent initiation into the LRA -ultimately made this environment one where they had to confront these losses on a day-to-day basis. In the case of M, he is particularly troubled by the impact of his time and captivity and notes a similar feeling amongst other former commanders who, at times, still think of returning to the bush:

> Right now, when you look at this young man, I think even now he is wishing to go back. The way he is suffering. He has got no place in the village in Alero. He tried to go there and he was chased away. He has got nowhere to stay. You see, he is just here now on the street (Interview Former Commander, Gulu 2023).

Reflecting back to the nature of M's navigation of life at home – as detailed in section 5.6 – acceptance from family at home would simply not be a universal experience for all returnees, particularly those with no family network to return to. Therefore, as will be indicated with child mothers and children born in captivity, their experience of return hinged on their ability to find belonging and purpose outside of their past lives.

These narratives underscore the delicate and uneven process of reintegration, where returnees often found themselves torn between their past and the present, caught in a tug-of-war between their memories of captivity and the societal labels thrust upon them. The stigmatisation they endured speaks to the broader societal struggle to reconcile with the painful legacies of the war. The intensity of rejection, particularly for female returnees who became wives and mothers in captivity, was further complicated by their dual identities as abducted children and as women who assumed roles typically defined by cultural rites of passage that were interrupted by the conflict.

As we turn to the experiences of child mothers, the intersection of their identity as former abductees and their new roles as wives and mothers reveals how the process of return and acceptance became uniquely gendered. Their return and reintegration were not only about reconnecting with their families but also about contending with the cultural expectations around womanhood and motherhood. These expectations were shaped by rites of passage that were absent or incomplete in captivity, and this rupture had profound consequences for how they—and their children—were perceived by the community. The following section delves deeper into these complex realities, exploring how child mothers navigated their roles and the stigmas associated with being both survivors of war and mothers of children born in captivity.

6.5.2. Leaving a Child, Returning a Mother – Reflections from Child Mothers in the LRA

The experience of child mothers and wives to commanders in the LRA was one of profound transformation, where the brutal realities of captivity reshaped their identities and sense of belonging. Abducted as children, these girls were thrust into a world where their roles as daughters and students were abruptly replaced with those of wives and mothers. In the bush, they became integral parts of a new, forced family structure, where their relationships with commanders and the children they bore created a complex web of belonging essential to their survival. Speaking with a group of child mothers

in Gulu, it was immediately evident how their shared experiences of abduction and captivity have left a lasting impact on their lives till today. This forced evolution into adulthood—imposed far too soon—highlights how life, relationships, and a distorted sense of belonging, shaped by the brutal realities of the LRA, continue to define their lives and create a profound dissonance with family and community members who remained at home. The honest and open reflections of these women, given so freely, offer keen insights into the complex experiences that child mothers encounter upon returning home.

6.5.2.1. Becoming 'Big' At Once – Abrupt Nature of Abduction and Changed Realities

Many women, like the first speaker, were only 14 years old when they were abducted, "a younger child," as she recalls. She emphasises how the war disrupted her life entirely: separating her from her parents, forcing her out of school, and confronting her with adult responsibilities while still a child herself. "It has made her now drop from school," she states, and the war "has given her a lot of challenges," one of the most significant being conceiving a child while she was still a child herself (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). This poignant statement of being "a child with a child" underscores the layers of responsibility, trauma, and premature maturation that define their experience.

Another woman echoes these sentiments, highlighting the complete and irreversible disruption the war caused. At just 14, like many others, she was attending primary school, a typical stage in a girl's life in Acholi society, preparing for the transition to adulthood through education and cultural teachings. But the war interrupted this path: "It has made her to be abducted," she says, and for 11 years and 8 months, she remained in captivity. It has made her come back with a child. She went as a child and she came back with a child" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). This powerful refrain captures the abrupt, enforced transformation of identity these women experienced. The journey from being a schoolgirl to becoming a mother in the bush radically altered their lives, leaving deep physical scars and emotional trauma. The woman notes that although she survived, she carries the trauma with her: "a lot of pain in her body... there was nothing good which that war has brought into her life, only bad things" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). Whilst gesturing to a scar on her chest - a visible reminder of the violence she endured – she equally notes the internal scars left by years of emotional trauma, the loss of her childhood, and the burden of caring for a child she was unprepared to have.

For these women, the abduction not only stole their childhood but also disrupted their developmental milestones, as another respondent notes. Like her friends, she was abducted at 14 and became a mother by 15. She spent 10 years in captivity and returned with three children, having lost her parents

and her opportunity for education along the way. The war not only deprived her of her childhood but severed her from her foundational relationships, particularly her parents, and denied her access to education. “She didn’t even attend the school,” she recalls (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). The cumulative weight of these losses – childhood, family, education – compounds the sense of helplessness and dislocation felt by many returnees.

The theme of premature adulthood runs through these narratives, with one woman summing up the experience starkly: "They just became big at once" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). This sentiment speaks to the enforced maturation and the overwhelming responsibilities of motherhood in a hostile environment. In a few short words, it encapsulates the loss of innocence and the speed at which these women were thrust into roles for which they were wholly unprepared. The suddenness with which they transitioned from being cared for to caring for others, from children to mothers, had an immense and lasting impact on their identities – a factor that would greatly impact their return ‘home.’

6.5.2.2. A Complex Homecoming – Dialectical Shuttling between Amnesty and Rejection

Amnesty, heralded as a universal tool of forgiveness, was central to all of the women’s return narratives. Yet, as we unpack these experiences, it becomes clear that while amnesty offered a legal and symbolic return to normalcy, the actual experience of homecoming was far more complex, filled with emotional, social, and material challenges that tested the strength of the forgiveness extended to them. As expressed by one woman, it was the government's declaration of forgiveness, delivered through the Amnesty Act and broadcast on Radio Mega, that began to break down the psychological barriers preventing their return:

> What made them to start having the heart of coming back home while in the bush was one, the amnesty... If they come back, they should not take them to jail, they should not kill them, they should not mistreat them (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

For many of these women, hearing about amnesty on the radio was the first time they had felt hope of returning without punishment or death. The Radio Mega programme became a lifeline, providing not only updates on amnesty but also a platform for returnees to share their experiences, further encouraging others to leave the bush. The radio broadcasts also fostered collective dialogue, with one woman recounting how local leaders, religious figures, and cultural elders played pivotal roles in fostering dialogue and publicly advocating for forgiveness and reconciliation, thereby making the amnesty "stand firm” (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). Nevertheless, while this combination of

radio messaging, public advocacy, and cultural engagement created a powerful push for those in the bush to return home, many women note how the reality they faced was far more difficult than the initial promise of forgiveness.

While amnesty facilitated their return, what awaited the women at home was often a harsh awakening. Reception centres such as GUSCO and World Vision provided basic provisions—mattresses, saucepans, blankets—intended to ease the transition back into civilian life. However, these material items could only go so far in helping the women, many of whom returned not just as individuals but as mothers, often with no familial or community support. One woman's account of this provision and their ill-preparation for the reality of return is simultaneously followed up with her expression that "it was like they have brought another war" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). This phrase, *"brought another war"*, encapsulates not only the emotional turmoil behind returning home but the challenges underpinning one's survival in a society that was devastated by war. In this manner, these packages given to returnees were merely a band-aid solution to assist in the short-term return, but not to account for the actual long-term challenges of providing for themselves and their children. Due to this, many returnees, namely child mothers, found themselves in situations where their families were not prepared to accept them, or, as in some cases, the families themselves were struggling to survive in IDP camps. These families, living in deprivation and insecurity, were ill-equipped to welcome back daughters who were now mothers, accompanied by children who were viewed as symbols of the enemy.

As such, the initial joy and warmth of homecoming often gave way to rejection and stigmatisation. One woman powerfully described how her family's initial embrace soon turned cold:

> Parents receive you very well, for you, you think they have received you with love, at the end, you stay for 1 or 2 weeks and they start talking bad things. They refuse you and now your name has been deleted from her list of children (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

This account reflects a broader pattern where forgiveness and reintegration were conditional and fleeting. As the practicalities of daily life set in—particularly the burden of providing for both the returnee and her child—families and communities often distanced themselves from the returnees. The amnesty card symbolised legal forgiveness, but it did not provide the emotional or economic support necessary for these women to rebuild their lives. Left with minimal provisions and forced to navigate their new roles as wives and mothers without sufficient guidance or resources, many found themselves marginalised within their own communities. The emotional and practical toll of this rejection was evident in the following account from one mother in the group, who stated:

> As a human being, when they refuse you from home, the room where you grew up, you start and you go and start renting as you are young, as a girl. It was not easy for them (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

This rejection forced many women to find new ways of surviving, often outside the traditional family structures they had once relied on, leading to further isolation and hardship. In this context, the promise of amnesty, while critical to their return, was only the beginning of a long and difficult journey for these child mothers. The material provisions from reception centres, though welcome, were insufficient to address the deeper emotional, social, and economic needs they faced upon returning home.

6.5.2.3. <u>'Counter-Cultural' Roles and Relationships – Being a Good Wife, Mother and Neighbour</u>

For child mothers who had become wives and mothers in the bush, returning to their maternal homes presented significant challenges to traditional Acholi customs. Despite their new realities, they were often still regarded as "children" due to their abduction as minors, which meant that customary protocols for marriage and motherhood were disregarded. This complex dynamic exacerbated the difficulties of reintegration.

One woman, reflecting on her disrupted upbringing, described how the war had prematurely forced her into adulthood. She recounted the teachings her parents used to give her, about preparing for womanhood and marriage: "When you are growing up, I should be telling you what to do when you become an adult. I should be telling you the kind of man you have to marry, and the clan that is good for you" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). However, the war disrupted these teachings. Abducted before she could complete her transition into adulthood under the guidance of her parents, she explained that "the war has disrupted everything, and she didn't finish the teachings. It has made her life hard, and it has spoiled her life." This disruption not only impacted her but "even all these friends of hers, they became women…they don't know how to show love to their husband or how to respect their husband" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

The traditional guidance of children into adulthood and marriage, embedded in Acholi culture, was deeply compromised for these women. These teachings were integral to determining personhood and belonging, linking back to earlier discussions on childhood in Acholi society. Without the full scope of these lessons, the abducted girls-turned-women were left to navigate their roles as wives and mothers without the cultural foundation that had historically underpinned these responsibilities.

This unpreparedness, coupled with the trauma of abduction, left many of these women grappling with the realities of motherhood alone. A woman, visibly scarred, shared that she had "many children who are orphans. Her parents are also not there. Even the husband is not there. And there is nothing good which even the war has brought into her life" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). Another woman added that many returned with multiple children, often from different fathers: "The way for them to understand, and the way someone else understands is so different. It makes the man leave you and go to get married to another woman" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). These personal accounts underscore the compounded challenges of single motherhood, intensified by the absence of social structures that traditionally supported such roles.

The breakdown of relationships extended beyond just the absence of partners. Many women struggled with their female peers. One woman explained, "The war has taught them they don't know how to be a good neighbour with their female friends. How to show love and be loyal, they don't know" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). The erosion of these social bonds reflected a deeper loss of social cohesion with one's neighbour.

A significant challenge for these women was the perception of illegitimate unions in the bush, which directly impacted how they and their children were received upon their return. Many returned with children born from unions that defied traditional customs, particularly the absence of bride wealth. K.J. – a former social worker – emphasised the difficulties this created, noting that when women returned with children, the local policy required their reunification with their maternal homes. He explained, "You can imagine a mother coming with maybe three or four children…that means the whole responsibility is given to that family: school fees, feeding and all that" (Interview K.J. 2023). In many cases, this burden led to families rejecting the women, denying them access to land, or demanding that the children be sent to their paternal families – a dynamic that will profoundly shape the lives of their children. However, as K.J. pointed out, "Even the paternal family normally they do shy away from responsibility, and at the end of the day, you find that the woman and the children, at the end of the day, they are isolated" (Interview K.J. 2023).

This rejection was often rooted in the perception that these children were born from 'illegitimate unions' outside the formalized practices of marriage in Acholi culture. Oliviera and Baines (2023) explain that these unions lacked customary rituals such as the paying of bride wealth or *luk*, leading to the perception that they were formed in "a moral space outside of normal life" (Oliviera & Baines 2023: 450). Similarly, Baines and Suarez (2022) argue that even when men sought to reunite with their families, they were often met with demands to fulfil cultural obligations that were financially

impossible. “Customary law requires men to either pay fines for failing to observe marriage protocols or to fulfil payment of bride wealth, which can be an insurmountable sum of money” (Suarez & Baines 2022: 16).

The return of women to their maternal homes further complicated these dynamics. Reception centre policies encouraged women to distance themselves from their captors and to reintegrate back into their maternal families. As Suarez and Baines (2022) note, women were often advised that since their unions were forced, they were not obligated to remain with the men who had fathered their children. This created a unique tension, particularly as some mothers concealed the paternal identity of their children to avoid further social complications (Suarez & Baines 2022: 15).

This tension is mirrored in the experience of D.O., who recounted how his family dealt with the return of his niece after she was abducted and forced into marriage with an LRA commander. While they chose to support her by taking her back to school, they also made a conscious decision to distance themselves from the man who fathered her children. “We told him off…we are going to take care of the kids. We are going to take our daughter back to school,” D.O. shared, highlighting the complexities of reintegration and the decisions families had to make to protect their daughters (Interview D.O., Gulu 2023).

Despite the support D.O.’s family offered, this was not the case for many other child mothers. As focus groups revealed, many women, unable to reintegrate into their maternal or paternal homes, were forced to navigate life as single parents in town. These women, perceived as “counter-cultural” due to their wartime experiences, were often excluded from Acholi society. Hatcher (2019) explains that such exclusion is rooted in their perceived violation of social norms, leading to their ostracisation and ongoing marginalisation (Hatcher 2019: 4-5). Allen et al. (2020) similarly note that even when these women were tolerated, it was often in ways that “persistently remind them of who they are. They are…‘just half-loved’” (Allen *et al.* 2020: 679).

This stigmatisation and rejection by their own families and communities ultimately shaped their own relationships with their children. As these women struggled to make sense of their identities in post-conflict Acholi society, many initially saw their children as burdens, complicating their already difficult path toward reintegration. This is evident in one woman’s reflection on her experience upon coming home:

> It was so hard and life was not easy. No one to help her. And even, no one to stand with her. She has been seeing those children like a burden to her, and they made her life very hard. There was no love for those children (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

The pain of having no support, combined with the trauma of the bush, led many of them to see their children as obstacles rather than gifts, as another woman explains, "She was seeing like an obstacle course to her life that God has given her" (*ibid* 2023).

These feelings were further compounded by the stigma they faced within their communities. As one woman recalled, “People, they just gather... and they can just be looking at you and stigmatising you. When she had just come back, they don’t even have any counselling team. She cannot even keep those children” (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). This lack of community and institutional support left many women feeling isolated and overwhelmed, further straining their relationship with their children. In moments of despair, some even prayed for their children to die, as the weight of their return was too much to bear: "She prayed that if any date could come and just kill all those children" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

Yet, despite the initial hardships, the support and solidarity these women found within one another's company began to shift their perceptions of their children. One woman described how they sought comfort in their group, sharing stories under the shade of a tree:

> Each of them, they come from the different places where they are renting, they come under this tree. They tell their stories...and they understand what they are going through...And that is how they have been staying up to now (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

Through these shared experiences, the women began to reflect on their roles as mothers, gradually transforming their relationships with their children. One woman, after finding strength in these group meetings, expressed her change of heart, "When she started knowing about God’s word, the gospel, her heart has become strong. She has started seeing that child as a gift to her" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

The shift in perception was not merely emotional; it led to tangible changes in how these women approached their role as mothers. As one mother reflected, "She started by that time showing love and has the child up to now. If the child falls sick, she sees it like she is the one who is sick" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). The women spoke of their deep commitment to ensuring their children’s well-being, education, and protection, despite the persistent challenges they faced, including financial difficulties and ongoing stigma. Another woman noted, “If the child passes to go to university, there

is need of money...and getting 2 million for a semester, it is not easy” (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023). Even in the face of these obstacles, they expressed their determination to do whatever was necessary to support their children: “She will always work until the day she dies” (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

These stories of resilience echo findings from other studies. In a 2014 study by Baines & Gauvin, they describe the role of Acholi mothers in reclaiming their identity through motherhood. One of the women in the study, Acii, placed particular importance on her role in managing household tasks, from gardening to childcare, as a way of reaffirming her value as a mother and a member of Acholi society. As Baines and Gauvin note, "We suggest that the good mother embodies the Acholi female *dano adana*: the attainment of gendered personhood and being a fully contributing and accepted member of society" (2014: 293). The women I encountered similarly expressed their dedication to these tasks, seeing them as a reflection of their commitment to their children and their roles as mothers.

Furthermore, the idea of motherhood as a form of resistance resonates deeply with these women's experiences. Baines & Gauvin (2014: 295), referencing Alfred and Corntassel (2005), explain that these acts of reclaiming traditional roles, such as Acholi motherhood, serve as a form of resurgence against the legacies of displacement and violence. This is evident in the narratives from my focus group, as the women’s efforts to care for, educate, and protect their children represent not only personal struggles but also collective acts of defiance against the long-lasting effects of war. As one mother in my group pointed out, “When you see those children, they are very looking nice. You cannot even tell that this child, they gave birth to the child from the bush" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

In conclusion, these women’s stories illustrate the profound transformation in their relationships with their children—from seeing them as burdens to embracing them as blessings and opportunities for regaining their sense of self and agency. Their resilience in navigating the challenges of post-conflict motherhood highlights the complexities of reintegration, as well as the strength they draw from each other and their cultural values. By reclaiming their roles as mothers, these women not only rebuild their families but also resist the lingering consequences of conflict and displacement. Through their dedication to ensuring their children’s future, they embody a powerful form of agency, defying the stigma and hardships that once threatened to overwhelm them.

6.5.3. Children Born in Captivity – A Case for *In*-tegration

Just as their mothers fought to reclaim their personhood and navigate the complexities of being both returnees and mothers, these women's children—born in captivity—embody a similar struggle for identity and belonging. Like their mothers, their very existence symbolises a negotiation of place within Acholi society, where their complex identities are tied not only to the status of their mothers but to the contentious circumstances of their conception. For these children, navigating their entry into a society they never belonged to involves grappling with the haunting labels of being 'children of rebels' and 'children of Kony,' which permeate every aspect of their post-conflict experience, from education and relationships to future employment prospects. This reality underscores that their journey is not one of reintegration, as seen with other returnees who once had lives in their communities, but rather a challenging process of integration into a world that has largely defined them by their origins.

The narratives provided by Children Born of War (CBOW) reflect the profound complexities they face upon returning home, often characterised by deep stigma, rejection, and dissonance between the peaceful depictions of home they heard in captivity and the harsh reality they encountered upon arrival. The contrasting experiences described in the focus group (Focus Group CBOW 2023) reveal significant themes of stigmatisation, loss, survival, and resilience, providing insights into the challenges these individuals faced in navigating their reintegration.

The first key theme is the expectation of home as a place of peace and safety, which was shattered upon their return. The girl (law student) explains her childhood vision of home as a "better place," based on the narratives her mother shared. She had endured the horrors of captivity, such as witnessing siblings drowning during a chaotic escape, which amplified her desire for the sanctuary of home. Yet, her return was marked by deep disappointment: "When we came back home...I wished that I died while in captivity" (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This poignant statement highlights the emotional and psychological burden these children carried, facing stigmatisation from peers and their communities. In this context, her expectation of belonging was replaced by rejection, illustrating the disconnect between the idealized version of home and its lived reality.

This sense of rejection is further echoed by one man, who shares how, after his mother passed away, he faced continuous rejection from his family, particularly his maternal side: "I faced a lot of rejection from my maternal side... there was a lot of stigma" (Focus Group CBOW 2023). His experience underscores the long-lasting effects of the conflict on family structures, with the stigma of being associated with captivity haunting him throughout his childhood. The loss of his mother exacerbated

his sense of displacement, creating a profound barrier to his full integration within the family. Despite moments of love and support, he encountered a reality where his presence was seen as a reminder of the conflict's pain and destruction, further alienating him from his familial network.

The process of reintegration also encounters complex challenges related to identity, particularly for children born in captivity. As noted in a focus group, many of these children lack basic identification and documentation, which creates barriers to accessing education and other critical services. One young woman shared how her mother, like many others in captivity, adopted a false identity during the conflict, which has complicated family tracing efforts post-conflict. “We have a challenge with identity... when they came back home, it is very difficult to find and discover someone’s real identity. Like, you can go to... what, what, and then only to find out that there is no one like Moses in that family” (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This challenge extends beyond personal identification and hinders the ability of these individuals to obtain birth certificates and national identity cards, as another young woman in the group emphasised, “Most of us who were born from captivity... don’t have birth certificates. And, actually, in schools... people in senior 4 and senior 6’s, those are the things they ask for” (Focus Group CBOW 2023). Consequently, this lack of formal identification not only obstructs access to essential services but also leaves children born in captivity in a state of legal and social limbo, further complicating their reintegration into society.

A second theme emerging from these narratives is the pervasive stigmatisation in broader social spaces, such as schools. The girl recounts her experiences in a primary school in Gulu, where her academic achievements were overshadowed by the derogatory labels she received from both peers and teachers. Her peers, recognising her intellect, nonetheless dismissed her success: “Even if you are the best, you won’t, like nothing else will come out of you. You were born in captivity” (Focus Group CBOW 2023). Such sentiments reveal how deeply ingrained societal perceptions of CBOW were, where success was met with scorn rather than celebration. This stigmatisation extended even to the teachers, with remarks like "You are from the bush" being used as casual insults in response to normal childhood behaviour. This intersection of institutional and peer-based stigma reinforces the social isolation CBOW faced, making their reintegration process significantly more challenging.

The psychological toll of this rejection and stigmatisation not only affected the children’s self-esteem but also strained their relationships with family members. In a deeply moving reflection, the girl describes how she attempted to shield her siblings from the same stigma by advising them not to reveal their relation to her: "I told them not to ever tell anyone that they were related to me" (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This act of protection underscores the internalised pain she carried, to the point

where she sought to sever her familial ties in public spaces to prevent her siblings from suffering as she did. This speaks to the broader theme of familial protection in the face of societal rejection, where CBOW often bore the emotional and social brunt of their circumstances alone.

The automatic assumption of guilt further compounds the stigma faced by CBOW. The girl explains how any conflict with other children led to her being blamed without question: "Everyone would just know that I am the one who started it" (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This automatic perception of guilt, tied to their identity as children born in captivity, illustrates the deep-seated biases that affected their daily lives. Despite the challenges, she reflects on how these experiences cultivated a sense of self-reliance: "I have known that I do not have anyone. That it is just me, and the world" (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This reflection introduces the theme of resilience, where, despite facing rejection, isolation, and discrimination, many CBOW developed an extraordinary sense of inner strength and determination.

The final, and perhaps most devastating theme, is the impact of stigma on mental health, leading in some cases to suicide. One participant shared the heart-breaking story of a boy who, after facing continuous verbal abuse from his maternal uncle regarding his identity as a child of captivity, took his own life: "They found he had hung himself on a tree" (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This narrative highlights the extreme psychological pressure CBOW faced, particularly within familial contexts where land disputes and other tensions were compounded by stigma. The land conflict, a recurring issue for CBOW and their mothers, becomes a site of both material and emotional conflict, where their inheritance rights were often challenged, and their identities are weaponised against them.

Further reflecting this weaponisation of identity, a male within the group also emphasised how, even into their adulthood, many children born in captivity contend with social stigmas that affect their ability to pursue romantic relationships. As the same male participant explained, “Once they know who you are, they begin to see you differently. Especially when you are brought to meet their family” (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This stigma extends to mothers as well, with many facing challenges when attempting to form new relationships due to having conceived children whilst in captivity. These associations with captivity often lead to rejections or fractured relationships, reinforcing the isolation and social exclusion that many returnees experience.

In drawing comparisons between the nature of CBOW’s return and that of their mothers, there is a clear continuity in the experiences of rejection and the battle for belonging. While mothers like those in the previous section faced challenges in asserting their identity and reclaiming space in their communities, CBOW encountered these challenges from birth. The generational trauma of being

linked to the conflict through birth created a cycle of rejection that shaped their experiences in both family and community settings. The girl's account of wishing she had died in captivity mirrors the moral struggle some mothers expressed in navigating motherhood at home amidst these ongoing challenges.

This integrated analysis reveals the multi-layered challenges that CBOW face in their return to life at 'home.' Their narratives offer a glimpse into the emotional, social, and psychological battles they fought daily, battles that were deeply intertwined with their mothers' experiences of reintegration. In their words, we see not only the weight of stigma and rejection but also remarkable resilience, as they navigated an environment that often saw them as outsiders, even in the place they longed to belong. Moreover, as the experiences of children born in captivity demonstrate, the process of reintegration is not only an individual challenge but also one that ripples through the very fabric of society, reshaping what it means to belong in a post-conflict world.

6.6. Conclusion – The Two Realities of Agentic Action in Post-Conflict northern Uganda

At the core of this chapter is the evolution of childhood within Acholi society across three distinct phases: before, during, and after the war. Before the conflict, childhood was deeply embedded in the communal values of Acholi culture, where children's roles were interwoven with family and clan life, fostering a strong sense of belonging. During the war, however, childhood was severely disrupted. Children became both victims and participants in the conflict, exposed to violence, displacement, and forced roles that diverged sharply from traditional norms. Many were abducted by the LRA, losing their formative years to the harsh realities of war. After the conflict, childhood shifted once more, as post-conflict transitions sought to restore normalcy while grappling with the complexities of reintegration and recovery.

This transformation in childhood reflects more than a temporal shift; it reveals the tensions between traditional Acholi conceptions of childhood and the children's rights discourse introduced by external actors. Traditional norms emphasised the collective role of children within the community—through work, obligations, and participation in cultural practices—while the children's rights framework focused on individual protection, emphasising education, safety, and psychological well-being. This tension created friction, particularly for returnees, who had to reclaim their identities after enduring profound violations of personhood.

The unique experience of returnees—especially child mothers and children born in captivity—further complicates the idea of "returning home" and rebuilding a sense of belonging. Often framed as individuals with "lost childhoods," these returnees embody the fractures between pre-war ideals and

post-conflict realities. Abduction, forced marriage, and raising children in captivity removed them from the traditional Acholi life cycle, leaving them with disrupted identities that fit neither pre-war nor post-war norms. For children born in captivity, the challenges of reintegrating into families, often compounded by stigma, underscore the complexity of returning to a community where their existence symbolises the scars of war. As expressed by Veale et al. (2017: 59), community acceptance upon return is not something that can be "simply claimed as a right," but a reality that "has to be negotiated in everyday relating." This is most certainly the case with returnees and thereby points to the importance of accounting for these relationships, as well as acknowledging the vital actions taken within "relational spaces at the intersection of individual and collective experiences" (Vindevogel *et al.* 2013; Veale *et al.* 2017: 59).

These tensions are not limited to individual struggles but extend into the broader post-conflict landscape of northern Uganda, where the social rupture caused by war reshaped perceptions of childhood. Communities grappling with rebuilding must confront the challenge of reintegrating those who have "lost" their childhoods. Returnees, marked by their past experiences, face significant barriers as they navigate a society that is itself rethinking identity, belonging, and normalcy.

While these challenges may seem overwhelming, they reveal insights into the resilience and agency of both individuals and communities in the post-conflict landscape. Amidst narratives of loss and disruption, there are also moments of hope—hope in the willingness to confront the past, share stories, and envision a better future. The ability to reconcile lost childhoods with the demands of adulthood and to rebuild social bonds speaks to a deeper, more complex form of agency.

This agency is not just individual but collective. Communities, too, are negotiating their identities in the wake of war, working to reintegrate returnees while also healing the broader social ruptures. The role of childhood in this process—both as an ideal to be restored and as a contested space—is thereby central within Acholi society. How communities redefine childhood and balance the expectations placed on children, reflects broader societal shifts.

The reintegration process in post-conflict northern Uganda is far from linear. It is an ongoing, complex navigation of identity, belonging, and reconciliation. Through everyday actions—often overlooked in formal reintegration frameworks—the deeper realities of post-conflict life are made visible. Agency here is both individual and collective, as returnees and communities work to redefine themselves in pursuit of peace. These acts of negotiation, whether reclaiming a lost childhood or forging new identities, represent the intertwined realities of agency in a post-conflict environment.

In this way, the two realities of agency in navigating one's being and belonging, both within the individual and collective realms, are found not only in the visible efforts toward social repair but also in the quieter, more personal struggles to reclaim identity and forge a future. By examining the evolution of childhood from the pre-war ideal to the complex post-war reality, we gain deeper insight into how individuals and communities continue to navigate the legacies of war, and how the intersection of childhood, identity, and belonging will shape the future of Acholi society. The final chapter will explore how these forces converge, examining how everyday acts—whether through navigating exclusion or re-establishing communal bonds—are crucial to rebuilding individual and collective futures.

7. CHAPTER SEVEN: Conclusion: Everyday Conceptions of Reciprocal Agency With and Between Returnees and Communities Post-Conflict

7.1. Introduction

The manifestation of children's agency in conflict settings has gained increasing attention in academic discourse, yet its nature in post-conflict environments remains far less explored and lacks conceptual clarity. This oversight, while partly due to the general absence of children's agency in academic and policy discussions, is also rooted in the normative assumptions that have long shaped the understanding of 'the child.' These assumptions, particularly when applied to post-conflict settings, reinforce vulnerability-based lenses that often marginalise the active roles that children play in their own reintegration. Former child soldiers (FCS) and returnees are predominantly framed through protectionist policies that prioritise formal processes over informal, culturally relevant practices that foster meaningful participation and agency.

This thesis sought to move beyond such limited frameworks, by examining how child agency, especially within the context of northern Uganda, is shaped by local norms and values. Through this lens, the research explored the often unacknowledged informal roles that children and their communities adopt in this post-conflict reintegration environment. It is within these community settings that their agency is truly nurtured and expressed, often in ways that formal reintegration programmes do not fully capture or support. The dominance of Western-centric norms in the design and execution of reintegration processes has often overlooked this critical aspect, limiting the scope of understanding of what child agency might look like in a post-conflict environment.

Furthermore, what is often missing from the design and execution of these reintegration programmes is the recognition that returnees are not simply returning to a pre-war notion of childhood. The conflict not only disrupted the lives of those abducted but also fundamentally altered the communities they were meant to return to, changing societal cohesion and childhood itself. Reintegration is thus far from a linear progression of returning home to pick up where life left off; rather, it involves navigating a post-conflict society that is also in the process of rebuilding. This renegotiation of childhood, identity, and belonging, is central to understanding the long-term realities of reintegration in northern Uganda.

Guided by this understanding, the central problem driving this research was the normative conflict between formal reintegration processes and local cultural values. This problem is deeply intertwined with both academic discourse and practical reintegration efforts. As a result, the study aimed to explore alternative conceptions of child agency and participation, particularly through informal

avenues, and to evaluate how these unsettle pre-existing structures and approaches. By examining the experiences of former LRA child soldiers, both during and after their post-conflict transitions, the research sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of child agency that aligns with the realities on the ground.

In this concluding chapter, I will synthesise the key findings from each chapter, focusing on how the agency of returnees has been shaped and expressed within the post-conflict environment. Through this, I will critically analyse the interactions between formal and informal processes of reintegration, emphasising how returnees and their communities have navigated this complex landscape. Ultimately, this chapter will highlight the need for reintegration frameworks to be more inclusive of local norms and participatory roles, as well as provide a reimagined perspective on child agency that reflects the lived experiences of those in northern Uganda.

7.2. Key Findings and Contributions of Each Chapter

This section reflects on the progression of analysis from chapters two through six, tracing how the study explored the evolving understanding of child agency and the reintegration of returnees into northern Ugandan communities. Beginning with a breakdown of the academic and conceptual foundations of the study's key concepts, and moving toward the lived realities of returnees from the LRA conflict, these chapters offered a comprehensive analysis of the complex interface between childhood and reintegration, and how these factors shaped the nature of agency within the post-conflict environment.

7.2.1. Critical Literature Review

Chapter two, the *critical literature review*, provided a foundational analysis that framed the research problem and key theoretical debates relevant to this study. It traced the evolution of Western conceptualisations of childhood, highlighting how historical, psychological, and sociological approaches have shaped modern understandings of children and their agency. The chapter established that normative assumptions about children, particularly in Western discourse, often frame them as vulnerable and in need of protection, leaving little room for recognising their agency, especially in post-conflict settings.

The literature review also provided broad insights from the socio-cultural approaches to childhood and the theory-practice nexus, further illustrating how Western-centric norms have influenced both academic discourse and reintegration practices. Socio-cultural approaches challenge the universalist notion of childhood by emphasising that childhood, and the agency of children, is a product of

cultural, social, and historical contexts. Vygotsky's theories, for instance, stressed that children's development is shaped equally by their cultural surroundings as by natural determinants, challenging earlier Western ideas that cast childhood as a separate, uniform stage of development. This shift towards recognising children as active participants in their own socialisation aligned with the thesis' focus on localising agency within the specific context of Northern Uganda, where children's roles are informed by community norms rather than fixed developmental stages.

Additionally, the theory-practice nexus highlighted how academic conceptions directly influence the formulation and execution of policies. The dominance of Western norms, as seen in frameworks like the UNCRC, led to the prioritisation of protectionist, psycho-social approaches in reintegration programmes, often to the exclusion of local practices and participatory avenues. These models focused on protection and provision, failed to harness children's participation and agency in meaningful ways. Scholars such as Wessels (2017) and Ochen (2012) critiqued this disconnect, calling for reintegration efforts to be grounded in local realities and to involve community members in supporting former child soldiers. These insights reinforced the thesis' argument for integrating socio-cultural and community-based frameworks into reintegration programmes, providing a more nuanced understanding of agency that moves beyond the dominant Western models.

A key insight from Edmonds (2019) guided the thesis by shifting focus away from protectionist and psychological approaches towards a more socio-ecological framing of reintegration. Edmonds argues that children's agency must be understood within its socio-cultural context rather than through a universal lens. This perspective is echoed by authors like Ochen (2012) and Derluyn et al. (2013), who advocated for integrating community-based approaches into reintegration programmes. These scholars emphasised the importance of accounting for the dynamic, collective nature of children's agency, rather than focusing solely on their psychological needs. This angle inspired the subsequent direction of the thesis, pushing for a reimagined understanding of child agency that is deeply rooted in local practices, values, and community structures. This chapter's contribution lies in its call for a rethinking of how reintegration is understood, moving beyond protectionist models to one that acknowledges the complexity of children's roles and agency within their communities.

7.2.2. Conceptual Framework

The third chapter, *Conceptual Framework*, served a critical role in guiding and rationalising the study's focus on the conceptual origins and normative biases surrounding the key concepts of 'the child,' childhood, and agency. Drawing from the findings of the literature review in chapter two, this framework clarified how both Western and non-Western contributions shaped these key concepts.

Importantly, the chapter avoided further dichotomising these perspectives and instead brought them into conversation with one another, creating a solid conceptual basis from which to approach the case analysis.

As outlined in chapter one, the study acknowledged that "the best way to engage with the phenomena to be studied is through an acknowledgement of the conceptual origins and normative biases surrounding the key concepts of 'the child,' childhood, and agency." These concepts carried historical and ontological significance that shaped how they were understood and applied in real-world contexts. The purpose of the conceptual framework, as explained by Jabareen (2009) and Levering (2002), was not just to collect these ideas but to provide an interpretative approach to social reality and construct the researcher's worldview. In this study, the conceptual framework brought these concepts into discussion to highlight the complexity and diversity of the child, childhood, child soldier, agency, and reintegration, justifying the need for a new normative conception of child agency embedded in the local cultural norms of northern Uganda.

Chapter three emphasised how normative conceptions of children, childhood, and child soldiers had shaped the structure and implementation of reintegration programmes. Western frameworks, such as that of the UNCRC, framed childhood as a time of innocence and vulnerability, which had practical implications for reintegration processes, particularly when applied in non-Western contexts like northern Uganda. As was demonstrated in chapter two, there was a significant Western bias in how childhood and agency were defined, often neglecting the role of informal cultural norms in societies like the Acholi, where children were seen as active participants in communal responsibilities from a young age.

From the study's findings, it became clear that conceptualisations of children and childhood varied widely, and these variations deeply influenced perspectives on child soldiers, agency, and reintegration. This framework was essential for analysing the case of FCS and returnees in northern Uganda, as it supported the argument that a one-size-fits-all model of reintegration, based on Western normative assumptions, was insufficient. Instead, the chapter demonstrated that reintegration programmes needed to account for local, culturally embedded roles and identities of children. Further, it laid the foundation for the subsequent analysis of the data gathered from interviews and focus groups conducted in northern Uganda. In this manner, the chapter directly supported objective one of the study, in that it provided both a clarification of the conceptual foundations of each key term, as well as gave insight into how these pre-existing frameworks impact and influence the design and execution of reintegration processes.

7.2.3. Methodological Foundations

Chapter four, *Research Methodology*, established the methodological foundations of the study, outlining how the research was conducted, how data was collected, and the approach taken to analyse it. This chapter played a crucial role in setting up the framework for the subsequent chapters, which would rely on the data collected through focus groups and interviews with participants in northern Uganda, particularly former child soldiers and community members involved in their reintegration.

The chapter emphasised the importance of adopting a qualitative research approach, specifically using informed Grounded Theory as the primary methodological tool. This approach allowed the study to focus on the lived experiences of children and their communities, capturing the authentic narratives and practices that shape child agency in northern Uganda. The decision to use Grounded Theory stemmed from the study's aim to build new conceptual insights directly from the data, rather than relying solely on pre-existing conceptualisations. This ensured that the data collection process was exploratory and flexible, allowing themes and patterns to emerge organically as the research progressed.

Data collection was centred around two primary methods: focus group discussions and interviews. A total of 150 participants—139 through eight focus group discussions and 11 through individual interviews—were involved in the study. The focus groups were conducted across different communities around Gulu, northern Uganda, and included participants from various categories, such as children, community members, and returnees. Additionally, interviews were conducted with current and former members of local and international NGOs to gather insights into the formal reintegration process and the broader cultural and social dimensions of reintegration.

Reflections on the ethical considerations and protocol of conducting fieldwork were a key aspect of chapter four, as well as a reflection of the challenges involved in conducting fieldwork in a post-conflict setting, such as northern Uganda. The researcher's role as a foreigner (*mzungu*) was addressed, recognising the importance of cultural sensitivity and the need for local support to bridge gaps between the researcher and the participants. The presence of local assistants, who understood both the culture and language, was vital in fostering trust and ensuring that the fieldwork was conducted respectfully.

In terms of data analysis, the chapter described how Grounded Theory was used to code and interpret the data. The analysis began with open coding, identifying initial themes and categories from the data, followed by axial coding, which explored the relationships between those categories, and finally

selective coding, which consolidated the findings into a coherent conceptual understanding of agency. The abductive logic of the analysis allowed for constant reflection on the data, ensuring that insights were drawn from participants' authentic narratives and not forced into preconceived frameworks. This methodological foundation became the cornerstone for analysing the lived experiences of returnees from the LRA, which would be explored in detail in the subsequent chapters.

7.2.4. Case Analysis of Captivity and Reintegration in northern Uganda

Chapter five, the *case study of northern Uganda's former child soldiers*, focused on the challenges and processes involved in their reintegration into post-conflict life. The chapter critically examined how historical, socio-political, and cultural factors shaped the conflict and, consequently, the reintegration experiences of returnees. A key issue addressed was the long-standing north-south divide within Uganda, which contributed to the marginalisation of the Acholi people and influenced the conflict's dynamics and the reintegration process itself.

One of the critical arguments presented in the chapter was how the LRA's militarisation and socialisation processes into LRA norms reshaped the identities of abducted children, making their reintegration into civilian life highly complex. The chapter also depicted the reality of what "home" meant for many returnees, emphasising that a return to life as it once was, was not possible for most. Many communities were forcibly displaced into IDP camps, where the social structure, land ownership, and cultural practices were significantly disrupted. This displacement created additional layers of complication for the reintegration process, as returnees were not only returning from the bush but were also trying to reintegrate into communities that had been fundamentally transformed by displacement. This reality challenged the notion of "home" as a place of stability and normalcy, revealing how reintegration required more than just the return to a physical location but also involved navigating a transformed socio-cultural landscape.

The chapter then critically examined the role of both formal and informal reintegration mechanisms. Local cultural practices, such as cleansing rituals to rid returnees of *cen* (evil spirits), were compared with the formal reintegration programmes run by NGOs and government agencies. The chapter highlighted the tensions between these two approaches, particularly how formal programmes often failed to take into account the cultural context of northern Uganda, relying instead on Western assumptions about childhood and reintegration. The chapter argued that effective reintegration needed to recognise the importance of local cultural norms and practices, rather than relying solely on external frameworks.

Additionally, the chapter engaged with the binary narrative of victim versus perpetrator in relation to child soldiers, arguing that the reality of these children's identities was far more complex. The reintegration process, it contended, needed to move beyond this binary to address the multifaceted experiences and identities of returnees, shaped by both their time in the bush and their community's expectations upon return.

Drawing upon the foundations set in chapters two through four, chapter five applied these insights by analysing how these pre-existing conceptualisations played out in the lived experiences of returnees. This connected directly to objective two, which sought to use the case study of northern Uganda's former child soldiers and their experiences during reintegration to critically examine the applicability of these concepts in practice. Furthermore, elements of objective three were incorporated, as the critical engagements with participants—through interviews and focus groups—were drawn upon to provide an analysis of this context through the lens of their lived experiences, as opposed to relying solely on what was contained in the literature. This emphasis on participants' perspectives allowed for a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of the reintegration process.

7.2.5. Through the Lens of the Participant – Unpacking the Long-Term Impact of War on Childhood, Return and Reconciliation

Chapter six, *researching with children and communities: acknowledging the everyday domains of agency and participation after social rupture,* aimed to highlight the everyday experiences and agency of former child soldiers and their communities in post-conflict northern Uganda, emphasising the dynamic and ongoing nature of reintegration. Rather than framing reintegration as a linear, one-time process, this chapter explored the complex and continuous nature of navigating relationships, roles, and identities in a post-conflict setting. The chapter further utilised grounded theory to analyze data collected from interviews and focus groups, which brought forward the lived experiences of returnees and the broader social transformations that occurred due to the conflict.

A central argument in this chapter was the need to reconsider what "reintegration" means, particularly in contexts where not only the individuals but also entire communities have undergone profound transformations. Reintegration, it argued, goes beyond the return to a physical space or the restoration of traditional social roles. It demands a mutual process of renegotiation, where both returnees and communities work together to rebuild relationships and social systems disrupted by war. The narratives collected throughout the fieldwork revealed that reintegration is an ongoing and reciprocal task that unfolds in the everyday spaces of post-conflict life, emphasising the agency of both returnees and community members.

Particular emphasis was given to the lived realities of child mothers and their children born in captivity. The chapter examined how these women, often stigmatised by their communities, faced unique challenges in navigating their reintegration. Their children, born on the fringes of society, also encountered difficulties in establishing a sense of belonging. This analysis reflected the ongoing struggles of navigating childhoods that were shaped not only by conflict but also by social exclusion and marginalisation, creating a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in reintegrating individuals whose very identities were seen as a challenge to communal norms.

One of the critical discussions in chapter six revolved around the changing concept of childhood before, during, and after the conflict. The chapter illustrated how the conflict disrupted traditional kinship structures and the cultural transmission of values that shaped childhood in Acholi society. Before the war, children learned their roles and responsibilities through communal practices such as the *Wang'oo*, where cultural knowledge and norms were traditionally passed down. However, the conflict and subsequent displacement into IDP camps fractured these structures, leaving children to navigate a world where the traditional markers of childhood had been eroded.

By drawing on participant interviews and focus groups, the chapter analysed how these ruptures continued to impact children post-conflict. For example, it explored the shifting behaviours of children after the war, with some participants observing a loss of respect for traditional norms and values. The chapter also engaged with the notion of children's rights, introduced through humanitarian interventions, but often clashing with the local cultural emphasis on communal responsibilities. This tension between Western rights-based frameworks and local cultural practices was a recurring theme in the chapter, raising questions about how children's agency could be understood in a context where traditional roles had been profoundly disrupted.

In connection with earlier chapters, chapter six built on the conceptual frameworks established in chapters two and three, demonstrating how returnees' experiences of childhood, agency, and reintegration in this context diverged from the universalised models often promoted by formal reintegration programmes. It also linked back to the methodological foundations discussed in chapter four, where the focus on qualitative data collection, particularly through interviews and focus groups, provided an in-depth understanding of how community members and returnees in northern Uganda experienced and navigated reintegration. This methodological approach allowed for the voices of participants to emerge clearly, showcasing the realities that typically remain hidden. Additionally, chapter six built on the analytical breakdown of the conflict history and return processes in chapter five, taking this analysis further by exploring the long-term realities of return and reconciliation. This

extended beyond the discussion beyond the immediate discourse on short-term reintegration, emphasising the often-overlooked, ongoing nature of these processes in everyday, informal spaces.

In doing so, chapter six sheds light on the agentic action taken within this space involving the navigation of both being and belonging, as well as exclusion. This analysis underscored how returnees had to constantly negotiate their identity and place within the community, balancing inclusion and exclusion, as part of their ongoing reintegration process. This everyday, agentic action seen both in the aftermath of conflict and its long-term impact, sets the stage for the final analysis of agency and childhood within the post-conflict reintegration space to follow.

7.3. Agency in Everyday Spaces – Navigating Victimhood and Belonging in Post-Conflict Reintegration

Agency within the post-conflict space is often framed in negative terms, such as navigating power and violence during war or the immediate aftermath, but much less is understood about how agency is enacted in everyday, informal spaces within the community. In the Acholi context, childhood is conceived not just as a period of dependency, but as a phase where children are central actors within society, shaped by local norms, values, and practices. Children's active participation in communal life, particularly through practices such as the *Wang'oo*, where they are socialised into roles and responsibilities, reflects their central position as active members of the community. These informal avenues provide crucial entry points for understanding children's roles within their communities, particularly how their reintegration post-conflict operates amidst these cultural dynamics.

However, the challenges of return—whether through rescue, escape, or otherwise—highlight missed opportunities to harness these understandings of childhood within the Acholi context. The roles and responsibilities traditionally assigned to children were often overlooked in the design and execution of reintegration programmes, which were informed by Western normative assumptions rather than local cultural practices. This oversight critically impacted the assumptions guiding reconciliation efforts, or the lack thereof. Reintegration programmes, while attempting to facilitate the return of abducted children, failed to integrate the broader social responsibilities that children held within the Acholi context. This gap undermined a potentially stronger foundation for reconciliation, which might have been better grounded in the cultural frameworks that already recognised children as active participants in community life.

Further complicating the return process is the undeniable interconnectedness of children's roles beyond their immediate family and home. Returnees did not return to the communities they left

behind; instead, they faced communities that had themselves been victims of violence, displacement, and social rupture. The collective victimhood of the Acholi people—displaced by the war and affected by violence—further compounded the difficulties of reintegration. This reality required not only an acknowledgement of the individual experiences of children abducted by the LRA but also a recognition of the communal suffering endured by their families and communities. The reintegration process thus had to address not only the child's return but also who the child had become during and after the conflict.

Maina (2011: 5) speaks to the distinctions between individual and collective victims, noting how the broader concept of mass victimisation refers not only to the experiences of individuals but also to whole groups and societies. In northern Uganda, this distinction between direct victims (the returnees) and collective victims (the entire Acholi population affected by displacement and violence) was clear. The return process was not just about reintegrating individuals but also about rebuilding a community that had been profoundly transformed by war.

The experiences of returnees also shed light on how divergent manifestations of childhood operated within this dynamic. Returnees had to navigate the labels of both victim and perpetrator in a context where amnesty and impunity coexisted. As Dubal (2018: 204 - 205) highlights, the symbolic depiction of returnees as victims within humanitarian discourse was not always straightforward. Returnees often saw themselves as deserving of pity, having been abducted and forced to fight. Yet, they also had to contend with their actions and roles within the LRA, leading to complex identities that could not be easily reduced to victimhood. As one returnee remarked, "I am a person with problems (*lapeko*)" (Dubal 2018: 204 – 205). Dubal further explains that claiming victimhood became, for some, a deeply ingrained aspect of their subjectivity, particularly after being exposed to humanitarian discourse for many years. Navigating this dual identity of both victim and rebel became an "active, agential hustle," as returnees sought to manage the expectations placed upon them both within their communities and the humanitarian frameworks in which they were embedded (Dubal 2018: 206, 209).

This reality reveals the limitations of reintegration programmes that frame children as passive victims, silencing their agency in the process. Children, in this context, become passive recipients of the reintegration process. This passivity is highlighted in the insights of the Prime Minister of Ker Kwaro Acholi, who noted, "Children were more so led through the process." In this manner, Branch (2011: 150) notes that due to their perception as vulnerable child victims, many participants interviewed who had experience in reintegration of returnees outlined detailed processes which, despite certain components of children's active engagement, primarily signified ways in which children were

participating, but only in ways allowed by these interventions, namely as passive recipients of care and support. Joseph, a programme coordinator for WAYA, challenges this thinking, noting:

> If you are working for children, then don't expect to realise full participation of the children. But, if you are working with children, working for and working with, these are two different things. Most of the agencies, they work ***for*** children. They don't work ***with*** children, because when you work with children, you give the task to the child to do. The work you want them to do (WAYA Interview 2023).

Joseph's statement underscores the critical distinction between involving children in reintegration processes and simply designing programmes for them, highlighting the lack of child agency in many such initiatives. This distinction is critical, as it reveals how children's participation is frequently limited to predetermined roles, rather than allowing them to actively shape their reintegration journey.

Moreover, Pooligny (2006: 215) argues that interventions should shift away from constructing non-political subjects and organisations and instead orient themselves toward working within community sites. This approach would treat returnees not merely as victims or perpetrators but as authentic actors with agency, capable of reshaping the social fabric of their communities (Branch 2011: 150 – 151). This dynamic was evident in the experiences of returnees who, in navigating exclusion from their original communities, found agency in forming new post-war communities, often organised around the identities and relationships they developed during captivity. For many former commanders, child mothers, and children born in captivity, belonging was often sought beyond their previous communities, where they could carve out spaces for themselves.

Therefore, the post-conflict reality for returnees—particularly in northern Uganda—demands a more nuanced understanding of how agency operates. Returnees were not just reintegrating into a stable community but returning to a world that had been equally transformed by war. Their navigation of victimhood and impunity was a critical component of their active, agential hustle, as they sought to reforge bonds within communities that had themselves been displaced and fractured by violence. By recognising the active role that returnees play in shaping their reintegration, we can begin to understand the complex dynamics of return that go beyond the labels of victim and perpetrator and acknowledge the spaces where agency and belonging are negotiated daily.

7.3.1. Re-Forging of Bonds & Carving out Spaces for Belonging in Both Existing and 'New' Communities

The actions taken by returnees, particularly those involved with the War Affected Youth Association (WAYA), child mothers, and children born in captivity, reveal distinct forms of agency rooted in

collective resilience, cultural engagement, and relational identity. Through their own initiatives, returnees sought to navigate the complex post-conflict environment by building new support systems that responded to the immediate challenges they faced. WAYA's foundation and the efforts of child mothers to create spaces of communal support both exemplify this agentic navigation, using cultural and symbolic resources to rebuild their lives and reshape their communities.

WAYA's origins can be traced back to the necessity for returnees to protect themselves from stigmatisation and the physical and emotional dangers that persisted after the war. Mr. Ogaba Joseph, a key figure in the organisation, explained how these young people, having been scattered across different divisions of Gulu, convened to address their problems through mutual support and collaboration. The emphasis on self-sufficiency is clear:

> As young people, with a focus and a vision, we say 'we cannot be living this kind of life.' We need to find a way of protecting ourselves from all these vices... if we can find a solution, we find a solution and we address it ourselves (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023).

This initial agency evolved into a much larger effort, incorporating peacebuilding, cultural activities, and economic empowerment, all while ensuring that the focus remained on the child as a central figure in the process of recovery.

The resonance of WAYA's approach with traditional Acholi practices, particularly the *Wang'oo*, is key to understanding the depth of their cultural engagement. Mr. Ogaba Joseph recalled how the *Wang'oo*, a gathering around a fire where elders would impart wisdom to the young, shaped his own upbringing and served as inspiration for WAYA's cultural programming:

> Before coming to the camp, I was a toddler and I was in the rural setting... and our forefathers, our elders, were great teachers; they teach you with wisdom... Now, since these elders are not around us, much as we may not be having all those stories, but the performance that I know, why don't we use it? (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023).

By reintroducing cultural practices like traditional dances and storytelling, WAYA created a space where children could perform and heal, while fostering peace and unity within the community: "Even a child of this age can perform and that was more healing than what we were doing for the children" (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023). These cultural activities became more than just performances—they were symbolic resources that helped returnees navigate their trauma, reclaim their identity, and reconnect with their heritage. As Shanahan and Veale (2018:2) highlight, symbolic resources like these enable individuals to act upon the world and facilitate developmental change, transforming not

only their internal experiences but also their external realities. Further, their grassroots initiative of involving children in laying bricks and working to fund education their education encapsulates the idea of collective agency, where individuals work together to create a better future for themselves and the children in their communities.

Central to WAYA's activities was the child, both as a participant and a focus of their work. WAYA's focus on child participation further underscores its commitment to fostering agency among young returnees. As noted in the interview, "Child participation was key and is key in our activity... culturally moulded, the child is different" (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023). In his advocacy for child participation, it was also emphasised that empowerment needs to go beyond the external to account for the internal domain. With reference to the vocational training many returnees received, Mr. Ogaba Joseph exclaims, "You have not empowered the child. Physically and mentally, you have empowered the person physically, but mentally, you have not empowered the child or the person." This statement about empowerment resonates with many conversations we had in the field with participants, who often noted how the training they received did not equip them with the capital or skills to actively make something of themselves in a competitive market, where everyone has become skilled in the same thing. Inevitably, many noted how they would simply sell the sewing machines or tools and just become *boda boda* drivers, as this is how they could make money. As such, physical empowerment in this sense did little to prepare returnees for the reality they would encounter outside of the centres. What was not accounted for was a true understanding of the conditions and situation these people would return to (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023).

Further, Mr. Ogaba Joseph's emphasis on involving children in meaningful ways reflects Lave and Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation, where newcomers—such as returnee children in this context—gradually move from the periphery to fuller participation through active involvement in the community (Veale & Stavrou 2007: 277). WAYA trained children as 'peer mediators' and integrated them into community peacebuilding activities, ensuring that they were not passive recipients of assistance but active contributors to the rebuilding of their society: "For us, we involve them to do the work for themselves. We only guide them as the adult people" (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023). WAYA thus functioned as a bridge between the pre-conflict and post-conflict generations, fostering a collective agency that intertwined the past with a reimagined future. This agentic involvement also reflects Veale, McKay and Worthen's (2017) notion of "mattering," where individuals, through public engagement, come to feel that their actions have meaning and impact.

Similarly, the formation of communal groups among child mothers represents another form of agentic navigation. Rejected by their families and communities, these women created their own support networks where storytelling and shared experiences became central to their recovery. As one woman explained:

> We realized that it's important to be in a group…each of them come from different places where they are renting, they come under this tree. We tell our stories and we understand what we are going through among the group... and we can decide, my friend is even passing what I am going through... that is how they have been staying up to now" (Focus Group Child Mothers 2023).

This shared experience of exclusion and trauma created a space for collective healing, much like WAYA's cultural initiatives. By forming these groups, the women exercised what Shanahan and Veale term "tactical agency"—a response to an environment of exclusion where external circumstances may not change, but internal resilience is strengthened through symbolic actions such as storytelling (Shanahan & Veale 2018: 9). These gatherings under a tree, where the women supported one another and even began saving money for their children's futures, show how they used relational resources to rebuild their lives and gain a sense of control in a marginalising post-conflict reality.

In this manner, the outlet of communal storytelling provided more than emotional support but also mirrored what Gergen describes as "world-making"—the act of imagining and creating new realities through storytelling (cited in Shanahan & Veale 2018: 10). This was also evident, as noted in section 6.5.2. of the previous chapter when one of the child mothers recalled how the support she gained through the group was vital in transforming the way she viewed her relationship with her child, going from a position where she saw them as a burden to where her child has become her whole world. In this manner, rather than dwelling on their traumatic pasts, the child mothers used these gatherings to envision and build a new life, one in which they could take control of their futures and find belonging among others who shared their experiences. This network of support within the child mothers' new communities thereby echoes Gustavsson et al.'s (2017) emphasis on the importance of accessing supportive resources within one's community to foster long-term resilience.

The creation of these support networks, both within WAYA and among the child mothers, illustrates how returnees were not merely passive recipients of reintegration programmes but active agents in reshaping their post-conflict world. These networks functioned as spaces for what Snodgrass & Bartelson (2014) call "peer-groups," where individuals could share experiences, offer mutual support, and find belonging. These groups became essential to the reintegration process, facilitating resilience

and enabling participants to move from the margins of society toward fuller participation (Snodgrass & Bartelson 2014: 8).

The children born in captivity observed and learned from these maternal practices of resilience. One child recounted how she would secretly watch the women gather under the tree, telling their stories and saving money: “I used to sit behind that tree and listen to these women... I want to grow up and protect these women” (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This moment highlights how the children, despite their marginalisation, began to formulate their own forms of agency, shaped by the resilience they saw in their mothers. One male participant reflected on how his experiences of exclusion and marginalisation shaped his identity: “It made me stronger as a person... I learnt to manage those feelings and I do not allow that to define who I am” (Focus Group CBOW 2023). This capacity to navigate exclusion and internalise resilience demonstrates what Antonovsky (1979) describes as a sense of coherence, where individuals respond creatively to stressful situations in ways that positively impact their long-term health and well-being (Gustavsson *et al.*, 2017). These children, often left to protect themselves due to their mothers’ vulnerability, developed a strong sense of agency, as one girl explained: “We just naturally, we learn to protect ourselves, because even our own parents cannot protect us at some point” (Focus Group CBOW 2023). Despite their marginalised status, these children forged their own paths and found ways to cope with their unique challenges of identity, belonging and stigmatisation.

Another child born in captivity also shared a powerful reflection on how accepting their reality helped navigate the challenges: “My mom always tells me... to accept the fact that we were born in captivity, that we are victims of the war... but this does not define me. You need to accept that this is us” (Focus Group CBOW 2023). The collective narrative among children born in captivity, shaped by both their individual experiences and their shared connection to mothers who formed supportive communities, exemplifies the notion of resilience that thrives on both personal and collective levels.

These acts of agency, whether through the cultural initiatives of WAYA, the communal gatherings of child mothers, or the resilience of children born in captivity, all reflect a broader renegotiation of identity and belonging in the post-conflict environment. As Veale et al. (2017) argue, peacebuilding and reintegration often take place through everyday interactions within local communities, rather than through top-down interventions. While returnees often faced exclusion from their communities, they found ways to create new spaces of belonging. WAYA’s integration of traditional practices and child participation resonated with broader community efforts to restore traditional norms, values and practices. As Mr. Ogaba Joseph noted, the return to cultural practices was not only about preserving the past but about shaping a peaceful future: “The cultural approach, when you look at it, it is cultural,

but it integrates all of these interventions for humanity... our culture supports peacebuilding" (Interview WAYA, Gulu 2023).

The returnees' actions also resonate with Wagoner's (2014) argument that social transformation occurs when individuals and groups engage in public spaces where their actions and ideals intersect. In the case of WAYA, child mothers, and children born in captivity, recognition of their agency is not only critical to note how they navigate their own challenges but also gives insight into the parallels between returnees and communities and how they both seek to renegotiate bonds, identity and belonging in the post-conflict environment. As Veale et al. (2017: 60) note, the intersection between individual agency and public engagement is key to creating transformative spaces. While returnees often experienced weak intersections with the broader community, they found strong intersections within their own groups, particularly among other returnees who shared similar experiences. The narratives of the child mothers and children born in captivity reveal the complexity of agency in the post-conflict environment. These individuals, often excluded from formal reintegration programmes, found strength in each other and in the cultural and relational resources they had at their disposal. As Ungar (2011: 1745) notes, social capital—networks of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness—can be both inclusive and exclusive.

In essence, the agency exhibited by returnees in Gulu, whether through the work of WAYA, the communal support of child mothers, or the resilience of children born in captivity, reflects a broader process of navigating exclusion and renegotiating identity and belonging. Their efforts to rebuild their lives were not limited to addressing the immediate tangible challenges of post-conflict life but were also deeply tied to reshaping their social realities and redefining their place in their communities. This agency, both individual and collective, illustrates the transformative potential of returnees in reshaping their communities and highlights the importance of recognising and fostering these acts of agency as central to successful reintegration. Further, as noted by Ungar (2011: 1746) "When services are provided, it is important to coincide *how* services are delivered and *what* they do." Regarding these services, as is the case with reintegration, it thereby becomes crucial to promote and sustain resilience post-conflict in ways that are *relevant* to communities. With this being said, reintegration programmes should account for the nature of agency, reconciliation and relationality that take place in a post-conflict environment as opposed to imposing linear processes that are divorced from these contextual norms, values and practices.

7.4. Final Analysis – Unpacking the Impact of an Alternative Conception of Childhood and Relational Agency Post-Conflict for Reintegration Programming

This chapter has explored the profound interplay between agency, childhood, and the complexities of reintegration within the post-conflict setting of northern Uganda. In doing so, it answers the central question of this research: *How do alternative conceptions of child agency and participation unsettle pre-existing structures and approaches towards the reintegration of children post-conflict?* This chapter reveals that child agency in Acholi society is not defined through the Western individual-centric lens, but rather through a collective and relational framework where the individual is deeply intertwined with the community. The reintegration of returnees, therefore, must be seen not only as an individual process but as one that exists in concert with the reformation of collective social structures.

Through the detailed analysis of groups like the War Affected Youth Association (WAYA), child mothers, and CBOW, the chapter highlights how returnees, despite being individually marginalised, have redefined their belonging and agency within new or reimagined collectives. Whether through forming their own support networks or re-engaging with traditional practices, returnees have utilised relational agency to find their place in society. This agency is seen not as isolated or individual but as interconnected with others—communities, peers, and support structures.

The findings of this chapter have been built upon the foundations laid out in previous chapters, which together contribute to answering the research questions. Earlier chapters explored cultural norms, theoretical frameworks, and the long-term consequences of war, providing the necessary context to understand the relational and collective nature of child agency in Acholi society. From the conceptual unpacking of childhood and agency in chapter two and chapter three to the socio-cultural impacts of war examined in chapter four and chapter five, each chapter worked to deepen our understanding of how child agency manifests in post-conflict settings. Additionally, insights from chapter six about Acholi childhood and children's roles and responsibilities within their communities were crucial in answering sub-question 1: *How do local northern Ugandan cultural norms, values and conceptions of 'the child' inform avenues for children's participation?*

7.4.1. Collective Agency and the Limits of Individual-Centric Approaches

One of the critical contributions of this chapter is the challenge it poses to the dominant individual-centric approach to reintegration programming. As seen in the experiences of returnees, reintegration often prioritises the individual victim or child soldier, failing to address the collective wounds

inflicted on the wider community during the conflict. The conflict severed the communal fabric of Acholi society, and the reintegration process, if limited to addressing individuals alone, risks neglecting the broader collective disrepair. As the chapter demonstrated, community members were not only victims of displacement and violence themselves but were also required to reconcile with returnees whose identities and roles had been radically transformed during the war.

WAYA exemplifies how reintegration can address collective as well as individual needs. Its cultural programmes, rooted in traditional practices like the *Wang'oo*, provided a space for returnees to engage in healing activities that emphasised peacebuilding and community unity. As Mr. Ogaba Joseph noted, these initiatives were not just about empowering individuals but fostering a collective sense of purpose and belonging. The collective process of reintegration, therefore, becomes critical to repairing the social fabric that was devastated by the conflict, and formal reintegration programmes that focus solely on individual victims fail to fully engage with this broader societal need.

7.4.2. Relational Agency and Belonging

Another significant theme of this chapter is the emphasis on relational agency, which is central to how returnees navigate post-conflict realities. As we saw with child mothers and CBOW, agency often emerged through collective action and mutual support. Child mothers who were ostracised from their families formed their own communities of care where storytelling and shared experiences created new social bonds. Similarly, CBOW, despite experiencing exclusion, drew on the resilience and strength modelled by their mothers to carve out their own sense of belonging. This aligns with Gergen's notion of "world-making," (cited in Shanahan & Veale 2018: 10) where storytelling enables individuals to envision and build new realities through collective action.

This chapter thus answers the research sub-question: *Why should informal avenues of children's participation be harnessed as an important avenue to include children as actors during the reintegration process?* The informal networks and collective participation in cultural activities, support groups, and peer mediation provide vital spaces for children and returnees to negotiate their identities and roles in a transformed society. These informal spaces highlight the importance of considering cultural and relational contexts when designing reintegration programmes, which cannot be adequately captured through formal, standardised frameworks.

In relation to this, sub-question one also finds resonance here: *How do local northern Ugandan cultural norms, values and conceptions of 'the child' inform avenues for children's participation?* With children's participation being highly intertwined with their roles and responsibilities in society,

it is important to recognise their position in the community to comprehend how agency unfolds within this space. The informal avenues for participation, as discussed in this chapter, are crucial in understanding how returnees and children renegotiate their identities and roles post-conflict. This also sheds light on why some returnees, when framed solely as victims or recipients of care, encountered difficulties fully reconciling with their families and communities, instead finding new communities of belonging. A member of World Vision also encapsulated this point, stating that, “children will always have the interest, but the capacity to participate will always be determined by the existing environment” (Interview World Vision 2023). Any analysis of agency within this context must consider the norms and practices that inform participation, further illustrating why the reintegration of individuals alone, without addressing broader social dynamics, can be problematic.

7.4.3. Renegotiating Identity and Rebuilding Social Cohesion

The impact of war on identity and belonging extends beyond the individual returnee; it encompasses the entire community. For children born in captivity, the challenge was not only returning to a place they had never known but renegotiating their identity within a community that had itself been fundamentally changed. For child mothers, the process was about returning to a community that no longer viewed them in the same light, forcing them to redefine their roles. Similarly, former commanders faced the challenge of reconciling their former authority in the bush with their new realities back home. Each of these examples demonstrates the need for reintegration programmes to engage not only with the immediate challenges of return but with the long-term renegotiation of identity and belonging that shapes post-conflict society.

This answers another key question posed by the research: *What does a reimagined concept of child agency look like in a post-conflict environment?* Agency in this context is not about individual autonomy or empowerment in isolation. Rather, it is about the continuous negotiation of one's identity and role within a changing community, often through collective processes. These acts of negotiation and rebuilding social cohesion are essential to long-term reintegration and must be acknowledged in reintegration programming. The idea of "mattering," as discussed by Veale et al. (2017), becomes central to this process, where agency is fostered through meaningful participation and engagement within one's community.

7.4.4. Concluding Remarks - Implications for Reintegration Programming

The findings of this chapter suggest that reintegration programmes must go beyond the individual and recognise the interconnections between personal recovery and community rebuilding. The

chapter illustrates that returnees' agency is deeply relational, and intertwined with the community's collective efforts to restore cultural practices, social norms, and community values. Reintegration, therefore, should not solely focus on providing individual support that ends with the initial return home, but must also foster spaces where returnees and community members can participate in collective healing and social restoration. Through unpacking the nature of children's participation within their communities, insight was given to the fact that children's roles and responsibilities made them central actors, not only within their family but in their communities. As such, approaching the reintegration of children within these socio-cultural contexts in a manner that solely accounts for the individual without the collective, fails to acknowledge and work with this dynamic, as opposed to against them – as seen with the tension between children's rights and local norms of mutual responsibility.

As Ungar (2011) noted, social capital is critical to resilience, and reintegration programmes must recognise the importance of networks of reciprocity and mutual support to foster long-term reconciliation. Whether through cultural programmes like those led by WAYA or through the formation of group networks – like those seen with the child mothers - fostering these communal spaces is essential to enabling long-term resilience. Reintegration programmes must, therefore, be designed in ways that are culturally sensitive, contextually relevant, and attuned to the relational nature of agency in post-conflict societies.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that reintegration in northern Uganda must be understood through the lens of relational agency, where the individual and collective are not separate but deeply interconnected. Returnees navigate their post-conflict realities through collective action, whether by forming new communities or by reconnecting with traditional practices. This form of agency challenges the dominant individual-centric approaches to reintegration, which fail to address the broader social disrepair caused by conflict, particularly in relation to one's identity and sense of belonging. By embracing a reimagined conception of child agency that recognises the cultural, relational, and collective dimensions of participation, reintegration programmes can better support the long-term recovery of returnees and their communities.

The findings of this thesis, particularly with respect to relational agency, belonging, and the need for contextualised approaches to reintegration, are not unique to the case of northern Uganda. While the conceptual underpinnings of childhood and agency in this context are specific to Acholi culture, the lessons extend beyond this region. Any reintegration and reconciliation programme that seeks to return individuals—whether children or adults—into communities disrupted by war must account for cultural diversity and the specific social structures that shape identity and belonging. This is

particularly relevant in cases where children have been abducted or targeted by armed groups, whether as child soldiers or in other capacities. As children's involvement in conflict increases globally, the need to understand their social roles and the cultural conceptions of childhood becomes ever more crucial for developing effective reintegration programming. Ultimately, the relational and collective dynamics explored here apply not only to post-conflict northern Uganda but to any context where reintegration requires the rebuilding of relationships, identity, and social cohesion after war. In this way, children are more than vulnerable victims to be subjected to protection and care; they are vital actors whose agency must be contended with both during conflict and in the post-conflict space. By recognising the intricate connections between individuals, communities, and cultural frameworks, this study paves the way for reintegration practices that honour the complexities of both human experience and cultural diversity, offering a model for more holistic and meaningful reconciliation.

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8.1. Interviews and Focus Groups

Prime Minister Ker Kwaro Acholi Interview. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

The Recreation Project Interview A. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

The Recreation Project Interview B. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

The Recreation Project Interview C. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

D. O. Interview. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

K. J. Interview. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

Caritas Gulu Archdiocese (Caritas) Interview. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

War Affected Youth Association (WAYA) Interview. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

Watye Ki Gen Interview. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

World Vision Interview. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Kampala, Uganda. December 2023.

Former Commander (M) Interview. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

Children's Rights and Violence Prevention Fund (CRVPF) Interview. Interviewed by Tyne Williams, Kampala, Uganda. December 2023.

Pece-Laroo Focus Group. Conducted by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

Bardege-Layibi Focus Group. Conducted by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

Unyama Focus Group. Conducted by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

Awach Focus Group. Conducted by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

Patiko Focus Group. Conducted by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

Bungatira Focus Group. Conducted by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

Child Mothers Focus Group. Conducted by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.

Children Born of War (CBOW) Focus Group. Conducted by Tyne Williams, Gulu, northern Uganda. December 2023.