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The Stories We Must Tell: Ugandan Children and the Atrocities of the Lord's Resistance Army


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Africa Rights Monitor

The Stories We Must Tell:
Ugandan Children and
the Atrocities of the
Lord's Resistance Army



Rosa Ehrenreich

ROUX springs forward and places himself before the marchers, his back to them, still with fettered arms.
When will you learn to see
When will you learn to take sides¹

During the summer of 1997, I spent a short time in Uganda as a consultant for Human Rights Watch, interviewing children who had been abducted by a rebel group called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and who had experienced almost unimaginable horror.² Adjectives cannot convey the reality best associated with images of the Cambodian genocide, the Jewish Holocaust, and recent events in Bosnia/Herzegovina. Like the Khmer Rouge, the Nazis, and Radovan Karadzic's Bosnian Serb militia, the LRA employs a calculated brutality against northern Ugandan civilians, forcing them to participate in atrocities against fellow citizens. The atrocities of the Lord's Resistance Army are on a much smaller scale, affecting thousands rather than millions. But this is little consolation to a child who has been forced, at gunpoint, to kill another child. Consider one girl's story:

One boy tried to escape, but he was caught. They made him eat a mouthful of red pepper, and five people were beating him. His hands were tied, and then they made us, the other new captives, kill him with a stick. I felt sick. I knew this boy from before. We were from the same village. I refused to kill him and they told me they would shoot me. They pointed a gun at me, so I had to do it. The boy was asking me, "Why are you doing this?" I said I had no choice. After we killed him, they made us smear his blood on our arms. . . . I still dream about the boy from my village who I killed. I see him in my dreams, and he is talking to me and saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying.³

How do you respond to a child who tells you a story like this? What do you say when the child breaks down in midstory and starts to cry?

This essay is about stories—the stories that we are told and the stories that we, in turn, tell to others. It has become a truism that we have lost our faith in master narratives and that the “real” is composed of many competing narratives, all fragmentary, contradictory, overlapping. In this article, I discuss the problems this view poses for those of us who see ourselves as advocates and activists rather than solely—or primarily—as scholars, but who nonetheless seek to combine social activism with intellectual rigor and honesty. In particular, I discuss the dilemmas this creates for the human rights activist, who is committed both to acknowledging diverse cultures, with all their internal complexity, and to being a strong advocate for change on behalf of those whose rights are trampled. (I am not unaware of the problematic nature of the terms I have just used; to speak blithely of “cultures”—and, indeed, to speak of “rights”—is to enter into dangerous territory.)

I begin by discussing the decade-old conflict in northern Uganda between the government and the LRA.⁴ After briefly providing background information on the conflict, I describe the many contradictory stories I heard during my time in Uganda about the reasons for the conflict's persistence. I discuss the difficulty of assessing these competing narratives, as well as the impossibility of ever getting at the “truth” about the conflict. I then turn to the stories of children who have survived months or years in rebel captivity, and I end by discussing the ways in which these highly personal narratives force us to insist that some things, at least, are absolute.

The Conflict in Northern Uganda

The LRA rebels have sown devastation and death throughout Uganda's northernmost districts. The rebel leader, Joseph Kony, claims to be in direct communication with the Holy Spirit, and Western newspaper reports have quoted Kony as insisting that his rebels will fight until they establish a Ugandan government based upon the Ten Commandments.⁵ Other sources report that the rebels, most of whom are Acholi—an ethnic group concentrated on the northern border of Uganda—seek to free the Acholi people from rule by other ethnic groups that dominate President Yoweri Museveni's government.⁶

The LRA's Ugandan rebels, who are based primarily in southern Sudan, receive arms and other aid from the Sudanese government and they make frequent incursions into the border districts of northern Uganda to attack government installations; to loot homes, stores, and health clinics; and to burn schools and huts. Civilians unlucky enough to get in the way often end up mutilated or dead.⁷ But what makes this conflict unusually

vicious—even for this troubled region—is that the LRA rebels target young children for abduction, virtual enslavement, and even death⁸—all part of their campaign of civil terror and as a principal means of military recruitment. Children as young as eight are abducted from their homes and schools and are used as beasts of burden and forced to march through the bush carrying the rebels' looted goods. Those children who protest or who cannot keep up with the march are killed, and captive postpubescent girls are given as “wives” to rebel commanders. When children are caught trying to escape, the rebels force other newly abducted children to beat or hack to death their less fortunate peers.

The rebels generally march the children back across the border to base camps in southern Sudan. Due to drought and food shortages, many children die of dysentery, malnutrition, or dehydration before ever reaching Sudan. Once in the LRA camps, the children—both boys and girls—are given rudimentary military training and are then forced into combat against both Ugandan government soldiers and—at the behest of the Sudanese government—the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Since the children make up the front lines in battles with the Ugandan army, they often end up being killed by bullets of Ugandan government soldiers.

While an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 children have managed to escape from rebel captivity over the past two years, an unknown number remain in captivity or have died. But even those children fortunate enough to escape find that their ordeal is far from over, as they often suffer from severe emotional and psychological trauma, malnourishment, disease, and physical injuries. Since many children have lost their parents during the conflict, they must also provide for their own food, clothing, and shelter. Survival prospects, however, are bleak in war-wracked northern Uganda. Conflict has destroyed the economy, the health care system, and the region's agricultural base.

As a result, northern Uganda now faces an acute humanitarian crisis. The government has urged civilians to leave their rural homes and to move to “protected camps” near government army installations. Tens of thousands of people have obeyed the government injunction and have set up temporary homes in the camps (many claiming that government coercion left them with very little choice). As of August 1997, there were well over 200,000 internally displaced people in the region, including those in the protected camps.⁹ Crowded conditions, lack of food, and inadequate sanitation and health care facilities have led to thousands of deaths each month.¹⁰ These problems have been compounded by rebel attacks on civilians in the camps. Every week brings new reports of child abductions, and although the conflict has been going on for over a decade, the Ugandan government seems utterly unable to come up with a strategy for protecting children from abduction. The LRA poses no real threat to the stability of Yoweri Museveni's administration in Kampala, but government attempts to combat

the rebels militarily have met with little success in the many years of skirmishing. (Like the hydra, the Lord's Resistance Army finds it easy to grow new heads, especially when the heads are those of replaceable child captives.)

Most northern Ugandans, however, appear bewildered and numbed by the conflict's persistence; there seems to be no good reason for the rebels to slaughter their fellow Acholi, no reason for them to target young children, no reason to keep fighting an unwinnable war that causes terrible suffering to the very people on whose behalf the rebels claim to be fighting. Indeed, what *are* the rebels fighting for? Is this an ideological struggle? A religious struggle? An ethnic struggle?¹¹ And why has the Ugandan government not managed to resolve the conflict and bring an end to the devastation of the north, and to the terrible plight of the region's children?¹²

These questions are not easily answered. To begin with, the rebels have no obvious spokespersons. Unlike the Irish Republican Army (IRA), they have no "political wing," which makes public pronouncements and negotiations difficult. When individuals occasionally do come forward to represent the LRA, their legitimacy and reliability are dubious.¹³ Yet the rebels are clearly capable of acting in an efficient and coordinated manner; they use land mines and automatic weapons, and they stay in touch with each other while in the bush through an extensive radio network. But they have apparently chosen to be silent—or, at any rate, extraordinarily vague—about their motivations and aims.¹⁴ If they have a political program, no one seems to know what it is.

The clear majority of northern civilians call for a peaceful, negotiated end to the fighting, which has left virtually no one untouched.¹⁵ In fact, the military approach to fighting the rebels has actually succeeded in killing more children, since the rebels force captive children into combat.

Nonetheless, the Ugandan government seems to be determined to pursue a military end to the conflict, claiming that no other solution is possible. After all, you cannot negotiate peace with someone you cannot find, and the rebels are generally nowhere to be found. Since the rebels seem to have no political agenda (so the government insists at any rate), the issues to negotiate are unclear. Additionally, the government is unwilling to negotiate with criminals and human rights abusers, claiming that the rebels might want amnesty and that gross human rights violations should not go unpunished. There is no obvious way out of the current deadlock.

The Stories We Hear

Explanatory Narratives

During my stay in Uganda, I was accompanied by a Human Rights Watch colleague, and together we conducted several dozen background interviews

with journalists, nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives, and government officials. Not surprisingly, we found little consensus among our interviewees as to why the conflict persists. Although theories abounded (some more plausible than others), none were wholly satisfying. By the end of our stay, the conflict's origins and persistence were no more clear than when we arrived. We came looking for reasons; we left with nothing more than a set of stories.

The explanatory narratives we encountered fell into several broad categories, but there were five metastories that predominated. I will call them, for the sake of my own narrative, the insanity theory, the anthropological theory, the government theory, the ethnicity theory, and the geopolitical conspiracy theory. It could of course be argued that by presenting these stories in such an artificial fashion—as if there are truly five distinct and monolithic schools of thought about the conflict—I am presenting a distorted picture, one that is far too simplistic to reflect the many diverse and nuanced explanations of the conflict. I plead guilty as charged.

The Insanity Theory

“Why are the rebels doing such terrible things to their own people?” By far the most common answer we received was a simple one: “They’re crazy.”¹⁶ The explanation goes like this:

The rebels are crazy. Only insane people would stay in the bush for ten years and claim to be in direct contact with the Holy Spirit. Only insane people would believe that a small group, isolated in one geographic area, has a chance of toppling a national government. Only insane people would terrorize people from their own ethnic group, the very people on whose behalf the rebels claim to be fighting. Only insane people would commit such atrocities as cutting off people's limbs and forcing children to hack to death other children. It's useless to try to determine the “reasons” for the rebels' behavior, because there are no reasons.

This is clearly not a satisfying explanation. While isolated incidents of brutality can be dismissed as evidence of a perpetrator's “craziness,” it is hardly useful to categorize as insane the actions of large groups. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people do not act in a coordinated way without reasons that seem to be—to them at least—compelling.

A variant of the insanity explanation—and the one that prevails in most Western media articles about the Lord's Resistance Army—draws on what we might call the “Heart of Darkness” paradigm. It runs something like this:

The rebels of the so-called Lord's Resistance Army are cult fanatics, combining a naive and literal-minded understanding of religion with an inhuman level of brutality. Their behavior is both savage and bizarre. But such

bizarre behavior is hardly unprecedented in this region of Africa, which has, over the years, seen many similar outpourings of savagery.¹⁷

This explanation is an all too familiar one; the conflict is bizarre, but Africa is simply Like That. Like the “they’re crazy” theory, this explanation is readily rejected; it presents an ahistorical and decontextualized version of events, and the resulting story lends credence to the notion that in Africa, savagery is what outsiders should expect, and efforts to change things are consequently in vain.

The Anthropological Theory

Few anthropologists have written about the conflict in northern Uganda, and the little work that has been done is based mostly on research conducted in the late 1980s before the widespread atrocities against children began. Perhaps for this reason, most anthropological commentators paint what appears to be a more sympathetic picture of the conflict’s protagonists.¹⁸ The anthropological version of the story is longer and far more nuanced than the stories we have examined so far, and I will not be able to do it justice here. Nonetheless, the version goes something like this:

When the British arrived in Uganda, they viewed pastoralist northern peoples, such as the Acholi, as less evolved than the peoples of the south and west, who had settled, agricultural societies. As a result, colonial civil service jobs went to southerners, while the more “primitive” and “war-like” northerners were recruited into the colonial armed forces. Consequently, the south of Uganda became better developed economically and northerners came to dominate the military. This colonially created socioeconomic division between north and south solidified after independence, when frequent bouts of political violence often followed (or were declared to be following) ethnic lines. In the decades since independence, the Acholi have been both victims and perpetrators of this violence.¹⁹

When Museveni came to power by defeating the Acholi general Tito Okello in 1986, many of Okello’s Acholi soldiers fled north to their home districts along the Sudanese border. Some of the fleeing Acholi soldiers crossed into Sudan, fearing that if they remained in Uganda, they would face retaliation from Museveni’s soldiers, many of whom viewed the Acholi as complicit in the atrocities of past regimes. The defeated Acholi soldiers later joined up with other opponents of Museveni and formed a rebel alliance. The bloodshed and violence of Uganda’s postindependence decades made many Acholi fear that it was kill or be killed; if Museveni was not overthrown, they believed his soldiers would destroy the Acholi.

One of the rebel leaders was Alice Lakwena, an Acholi prophetess and healer. Over the years, traditional Acholi beliefs in *jogi* (supernatural forces) had had a Christian matrix imposed upon them by the teachings of Western missionaries, and Alice Lakwena was one of the many Acholi who interpreted Christian doctrine in a uniquely Acholi way, combining professions of faith in Catholicism with a belief in spirit possession and

witchcraft. Lakwena promised her Acholi followers that the Holy Spirit (*Tipu Maleng*) would help them overthrow Museveni, and that they should also purify the Acholi community from within by eliminating witches (using violence when necessary).

The Acholi, gloomy after their military defeat by Museveni and filled with guilt because of their role in the abuses of previous regimes, readily embraced Lakwena's millenarian promises. In 1987, she led an army of thousands of Acholi against Museveni's soldiers. She had some of her "followers" abducted or coerced into her army, justifying such action as for their own good. Still, Lakwena gained enormous popular support among the Acholi. She promised that the Holy Spirit would protect her true followers from enemy bullets. Believing her words, many Acholi marched against Museveni armed only with sticks.

The modern weapons of Museveni's soldiers handily defeated Lakwena's army. She fled to Kenya, and the rebel alliance more or less disintegrated. But Joseph Kony, a young relation of Lakwena's, remained in the bush with a small band of followers. Kony claimed to have inherited Lakwena's spiritual power and, for a time, he too garnered much popular support; large crowds would turn out to hear him speak. He eventually rechristened his band of supporters the Lord's Resistance Army, and he and his rebels continued to fight to overthrow Museveni and to purify the Acholi from within.

While Kony's activities may seem bizarre to outsiders, they in fact form part of a coherent belief system. Kony has vowed to rid the Acholi of witches and believes that killing a witch is not a wrongful act in the same way that killing a person is wrongful. The rebels kill those they believe are working with evil spirits. The rebels view the conflict through the lenses of religion and ethnicity. From such a perspective, all those not with Kony are against him, and anyone against Kony—and, by implication, against the Holy Spirit—must be working with evil spirits. Thus, the apparently senseless violence against civilians, though tragic, is not senseless when viewed in context.

Condensed as this account is, it is clearly much richer and more complex than the insanity theory. Because it is more nuanced, it might be more persuasive. But is it a little too pat? Are simpler explanations sometimes better? And how do we interpret such an account? Are we willing to say that brutal violence ever makes sense? Is there any moral universe in which forcing children to kill other children could be acceptable?

The children who have escaped from the rebels tell of numerous rituals involving water, stones, special prayers, and medicines. Such reports suggest that the rebels remain motivated by a variant of Alice Lakwena's millenarian beliefs.²⁰ Over the years, rebel leaders who left or died were replaced by captive children, some of whom—abducted when very young—have now been with the rebels for years. Even if the rebel leaders believe that what they are doing is morally justifiable and reflects the will of the Holy Spirit, do the captive children believe in Kony's spiritual (as opposed to earthly and coercive) powers?

The escaped children we spoke to were disbelievers more or less by

definition, since they had persisted in escape plans even after being told that the Holy Spirit punishes children who try to escape. But what about the children who remain with the rebels? Forced to commit atrocities themselves, and powerless against the superior force of their captors, do they come to believe in Kony's words as a form of psychic survival—the only way to live with oneself when one has become complicit in atrocities? To the extent that captive children may come to believe in Kony's supernatural powers, whether out of fear or guilt, does this alter the nature of the rebels' beliefs? If a number of “the rebels” are indeed former child captives, what does it mean to speak of “the rebels,” much less of what they “believe”?

The Government's Theory

Not surprisingly, most Ugandan government spokespersons give little credence to the notion that the rebels are true, if misguided, believers. The official government explanation, which presents rebel leaders as cynical and manipulative, can be easily summarized:

It is nonsense to imagine that religion has anything to do with the conflict in the north. Ugandans don't believe in witchcraft anymore. It's also nonsense to believe that Kony has a political agenda of some sort, or any legitimate grievances. The bloodshed of Uganda's past is over, and the Acholi are valued members of our nation.

This is about pure greed on the part of Joseph Kony, who is a tool of the Sudanese government. They give him money, weapons and cars; in exchange, his army helps them fight against John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army. Simply put, Kony is a Sudanese mercenary, a hired gun. If he returned to Uganda as an ordinary civilian, he would have no money, prestige, or power, and neither would his commanders. In order to have an army, Kony needs to abduct children, since his brutal methods have ensured that no sane civilian would join him voluntarily. And children are much easier to manipulate and control than adults.

The conflict persists because of Kony's greed. As long as he is aided by Sudan, it is very hard for the government of Uganda to defeat him completely. He isn't really interested in fighting against the Ugandan army; in fact, he usually flees back to Sudan when they come after him, and it is hard for our troops to follow.

Kony is not a revolutionary but a bandit. The government is doing all it can to fight him, but it's very difficult; his rebels come and go, and the border with Sudan is long and difficult to defend.²¹

The Ethnicity Theory

In a previous issue of *Africa Today*, David Newbury draws our attention to the ways in which press accounts of the Rwandan genocide distorted the realities of Rwandan politics and history by insisting that the genocide resulted from “centuries of tribal conflict.”²² In the case of Uganda, it is

also tempting to make generalizations about deeply rooted ethnic conflicts and entirely ignore the ways in which ethnicity has been created and manipulated, as much as discovered. Nonetheless, many Ugandans today interpret political events—or at least certain kinds of political events—in terms of ethnicity. Many of the Acholi people we interviewed, for example, viewed the conflict as part of a conspiracy to destroy their people. That story goes like this:

When the British came, they gave the best jobs and provided the best education to ethnic groups in the south and west. But southerners and westerners, though wealthy and well educated, were not strong or brave, unlike the northerners. Consequently, when Milton Obote, a Langi, became Uganda's first president, he relied on the northern Langi and Acholi tribes to form his army. When Idi Amin took power, he was afraid of the Acholi's power within the army and subsequently slaughtered many of them. After Amin fell, Obote returned to power and again relied on the Acholi to be the backbone of his army, although he also feared them. Thus, he deliberately sent them into situations in which they would likely be killed. As a result, the Acholi died disproportionately during the war against Museveni's army.

Since Obote always sent Acholi to fight Museveni, his soldiers saw them as their enemy and held them responsible for everything bad that happened. When the Acholi could take no more of Obote's insults and threats, the Acholi general Tito Okello finally ousted him. Okello would have set up a true democracy, but Museveni—after signing a peace accord—broke the agreement and continued the war, eventually defeating Okello. The Acholi had to flee to the north to avoid Museveni's vengeful soldiers.²³

At this point, the narrative branches, and we get two divergent explanations of the current conflict and why it has persisted. The first is the more extreme:

The Acholi have never wanted anything but peace, and it is slanderous to say that Acholi rebels are slaughtering Acholi civilians. The so-called conflict in the north is part of a plot to destroy the Acholi that was hatched by Museveni's government when it failed to destroy them through other, more straightforward means. There are no rebels; the so-called rebels are really government soldiers disguised as Acholi, that is why the army never succeeds in destroying them. They don't want to destroy the "rebels," because they are really their own men disguised so that they can kill more Acholi, while the Acholi themselves take the blame. Who has actually met Joseph Kony? How do we know he is still alive? True, captive children claim to have met him, but they only know what they are told.

The second account, while less extreme, reflects a similar ethnic paranoia:

The Acholi have long been a thorn in the government's side; they represent a potential military threat, since they formed the backbone of the

army that fought Museveni, and today they consistently vote against him in elections.

The conflict in the north persists because the government really has no desire to end it. Many generals are getting rich off the war because there's a tremendous amount of corruption and incompetence. Being one of Africa's most successful guerrilla leaders, surely Museveni could eliminate a tiny group of rebels if he really tried to do so.

But after all, why should the government try hard to destroy the rebels? For the most part, it is Acholi destroying Acholi; the rebels do little damage to the government, but they kill and abduct many civilians. The government hates the Acholi and wants us to destroy ourselves, so they do not intervene to end this conflict. Fighting against the rebels is also designed to kill the Acholi, since the government knows full well that most of the rebels' soldiers are captive Acholi children.²⁴

The Geopolitical Conspiracy Theory

In addition to conspiracy theories stemming from ethnic paranoia, there is also an elaborate geopolitical conspiracy theory. This explanation of the conflict—favored by many northern politicians—has two versions. The first states that the conflict with the rebels is simply a proxy war for the Ugandan government's undeclared war against Sudan:

Since the late 1960s, when both were students at the University of Dar es Salaam, Yoweri Museveni has been a close friend of SPLA leader John Garang and thus wants to help him overthrow the Sudanese government. For political reasons, he can't come out and openly aid Garang, since an all-out war between Uganda and Sudan would be disastrous. Consequently, he is covertly supplying Garang with arms, money, and even Ugandan soldiers. The Sudanese government is naturally angry at Ugandan attempts to destabilize Sudan and, in return, they have started to aid Kony's army. It's a simple tit for tat; you help our rebels, we'll help yours! In addition, Sudan uses the LRA as a mercenary army to fight against the SPLA.

This conflict is not about religion or the LRA's political agenda; it is simply about Ugandan-Sudanese relations. The conflict drags on because the Ugandan government refuses to stop supporting the SPLA (support that it does not even acknowledge). The conflict in the north won't end until Uganda and Sudan resolve their differences and there is genuine peace between these two governments. In the meantime, the Acholi people—and especially the Acholi children—are caught in the middle of a quarrel between two governments—a quarrel they did not create and cannot end. The Ugandan government is sacrificing the Acholi to its quarrel with Sudan.²⁵

A more elaborate version of this narrative is voiced by opponents of Museveni:

This is about more than just Sudan; it is about Museveni's Napoleonic ambitions. He has his finger in every pie in the region—giving covert aid

to allies in Rwanda, Burundi, and Ethiopia (as well as Sudan), and everyone knows that he was behind Laurent Kabila's rebel movement in the former Zaire. Being head of a poor country, Museveni can't get approval from parliament for covert funding for his friends in neighboring countries. Parliament would say, "No, feed your people first!" The conflict in the north, however, provides a handy excuse for endless amounts of military spending, which parliament does approve. But little of this money or equipment ever reaches the north. Instead, it goes all over Africa. Thus, the conflict in the north drags on, since Museveni has no incentive to end it because it's a convenient cover for his covert activities. As a result, Acholi children are being sacrificed to Museveni's geopolitical ambitions.²⁶

Assessing Competing Narratives

Given the various competing narratives regarding the conflict's origins and persistence, how can we discern "the truth" about the conflict? On the one hand, some of these narratives clearly have more plausibility than others; they accord more or less well with events we know to have occurred and with information from sources we consider to be "reliable." Thus, we can readily reject the insanity theory and regard the genocide theory with extreme skepticism.²⁷ But what about the other theories? How should we assess these narratives, each of which has a certain plausibility, a certain internal coherence and integrity?

We cannot find the rebel leaders to ask their opinion, and even if we could, it is unlikely that they would do more than present us with their own narratives. We cannot know what *really* motivates them, just as we cannot know what *really* goes on in the minds of the government leaders. In short, we cannot *really* know much of anything at all. It is not, of course, impossible to gain some greater understanding of the conflict. With time, we might amass additional evidence to support one of the theories (do people in Burundi use weapons manufactured in Ugandan munitions plants? are there witnesses who can report on statements made by high government officials?), but given the ongoing crisis in the north, time is something we do not have.

Having spent only a short time in Uganda, I am not as well equipped to assess the various stories and theories as those who have spent months or years there. Lack of sufficient time and knowledge is often a problem with human rights monitoring, since human rights groups tend to be underfunded and understaffed. Much of the time, human rights groups notice problems only when they reach catastrophic proportions. Weighing conflicting accounts would obviously be easier if rights groups had a more sustained involvement in different issues and regions; but lack of resources—not lack of will—often prevents them from doing so. The world is filled with tragedies, and when resources are limited, a crisis mentality prevails, and only the tragedies that are ongoing and egregious get much attention. But

even if we had sufficient resources, we would not be able to fully resolve the dilemma of assessing competing narratives. Too much will always be inaccessible to us and we will never have full information. We are always guessing.

These observations, of course, are hardly original; what I am saying about the crisis in northern Uganda is equally true of most other conflicts in the world, and the dilemma of understanding the roots of such a conflict is one that is familiar to all historians, anthropologists, and political scientists. From a scholarly point of view, this is not necessarily a dilemma. In fact, it is interesting, because it confirms the richness, the complexity, and the layered quality of events. We do not know, and probably cannot know, the "truth" about why the conflict began and why it continues. Life consists of stories, some more persuasive than others, but all are, to some extent, irreducible and nonfalsifiable. To the scholar with even the slightest postmodern bent, this is as it must be, and as it should be.

Personal Narratives: The Children's Stories

The explanatory narratives just examined invite us to be skeptical about the possibility of constructing a master narrative to explain events in northern Uganda. And if the conflict constituted "history" rather than "current events," we might be able to stop right here, with a satisfying set of reflections about the partial and contingent nature of historical "truth."

But in addition to these explanatory narratives, one also encounters personal narratives—namely, the narratives of the children we interviewed who had been abducted by the rebels but who ultimately managed to escape. Like the plethora of explanatory narratives, the children's stories must also be reckoned with. Should these personal narratives have the same status as explanatory narratives? To answer this question, we need to examine some of the children's stories.

My colleague Yodon Thonden and I interviewed twenty-eight children during our stay in Uganda. We interviewed children at two World Vision trauma counseling centers, one in Kiryandongo (outside the conflict zone) and one in Gulu town (in the conflict zone). We also interviewed children at the Gulu Save the Children Organization's (GUSCO) trauma counseling center in Gulu town, at St. Mary's School in Aboke, and at the barracks of the Uganda People's Defense Force in Gulu.

The children came from a range of social backgrounds. While some were from educated professional families (particularly the girls from St. Mary's), others—like most of the children at World Vision and GUSCO—were from small rural villages, the children of uneducated farmers. Most of the children we met had some schooling before being abducted, but a number of the children told us that before their abduction, their schools had been destroyed or closed as a result of rebel activity. (The LRA rebels tar-

get schools—and often abduct schoolchildren en masse—probably in part because schools are simply an excellent place to find lots of children. Some of the children, however, told us that the rebels intentionally abduct some well-educated children to serve as nurses and future leaders.) The rebels primarily stage abductions in Gulu and Kitgum, homeland of the Acholi, and most of the children we met were from that ethnic group. But a few of the children were from other ethnic groups and had been abducted in the neighboring district of Apac. Some of the children had been with the rebels for short periods (one to two months), while others had been in captivity for several years. Similarly, some of the children we met had escaped months before, while others, such as a boy I interviewed in the army barracks in Gulu, had escaped only days before. In several cases, we found (to our great discomfort) that we were the very first people to “debrief” children after their escape—the trauma counseling centers being heavily understaffed.

While a number of the older children spoke English, about two-thirds of our interviews were conducted with the assistance of interpreters. In most cases, the interpreters were also counselors at World Vision and GUSCO. Some children required virtually no urging to tell their stories; they simply launched into lengthy narratives, and we asked very few questions, except to clarify dates, place names, and so on. In other cases, we had to ask a long series of questions in order to elicit responses.

It is difficult to know the degree to which the nature of our questions, our identities as U.S. human rights researchers, or the identities of the counselors (mostly Langi and Acholi social workers and nurses) affected the nature of the stories the children told us. We tried to be as conscious of these influences as possible, and we were careful not to ask leading questions. The stories the children told us are remarkably similar to those collected by Amnesty International researchers, World Vision researchers, and a great many journalists, although the interviews were conducted with different children and interpreters at varying times during the last two years.²⁸ Also, children who had escaped only a few days before meeting us told stories that were very similar to those told by children who had escaped several weeks or months before.

The report published by Human Rights Watch tells the children’s stories in great detail.²⁹ Here, for space reasons, I present only a few fragments. I begin with a story about the moment of capture by the rebels.

There had already been rumors that rebels were around, and we were very fearful. My grandmother was hiding in the bush. It was morning, and I was practicing my music when I heard a shot. I started running into the bush, but there was a rebel hiding behind a tree. I thought he would shoot me. He said, “Stop, my friend, don’t try to run away!” Then he beat me on my back with the handle of the gun. He ordered me to direct him, and told me that afterwards I would be released.

But afterwards it was quite different. That afternoon we met up with

a very huge group of rebels, together with so many new captives. We marched and marched. Once we passed close to my homestead, but I was carefully guarded and I could do nothing. We came across a car which we ambushed, and later we came to a homestead and found a family with a father who was drunk. The rebels said, "This one is drunk, we cannot spare him!" So they clubbed him to death, then dragged him to a hut and burned it. As we went we burned many houses. I also recall that after we attacked a Kitgum trading center, we came across two hunters, and they were killed with clubs and bayonets.

This looting and killing continued as we marched. So many people were killed. You had to adapt yourself quickly to that kind of life. (Charles, fifteen)³⁰

The youngest child we interviewed was William, aged ten:

They beat us, then they made me carry some radios and carry the commander's gun. It was heavy and at first I was afraid it would shoot off in my arms, but it was not filled with ammunition. We joined a big group and we walked very far, and my feet were very swollen. If you said that you were hurting they would say, "Shall we give this young boy a rest?" But by a "rest" they meant they would kill you, so that if you did not wish to die you had to say you did not need a rest.³¹

Many of the children we met told of being forced to kill other children. The rebels seem to make almost all child captives either participate in or watch the killing of other children; many children spoke of being told to stand in a semicircle around the child to be killed and of being forced to inflict at least one or two ritual blows:

We walked and walked and they made us carry their property that they had looted. At about six a.m. they made us stop and they lined up in two lines, and made us walk between them while they kicked us.

On the second day of marching our legs were swollen. They said, "Eh, now, what should we do about your legs? You must walk, or do you want us to kill you? It's your choice." So we kept going.

On the third day a little girl tried to escape, and they made us kill her. They went to collect some big pieces of firewood. Then they kicked her and jumped on her, and they made us each beat her at least once with the big pieces of wood. They said, "You must beat and beat and beat her." She was bleeding from the mouth. Then she died. Then they made us lie down and they beat us with fifteen strokes each, because they said we had known she would try to escape. (Stella, fifteen)³²

The long, hungry days of marching through the bush also featured prominently in the children's stories:

After a time we received a radio message to go to Sudan [to the main LRA base camp]. We started marching and it became very dry. We could

not find water or food, and we ate the leaves of trees. Many became sick and died, and you would see children everywhere, lying down like they were sleeping. But they were dead. (Charles, fifteen)³³

Memories of combat also surfaced. Children told us that rebel commanders would often refuse to let the child soldiers take cover when going into battle, because taking cover was forbidden by the Holy Spirit, who would protect children who obeyed rebel leaders.

After we crossed into Sudan . . . we were trained how to attack vehicles, and how to shoot. . . . I was given a gun: an AK-47. I had to carry it on my right shoulder at all times. It was so heavy. The loaded magazine made it so heavy. For a while, my right arm was paralyzed from the weight, and the skin on my shoulder burned from carrying it. . . .

I was good at shooting. I went for several battles in Sudan. The soldiers on the other side would be squatting, but we would stand in a straight line. The commanders were behind us. They would tell us to run straight into gunfire. The commanders would stay behind and would beat those of us who would not run forward. You would just run forward shooting your gun. I don't know if I actually killed any people, because you really can't tell if you're shooting people or not. I might have killed people in the course of the fighting . . . I remember the first time I was in the front line. The other side started firing, and the commander ordered us to run towards the bullets. I panicked. I saw others falling down dead around me. The commanders were beating us for not running, for trying to crouch down. They said if we fall down, we would be shot and killed by the soldiers.

In Sudan we were fighting the Dinkas, and other Sudanese civilians. I don't know why we were fighting them. We were just ordered to fight. (Timothy, fourteen)³⁴

And again:

After training in Sudan, the rebels sent me back to Uganda. I was to be part of a group that would attack trading centers in Kitgum and abduct new children. I was well-armed, a soldier already. As we were returning, we were attacked by government soldiers. The frontline was somewhere ahead of where I was, and the commander said, "Run, run to the frontline!" It didn't matter whether you had a gun or not. If you did not run they would beat you with sticks. Many children without guns had to run to the front.

You are not allowed to appear to be thinking too much. If you had a gun, you had to be firing all the time or you would be killed. And you were not allowed to take cover. The order from the Holy Spirit was not to take cover. You must have no fear, and stand up as you run into fire. This was because they said you would be protected by the Holy Spirit if you stood tall and had no fear. But if you took cover, the Holy Spirit would be angry and you would be shot dead by all the bullets.

So many, so many were killed. (Charles, fifteen)³⁵

Rape by commanders was mentioned by girls, but only elliptically; the euphemism was that the girls had been "given as wives":

After the military training, I was given to a man called Otim. There were five women given to one man. The man I was given to was very rude to me: he thought I wanted to leave him and escape. He beat me many times with sticks. He thought I wanted to escape. Now I'm going to be a mother soon.

I don't want to be a mother at this age. But it happened and I must accept this. (Sarah, seventeen)³⁶

None of the children we met seemed to have any real understanding of the rebels' aims and motivations. They frequently told us that the rebels wanted to "overthrow the government," and that Kony claimed to be doing the bidding of the Holy Spirit. Beyond that, the children could not go.

It happens like this: Kony himself, he says he works with the Holy Spirit, and it talks to him, and he translates to the soldiers. So some days he says: "Today, you must burn the earth and kill the people." That is the reason the rebels make so much destruction.

We used to question ourselves: this man, Kony, why is he sending us to go kill our brothers, our sisters, our fathers and mothers, to burn their houses, eat their food? Why are we having to do this? But there was no answer at all. We cannot see an answer to that question. (Stephen, seventeen)³⁷

All of the children spoke of their uncertainty about the future. Many of them had lost their parents in the conflict and did not know where to find other relatives. The fear of being lost and alone, with no one to support them, was coupled with a fear of rebel retaliation:

I am afraid to go back home to my village, because the rebels are still there in plenty. I fear they will kill me if they come to know of me here. I was in primary three when I was abducted, and I would like to go back to school, if there is somewhere that is safe. I don't know. I am sad now. The other thing I would like to say is that I experienced the deaths of many children. I wish there could be a solution. (William, ten)³⁸

There is no reason, really, to stop here; I could fill fifty pages with long quotes from children. But there is probably little need. We interviewed about thirty children during our stay in Uganda, and we soon came to see that each child's story was fundamentally the same. The essential elements were these: capture by the rebels; long, exhausting marches through the bush, on swollen feet, carrying heavy loads, and not having enough to eat or drink. The witnessing of atrocities. The forced participation in atrocities: usually killing another child. The fear and guilt. The military training, and

the bewilderment of going into combat and of adjusting to “that kind of life.” For girls, the rape. And finally, the escape.

The very sameness and simplicity of the children’s stories gave them a terrible power. Like the words of a half-forgotten fairy tale, they seemed somehow archetypal, striking a deep chord. “We walked and walked . . . I was hungry . . . after a time we came to a village . . . I was afraid.” The world reflected in the stories is indeed a child’s world. Here we have no grand theories, no stories of geopolitical affairs or genocidal plots. We have only a world of direct, personal experience, of events that slide out of control, of long days and nights lost in the bush, of hunger, of powerful, frightening figures who can hurt and who can kill.

At the same time that their very similarity gives them power, each child’s story is fundamentally unique. The outlines are the same; the details are different. One child recalls the way the heavy gun burned the skin on his shoulder; another recalls the blood that dripped from the mouth of a girl she helped kill. The only possible response to the children’s stories is heart-sickness, and it is hard to say whether it is the stories’ similarities or their differences that most linger in the mind.

The Stories We Tell

Up until now, I have been discussing the stories that we—as scholars and activists—are told. I want to turn now from these stories to the stories that we, in our turn, tell to others.

This is where the scholar and the activist often part company. If the explanatory narratives I described earlier each have their own coherence and integrity—if it is impossible to reduce the multiplicity of explanatory narratives to a single master narrative—the children’s narratives are irreducible in a different sort of way. There is nothing we can do with them; they will not disappear. Instead, they take us by the shoulders, they shake us and demand a response, some sort of action. Some stories demand that we establish a master narrative of our own or, at any rate, a sort of hierarchy of narratives. If a legitimate response to the multiplicity of explanatory narratives is to make a statement about the fragmentary and contested nature of “reality” and the elusiveness of historical truth, the only legitimate response to the personal narratives of the children is to take action to find a solution, *now*. And in some unavoidable sense, “finding a solution” requires us to insist on some absolutes and to construct a master narrative of the sort we know to be fallible and suspect.

Few of us are solely scholars or solely activists; this is in many ways a false opposition. Few of us care so little about the human pain all around us that we can shrug off our inability to find clear-cut answers, declaring all

master narratives false, unnecessary, and irrelevant. And few of us are so bent upon a life of action and passion that we fail to see the complexities that make passion and action morally and intellectually risky. Most of us struggle to reconcile the two roles, and we may find ourselves continually shifting roles.

But as a human rights lawyer and a sometime student of anthropology, I find the dilemma to be none the less real, for the role of the anthropologist and the role of the lawyer do not sit well together here. The anthropologist is concerned with presenting an honest and nuanced view of people, cultures, and events—a view that does not impose an outside value system on others but faithfully reflects all the complexity and ambiguity of life. The lawyer, on the other hand, is fundamentally an advocate, not a neutral observer. We all know, from the courtroom dramas that saturate our media, that the lawyer's job—perhaps the lawyer's own legal and ethical obligation—is to present a narrative that will crowd out all other narratives and reduce chaos and multiplicity to a unitary, coherent, and powerful story.³⁹

While the human rights lawyer is not as much of a performer as a trial advocate, the job is still—fundamentally—to tell a single story. The “client” is not a plaintiff or a defendant in court but a person or, more often, a group of people who are suffering. When faced with the question, “Why are these abuses occurring?” the human rights advocate cannot say something vague about contested narratives and the multiplicity of meanings. Things must be boiled down, simplified; generalizations must be made. And the stories we tell matter greatly, for some stories—perhaps all stories—produce action, rather than just more stories. If we believe anything at all, we have to believe that some actions may provide comfort and help, while others may cause discord and pain. Most of us naturally prefer positive action, but categorizing all the possible actions that might be taken is not easy and requires us to choose between the stories we have been told. The link between the word and the deed is often obscure, but it is there. And so we must favor some stories over others.

If the Ugandan government is in fact out to get the Acholi, for example, we need to call for action to combat the government's policies. But if the government wants to protect Acholi civilians but lacks the resources, a much different response is required. If the government finds supporting the SPLA's struggle against the repressive Sudanese government more important than stopping atrocities against northern civilians, a different response is again in order.⁴⁰ The mode of negotiating with the rebels would also differ depending on whether Joseph Kony is actually motivated by greed or if he is motivated by religious fervor.

How much weight we give each explanatory narrative affects our ideas about potential solutions to the human rights abuses in northern Uganda. In turn, our ideas about solutions affect the kind of stories we tell about events there, since how we frame our stories will influence readers and determine whether they agree with our proposed solutions and whether they feel

inclined to help us reach those goals. But for many reasons, we are not free to tell our stories any way we please; we must also accept certain constraints on our storytelling.

My task during my visit to Uganda was to produce a report for Human Rights Watch. These reports, as many readers will know, have a fairly standard format; they are bound, generally eighty to 200 pages; they begin with a "Summary and Recommendations" section, then usually move into a section on historical and legal background; they go on to discuss "findings" in more detail and include, at some point, an analysis of those international human rights and humanitarian standards that have been violated and in precisely what way. Things must be made to fit into certain boxes; actions need to be defined (as genocide, as a violation of a particular set of civil and political rights, as a violation of a particular article of a particular convention). Human Rights Watch reports are legalistic documents, designed to be used as part of advocacy campaigns: here is what is happening, here is why it is happening, here are the people who are responsible, and here are the things that must be done to stop these abuses. The reports are sent out to journalists, senators, NGOs, and international donors. To be effective, they need to motivate those people to act, to write stories, to enact legislation, to change their policies, and to give money.

There are many other constraints, some very mundane. For instance, much of what ended up in the final version of this report came out of editorial compromises. These reports have many editors, and the text that ultimately gets published bears all the scars of the editing process. Similarly, the text is also constrained by organizational requirements; Human Rights Watch deals mainly with civil and political rights, and text sections that stray too far in the direction of murky social and economic rights are ruthlessly redirected. Finally, a legalistic standard of evidence prevails; if you did not see it yourself, and you did not hear about it from someone who saw it, the interesting rumors you have heard are not worth much.⁴¹

Inevitably, many of the nuances get lost; inevitably, the story that is told can often distort as much as it clarifies. This is true not only of such highly constrained documents as human rights reports, but also of the most open-ended kinds of stories. Consider the stories I have told here: I started with a tear-jerker, a standard advocate's ploy. (What does one tell a weeping child?) Was this a fair way to frame any of this? And was it fair to lump all anthropologists together and to come up with something labeled "the anthropological theory"? Was it fair to present so many fragments of children's narratives, fragments that are themselves pieced together from conversations directed by my own questions, conversations which often required the assistance of an interpreter?

I am not sure what to do about all these questions, for as I have said, I see the tension between the roles of scholar and activist as one that is permanent and real, rather than merely apparent. Ultimately, I think the best any of us can do is to present both our own judgments and generalizations

and to make available to as many people as possible the original words of our informants. There is something to be said for simply bearing witness in as honest a fashion as possible, for giving airspace to voices we normally do not hear. Thus, in our Human Rights Watch report, we used as many direct quotes as we could; a lengthy first section consists of narratives from the children we met. To the extent possible, we wanted our readers to be able to assess for themselves our conclusions and recommendations. We also wanted our readers to be able to read between the lines, to form for themselves some of the judgments we could not express—for one reason or another—in such a format. (For instance, I ended up feeling rather strongly that the Ugandan government has quite a bit to answer for, and that a negotiated peace is the best hope for an end to the conflict. For many reasons, most of them probably good, little of this feeling could be directly expressed in the report. But I hope that we have provided enough in the way of quotes from others to enable readers to reach a decision about this for themselves.)

I do not know how well we succeeded. I do not know how much our need to tell a coherent story, and work around organizational constraints, forced us to do violence to the complex and subtle truths about events in northern Uganda. Indeed, I worry about the opposite problem as well: I worry that our desire to be faithful to the complexities may have harmed our effort to give readers a coherent master narrative of events, something that will leave them as shaken and moved as our experiences left us, something that will motivate them to act to help northern Uganda's children.

But there is, I think, no other way to proceed than by presenting our own stories—as partial and risky as they may be—with humility, and with hope.

Notes

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1. Peter Weiss, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, English version by Geoffrey Skelton, verse adaptation by Adrian Mitchell (New York: Atheneum, 1966), Scene 33, p. 101.

2. In late May–June 1997, I spent about two weeks in Uganda as a consultant for the Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Project. I was accompanied by a colleague, Yodon Thonden, counsel to the Children's Rights Project. The various

unpublished notes and materials I have drawn on in this essay are on file with Human Rights Watch, and readers seeking a fuller discussion of the conflict in northern Uganda should turn to the Human Rights Watch report that discusses our findings, *The Scars of Death: Children Abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1997).

3. *The Scars of Death*, p. 1.

4. The group has undergone a number of name changes over the years. It was initially called the Holy Spirit Movement, under the leadership of Alice Lakwena in 1987. In the years since then, the group has been called the Holy Spirit Mobile Force and the Lord's Army, among other things.

5. See, for instance, Bob Drogin, "Ugandan Rebels Terrorize in the Name of the Lord," *Los Angeles Times* (1 April 1996), p. A1: "[Lord's Resistance Army rebels] say their goal is to topple the government of president Yoweri Museveni and to install a regime dedicated to enforcing the Bible's Ten Commandments."

6. See, for instance, children quoted in *The Scars of Death*, pp. 30–31.

7. For general information on the conflict and its effects, see *The Scars of Death*; see also Parliament of Uganda, "Report of the Committee on Defense and Internal Affairs on the War in Northern Uganda" (January 1997); UNICEF, *Background Situation Report* (June 1997); and Gulu Disaster Committee, *Gulu District Emergency Plan* (May–June 1997).

8. For published material documenting the LRA's targeting of children, see *The Scars of Death*; see also Amnesty International, *Breaking God's Commands: The Destruction of Childhood by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda*, AI Index: AFR 59/01/97 (London, 18 September 1997); UNICEF/World Vision, *Shattered Innocence: Testimonies of Children Abducted in Northern Uganda* (Uganda: World Vision, 1997); Robby Muhumuzu, *The Gun Children of Gulu* (Uganda: World Vision, December 1995); and *Girls Under Guns* (Uganda: World Vision, 1995).

9. In June 1997, there were an estimated 240,000 internally displaced people in the north (UNICEF, *Background Situation Report*).

10. In the "protected camp" at Pabbo, for instance, during the month of February 1997, there were, out of a total camp population of roughly 30,000, 1,457 deaths from malaria, 14 from measles, 1,558 from diarrhea, 490 from "diarrhea with blood," 16 from malnutrition, and 480 from upper respiratory disorders like pneumonia (more recent figures were not available): Gulu District Office Morbidity Data for Protected Camps (February 1997).

11. A recent Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children report on the war in Sierra Leone raises similar issues. "Most Sierra Leoneans consider the continuing war pointless. . . . Although the early stages of Sierra Leone's civil war may have been somewhat comprehensible, conversations with Sierra Leoneans both young and old, well-educated and poorly educated, rural and urban, suggested that uncertainty over why the fighting continues is widespread"; in *The Children's War: Towards Peace in Sierra Leone* (New York: Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, June 1997), p. 4.

12. See Christopher Ojera, "11 Years On, War Wracked Acholi only Getting Worse," *The Monitor* 146 (Kampala) (25 May 1997): 16.

13. A number of expatriate Acholi have claimed, at various times, to represent the Lord's Resistance Army. Their pronouncements, however, appear to bear little relation to the LRA's activities on the ground, causing many observers to question whether the purported spokespersons have any authority with the LRA or, indeed, any contact with LRA leaders.

14. There is a website devoted to the promulgation of what purports to be Lord's Resistance Army publicity materials, but like the pronouncements of various

LRA "representatives," the website's materials bear virtually no relation to anything actually happening in northern Uganda, making it impossible to assess their authenticity. The materials are posted via the Columbia University web server by Benjamin Otuno, a Ugandan student enrolled in Columbia's extension school. The site's address is <http://www.columbia.edu/~bo23>.

15. For two thorough discussions of Acholi attitudes toward the conflict, see Acholi Parliamentary Group, "Submission to the Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Internal Affairs Investigating the Northern Rebellion with a View to Bringing It to a Speedy End," date uncertain, but probably December 1996 or January 1997; and Norbert Mao and Daniel Omara-Atuba, "Report of the Committee on Defense and Internal Affairs on the War in Northern Uganda," *Minority Report in The Parliament of Uganda* (January 1997).

16. Civilians, aid workers, and many of the government representatives we met tended to dismiss as pointless our attempts to understand the rebels' motivations. As one Italian nun told us with a shrug, "When you think about it, you feel a headache"; Sister Bruna Barolla, quoted in *The Scars of Death*, p. 60.

17. See, for instance, Drogin, "Ugandan Rebels." The article describes what it refers to as "the atrocities and attacks by . . . a fanatic Christian fundamentalist cult led by a self-proclaimed prophet with a murderous manner." It goes on to blithely note that "brutal and bizarre insurgencies are hardly new in Africa, where rebels without a coherent ideology have laid waste to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia and other nations in recent years." See also "Rebellion in Uganda," *Foreign Report*, Section 2402 (6 June 1996): "[LRA leader] Kony is the successor to the fanatical priestess Alice Lakwena, who conducted a full-scale civil war against the government in the late 1980s. He has a bizarre policy based on the Ten Commandments that nonetheless also endorses the abduction of young men to reinforce his army, widespread rape of young women, cutting off people's ears and lips and wholesale destruction of houses and property." For other similar descriptions of the LRA insurgency, see James McKinley, "Christian Rebels Wage a War of Terror in Uganda," *New York Times* (5 March 1997), p. A1; and "Ugandan Rebel Activity Erupts in Fighting: Religious Fundamentalism One Cause," *CNN World Report* (20 February 1997).

18. I have been unable to find any current anthropological work on the conflict in northern Uganda. The story I relate here not only presents an extremely simplistic condensation and combination of several remarkably rich accounts written some years ago, but it also represents my own extrapolation from them. As far as I know, only two anthropologists have written much about the early days of the conflict; they are Heike Behrand and Tim Allen. I am deeply indebted to both of them for what little understanding I possess of the culture of the Lord's Resistance Army, and I hope that I have not misinterpreted their work. If the account I present strikes readers as inaccurate or incomplete, the fault is most certainly my own. Readers should see Heike Behrand, "War as Nature's Way of Rebelling: The Holy Spirit Movement and the Power of Nature in Northern Uganda," *Anthropos* 88, nos. 1-3 (1993): 39-46; and Behrend, "Is Alice Lakwena a Witch?" in Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle, eds., *Changing Uganda: The Dilemmas of Structural Adjustment and Revolutionary Change* (London: James Currey, 1991). See also Tim Allen, "Understanding Alice: Uganda's Holy Spirit Movement in Context," *Africa* 61, no. 3 (1991): 370-399.

19. For scholarly accounts of Uganda's postindependence decades, see Thomas Ofcansky, *Uganda: Tarnished Pearl of Africa* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996); A. B. K. Kasozi, *The Social Origins of Violence in Uganda, 1964-1985* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994); Amii Omara-Otunno,

Politics and the Military in Uganda, 1980–1985 (London: Macmillan, 1987); and A. G. G. Gingera-Pinyewa, *Northern Uganda in National Politics* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1992).

20. For a more extensive discussion of the Lord's Resistance Army's religion and ideology, see *The Scars of Death*, pp. 30–35.

21. For an example of such pronouncements, see Yoweri Museveni, "Address at the Opening of Parliament" (28 April 1997): "Kony is not fighting for political aims but for a style of living that he cannot afford through legal toil." See also the comments of Col. James Kazini, commander of the Ugandan People's Defense Force, Fourth Division in Gulu; and of Alphonse Owiny-Dollo, minister of state for the north, quoted in *The Scars of Death*, p. 75.

22. David Newbury, "Irredentist Rwanda: Ethnic and Territorial Frontiers in Central Africa," *Africa Today* 44, no. 2 (1997): 211–221.

23. See the comments of Paulinus Nyeko, Gulu Human Rights Focus, quoted in *The Scars of Death*, pp. 10, 63–64; see also the Acholi Parliamentary Group, "Submission to the Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Internal Affairs"; and the testimony of Acholi leaders quoted in The Parliament of Uganda, "Report of the Committee on Defense and Internal Affairs."

24. See the comments of Angelina Atyum, vice-chair, Concerned Parents of Aboke; and Paulinus Nyeko, Gulu Human Rights Focus, quoted in *The Scars of Death*, pp. 78–79.

25. See the comments of Norbert Mao, member of Parliament (MP) for Gulu; Daniel Omara-Atuba, MP for Lira; and Andres Banya, Acholi Development Association, quoted in *The Scars of Death*, p. 79.

26. See comments of Livingstone Okello-Okello, MP for Kitgum, quoted in *The Scars of Death*, p. 80.

27. Despite my great skepticism about the "ethnicity theory," ethnic prejudice certainly persists, and Ugandan history, along with recent events in neighboring countries, makes it dangerous to dismiss fears of ethnic genocide out of hand.

28. See, for instance, Amnesty International, *Breaking God's Commands*; and UNICEF/World Vision, *Shattered Innocence*.

29. See *The Scars of Death*.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

39. One of this article's external reviewers points out that there is no need to assume that a human rights advocate ought to be like a lawyer in an adversarial proceeding. Instead, a human rights advocate might conceive of her role very differently, perhaps seeing herself more like the judge in a proceeding in a civil law country than as a lawyer in a common law country. This is an interesting and provocative point, since it is undeniably true that organizations like Human Rights Watch have imported, more or less wholesale, many of the assumptions about advocacy and evidence that prevail in the U.S. legal system. In part, this is because organizations like Human Rights Watch are populated in large part by lawyers (though people also come from many other backgrounds, including anthropology, political science, history, etc.). Human rights groups have seemingly adopted certain legalistic assump-

tions, but not others, with little discussion of why that is. This issue should be part of a broader discussion about the ways in which human rights organizations conceptualize their role.

I do not mean to overemphasize the lawyerly aspects of doing human rights work. I speak about lawyers because I happen to be one, and the adversarial advocacy tradition is one that is very familiar to me. But I think that the dilemmas I am discussing apply to all advocates, not merely to those who see themselves as lawyers in the Anglo-American tradition. (Even a judge in a civil law proceeding must make findings of fact and come up with a [legally binding] determination of what happened, and a binding decision about how the situation can be rectified.) By its very nature, human rights research calls for advocacy. Perhaps we should distinguish between two phases of human rights inquiry. In stage one, the researcher tries to determine whether anyone's rights are being violated, in what way, and by whom. In this stage, the human rights researcher seeks to be a neutral observer. If human rights abuses are deemed to be occurring, however, we move into stage two: advocacy on behalf of those whose rights are being violated. The stages blur, of course. Once we begin to articulate our belief that someone's rights are being violated, we have moved into the advocacy stage, though it may take us some time to realize this.

40. Many of these issues, I think, are deliberately avoided by many human rights groups, because they force the kind of painful analysis that most rights advocates shy away from. For instance, perhaps the Ugandan government genuinely believes, in some utilitarian way, that helping John Garang's SPLA will, in the long run, advance the cause of human rights in the Great Lakes region. Perhaps the government is, indeed, making some sort of pragmatic calculation here: we will aid John Garang, which means Sudan will aid the LRA, which means that numerous children and other civilians will die, but if the SPLA wins, there will be lasting peace.

Human rights groups tend to adopt a Kantian approach to issues like this: you cannot establish a hierarchy of wrongs and use the lives of individuals as means to an end. The rights of a single child weigh as much as the rights of thousands. To some extent, perhaps only outside observers have the luxury of adopting so Kantian an approach. This issue too merits further discussion.

41. Such a standard begs some interesting questions. Legal evidentiary rules have a complex and not terribly coherent history, and it is hardly obvious that the hearsay rule is essential for human rights reporting. Sometimes rumors—reported as such—are highly enlightening.