

# Ambiguous Void: Experiences of Loss among Families of the Missing Abductees in Northern Uganda

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## Abstract

From 1986 to 2006 northern Uganda experienced a devastating civil war between the rebel group 'Lord's Resistance Army' (LRA) and the Ugandan government. During the war abductions were a harsh reality for a large number of people, who as abductees were forced to act mainly as soldiers with the LRA. While some of the abductees managed to escape, a great many of these people did not, and thus, their families continue to live in uncertainty of their loved ones' destinies; they might be dead or they might be alive and return one day. This article explores how the families of the abductees experience this ambiguous loss. Firstly, we argue that the absence of a missing abductee creates a void in the families that continues to have an impact on them and their everyday life through the presence of absence. Secondly, we argue that the lack of closure regarding the missing abductees creates a chronic state of liminality in the families, which thus becomes what is *normal* and what constitutes the context of the families' lives.

## Introduction

Abductions in large numbers were a devastating part of the civil war between the rebel group 'Lord's Resistance Army' (LRA) and the Ugandan government in northern Uganda, which lasted over twenty years. Between 1986 and 2006 the LRA abducted between 60,000 and 80,000<sup>14</sup> people, mainly children and adolescents, who were forced to become soldiers (Blattman & Annan 2010: 883). Both during and after the war many of the abductees escaped LRA and spent time in reception centres, where reintegration initiatives took place to help them return to their communities (Verma 2012: 444). In 2000 an amnesty act was passed in Uganda, making it possible for abductees to return to their local societies without facing trial for atrocities committed with LRA in the bush (Dolan 2009: 51). The Amnesty Act was received with mixed reactions (Finnström 2008: 92-93, Justice and Reconciliation Project 2012). When people were

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<sup>14</sup> There has been disagreement about the exact numbers of abductions (cf. Branch 2008:12). Therefore this number is only an estimate which is however based on several recent analyses.

abducted, they became *abductees*. When they were referred to as people committing atrocities they were labelled as *rebels*. And when returning home, they were all *returnees* escaping captivity in the bush. One of the reasons for the disagreements concerning the Act is thus the ambiguity surrounding the categorisation of the persons subject to the Act. Critics ask how rebels can avoid trial, while others fail to understand how abductees as victims can be forced to apply for amnesty. During 2012 the Amnesty Act was substantially reduced, but extended. Today fewer abductees return from the bush and reception centres are closing down. During our fieldwork in Gulu in 2012 we visited two of the reception centres still running. Through these visits we gained insight into how these centres were offering shelter, psycho-social support, health checks and education as well as helping returnees searching for their relatives.

However a great number of the abductees have never returned home. Many died in the bush, either of hunger or disease, in battle, or in an escape attempt; others are still living with the LRA (Verma 2012: 443-444). Information on how many have never returned is limited. The only report addressing this issue is based on a survey conducted by the NGO 'Children/Youth as Peacekeepers' (CAP); in 2012 it estimated that 1036 abductees were still missing in Gulu (CAP 2012: 10). The families of the missing continue to live in uncertainty regarding the fate of their loved ones.

Today Gulu Town appears to be a city in growth. The reconciliation processes that started when the civil war came to an end are now being replaced by a focus on progress and the future in general. The Acholi people of the area seem to be once again united by the fact that the majority suffered and experienced horrifying atrocities. The families of the missing abductees are in some ways left out of this recently constructed solidarity, as they are ambiguous victims in relation to their abducted family members who possibly, if they are alive, are affiliated with the LRA. The families think of themselves as victims, but if their social surroundings get to know about their abducted family members, they risk becoming associated with the rebels' immoral actions. Furthermore, the families struggle to move on because they lack knowledge concerning their family members, and are uncertain if they will ever return. Thus, the war continues to affect the lives of many of these families, and they find themselves stuck in the past, while the surrounding society struggles to move forward.

In the aftermath of the war, there has been little focus on the families of the missing abductees, and they have thus become invisible. This article seeks to draw attention to this overlooked field of study, by addressing grief in the void of a missing family member, and discussing the nature of loss among the families of the missing abductees in northern Uganda.

## **Making the Invisible Present: Fieldwork among Families of the Missing**

The ethnography in this article was generated during our fieldwork in Gulu Town and its surroundings from August to December 2012. The ethnographic field was defined by the absence of an abducted family member who continued to be missing and the uncertainty connected to this condition. Thus, the field was based on the significance of absence and uncertainty in the families of these missing persons. Our access to the field was gained through the conference 'Dialogue on Disappearances' in Gulu Town, which took place on 30<sup>th</sup> of August 2012. The conference was held by the NGO 'Justice and Reconciliation Project' (JRP) which, at the time, was one of the only NGOs focusing on the families of the missing abductees through their campaign 'The Right to Know'. Through representatives from JRP, the reception centre GUSCO

and the NGO 'Children/Youth as Peacebuilders' (CAP) we established contact to families with abducted family members who were still missing.

Fourteen families became our informants, and we visited four of them on a regular basis. We did not stay with one family at a time, but visited instead the different families several times a week, spending whole days with each family. Thus, we maintained a continuous contact with all the families during the entire length of our fieldwork. During our family visits it was often the head of the family we followed and talked with. This was partly due to their authoritative position in the family and, maybe more importantly, their close relation to the missing family member. Hence these people became our key informants: Middle-aged Alice and young Geoffrey, both missing a brother; the older Patricia, missing her younger son; and the middle aged couple Christopher and Grace, missing their oldest son. The missing persons were all abducted between 1996 and 2002. The impact of the missing family member on the family seemed to be related to the gender and age of the missing. The majority of the missing family members among the families we met were young men, but the impact on the families differed according to whether the young man was a son or a father. When missing a father, the families were lacking the head of the family and thereby the primary provider, whereby the remaining family were not only emotionally but also practically and economically burdened. In addition ties to extended families could be damaged, if it was the head of the family who was missing. For example, one of our informants, being the wife of a missing husband, told us that his family had abandoned her and refused to help her, which left her economically and socially deprived. The four key families lived in the outskirts of Gulu Town, and made a living by growing and selling crops, letting plots of land and running small one-man businesses.

During our fieldwork we involved ourselves in the daily lives of the families, which meant participating in household chores, daily social interaction, ceremonies like weddings and funerals, and going to church. Through our participation we were ascribed the roles of daughters in the families and thereby earned an intimacy and trust, which allowed us to gain access to sensitive topics. Our role in the families made us aware of the void left by the missing family members and the grief connected therewith, which was rarely articulated, but instead was embedded in the family members' actions and daily life. Therefore we conducted in-depth and life story interviews in order to clarify and elaborate on the assumptions we generated through participant observation. Thus the fieldwork was in some ways an illumination of the invisible, as the void in the families was highly invisible outwardly due to the lack of family members' articulation on the topic both in their families and in public.

A special condition during our fieldwork was the fact that we were two fieldworkers cooperating at all times, which we found to be a great advantage. During participation in the families' lives we were able to cover different aspects, and when conducting interviews we experienced that the interviewer was able to pay full attention to the conversation, while the other ethnographer would be taking notes. Especially the last mentioned condition proved to be very important in our field given that we engaged in a topic that was extremely sensitive for our informants. Our cooperation strengthened our subjective intimacy with our informants in the field, as well as our objective and analytical distance, since we constantly reflected on our continuous findings with each other.

## **The Presence of Absence**

As an ambiguous interrelation between what is there and what is not, absences are cultural,

physical and social phenomena that powerfully influence people's conceptualisations of themselves and the world they live in (Bille *et al.* 2010: 4).

From an outsider's point of view it is difficult, if not impossible, to notice that something is different in the families of the missing abductees compared to other families who have experienced the devastating civil war in northern Uganda. All families in this region have suffered and all have lost loved ones, yet the families of the missing people abducted during the war are still living with an uncertainty about the fate of their family members. The families of the missing abductees did not talk about this condition in public nor very much at home with their families. However, through in-depth interviews, conversations and participation in the families' daily lives we experienced the continuous influence of a missing family member upon the families, and found that the lack of talk was not tantamount to a lack of significance. Thus, while the missing family members were physically absent from the families, they still remained present in different ways.

Some of the families still had physical traces from their missing family members in the form of photographs and clothes. For instance, Nancy, a middle-aged woman missing her second born son, still kept her son's suitcase full of clothes untouched in her home, waiting for her son's return, and she had also kept his photographs. Another example was Grace, a middle-aged woman missing her eldest son, who still had a pair of her son's trousers, which she kept from the rest of the family in a hidden place. Grace told us that once in a while, when she was longing for her son, she would take out and look at his trousers. In a similar manner, Winnie, a woman in her thirties missing her husband, told us that: 'When the clothes [of the missing husband] are with me, I always imagine him'. According to anthropologist Carol Kidron, a person-object interaction can semiotically and sensuously reawaken the past (Kidron 2012: 15). In addition, anthropologist Michael Jackson states that inter-subjectivity also includes material objects, since objects can be charged with subjective meanings and sociality (Jackson 1998: 9). Thus, when Grace and Winnie take out the clothes from their son and husband, it strengthens their imagination of their missing family member. In this way clothes can be seen as a past materialisation that reaches into the present and creates a virtual presence of the missing family members through the women's imagination and remembrance. This enables the women to maintain a connection to their relatives, even though they have not seen them physically for years.

However, it was far from all of the families that interacted with objects from their missing family members; some had lost these personal effects belonging to the missing family member during the war, others just did not want to. A common stance among the families was that it served best to forget about their missing family member and the abduction, since remembering and memorising brought pain and worries:

*We [the family] have been keeping the photos [of the missing brother] for the children, but I don't like to look at them [the photos], because whenever I take a look, it gives me more pain. It gives me a memory of him.*

The statement comes from Alice, a widowed woman missing her brother, but similar wordings were expressed in other families as well:

*The absence of the son from the family causes the family a lot of psychological things, especially from the mother [Grace], she*

*mourns a lot. I think she shouldn't keep thinking of the son. She says, if the son were there, he would do this and this. I think she should forget. (Christopher, Grace's husband)*

*Praise God for my sister if she was to be here (...) Sometimes we would get time, and we would talk and chat. And that is what makes me sometimes to have so much pain, when someone talks about my sister. And the pain makes tears falling down my face. (...) Always my brothers, they tell me not to be overthinking of my sister now. (Beatrice, a widowed woman in her early thirties, missing her sister)*

Their statements further stress the prevailing urge to forget among the missing abductees' family members, incited by both themselves and others. A line can be drawn to anthropologist Eleanor Hutchinson's study of orphans in Malawi, where she found that forgetting was a social practice that served to help the orphans recover from their parents' death. She points out that forgetting can be seen as an active choice, and in continuation hereof silence becomes an important and positive non-verbal form of communication between the orphans and their social surroundings, with the purpose of ensuring that the children can overcome the loss of their parents and sustain good relations with their social surroundings (Hutchinson 2011: 22). In a similar manner the attempt to forget by the families of the missing can be seen as a way to cope with *overthinking*, pain and worries that can have a negative impact on each family member, their social relations and maintenance of their daily life.

However the statements by Alice, Christopher and Beatrice also reveal that forgetting was not fully possible, since talk, pictures and objects from time to time would reawake memories. This was applicable for missing abductees' family members whether or not they were actively seeking to maintain a connection to their missing relative. As articulated by Atim Betty—a woman whose husband's brother was abducted—the uncertainty surrounding the fate of the abductees also made it difficult to forget:

*(...) So many people were abducted and many people have not come back (...) You know, even if it is you, if someone dear to you is abducted and taken into captivity and you got no clear information whether the person is dead or not dead, you cannot forget. Because you are thinking one day, one time, the person will come back. But if you hear that the person is dead, then you can try to forget.*

As Atim Betty expresses, forgetting is only possible when uncertainty is replaced by knowledge of their family member's fate. A strategy to gain knowledge among the families was to listen to the radio, where news about returnees was announced. When hearing about returnees, the families often turned to the reception centres looking for information on their missing relatives, as described by Alice, sister of an abductee:

*The radio was Mega FM. It was running this particular programme. The children who were rescued were brought to the radio to talk. None of them I know. But I went to the reception centre and asked. All the radio programmes I have been listening*

*to, but I have not got any information. But I am still listening to the radio.*

Besides visiting reception centres, the families sometimes got information from returnees who came to them with news about their relatives whom they knew from the bush. In this way missing family members became present through the returnees. As explained by Patricia, mother of an abducted son: ‘People who are coming [returnees] say he is there [in the bush]. But I don’t know if it is true or not’. Patricia’s statement also illuminates the uncertainty concerning the information brought by the returnees, which was a general characteristic among the families. Rose, whose husband was abducted, explained:

*The people who came back didn’t have any information, but I think maybe they were afraid to tell me the truth, that he is dead (...) Sometimes if you hear somebody came back, I will go and ask. But they will say that he moved in another direction.*

Anthropologist Mikkel Bille points out: ‘Missing persons bring about a tension between progression and suspension of expected life courses. In these cases closure is not an option’ (Bille *et al.* 2010: 15). Thus, while many of the families of the missing abductees tried to cope with their situation through forgetting, this proved impossible since they had no certainty and no closure. In addition the personal belongings and pictures from the missing persons not only served as a way—for some—to actively maintain a connection to their missing relatives, but also activated memories among missing abductees’ family members who attempted to forget. Thus, these objects testified to the anomalous absence of a relative from the families, which contributed to making the attempt of forgetting difficult. Hence—while not being physically present in the families—the missing family members left a *gap* that was highly present in the families:

*You know, the person with whom you have been staying together, if you happen to miss [him] it causes you pain in the heart, because his missing left a lot of gap in the family. (Geoffrey, a man in his early thirties missing his older brother)*

*It [him not being here] affects the family because his gap is there. (Patricia, a woman in her mid-fifties, missing her second born son)*

Geoffrey’s and Patricia’s statements indicate that the missing family member continues to influence the family several years after the abduction, since he or she constitutes a missing part of the family whose fate is not accounted for.

A comparable finding can be traced in the anthropologist Lotte Buch’s study of the wives of detainees in the West Bank who are detained indefinitely: ‘(...) To talk about life as a wife of a detainee is to talk about a void: about places, times, and situations that were somehow not quite right because something was and continued to be missing’ (Buch 2010: 89). The void Buch is describing and the gap mentioned by Geoffrey and Patricia seem to refer to similar conditions—a sense of lack in the family, an anomaly, created by the abrupt and continuous absence of a beloved one whose fate is not known. However, the situation in northern Uganda also differs from Buch’s example from the West Bank, since the families in northern Uganda do not know what has happened to their relatives and do not have the possibility of keeping in touch with

them. In addition, in the sphere of northern Ugandan society and the social surroundings of the families, we experienced that a fear of the abductees prevails, since they most likely have been, or are, affiliated with the LRA if still alive. In the example from the West Bank, the detainees have themselves chosen to commit an act with the risk of imprisonment, whereas the abductees' affiliation with LRA is involuntary. But for both the wives of the detainees in the West Bank and the families of the missing in northern Uganda, it is through personal belongings of the missing, pictures and talk that memories reawake and the absence continues to be present in the families, reminding them of the ambiguous loss of their loved ones and maintaining a void in their lives.

## Chronic Liminality

*What we want is only answers that your person is not there or your person is there, so that you can start on a new life. (Flora, mother to a missing abductee)*

During our fieldwork in Gulu town in 2012 the rebuilding of society had been taking place for a while, and people were looking forward to a brighter future. In many ways the families of the missing abductees were an exception to this development. Many of them had not yet had the opportunity to forgive or reconcile, because of the uncertainty surrounding their missing family member. While living with this condition, some of the families were finding new ways to manage the situation.

Geoffrey was a man in his thirties living together with his extended family in a large compound on the outskirts of Gulu town. During the war his older brother was abducted by the LRA as a young teenager. Geoffrey's family, like the rest of the families we got to know in Gulu, did not know whether the abducted brother was dead or still alive. As a way to manage the impact that this void had left, Geoffrey's family had held a funeral for the abducted brother in his absence. According to traditional Acholi funeral customs, there are three rituals that have to be performed: the burial of the dead body; the cleansing of the tools used for the burial and the calling of the spirit of the dead (Odoki 1997). In many ways the funeral of Geoffrey's brother deviated from the traditions and employed new practices. Geoffrey and his mother explained that they had combined several Acholi rituals to make an appropriate ritual for the special situation they found themselves in, with an absent body and the uncertainty surrounding the brother's actual death.

*(...) the last funeral rite we did (...) was for two people that we combined together—specifically for him, we got small sticks we put like to represent the grave. On those we put a bedsheet to represent his grave. And we slaughtered a goat, in respect to making the funeral for him. That was what we did. But we didn't call for his spirit, because we had some thinking that maybe he is not yet dead, that is why we didn't call for his spirit.*

Concerning the missing brother's possible return, they explained:

*What we do culturally when one comes back, even if one has taken (...), for example one has been in prison for long, after coming back, before the person steps on the compound they pour some*

*water before he enters the compound, so that it cleanses him. That will also be the same way that will be done if a person abducted happens to return. And for one who is abducted and people shed tears for him, on his return, a goat has to be slaughtered, and the people who cried will have to eat that goat to give him blessings.*

In their constructed funeral ritual Geoffrey's family was preparing themselves for a loss that had not yet arrived. And hoping for it to never actualize, they imagined the rituals to be performed if the missing abductee should return home.

*We couldn't call for the spirit, as I told you. Hoping he [the missing brother] might be alive. On the other hand it could be true that he was dead.*

Together with the majority of the Acholi, Geoffrey's family took part in a common narrative concerning the war, referring to a collective trauma, by which the Acholi people collectively identify themselves as victims of the atrocities committed by the LRA (cf. Dolan 2005, Finnegan 2010). However, the uncertainty surrounding the families of the missing abductees affects the categorisation of these families in the local Acholi society. This condition was made clear to us during our participation in a meeting of a women's revolving loan group together with one of our key informants, Alice. At the end of the meeting we were asked to present ourselves whereupon we explained our research among families with missing relatives who were abducted during the war. The atmosphere at the meeting changed from unrestrained and casual to tense and this change was followed by silence. After the meeting our interpreter explained to us that our phrasing was stigmatising and that we should not put Alice's situation into words publicly. When we asked whether it was known to everybody that Alice's brother was abducted, our interpreter explained that everybody knew, but it could not be articulated because of stigma. The stigmatisation was bound to the possibility of Alice's brother still being a rebel with the LRA. Thus, avoiding the uncertainty surrounding Alice's situation as a family member of an abductee by not mentioning it in public precludes a categorisation of her as a victim or perpetrator. However, the stigma that follows the uncertainty was sometimes allowed out into the open. As a mother of an abducted son told us: 'I remember they pointed, they said "his brother is a rebel somewhere!"'.

The families did not fit into the common story of suffering, as they found themselves placed between being secondary victims or secondary perpetrators (cf. Buch 2010). They were invisible in their social environment, because they had not yet been, or perhaps would not ever be, classified as victims or perpetrators (cf. Turner 1967: 96); they themselves were in an ambiguous void. The families were not regarded as families to victims, since the abductees have not yet become returnees, and have had the chance to tell their story. At the same time they were not classified as bereaved either, since the fate of their missing family member was not accounted for. Thus our ethnography shows that even though the Amnesty Act was enacted in order to erase the binary positions of victims and perpetrators, the categorisations remain and have a real impact on the families' lives, since they stand outside of all recognised fixed points in the structural classification system which has emerged in the local society in the wake of the reconciliation processes (cf. Turner 1967: 97).

Concerning the families' loss and problems of classification in the local community, it seems rather natural to look at the families' situations through the lens of a classic

anthropological concept like that of liminality (Turner 1967), which refers to a demarcated temporal phase of anti-structure. But looking closer, the concept seems hard to apply, because the assumed liminality risks transcending the temporal transition and becoming permanent (cf. Buch 2010). The funeral of Geoffrey's brother encapsulates the ambiguity of the void that the missing abductees have left in the families. It explicates the liminal phase the families go through mourning the abductee and preparing for his funeral in the hope to feel more at ease. At the same time it illuminates the chronicity of this liminality. The family members prepare themselves for the liminal phase not to end, but to become more permanent. They do not expect the abducted brother to come back in the future, but nevertheless they perform the funeral rites leaving open the possibility of the abductee's return.

The anthropologist Henrik Vigh has elaborated on the concept of crisis and chronicity in his work on the urban youth in Guinea Bissau (Vigh 2008). Vigh focuses on how agents act *in* the crisis, instead of through it, and by this he offers an alternative way to understand crisis as context and not only as an abnormality. According to Vigh: 'Crisis, when it is chronic, may become normal in the sense that it is what there is most (...)' (Vigh 2008: 11, with reference to Taussig 1992: 17). Vigh's concept of chronicity can be elaborated further and applied to the aspect of liminality; the liminality in which the families find themselves is the abnormality in the somewhat recovered normality. It allows for the families of the missing abductees to live both in chronicity and liminality at the same time, in a kind of suspended temporal frame. The families need to deal with the chronicity of the situation that their relatives are missing, sometimes even performing funeral rituals; and at the same time they still hope for their return, and thus closure is not an option.

While Vigh, with the notion of chronic crisis, is concerned with crisis on a societal level, e.g. war or violent conflict, we adopt the notion of chronic liminality in relation to a specific dimension of crisis on a family level. Vigh is talking about crisis as societal context, and for many years that was the situation for the families in Gulu due to the long civil war. As the war has ended, the societal crisis has been altered, and while people are still struggling to create a better life, many people are also reconciling and trying to move on with their lives. However the families of the missing abductees are left in a chronic state of liminality because of the uncertainty surrounding their missing family member. As formulated by a young woman, whose father was abducted: 'People call it "peace is there", but for you, you see peace walking there, but inside your heart, there is no peace'.

## **Ambiguous Loss and the Normality of Uncertainty: Unifying the Threads**

In this article we have examined how the ambiguous loss of an abducted family member manifests itself in family life as well as in the local community. We found, that in the aftermath of the civil war in northern Uganda, there is a general focus on leaving the atrocities of the past behind in order to reconstruct society. In this process, the families of the missing abductees have become a rather overlooked group<sup>15</sup>. These families have a difficult time leaving the past behind, since it is still present in their everyday life due to the ambiguous loss they have suffered, and continue to suffer. The void of the missing abductees in the families continues to affect them

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<sup>15</sup> In January 2016, Refugee Law Project (RLP) and National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC) organised a cleansing ceremony which was attended by families of missing abductees. It will be interesting to see whether the ceremony was just a single event or marked the beginning of a renewed societal focus on the families of abductees in northern Uganda and their missing relatives.

because of the presence of their absence, which manifests itself in different ways. Objects, in the form of pictures, clothes, and personal belongings, become charged with subjective qualities and rekindle imaginations, maintaining connections to the missing persons. This process did not only occur among family members who actively sought the connection, but also among family members who unsuccessfully strived to forget. Thus, forgetting is not an option, since the uncertainty surrounding the fate of the missing abductees keeps the possibility of their future return alive.

Our engagement with the families showed us that as long as the uncertainty prevailed there could be no unequivocal closure—only a void characterised by ambiguity. Liminality is not a temporal demarcated phase as in rituals of transition. It becomes chronic and almost normal as a context for everyday life. Hence, as befits a permanent betwixt and between, Geoffrey's family was burying a representation of the absent (presumed dead) body and preparing for the possible return of the very same (living) body.

Whether or not this state of chronic liminality will continue to comprise the context in which the families' lives unfold is uncertain. Other studies of post-conflict societies show that categories of victims and perpetrators have officially been erased in the form of a prohibition against certain categories in order for people to live peacefully together (Buckley-Zistel 2006: 144-147). Even though categorisations have not officially been erased in northern Uganda, the Amnesty Act and local reconciliation initiatives can be seen as attempts to blur the lines between victims and perpetrators. However, as this article has shown, the categorisations are still present and have an impact on the families and their lives. In line with other studies of loss and grief among families of missing persons (Boss 1999: 13, 27) our analysis also points to the longevity of uncertainty and the lack of closure in family life. Thus, the families of the missing abductees are continuously suffering since they are not recognised as victims and because the presence of the missing relatives in the families remains constant.

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