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### Conflict legacies

*Understanding youth's post-peace agreement practices in Yumbe, north-western Uganda*

Both, J.C.

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### 3. 'IT APPEARS AS IF WE ARE STILL IN THE BUSH': RECURRENT EXPERIENCES OF CONFLICT AT THE MARGINS OF YUMBE DISTRICT

'*Tabu ambamba*'<sup>142</sup> was what Faridah always repeated when talking about the periods of conflict in the past in Yumbe District. Originally from eastern Uganda, she now considered herself Aringa after spending more than 25 years in Yumbe. At 55 years of age, she looked old but strong. She smoked locally grown and cured tobacco (something I did not see other women in Yumbe do) and her house was often rather dirty, as she preferred to work on the land or to work with and assist other people than to look after her home. She always wore the same dress, and it was obvious that the little money she earned by selling her surplus produce of groundnuts and sesame was often spent on others, particularly her children, step-children, and grandchildren, as well as widows in the community.

Faridah was a very active farmer and knew how to secure food for her family and dependants. Even the small plots around her home in Yumbe town had been turned into fertile sources of agricultural produce, including pumpkins, groundnuts, and sweet potatoes. These were efforts that many people in town would not make, out of fear, for example, that their produce might be stolen at night from their town plots, living as they did in a town with many 'strangers', including numerous 'thieves'. Often, when I arrived early in the morning without an appointment, I found her barefoot with mud up her legs, working her small fields.

Born to Christian parents in eastern Uganda, Faridah lost her mother when she was still young. She attended primary school only for a few years before dropping out. At around the age of 20, she fell in love and married an 'Aringa boy': one of Amin's soldiers based in Jinja barracks. These soldiers were generally disliked and feared by many Ugandans in the south, she suggested, but also adored by some women for their height and physical strength.<sup>143</sup> Faridah described herself as 'the rib of her husband'. Listening to her talk about him, he seems to have adored her too. He used to walk next to her when she went to fetch water, loving always to be by her side. She spoke about him with tender words and smiles, even so many years after his death. At the time she had married him, he already had a first wife in Yumbe (later he married another wife, and eventually he had many children). Soon after she moved to Yumbe too, the war began: the earlier president of Uganda, Milton Obote, came back from exile to overthrow Amin. He was helped by the Tanzanian army, the Tanzanian

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<sup>142</sup> *Tabu* (Swahili for 'problem'), *ambamba* (Aringa for 'too much'): '(There were) a lot of problems.'

<sup>143</sup> And perhaps also their wealth (see Decker 2013).

People's Defence Force (TPDF). When the UNLA (Obote's forces) entered the West Nile region in the late 1980s, they aimed for large-scale 'revenge on the people of Amin'. While life rapidly became more and more insecure for everyone in the region, women like Faridah faced particular risks because of their appearance: they looked 'brown', which meant that they could not originally be from the northern region, where people look 'very black'. Women like her, according to the UNLA, must have been married to Aringa officers or soldiers while they were based in the south. Now the soldiers used them to trace their former army husbands, and they themselves too became the special targets of revenge atrocities.

Under Obote II I used charcoal. I had to make myself look black, looking very ugly. In that period I really suffered. This was the case under Obote II and Binaisa.<sup>144</sup> [About] those who were very brown, they would know: 'These women came with the military.' They would force you to show your husband. When they saw him, they would just shoot him in front of your eyes. One man from a village in Midigo, his name was Juma, he was an officer [...] the wife had to show him. First they raped her, the husband was shot dead and then also the child and the woman, including the brothers. Another man was also killed like that; it was me who then looked after the children. (Interview, 25 September 2011)

This was at the very beginning of the 'liberation war'. It soon became clear that people could no longer stay in their homes; insecurity and fear were rapidly increasing, and people from Yumbe started to flee en masse to Sudan:

That war was the worst. You had to run away, naked or with clothes. Even children, you just left them behind. Why? Because of the gunshot; when you hear it, you just forget everything. So many people lost their lives. (Interview, 25 September 2011)<sup>145</sup>

Later, while living in exile in Sudan during the first half of the 1980s, Faridah used to return to Yumbe with another woman, and they would risk their lives to try to harvest the crops they had left behind in their fields when they had fled. They counted on the local 'self-defence groups' that had remained behind in Yumbe and the corridors they had established to protect people like her against the avenging army.<sup>146</sup> She told me how, on one of those journeys, this protection proved insufficient, and, together with the woman she had been travelling with, she was chased by the UNLA soldiers.

The woman was running [in a] straight [line] and got shot in her back. She died. Me, I was zigzagging. I was touched by a bullet passing the upper leg [showing me the scar], [but] I kept on running until I reached the river. I managed to hide

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<sup>144</sup> President Godfrey Binaisa was appointed to take over from interim president Yusef Lule on 20 June 1979 and was removed from power some time before Obote was elected in 1980. The latter election outcomes were disputed and eventually led to the 'bush war' headed by president Museveni.

<sup>145</sup> Such narratives are confirmed by those captured by Barbara Harrell-Bond (1986: 43-44). In the introduction to this dissertation, I show how women's memory of fear was instrumentalized by the NRM in order to win the presidential elections in Yumbe in February 2011.

<sup>146</sup> See Chapter 2

myself from the soldiers passing, by diving under the water and remaining under water for some time. (Field notes after a visit by Faridah to my home in Yumbe, 20 May 2011)

According to Faridah, when Uganda was taken over by the NRA in 1986 and people began returning from Sudan, her husband was called upon by the new president, Museveni. The reason remains unclear, but it seems that he was called to Kampala to take a position in the new army, or to hand in his weapon due to retrenchment. He never reached the capital city, however; while driving near Kampala, the car hit a landmine and he and the driver died on the spot. Faridah never talked of suspecting any intended attack on her husband; rather, it seems likely that in the immediate aftermath of the bush war in the Luwero Triangle, many landmines remained hidden in Uganda's central region.<sup>147</sup> When the news of his fatal accident reached the family in Yumbe, according to her, all his other five wives left soon after and returned to their homes. When asked why she stayed and did not go back to her relatives in the east, she said: 'I am here because of the children. If you leave the children, no one can look after them. The children would feel like tortured orphans.'

Faridah stayed in Yumbe with her children and some of the children of her previous co-wives and struggled to help them go to school. Only later did she remarry, to a brother of her late husband. The aged man came across as a loving and caring man. Despite his age, he was still using his bike to engage in small trades at the various weekly markets in different parts of Yumbe District.

Of another period of rebel activity that Faridah experienced in Yumbe, she claimed: 'We were beaten. I was beaten by rebels. Women were raped. If you wanted them not to rape you: when the child has defecated, you take it and smear it on you to look dirty.' While narrating this, Faridah gestured smearing her stomach and legs with the excrement, then she demonstrated in a lively way how the rebels would come close to her body and be so disgusted and even throw up because of the stink. 'You do all this to save your life.' It was very difficult to reconstruct together with Faridah when this later episode happened exactly, though it seems most likely that it took place during the period in which the WNBK rebels were active in the mid-1990s.<sup>148</sup> She claimed that she managed to avoid being raped using this strategy, while many other women in her close environment were not so lucky.<sup>149</sup> At that time, she did not live in town but in a bushy and remote part of the district, those places where the rebels liked to hide. 'We were robbed of what we had; we really suffered at the hands of the rebels.' During periods in which the rebels were active, they

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<sup>147</sup> The NRA bush war was fought mainly in the Luwero Triangle, though later the fighting approached Kampala from different sides before the takeover. Wobulenzi, where Faridah's husband was killed by a landmine, is between Luwero and Kampala.

<sup>148</sup> During the period following this, in which the UNRF II rebellion was active, I know that Faridah was not in Yumbe but spent a few years with her family and started cultivating crops after returning home to visit a sick relative.

<sup>149</sup> Occasionally, I met other women of her age at her home that would allow me to interview them about their experiences with rebellion in the past. Rape was often referred to in their accounts.

would come repeatedly to people's homes for food, looting and causing disturbances. When they left, Faridah said that the people would sweep away their footsteps to hide the fact that their home had been visited by rebels, for when government soldiers noticed that rebels had visited a house, this provoked beatings and sometimes worse, because they were often accused of being rebel-collaborators.<sup>150</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to investigate how the experiences of armed conflict over the past decades continue to play a role in Yumbe District more than ten years after peace was signed in 2002. The aim is to draw attention to the relatively unknown 'lived experiences' of the people in the District, and more specifically to the recurrence of the experience of violence and insecurity in their lives. These are predominantly the experiences of those who are parents to the youth whom I focus on in the following chapters. As the story of Faridah above shows, this generation of parents went through a large number of disturbing events in the period between 1979 and 2002. One important contribution that this chapter makes to the existing literature on the region, therefore, is its specific focus on people's recurring experiences with conflict and violence over an extended period of time. Second, I focus on how these experiences continue to permeate their lives in the aftermath of such turmoil.

Many of the experiences of my older interlocutors, and the complex conflict dynamics they imply, have hardly been documented. The region, which is currently inhabited by more than 500,000 people, still contains many 'untold stories' (Rosenthal & Bogner 2014). Regional and national post-conflict politics play a large role in this 'silence' (ibid.; RLP 2004; Bogner & Neuner 2013). One important reason, for example, is the fact that former UNRF II rebels in Yumbe claim that they brought development to the region through the extensively negotiated peace agreement signed in 2002. They perceive themselves as heroes and defenders of the Aringa people, and their political influence prevented those who were victimized during their rebellion from speaking out about their experiences in the aftermath of conflict (RLP 2004; Bogner & Neuner 2013). Slowly, however, this space is opening up in Yumbe (JRP 2013; Bogner & Rosenthal 2014), and in this chapter we shall see that people in Yumbe fell victim not only to the UNRF II but to a large number of rebel groups and armies over the past decades.<sup>151</sup>

To understand the depth of the past conflict dynamics in Yumbe, with regard to their full and complex dimensions, I argue therefore that an attempt should be made to

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<sup>150</sup> I interviewed Faridah on various occasions, accompanied by two different research assistants, and I also used to visit her home frequently alone. This portrait of Faridah is informed by a compilation of observations and interview data gathered over time.

<sup>151</sup> See more on the chronology of armed groups in the region in Chapter 2.

understand people's multiple experiences of conflict.<sup>152</sup> Unlike many NGOs do, for example, when approaching regions like these, I argue that we should look beyond the most recent episode of violence. 'Multiple experiences', the way I use the term here, refers not only to how different villages, towns, or communities in the same area have had different interactions with armed groups, depending on their geographical location or, for example, the political or religious choices made by their local leaders (see De Bruijn & Van Dijk 2007). Admittedly, this is an important feature of the conflict dynamics in Yumbe, and one that has received scant attention. But 'multiple experiences' here refers also to the fact that many clans, families, and individuals have experienced more than one war-related crisis during their life course; thus, the term relates to people's recurrent experiences of conflict. I question how we can and should understand the current effects of the accumulation of such experiences over time between 1979 and 2002.<sup>153</sup>

I began this chapter with the narrative and a description of Faridah, compiled from many encounters we had. It clearly shows the recurrence of violence in her life. But she also carried a strong ability to survive, and even perhaps thrive, something not all interlocutors in this chapter did. Faridah's narratives of the past are a complex puzzle of dire experiences. She managed to narrate them with a lot of bravura and came across as a strong personality and a loving and caring mother figure, not only to her own children but to all the children in the neighbourhood and a few abandoned and widowed women. The story of Faridah refers to recurring experiences of violence and fear, as well as to many different tactics employed for survival. Almost all of the different insurgencies in the region had affected her and her family in various ways. In most of her narrations, it was not clear where exactly she had been residing and whether her place of residence was perhaps particularly unsafe. But her own background (coming from eastern Uganda) and her marriage to a soldier in Amin's army definitely increased her vulnerability after Amin was overthrown. Her amazing inventiveness (colouring her skin with charcoal, smearing excrement on her body to disgust rebel rapists) was and remains an invaluable resource for her. Her ambition to farm large pieces of land (for self-sufficiency plus sale of the surplus groundnuts and simsim),<sup>154</sup> despite the fact that the land was far away from her home and her back pain often caused her problems, showed her to be a uniquely strong person among a group of women who often appeared to be more defeated by their experiences stemming from the same period, and the ensuing physical limitations and poverty that affected their lives in the present.

Below I investigate further a variety of 'multiple experiences' with armed conflict in Yumbe that my interlocutors described. They illustrate the way in which the various

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<sup>152</sup> At the same time, one has to acknowledge such an outsider understanding will always remain incomplete, as Sommers (2015: 31, referring to the work of Carolyn Nordstrom 2004: 59-60) underlines. For what people actually have experienced in terms of violence and still experience today remains difficult to express or is often 'silenced' (intentionally or unintentionally, forcibly or by choice).

<sup>153</sup> Some sources suggest that violence in Yumbe decreased significantly after 2000, when peace negotiations between the Ugandan government and the UNRF II began. But one well-informed interlocutor made reference to the rapes that still occurred in the surroundings of Bidibidi, the former Oxfam compound where the UNRF II rebels were camped during the peace negotiations (field notes, 22 March 2011), and this is why I speak of the period up until 2002 here.

<sup>154</sup> The local term for sesame seeds.

conflicts deeply permeate the life histories of people of this generation. Thereafter, I move to the present and the way my interlocutors perceive the role of these past experiences in their present-day lives.

## RECURRENT EXPERIENCES WITH ARMED CONFLICT

The complexity and multiplicity of violent experiences hidden in the northern West Nile region are enormous and have so far received little attention; nevertheless, they raise important questions about local people's outlook on life today. Publications so far (often written at the height of conflict or in its immediate aftermath) naturally focus rather narrowly on one main event or rebel group (see for example Harrel-Bond 1986; Payne 1996; Baaré 2004). This approach, one could argue, partly *de-contextualizes* and *de-historicizes* the ways in which, for example, forms of violence and the repeated experience thereof, as well as the means with which to cope with insecurity, become deeply engrained in the people and the social fabric of a community. In the Introduction to this dissertation, we already saw that there are references to embodied and emotional repertoires that have obtained cultural meaning, as exemplified by the rhetorical question: 'Where do you run to with your children?' It was in the actual 'nests' of such experiences of running away and hiding (in maize fields or mango trees) that many of my youth interlocutors were born and raised. To understand their position in society today is to understand the broad and recurrent range of such experiences that befell their parents and themselves as children, as well as the current impact of these events.

What do the experiences of these parents look like? Here one enters a complex patchwork of experiences that have shaped individual and collective histories. Not one of these historical trajectories is the same. One middle-aged interlocutor noted, when speaking about the violence and hardship faced by his clan over the past 35 years: 'Our problems are beyond.' He was referring to something beyond what one could easily grasp, beyond any imaginable form of reconciliation, beyond anything people could solve locally, according to him. The people of his clan, living on the periphery of the district, close to the border with Sudan, identified themselves as having been deeply affected by the violence of the past. Over time and during a variety of armed conflicts since 1979, seven adult men of influential standing in their clan (one a sub-county chief, the others also working for the government in various capacities) had been killed,<sup>155</sup> leaving many orphans and widows behind. Most women had been raped, particularly during the WNBF rebel incursions in the mid-1990s, and most of their properties and livestock had been lost to looters multiple times during the various rebellions that had ravaged the northern part of Yumbe. Members of the clan felt that they still faced difficult relations with the communities around them, many of whom had joined different rebel parties to which the clan had fallen victim because of its maintenance throughout the conflicts of a pro-government

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<sup>155</sup> Some of the elderly men who died during the conflict had previously served in Amin's regime. Their role was presented as one of loyal government servants, and their own loyalty to the Amin regime was not questioned by the clan in their discourse about the past. (See also chapters 2 and 4 on this matter.)

stance. Many of the children in this clan, as mentioned, had lost their fathers. For example, one man who had been killed had left 23 children and several wives behind. The children had thus been forced to drop out of school at a young age because there was no money to pay for school and they had to help their mothers cultivate the land.

The narratives of the different relatives of this man show how violence was encountered time and time again, and how the people felt lost in its long-term aftermath. They stated they were unable to redress their collective wounds and their social relations with neighbours, leading to a sense of defeat *vis-à-vis* life even in the present. The inability to seek redress for the wrongs committed against them was something that they partly blamed on the amnesty granted to the rebels upon their return, which prevented the clan from accusing people based on what had been done to the clan, let alone from seeking any form of justice. While the inclination of this clan over time had been to join the government army to fight the rebellions that they fell victim to, their immediate neighbours had made different choices (individual members or brothers together had joined various rebel groups), revealing the intricate geography of conflict in the region<sup>156</sup> and the complex social configurations this led to afterwards. Defining perpetrators and victims over such a tumultuous stretch of time proves to be a task of great complexity, even in this small locality shared by only a few different clans. The clan's narrative and that of others allow us to imagine how social relations in Yumbe are still deeply affected by the past, even if in daily life these tensions are not so visible to the observer.<sup>157</sup>

What the clan mentioned above shares with Faridah and other people in Yumbe is that their histories over the past decades are a composite of dire experiences; yet individual stories may differ. One woman I met often at Faridah's home spoke in particular about the extremely violent encounter that took place with another armed actor—one that does not occur in Faridah's layered account—namely, the SPLA. In an attack in 1984 she lost her husband, daughter, and baby while she herself was raped. Unlike Faridah, she looked very old, although they were the same age, and very depressed most of the time. She was suffering with many health complaints and surviving by carrying water, at her age, to other people's homes. She leaned heavily on her eldest son but often came to Faridah for financial support to go to the clinic when her knees were aching or her ears pained her. Another interlocutor was tortured by the SPLA in south Sudan in the late 1980s and became disabled; then in the mid-1990s he was threatened by the WNUF, almost killed, and later his wife and eldest daughter (an adolescent at the time) were raped by members of this same rebel group. The latter event still caused tension between him and his parents-in-law, who did not understand why he had not been there to protect the women. He occasionally made subtle reference to this persisting tension in the multiple interviews I had with him.

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<sup>156</sup> For similar descriptions of a complex 'geography of conflict', see De Bruijn & Van Dijk 2007.

<sup>157</sup> References to antagonism between people in Yumbe based on the perpetration of atrocities against each other were often rather implicit; they came to the ethnographic surface only occasionally, and only in reading my field notes very carefully did I notice the inconsistencies with which people spoke to me over time of reconciliation with perpetrators that were known to them. The predominant trope one would encounter was that all were relating well to each other.

People demonstrated very different impacts of these past events in their present-day lives. Quite a number of interlocutors showed a particular ‘resilience’ and an amazing talent for life, as Scheper-Hughes (2008) would call it; others showed how their lives were still very much affected by past events, such as the clan members and the woman targeted by the SLPA mentioned above and someone such as Hamid, whose narrative is provided below. Here it is important to note that in the literature on trauma, a dose–effect relationship has been established between the experience of traumatic events and the prevalence of psychological morbidity—in particular, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Neuner et al. 2004). The aim of the present research, however, was not to measure mental disorder related to the high incidence of people’s interaction with what can be described as ‘traumatic’ events over the past decades, but to apply a more holistic perspective on the outcomes of such experiences, beyond the individual and psychological realm.<sup>158</sup> From an anthropological and historical perspective, I aim to assess the impact of these past events on the present through the way people present them in their narratives today. One important finding that emerges from such a perspective is that people draw attention to the continuity in hardship they experience. Many narratives about their experiences in the past fluently transformed into painful analyses of their present-day conditions. In the remaining part of this chapter, I assess this dynamic and aim to explain it. The case of Hamid below shows a sequence of encounters with armed conflict and their effects on the life of a man and his family currently residing on the fringes of Yumbe town. Hamid had rather different experiences from those of Faridah, yet he too has had multiple experiences with conflict in Yumbe. His experiences differ from those of Faridah for a variety of reasons. While Faridah was a potential target for revenge atrocities because of her light skin colour, Hamid was treated as a suspect by the Ugandan army because his uncle was with the rebels. Hamid draws more attention to the loss of children, and gender is also a factor in his and Faridah’s different experiences. Following the earlier narrative of Faridah, then, we turn now to the narrative of Hamid, which shows how past and present hardship come together—the main theme for the remainder of this chapter.

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#### HAMID: TREATED AS A SUSPECT

Hamid’s narrative of his experiences of conflict went as follows: ‘During the insurgencies, I lost my education. I only managed to reach up to Senior 3.’ Hamid here indicates that the overthrow of the Amin regime and subsequent liberation war and displacement caused

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<sup>158</sup> This choice is related to my own disciplinary background in history and anthropology, but also to the fact that trauma-focused research in conflict-affected populations often applies a very narrow, individual-focused, medical–psychological approach that does not shed light on people’s everyday experiences in the aftermath of conflict. Neither do such approaches focus much on the meaning people give to their experiences or the way they influence their social relations in conflicts everyday aftermath. Besides that, political aspects of factors that allow difficult circumstances to persist after conflict, for example, often remain out of the picture in such research (see for example Both & Reis 2014). This is why I argue for a more holistic approach, one that unfolds in people’s narratives and cultural perspectives on the impact of past events and that pays attention to the meaning they attribute to these events (See Jackson 2002; Zarowsky 2004; Nordanger 2007).

him to drop out of school. 'I married too young. I married in Sudan [while in exile] when I was 20 and my wife was 15.' When explaining how many children he and his wife had, he said:

I had six children. I lost three to sickness, because the time we came home [from exile in Sudan in the late 1980s] the problems affected all of us: there was no medication, no food. Today, the drugs for malaria and other simple diseases are common, but in those days it was not the case.

He continued:

In 1996, I had a lot of problems. I was working for [Sudanese] refugees with Oxfam when the West Nile Bank Front came and looted us. I was the first person to be held under gunpoint at Bidibidi.<sup>159</sup> It was 5 AM in the morning. I had just walked to the latrine, so they [the rebels] stopped me. Amongst the rebels I saw my uncle was amongst them. If he had not been there, the rebels would have shot me.

I was the storekeeper; I had all the keys [that the rebels wanted for looting] in my hand. I was seriously beaten on my back and have pain up to today. After me they went on to beat people and to fight and loot everyone. Then [after the attack] the Oxfam staff had to leave and the refugees were relocated to another site, near Arua. We [the staff] were also relocated. When I came back to Romogi (sub-county of Yumbe District), some government soldiers tended to hold me under gunpoint saying that I was a rebel fighter. They thought I was a collaborator because the road of the rebels passed through my home.

I was a civilian, I told them; I did not have a gun. They took me up to Arua,<sup>160</sup> until the LCs [local councillors from his home area] followed me, telling them that I was captured for nothing.<sup>161</sup> Then I even stayed in Arua for some time, to feel secure. Then the Bamuze War [the UNRF II rebellion, referred to after the name of the group's leader, Ali Bamuze] started from 1998 up to 2000. You could not stay here. Everyone was looking for a place to sleep [hiding in the bush or in towns]. I could stay with you during the day but I would not tell you where I would sleep [out of fear that some people in the community might be 'rebels at night']. [It was like this] until AROPIC<sup>162</sup> started negotiating the peace agreement.

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<sup>159</sup> Bidibidi is the name of a place on a hill on which the Oxfam compound was built. It was a huge and impressive structure and looked out over the large refugee settlement of Ikafe, where the aim was to allow Sudanese refugees to become self-reliant by giving them plots to cultivate (Payne 1998). Yet this large settlement soon faced enormous insecurities due to the attacks of the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF), a rebel group with an alleged recruitment base in the neighbouring district Koboko. Many shared the assumption that behind these attacks there was contestation over where the Sudanese refugees should be hosted. People in Koboko District accommodated the early influx of self-settling refugees from Sudan, but they were later transferred to Yumbe District because of their increasing number, political tension between Uganda and the government of Sudan, and safety problems in Koboko (ibid. 7). This seems to have unsettled the WNBF-Koboko rebels, for the assumption was that having refugee-hosting programs in their district would help develop the local infrastructure and economy. Now this opportunity was suddenly displaced to Yumbe District. This is one of the reasons why the Oxfam compound was a very important target in Yumbe District for the WNBF rebels (interviews, JB; Payne 1998; RLP 2004). (One generally well-informed youth interlocutor suggested in 2013, however, that it was the Ugandan government that was behind this attack. No other references to such a theory have been found.)

<sup>160</sup> Arua is the regional capital and largest town in West Nile.

<sup>161</sup> By this, Hamid meant that they testified that he was innocent.

<sup>162</sup> The Aringa Obongi Peace Initiative.

Hamid's most serious problems when I got to know him were the fact that he suffered from serious diabetes, he had difficulties in accessing good medication, and his often deteriorated health prevented him from working. This latter problem made it difficult for him to keep his daughters in school, something he considered very important. This was based on his own experience: with his Senior 3 level only, he had in the past been able to become a storekeeper for an NGO, which was perceived locally as a very good position. Nowadays, he spent his time writing letters and project proposals for many people in the community, which earned him some money. His English (used in these proposals) was very poor, but being one among only a few of his generation who had gone to secondary school, his education had ensured him access to work other than farming (e.g. writing), which now, with his diabetes, offered a very necessary source of income. In 2013, however, when I met him again, he was too weak to bike to town and sit on his 'veranda office', which caused him to lose his income. He had a very difficult time sustaining his family.

Hamid's final sentence during an interview about the past suddenly moved to the present: 'We are now the poorest district. The economy [...] the harvests [...] they are all down.' He emphasized a feeling of enduring suffering that many people in Yumbe expressed when asked about their past experiences. They would in one sentence combine the difficulties of war with, for example, the present uncertainties and concerns about drought and failing harvests in the middle of 2011, and with their concerns about poverty and inflation. In other people's narratives, too, a cut-off between past and present hardships was not always obvious: direct lines were drawn. Much of this coincided with their age and diminishing physical health and strength, as well as with their very understandable concerns about the lack of 'development' and the persistent deep poverty in their environment, as we shall see below.

## **IN THE AFTERMATH OF CONFLICT: EXPERIENCING A SENSE OF CONTINUITY**

The first things that people in Yumbe expressed with regard to the years of war that were finally over were that they were now able to sleep in their homes at night (no longer needing to sleep in their fields, in mango trees, or in the bush for fear of rebels or government soldiers), that they were no longer scared when a stranger entered their compound, and that they greeted the former rebels who came back home when they saw them and even shared meals with them.<sup>163</sup> Adults, in particular, often expressed the feeling that people were tired of war and that therefore conflict was unlikely to break out again. Furthermore, the elders had cursed any return to rebellion upon the signing of the peace agreement in 2002,<sup>164</sup> and since the past ten years had been relatively peaceful, all

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<sup>163</sup> This act of greeting and sharing food was given as the ultimate proof of reconciliation, according to local customs.

<sup>164</sup> 'Indeed, the elders not only supported the process of peaceful resolution, but also made it an imperative, exerting pressure on the combatants by threatening them with a curse if they went against peaceful negotiation.

seemed positive. Yet how does a community emerge out of war? Or who emerges out of war and who does not? Which of the above-narrated experiences of violence and hardship remain influential today, and how do they shape people's experiences of the present? Some of the important observed dynamics are analysed below; however, bearing in mind the broad range of experiences of violence and hardship over time, these observations are unavoidably incomplete.

In the more than ten years since the peace agreement of 2002 marking the end of a long era of conflict, many people in Yumbe displayed great strength in overcoming their experiences of violence and appeared to be focused on present-day life and survival. Despite their strength, however, the people I met—especially those ageing (see above) and those living in remote rural areas that had often experienced more intense and frequent episodes of conflict than other parts of the district (because less protected by army barracks, for example)—often communicated a sense of experiencing continued hardship. People frequently drew direct lines between the violence of the past and experiences of suffering in the present, violence which still tended to disrupt their sense of well-being so many years later. The following four sections draw attention to the most important themes that emerged from analysing how this sense of continuity was explained in people's narratives. The sections relate to the domains of (a) persistent poverty, (b) unrelenting health problems, and (c) a continuous feeling of political neglect in the aftermath of conflict in Yumbe. Finally, (d) the failure of 'closure' due to divisive post-peace agreement policies will be discussed.

### *Persistent poverty revives painful memories of the past*

The loss of houses, livestock, and money or other properties to the various rebel groups,<sup>165</sup> often experienced multiple times, meant that many people continued to lament their losses and experience poverty in Yumbe in the present. People first began losing their properties when they crossed into Sudan and Congo (then Zaire) as refugees.<sup>166</sup> Everything they had had to leave behind in Yumbe had been either looted or destroyed. After the return from exile and the great struggle to rebuild, there had then followed the various rebel incursions, which had involved further looting and had again displaced people, sometimes more than once. Young people often reported that the cumulative experiences of loss and violence had meant that their parents had 'lost morale': they had given up hope that they would ever be able to rebuild their lives with their own strength. An adult man in Kei sub-county, for example, suggested: 'Whenever we try to regain [...], war always keeps on destroying' (FGD, 22 September 2011). He was referring to the feeling of senselessness that some felt about trying to rebuild their lives

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[...] Or as one ex-combatant said, "The elders said 'no gun shoots the UNRF II, no gun shoots the UPDF. If you fire, the ammunition will turn back on you'" (RLP 2004: 22).

<sup>165</sup> According to various sources, on some occasions the robbers were actually just roaming thugs pretending either to be rebels or members of split rebel factions.

<sup>166</sup> Some people had acquired a lot of wealth during Amin's regime, including multiple cars, which were lost to looters. Other items were sold to buy food in exile. For references, see Chapter 2.

and the struggle they faced to reach a state of material well-being. Was he also, however, referring to a dynamic that was perceived as still ongoing? To the fear of a potential return of war?

There was a generally shared sense among people of being unable to recover their livelihoods to the level they had achieved before the outbreak of war, and many experienced a deep sense of deprivation because of this. As one old man in Yumbe town put it: 'In houses, what you see, you cannot believe that it is eatable by our own people. What is supposed to be eaten is terrible, it will cause tears' (Local leader, FDG, 15 March 2011). People who are struggling to bring food to the table naturally also have a very hard time providing additional basic needs (such as paraffin, sugar, salt, and soap) for their families, paying for medical care, and sending their large number of children to school. On many occasions, women stated it was particularly the days when their children were sent home from school because they were unable to pay school fees<sup>167</sup> that made them recall the past very strongly: 'When my child is sent back from school, I always feel terribly tortured and it makes me remember all that has happened' (Margaret, FGD, 14 September 2011). They reported feeling very sad at such particular moments about the lack of resources and/or physical strength (required for farming in this predominantly agricultural society; see below) that they had lost during many years of conflict. The present-day confrontation with poverty, and in particular the inability to educate their children, women reported, threw them back in time and made them recall their painful past experiences. Women referred to these episodes as particularly introspective and sad moments, though also ones that produced feelings of anger.<sup>168</sup>

Men too referred to the inability to educate their children as triggering thoughts about their distressing past. In addition, situations in which the family faced problems that would normally have been resolved by the transfer or slaughtering of cattle, which they recalled they *used to have* and had still not been able to regain, would make them think of the past. In other words, the confrontation with present-day poverty, especially with regard to the cost of education and of bringing peace between families and clans through ceremonies that required livestock, was associated with painful moments of recalling the past. Young people sometimes reported observing these moments as shaping their parents' behaviour, when their parents appeared miserable or depressed. Parents' inability to educate their children (which they wanted in order to give them better prospects; see Nordanger 2007: 76-77) and the failure to appease ancestors, relatives, or other clans represented for many a deep loss of control over their prospects for the future and their ability to maintain peace and invest in social relationships (see Middleton 1965).

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<sup>167</sup> It often occurred that children would start attending school in a new term or new school year, but were sent home after a month if parents failed to pay their school fees.

<sup>168</sup> Dickson-Gómez finds a similar dynamic in El Salvador. She writes about a mother who, in front of her children, refers to the poverty in her childhood and the poverty experienced during war on the day she loses her job. The author argues: 'Although current economic difficulties are the most proximal cause of the mother's *nervios* in this example, economic problems bring back memories of the war for her' (2002: 429). But the relationship between poverty and the aftermath of war was different here than in Yumbe: 'The war was the sacrifice that she and others made so that their children could live a little better. Unlike many *campesinos* in the community, the woman did not seem willing to concede that the war had, by and large, not accomplished its economic goals' (*ibid.*).

Young people themselves, in the present, often mentioned with regret having lost a parent or uncle<sup>169</sup> in the war, who would have been able to support them in school due to his wealth or social standing. Their lack of prospects today (in terms of limited access to education as well as frequent early marriages, among others reasons because it was too expensive for parents to support the needs of girls) was expressed in reference to the experience of conflict in the past and how it had materially damaged their extended families/clans.

Equally distressing for poor households was the experience of hunger and drought, which were observed as drawing people back in time. This was particularly noticeable in 2011, when during the first rainy season in Yumbe it had hardly rained, causing the crops to spoil, and people were anxiously waiting for the second rainy season, which was failing to begin. To make things worse, the droughts coincided with the fact that civil servant salaries had been unpaid for months and there was high inflation after the 2011 elections.<sup>170</sup> This all meant that present-day environmental conditions revived thoughts about the days in exile or immediately after the return from exile, in which there was hardly any food and harvests sometimes failed. Seeds (provided by humanitarian organizations at that time) were often needed for immediate consumption and could not be preserved for planting (field notes, JB).

Concluding on this theme, one could argue that the persistent present-day conditions of poverty and hardship in Yumbe, by drawing people's thoughts back to the past in ways described above, meant that many continued to experience a sense of sustained hardship and faced an inability to escape painful memories. Recalling one's past losses, material and otherwise, because provoked by present-day hardships and poverty, was not necessarily a constant factor ten years after the last armed conflict had ended. Rather, recall was related to specific confrontational moments (a child being sent home from school, which could happen at the start of every new term) or specific periods (for example, of extended drought after the dry season, or during the steep inflation after the 2011 elections). Despite these not being everyday experiences, however, such moments and periods did frequently recur and persist in the context of living in the impoverished district.

### *Enduring health problems in the aftermath of conflict*

Just like the present-day experience of poverty, contemporary bodily experiences in particular also made people recall and remember previous times: '... there is chronic pain, because of severe torture' (Male community member, Midigo, Migo Parish, 12 August 2011). On such occasions, when people spoke of pain, men and women often referred to having had their 'backs beaten' by rebel or government forces. Men were also sometimes forced by the rebels to carry heavy loads of looted goods quickly into the bush before

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<sup>169</sup> In fact, an uncle would also be called 'parent' in most contexts.

<sup>170</sup> Substantial amounts of money had been handed out by the governing party before elections, and thereafter prices of basic food items such as sugar and cassava more than doubled.

being released, causing physical complaints that persisted up to the present. Women occasionally referred to enduring pain due to beatings and rape. Rape has been underreported in the few documents available about the conflicts in West Nile,<sup>171</sup> but was frequently mentioned during this research.<sup>172</sup> Raped women reported spontaneous miscarriages and other reproductive problems more than 15 years after an assault, and often, after we asked them specifically, reported they had not been to hospital despite their continuing reproductive health problems.<sup>173</sup> Others shared that they had become HIV positive. Rape was reported as occurring at the hands of both rebels and government soldiers; at other times, women reported that it was difficult to determine who was who because the same type of uniform was worn by both sides. Husbands, when they were not killed, sometimes joined the rebels after their wives had been raped or other relatives were mistreated (in order to enable them to take revenge), while other spouses joined the UPDF, convinced about the need to fight against the rebels.

Landmines, bullets, and the occasional use of a gunship or helicopter by the government forces also left people living with disabilities to this day. One man miraculously survived a cut through the throat, while his companion died in the same murder attempt. Occasionally, people had their ears cut off. In all such cases of disability, aside from the psychological trauma experienced, in an agricultural society this greatly affected people's ability to continue farming and thus to maintain a certain level of livelihood security (Uganda Human Rights Commission & United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights 2011; Hollander & Gill 2014). As we have seen above, the poverty that followed and which remains the reality for many today often provoked people to recall violent events. People that had been personally attacked and maimed by rebels who had later received amnesty (including amnesty packages) and been reintegrated into the community often reported experiencing severe 'psychological torture' on a daily basis upon seeing them. Furthermore, others were not only reminded of the past due to the fact of living with disabled people among them, but also mentioned that deaths that occurred in the absence of proper healthcare provision made people in the community recall the past:

Actually, during the war, very many people died; we experienced a lot of death! And right now, when somebody dies, this experience brings back immediately to our minds that 'I think this one has been killed by using a gun.' So sometimes very many women, you know, they get shocked. (Woman in a remote part of Kei, 22 September 2011)<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Reference to the occurrence of rape during the last rebellions does not occur in the Refugee Law Project's (RLP) working paper 12 (2004) or in Mischnick (2009); but more recently, attention was paid to this topic by Bogner & Rosenthal (2014).

<sup>172</sup> Male rape, also often underreported, was never referred to and we do not know if it occurred.

<sup>173</sup> In Midigo, a woman reported the rape of her 10-year-old daughter, who was still suffering from complications ten years later. The mother too felt 'tortured' by having been unable to prevent the attack. More cases of rape committed on girls below age 18 were occasionally reported.

<sup>174</sup> See Allen and Reid (2014: 10) on how sudden death in the immediate aftermath of 'refuge from refuge' in Sudan had led to violent witch hunts in Yumbe's neighbouring district, Moyo. For Yumbe, such data concerning the 1980s does not exist. But some reference was once made during a life history interview to a period in which a group of young men was deeply involved in dealing with (i.e. killing) witches in the community. Witchcraft

The two research assistants present on this occasion explained that what women referred to as 'shock' should be understood as suffering from *trauma*, a term that the assistants had become acquainted with in their professional and/or private lives.<sup>175</sup> Other reference was made to women suffering from *heart disease* or *ulcers* as an effect of memories of the past. Margaret, who said above that she felt terribly tortured by her memories when her child was sent back from school, went on to say: 'Most of the women, because of over-thinking, have developed [an] ulcer. We call it ulcer of the heart.' Another woman made a similar remark:

We had a plan to at least ensure that our children would be educated, that they go for higher learning institutions. But when the insurgency came, all our properties were looted. It even stopped our children from going for further studies. This has left us with heart disease which we call ulcer ... which may not be named ... may not be diagnosed by the medical workers, but we normally say ulcer. (Woman, Migo community, 12 October 2011)

One research assistant then explained, after consulting the focus group participants about this remark, that it was indeed especially women who suffered from shock and/or ulcers, as Margaret had also suggested.

Through their somatic experiences, people thus drew clear connections between the past and the present. While certain conditions of ill health could have been addressed if appropriate health care had been provided, local people often lacked access to the right care and many of those who might have been in a position to change this situation (NGO employees and local policy and law makers in Yumbe town and the regional capital Arua) were unaware of such specific health needs (such as those pertaining to complications after rape, and disabilities due to mines and ammunition used during the conflict). The vastness of the district territory and the limited number of easily accessible roads increased this knowledge gap. Furthermore, there was the fact that many people working for the local government in Yumbe, those guiding government programmes, and NGOs when they rolled out initiatives in the district were simply unaware of many of the facts of what had happened, when and where, over the past decades. Many local government staff members had spent the 1990s studying elsewhere while two destructive rebellions were taking place in Yumbe. They had now returned to Yumbe in order to contribute to the development of their home area. It was indeed not uncommon to speak to people in the district headquarters who were unaware of the fact that children had been abducted in the district and used as 'child soldiers', or that landmines had been used in specific areas, or that rape had also been prevalent. Remoteness and a lack of documentation thus made it difficult for people at the margins of an already marginal district to access

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accusations and occasional witch hunts still occur in Yumbe, though I am unable to reflect on the developments and changes that accusations of witchcraft and witch hunts have undergone over time (for further information, see Allen 1991a & b; Allen 1997; Allen & Storm 2012; Allen & Reid 2014).

<sup>175</sup> One of the assistants was a psycho-social counsellor, the other a survivor of torture by the SPLA and WNBf.

appropriate medical care so many years after the peace agreement,<sup>176</sup> and in many ways they felt neglected for years—as the following section shows.

*Persistently neglected areas: Remoteness and prevailing suspicion*

The elderly woman quoted below draws attention to a feeling of continued sense of displacement, not only mentally but also physically:

It appears as if we have escaped war and have not reached our place of settlement .... It appears as if we are still in the bush where we were staying [hiding/taking refuge] before. (Elderly woman, FGD, 15 March 2011, Yumbe Town Council)

Not having reached *our place of settlement* refers to the difficult living conditions that the elderly people attending this meeting were experiencing in present-day Yumbe. The woman compared their living conditions to those experienced in the past as a refugee in the bush: living without good housing, every day searching to scratch together something to eat, and the fact that even simple medical ailments were leading to death. Many other people shared this feeling, especially those living on the fringes of the district, in areas that were very bushy and served by very badly maintained access roads. People from areas such as these were still blamed by the government, according to some of their inhabitants, and therefore purposely neglected:

Us, who are just here in the bush, we don't look like human beings to the government. They see us like animals. [...] The roads you have seen here ... sometimes, eeh, this money we look for, through thick and thin, sometimes we collect them and begin maintaining these roads ourselves. [...] This road you have seen here goes *deep* into the Sudan. And it is a bad road, because people who are bad use this road from Sudan, from anywhere they use this road. [...] this place is actually the place where very many people who are bad normally pass. (Man, FGD Kei, 22 September 2011)

The angry male interlocutor above suggested that the road was left unrenovated by the government because it had always been used in the past by insurgents who were hiding out in Sudan to enter Uganda. Repairing the road, with its crosscutting streams, rocks, and rough soil, was, according to the speaker, not likely to be performed by the government, because to leave it badly accessible meant that no one (i.e. no new rebel groups) could easily use it to cross over the border. But this also meant that the people living along this road felt vulnerable and not cared about. People here had been displaced in the 1990s when the area had been bombed by the Ugandan government in order to chase away the WNBFB rebels who were hiding and attacking in these areas, and the locals' houses and livestock had been destroyed. They still felt neglected to this day, so far away from the

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<sup>176</sup> This is not to suggest that these people needed only medical health care in order to 'recover' from war. Emotional, economic, and political scars were equally present and often interrelated (see Hollander & Gill 2014; also the next section of this chapter).

seat of the district government in a place where hardly anyone who represented the government ever came, a situation worsened by the very bad condition of the roads.

In another sub-county of Yumbe District, the above-mentioned accusation of a purposeful marginalization in the form of continuing neglect by the government returned:

Since the beginning of the war until it ended, up to now, there is nothing that makes us feel that we have been supported in our area here. [...] The two forces that fought in this place actually brought a lot of issues. One, some people were killed from this community. Others, their legs were amputated; then, others [...] other women were raped. And then our animals were eaten; our properties in the house were all looted. Even some [...] actually they brought HIV and AIDS. Because after raping women, then later on they were tested positive, which means these people brought a lot of problems to the community. The government has actually seen this parish as a frontline.<sup>177</sup> The government is saying, when things [development projects, for example] are coming this way, they will say No, let these things not come to X. Because there are still some issues that are supposed to be handled [...].

At this point, my research assistant whispered an explanation: 'Maybe they [the government] suspect these people as collaborators.' The speaker then clarified his point after I posed more questions about why local people were feeling that they still faced problematic issues with the government:

Since this was a frontline area, the government is not satisfied because of this place. Things like ammunitions, things like bombs, up to now, when you get to the bush, you can still find them. But if the community members find these things and take these things to the headquarters in Yumbe [in order to hand them in], there they will say, 'Still people have maybe hidden guns [...]. So because of this, they should not be supported.' (Male community member, FGD 23 November 2011)

The above interlocutor thus related how local people had the feeling that they were still considered suspects by the government and local government. Indeed, another community member had earlier commented:

The government troops even actually believed that the whole community within this area were collaborators [with the rebels], yet they were not. LCs [local councillors]<sup>178</sup> were even targeted [...] [they were threatened by the rebels], and if an LC had gone to explain the fact [to the local government officials or army], he would still be looked at as a collaborator, that he was hiding the other [...] the other group, the other people who were in the rebellion and so on [...]. (Male community member, FGD 23 November 2011)

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<sup>177</sup> Rebels would hide out in the bushy area nearby and prey on the people who got caught in the heavy fighting between the rebels and the army that tried to attack the rebels and their collaborators.

<sup>178</sup> Representatives of the government at the various local levels.

On other occasions, it became clear that it was of great concern to local communities that some of their members continued to be treated as suspect, being harassed by police and security people every now and then.<sup>179</sup>

From the above, we can conclude that some of the remote regions that suffered most during the period of rebellion—because they were close to a road from Sudan or lay near to bushy areas where rebels would hide out and from which they would attack and retreat, provoking revenge from the army in the area—were still today very much confronted with the past, because ‘development’ had not come their way.<sup>180</sup> Wells, clinics, and schools were sparse in these vast regions, and people felt intentionally neglected by the government, whom they thought still regarded them with suspicion. They suggested that as a consequence, development projects they applied for were blocked by the district centre from entering these territories. The very conditions of life in these regions, with their polluted water sources, bad roads, and limited access to health care, made people recall the past, as we saw earlier, when people fell sick and died in their midst because of the lack of easy access to a hospital (due to bad roads and long distances to health centres). Furthermore, they did not feel protected at the border. Therefore, at Yumbe’s margins, many people continued to feel they were treated as suspects and perceived a lack of care by the government in the aftermath of the peace agreement. They really did live at the margins of an already very marginal region. NGOs coming to the region tended to reach these remote areas rarely,<sup>181</sup> and the feeling of neglect was increased when people compared their region with the development initiatives they saw emerging elsewhere in the district and in other parts of Uganda.

### *Divisive post–peace agreement policies*

Deep grievances were expressed by those who had fallen victim to the former rebels. They predominantly emphasized that what they considered ‘so painful’ was the fact that the rebels had received financial and material compensation<sup>182</sup> and support to resettle, while they had been left out and forgotten. Again, as in the cases of the remote areas noted above, a sense of feeling intentionally neglected emerges here as it was experienced by people who had suffered violence during the various incursions. Increasingly, these people were expressing the need for ‘compensation’ in their interactions with NGOs and researchers (see also RLP 2007; JRP 2013; Bogner & Rosenthal

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<sup>179</sup> An interview held with one of the elders in Yumbe in 2010 revealed that similar dynamics (of continual following up and harassment by intelligence people) pushed Bamuze and others into exile in the late 1980s, where they later formed a new rebellion.

<sup>180</sup> I was made aware of these localities by a key interlocutor, who had a clear idea about the areas that had been ‘most affected’ by the various insurgencies in the past. We visited three of the four remote locations he indicated together.

<sup>181</sup> Due to financial constraints, these NGOs also had to limit their regions of intervention.

<sup>182</sup> This compensation took the form of materials to go home and restart their lives. Ultimately, under the amnesty package, UGX 4.2 billion were divided among the former rebels as part of the peace agreement and later, for example, in the form of access to development projects under NUSAF (the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, a government organization with funding from the World Bank).

2014). Local people felt abandoned and neglected by the government, while those whom they knew to have engaged in atrocities had been supported (RLP 2007: 3). More than ten years after the peace agreement, there is a strong discourse on the need for compensation among those who identify themselves as ‘victims’, and it is getting louder. Recently, the government undertook an appeasement move towards those people who consider themselves ‘victims’: during my stay, the new Resident District Commissioner (RDC)<sup>183</sup> was increasingly inquiring about the past and trying to assess the sentiments and internal grievances in Yumbe that needed to be addressed (in a political manner) in order for things not to escalate. This particular RDC was replaced in 2013 however, and his activities thereafter seemed to come to a halt.

While the strong call for compensation was directly related to the notion that the ‘government has been rewarding the rebels’ by paying them and that the ‘victims were forgotten’, it should also be understood with regard to the poverty people felt they were still caught up in so many years after peace had been signed, and to the fact that these living conditions made them re-experience the past during periods of explicit hardship in the present. It is understandable that people still sought compensation, not only to address an injustice committed by the Ugandan government in their eyes (e.g. of ‘paying the rebels for atrocities committed’), but also because an improvement in their livelihood through financial or material compensation would enable them to alleviate the most immediate symptoms of poverty and probably reduce the level of recall of a painful past.

It is in this light, I believe, that we should understand the notion of ‘rubbing off the memory’ / ‘rubbing of their faces’, an expression people used when referring to this topic. When this expression was used, it was accompanied by a washing movement over the face from above downwards, signifying the need to clean and wipe away the memory, as well as the belief that something like this was possible, if only the right measures would be taken. It was a reference to what was needed in order to ‘forget’ the pains of the past and allow reconciliation with the ex-combatants in the community, as well as with the government. This idea of ‘paying’ resonates with older practices of reconciliation—for example, after a clan member had been killed by someone from another clan.

So far, these demands for compensation have not been addressed. However, I did notice a renewed interest in the theme among NGOs in the West Nile region. After much work had been done in the Acholi and Lango regions in the aftermath of the LRA conflict there, many NGOs realized there were more regions that are recovering from war and which should be included in the formulation of transitional justice policies in Uganda. Yet it is hard to predict the direction of this renewed interest in the region. Will it ignite a spark of unrest and social-political discontent by opening festering wounds in the district? Or will it be able to assist people in transforming their perspectives on justice and allow them to demand more inclusive citizenship? Do the contacts with these NGOs raise unmanageably high hopes of finally accessing compensation<sup>184</sup> (as an unexpected

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<sup>183</sup> The RDC is the highest representative of the government in any district. It is a position that is often shuffled, which means that the particular RDC to which I refer here had been placed in Yumbe for only about two years.

<sup>184</sup> People’s continual references to compensation, based on older traditions and reinforced by the example of the ex-rebels who had been compensated by the Ugandan government, does not match completely with the wider notion of ‘reparations’ that transitional justice organizations promote for war-affected populations (see

outcome of the interactions and collaborations of different parties with different perspectives; see Tsing 2004)? Will people feel excluded again and become more and more angry as a result of externally imposed ideas of reconciliation, while their real self-defined agendas for compensation (as a quick fix for their most severe problems) remain pending?

Many of these questions are related to the popular but increasingly questioned process of transitional justice and how it is taking shape in Uganda (see for example Baines 2010; Branch 2011; Bogner & Neubert 2013) and other countries (Nagy 2008; Macdonald 2015). Only time will reveal its impact. But it remains to be seen whether these NGOs will ultimately contribute to a heightened sense of disappointment and feeling neglected, or whether they can make a positive contribution to the social fabric into which they have entered in the long-term aftermath of conflict. One of the immediate challenges facing them is the lack of documentation and the fragmentation of knowledge about what happened when and where in the vast district and broader region. Furthermore, and related to this, the rationales of NGOs for selecting their fields of intervention are at times somewhat random. They tend to start operating in areas where local government officials direct them and hardly ever do they reach the more remote spaces where suffering was particularly acute during the various rebellions.

## DISCUSSION

[...] although people had suffered humiliation, bereavement, mutilation, and grievous loss, few spoke of unhinged minds, broken spirits, or troubled souls. Rather, suffering was seen as something shared, and healing was sought not through therapy but in things. Not through words, but deeds. Fees to send children to school. Cement and roofing iron to rebuild houses. Grain. Micro-credit. Food. Medicines. It may well be that a diagnostic label like post-traumatic stress disorder is empirically justified, but it is imperative that we acknowledge that psychic wounds and national reconciliation are, for many Sierra Leoneans, not the burning issue. Rather it is the material means that are needed to sustain life, and ensure a future for one's children. (Jackson 2002: 71-72)

What destroys us [...] is not loss in itself, but the lack of what one needs to go on. (ibid. 37)

Following mental health models, the cumulative experiences of violence suffered by my interlocutors could be reason to suspect high levels of PTSD following the dose–effect hypothesis (Karakuna et al. 2004). In such models, exposure to multiple traumatic events explains the prevalence of high psychological morbidity in a population (Neuner et al. 2004). Yet, in this chapter, I have approached the effects of decades of conflict and people's recurring experiences of violence from a broader, more holistic perspective. People speak of the effects of conflict in meaningful terms, with regard to their

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Macdonald 2015). In other words, people in Yumbe expect financial and material compensation, whereas reparations in international law also include, for example, rehabilitation (including access to legal services) and guarantees of non-repetition (Uganda Human Rights Commission 2011: 13).

experience of the everyday environments that they engage in in the present. Physical complaints and the prevalence of poverty are described as being disempowering in and of themselves, while also drawing people back to remembering the painful experiences of the past; but their interpretation of their lives does not stop there: people also refer to a persistent underdevelopment. The latter is based on an accusation of being purposefully neglected, of injustice (comparing the 'royal' payment of ex-combatants with the lack of any compensation for the victims), and summarizes the painfulness of their persistent marginal existence in a rapidly modernizing country (and even district). It draws attention to the discrimination of crisis, the way it affects some more than others in the same context (Whyte 2008), and how politics often produces new social inequalities and related grievances in the aftermath of conflict. The accusations of neglect are directed towards the Ugandan government, the Amnesty Commission, and local government actors. Local and international NGOs, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), and researchers, who have been in contact with these people but have disappointed their expectations, are still igniting the last remnants of hope for justice that many of these people have while time continues to pass.

The mental health literature indeed points to the fact that adversity faced in the aftermath of conflict has a significant impact in terms of determining mental health outcomes, beyond the experiences of conflict itself (Fernando et al. 2010; Miller & Rasmussen 2010). In this chapter, I have traced how this works out in a specific locality, through local processes and dynamics. In Yumbe, persistent poverty and related bodily (ill health) experiences in Yumbe in particular feed and perpetuate the sense of continuity with regard to the past in my interlocutors' narratives. Ultimately, these experiences on the fringes of the district, after an official ten years of peace, also generate a feeling of political neglect and disconnectedness.

The conditions in which they live make these people recall their traumatic past experiences when specific difficult moments trigger invasive memories of the past, which in turn causes emotional disturbance. Young people are witness to these processes taking place in their parents, which they at times refer to as debilitating their parents. Rather than slowly closing this period of enduring hardship, the style of governance in Yumbe and Uganda, as well as the practices of NGOs and sometimes CBOs, can be seen as enlarging the gap—if only because they show that life can be different—and furthering the sense of estrangement among the elderly and poor peasants living in remote Yumbe, who do not understand the logic of these organizations' practices and the aims of their visits.

The most unfortunate development was the fact that the survivors of violence were not considered during the well-negotiated peace agreement of 2002, and their voices were silenced in its aftermath (Bogner & Rosenthal 2014). The significant pay-outs later given to ex-combatants provoked a sense of injustice. The 'wrongdoers' were paid; and people who felt that everything had been taken from them felt forced to forgive the perpetrators,<sup>185</sup> while they themselves were unable to access reasonable compensation for all of the hardships they had suffered. This matter has led to new grievances and

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<sup>185</sup> This is the general feeling in Yumbe. In-depth research also showed that the categories of 'perpetrators' and 'survivors' are not straightforward in Yumbe, as elsewhere (see for example Lubkeman 2008; Dolan 2009; Baines 2010).

divisions in the social fabric, which have been added to the havoc already attributed to both ex-combatants and the government, leading to people feeling angry and disillusioned.<sup>186</sup> It is difficult to imagine how the complex process of transitional justice in Uganda can turn this tide within the lifetimes of many of the interlocutors who were central to this chapter.

## CONCLUSION

The expression ‘it appears as if we are still in the bush’ that forms the title of this chapter refers to several mechanisms at play as analysed and explained by people in the remote corners of Yumbe District vis-à-vis the enduringness of their experience of misery. First, the material conditions of life, as the people tend to live in deep poverty, resemble those of life on the run—that is, when people made make-shift huts in bushy areas in order to escape army and, later, rebel incursions, before they eventually went into exile in the 1980s. In such situations, access to food was extremely limited, as people were away from their farms and had to rely on what they could find around them to eat. Second, the people whose experiences form the core interest of this chapter also report being literally drawn back in time by triggers in their present-day lives. The experience of absence of development, lack of health services, feeling intentionally neglected, and their self-comparison with the better position of former rebels—all these factors repeatedly draw them back towards painful memories. Intricate ways in which the past remains present as a structuring experience were laid bare in this chapter. This structuring particularly affects the generation of ‘parents’ to the youths that are central to this dissertation and has affected their young lives in multiple ways. Children born into such families face a difficult trajectory overcoming these conditions and are likely to be deeply affected by the inheritance of material and morale loss and the related worldviews arising from the many effects of years of conflict.

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<sup>186</sup> Yet their strong wish for compensation, if ever realized, is likely to create serious new tensions within the community, as Macdonald (2015, referring to Miller & Kumar 2007) warns.