

# Being Normal: Stigmatization of Lord's Resistance Army Returnees as 'Moral Experience' in Post-war Northern Uganda

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ANNA MACDONALD

*School of International Development, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK*  
anna.macdonald@uea.ac.uk

RAPHAEL KERALI

*Independent Research Consultant, Gulu, Northern Uganda*

*MS received September 2019; revised MS received September 2019*

The literature on Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) returnees in Acholiland, northern Uganda tells us that those who returned from the rebel group are likely to experience stigma and social exclusion. While the term is deployed frequently, 'stigma' is not a well-developed concept and most of the evidence we have comes from accounts of returnees themselves. Focusing instead on the 'stigmatizers', this article theorizes stigmatization as part of the 'moral experience' of regulating post-war social repair. Through interview-based and ethnographic methods, it finds that stigmatization of LRA returnees takes many forms and serves multiple functions, calling into question whether this catch-all term actually obscures more than it illuminates. While stigmatization is usually practised as a form of 'social control', its function can be 'reintegrative' rather than purely exclusionary. Through the northern Uganda case study, this article seeks to advance conceptual and empirical understanding of the manifestations and functions of stigmatization in spaces of return, challenging the logic underpinning those interventions that seek to reduce it.

Keywords: Displacement, reintegration, return, social repair, Uganda

## Introduction

Over 10 years since the end of the war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda (GoU), numerous studies argue that those who have returned from the LRA, often having been forcibly abducted by the group, face severe and punishing forms of 'stigmatization' in the context of their daily lives.<sup>1</sup> Despite being widely used, the term 'stigma' is rarely defined or conceptualized. It has become shorthand for everything from name-calling and finger-pointing to violent attacks and systematic exclusion from economic resources. Most accounts we have come from individual experiences of LRA returnees,

leaving us without clear understanding of what Kleinman and Hall-Clifford (2009: 418) call the ‘unique social and cultural processes that create stigma in the lived worlds of the stigmatised’. With a focus on northern Uganda, this article seeks to address this gap in order to contribute to a fuller understanding of how stigmatization of ‘complex political perpetrators’ (Baines 2009) functions in turbulent spaces of return.

The article starts from the premise that stigma ‘is the mark, the condition, or status that is subject to devaluation’ (Pescosolido and Martin 2015: 91). ‘Stigmatization’, meanwhile, ‘is the social process by which the mark affects the lives of all those touched by it’ (*ibid.*). Adopting frameworks proposed by Kleinman and colleagues, the argument follows that stigmatization of LRA returnees is embedded in the ‘moral experience’ of post-war social suffering and repair. Moral experience is understood as the intersubjective flow of ‘practices, negotiations’ and ‘contestations’ among those with ‘whom we are connected’ (Kleinman 1998: 358–359). Moral experience is not abstract or static. It is rooted in ‘positioned views and practice’, ‘situated relationships’ and specific places that are always in flux (*ibid.*: 365). The stakes are always high because they involve deliberation and contestation around things that, by any measure, ‘matter greatly’, be it ‘status, relationships, resources, ultimate meanings, one’s being-in-the-world, and one’s being-unto-death and transcendence’ (*ibid.*: 362). Stigmatization of LRA returnees, this article argues, is best understood as something that can happen as part of the ‘moral experience’ of everyday engagements, rooted in social and cultural practices, norms and negotiations that seek to (re)construct and (re)imagine a sense of ‘normality’—however contested—in the aftermath of abduction, violence and mass displacement.

Adopting a ‘moral experience’ lens, findings suggest that all LRA returnees, by virtue of time spent with the rebel group, may possess stigma but this will not always lead them to be stigmatized and, even if they are, this takes a variety of forms and may serve multiple functions, ranging from rejection to resocialization. The findings presented here call into question whether this catch-all term actually obscures more than it illuminates. This has important policy implications too: if stigmatization is understood as a multifaceted expression and manifestation of social suffering and repair, then efforts to reduce it cannot rely on one-dimensional ‘awareness’ and ‘education’ campaigns, which, as in other contexts, have failed to have a discernible impact (Pescosolido *et al.* 2010; Pescosolido and Martin 2015: 105).

This study of LRA returnees and stigma departs from previous studies in two important ways. First, it explores stigmatization through the perspective of the stigmatizers. As such, it focuses on the dynamics of stigmatization in the context of post-war village life, where the majority of returnees have resettled. Despite the disruption created by mass displacement, the villages today are once again close-knit social settings shaped both by cooperation *and* contestation. These are ‘communities’ in so far as people share kinship links and relationships are based on shared economic and social activities, such as collective farming, and savings and loans groups. Yet, as Heald (1998: 212) notes, ‘the neighbourhood’ is also ‘the

sphere of the most embittered enemies, where conflicts over land, women and breaches of norms are most evident and serious’.

Second, this study is concerned with understanding the stigmatization of a numerically large, but relatively under-researched group: those male returnees believed to have been forcibly abducted.<sup>2</sup> Existing studies overwhelmingly focus on abducted girls and women and their children who were ‘born in captivity’, often as a result of forced sexual relationships.<sup>3</sup> The social and moral issues presented by the return of these women and children places almighty stress on the normative foundations of this patrilineal, patrilocal society. Without formal claims to land, their *very presence* represents a profound and particular moral and social burden on extended families. In a society with clearly defined gender roles, the situation is not necessarily the same for male returnees, notwithstanding the fact that this is a highly heterogeneous group. A focus on how male returnees have been received home—thus far understudied—therefore advances our understanding of the complex dynamics of stigmatization in spaces of ‘return’ in post-war northern Uganda.

This study is based on both authors’ long-term ethnographic and interview-based research in Acholiland since 2010 on topics of post-war justice, forgiveness, revenge and community security. Specifically, it draws upon research conducted between 2018 and 2019 in four villages in Gulu district: three rural and one peri-urban. This involved a set of 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews with community members (10 in each location); six focus-group discussions with community members across research sites (n20 each); and 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with village authority figures, including *rwodi* (chiefs), local councillors (LC1), religious leaders, clan elders, *atekere* (clan ritual leaders) and chairpersons of village savings and loans groups.

The article begins with a review of the theoretical literature on stigmatization. Conceptual and empirical gaps are identified that justify an everyday and relational approach to understanding its manifestations. Vernacular understandings of the term ‘stigma’ and the social politics of ‘being normal’ are then explored in the post-war Acholi context. Against this, three existential, sometimes interlocking, processes of social deliberation and contestation are identified that render LRA returnees vulnerable to ‘disqualification’ from ‘full social acceptance’ (Goffman 1963: 9). Viewed through the lens of ‘moral experience’, the first is the process of judging whether individual behaviour of the returnee is considered ‘good’, meaning economically productive and respectful to others; second is whether the returnee is thought to have come back from the LRA with bad spirits (*cen*) that will ‘contaminate’ the local environs; and third is the process of securing and defending resources in the context of post-displacement political economies of survival, particularly in relation to land.

The argument follows that, because it happens for different reasons, stigmatization serves a range of functions. Often it is deliberately exclusionary, rooted in rejection, even the desire for expulsion from village life. In other instances, it is based on cultural ideas related to the importance of cleansing and/or shame in resocializing individuals after wrongdoing and is reintegrative in purpose. Uniting

this, stigmatization functions as a form of resistance to hegemonic discourses around amnesty, forgiveness and anti-stigma interventions, and as a way of people and communities expressing some agency—even humanity—in those spaces where LRA returnees have ‘come home’.

### **Understanding Stigmatization as a ‘Social Process’ and as a ‘Moral Experience’**

In 1963, the sociologist Erving Goffman published a study: *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*. To possess ‘stigma’, he argued, was to possess an ‘attribute that is deeply discrediting’, while to stigmatize was to categorize this ‘undesired differentness’, usually in relation to the ‘unconscious expectations and norms which act as unseen arbiters in all social encounters’ (1963: 13–15). Amongst Goffman’s major contributions to the theorization of stigma was the dynamic and circular relationship between the noun (stigma) and the verb (to stigmatize). It was, he argued, a socially constructed, ‘special kind of relationship’, which takes form when there is a perceived gap between the ‘virtual social identity’ and the ‘actual social identity’, the former constituting societies’ normative expectations about individual behaviour and the latter representing ‘the attributes really possessed by a person’ (Goffman 1963: 12; Yang *et al.* 2007: 1525).

Since then, there have been scores of studies on stigma, but very little empirical or conceptual development of Goffman’s important premise that ‘stigmatisation can be enacted only through social relations’ (Pescosolido and Martin 2015: 91). Social psychologists and microsociologists working in the subfield of symbolic interactionism have dominated research, focusing on how individuals cognitively process stigma and how best to promote more tolerance towards conditions that are stigmatised.<sup>4</sup> Both approaches have been critiqued for isolating ‘stigma’s broader effect within the individual stigmatizer or recipient’, rather than examining its wider social sources and processes (Yang *et al.* 2007: 1527–1528; Link and Phelan 2001; Parker and Aggleton 2003 see also Tyler and Slater 2018: 729–731; and Hannem 2012).

Recent sociological research has addressed this through studies examining how the institutionalization of power relationships—social, economic and political—determines the transmission of stigma.<sup>5</sup> While this new focus on ‘looking up’ (Hannem 2012; cf. Tyler and Slater 2018: 731) to the structural and structuring factors that generate stigma is important, gaps in our knowledge remain. Studies are Western-centric, focusing on how state institutions and political discourse generate and re-enforce stigma’s discriminatory impacts. In northern Uganda, where state institutions are peripheral and/or lack authority and legitimacy, we need first to understand how stigma is ‘embedded’ in ‘local worlds’, ‘moral modes’ and ‘relational networks’ (Yang *et al.* 2007: 1528; Kleinman and Hall-Clifford 2009). As Johnson argues, ‘glimpses of stigma as lived experience’ in such contexts ‘are all too rare’ (2012: 633). In her study of HIV-positive women in rural Malawi, for example, she finds that the concept ‘serves us ill as a descriptor of the experiences of HIV-positive people if it is not related to the social situations in which particular lives unfold’ (2010: 647).

Bringing some coherence to psychological and sociological explanations, the anthropologist Arthur Kleinman and colleagues suggest that stigmatization is best conceptualized as part of ‘moral experience’ (Yang *et al.* 2007). Experience, here is understood ethnographically as ‘the felt flow of interpersonal communication and engagements’ that is ‘thoroughly intersubjective’ and takes place in a ‘local world’ that is culturally, socially, economically and politically specific (Kleinman 1998: 358). It is ‘moral’ because it refers to deliberation and contestations around ‘a set of social norms and obligations that constitute what is most important to people living in a particular community’ or ‘*what matters most* for ordinary men and women’ who have ‘important things to lose, to gain, and to preserve’ (Kleinman 1998: 362; Kleinman 2006; Yang *et al.* 2007: 1528, emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> In contexts of social suffering, defined as ‘the trauma, pain and disorders to which atrocity gives rise’ that defy neat biomedical or legal categorization (Kleinman *et al.* 1997: ix), a moral experience perspective on stigmatization takes us back to Goffman’s language of relationships allowing us to better understand:

those doing the stigmatizing, for it allows us to see [them] as interpreting, living and reacting with regard to what is *vitally at stake* and what is most *crucially threatened* (Yang *et al.* 2007: 1530, emphasis added).

Further, unless we examine stigma through this lens, we risk presenting a very ‘formulaic’ notion because:

stigmatizing someone is not solely a response to sociological determinants or a deeply interpretative endeavour played out in a cultural unconscious. It is also a highly pragmatic, even tactical response to perceived threats, real dangers and fear of the unknown (*ibid.*: 1528).

This is the approach followed in this article. Stigma and stigmatization are analysed as moral experience in those quotidian post-war spaces in which relationships and communities are being reconstructed, and in which war has ended but violence and social suffering endure.

### **The LRA War, Social Suffering and Anti-stigma Interventions**

The war began in northern Uganda in 1986 and, soon after, the Acholi-based rebel group, the Lord’s Resistance Army, began fighting the new National Resistance Movement (NRM) government, headed by President Museveni. The NRM/A was conducting a brutal military campaign to suppress opposition in the north of the country<sup>7</sup> and the leader of the LRA, Joseph Kony, drew upon a repertoire of metaphysical beliefs, combining Christian and traditional cosmologies in a sustained insurgency that remained in Acholiand and other regions of the greater north, including Lango, West Nile and Teso. Kony’s contention that the NRM was intent on ‘destroying’ the Acholi resonated widely but this did not translate into popular support for the LRA’s methods, so the high command became increasingly reliant on abduction to fill its ranks (Schomerus 2010: 121).

The data on LRA abduction rates during the war (1987–2008) is patchy. A study examining records of nine NGO-led reception centres<sup>8</sup> for formerly abducted persons calculated figures ranging from 24,000 to 38,000 children and youth, and 28,000–37,000 adults (Pham and Vinck 2007: 1). We do not know what happened to everyone in the LRA. Those who did not die or go missing were either captured by the Ugandan army during battles or managed to escape. By 2007, it was estimated that more than 20,000 children and youth had been processed through the reception centres but this number does not include ‘the thousands’ who were not, nor does it include ‘adults who left the LRA and have returned to civilian life’ (Pham and Vinck 2007: 1).

A large majority of those abducted were exposed to, but also perpetrated, extremely violent acts, sometimes against their own neighbours and family members (Annan *et al.* 2006; Pham and Vinck 2007). They have complex identities as ‘victim-perpetrators’ and, on their return, communities had to ‘reconcile’ the terrible experiences of the abductees with their own suffering at the hands of the LRA and the GoU (Baines 2009: 166–167). With up to 90 per cent of the Acholi population forcibly displaced at the height of the conflict in the early 2000s, LRA returnees were mostly ‘re-integrated into settings of chronic crisis’ (*ibid.*). Life in the IDP camps has been conceptualized as ‘social torture’, perpetrated by the state ‘on a mass rather than an individual scale’ (Dolan 2009: 1).

In response to the complexity of the situation, the Amnesty Act was passed in 2000, after a long campaign by Acholi religious, political and cultural leaders. In theory, it provides an amnesty certificate to any LRA member willing to renounce conflict and surrender weapons. The act also established an Amnesty Commission, to ‘encourage communities to reconcile with those who have committed the offences’ (Hovil and Lomo 1994: 7). According to the Commission, roughly 13,650 certificates have been issued to ‘former LRA abductees’.<sup>9</sup> The act itself uses the word ‘forgiveness’ to describe its rationale and, in Acholi, the same word, *timo kica*, is used to denote both the amnesty and forgiveness. Forgiveness then became closely associated with the moral authority of religious leaders, but also the institutional power of the state.

The Amnesty Commission’s ‘resettlement’ and ‘reintegration’ function was largely outsourced to non-governmental organization (NGO)-administered reception centres and overseen by regional District Peace and Reconciliation Teams (DPRTs). Anti-stigma ‘sensitizations’ were conducted in camps, and later in resettled villages, and over the radio waves. These described LRA returnees as innocent children, forcibly abducted and devoid of agency during time spent in the bush. It was not just forgiveness being promoted; it was also an appeal to forget. Senior DPRT staff explained: ‘we don’t want them to remember.’ As part of the effort to ‘train the community to accept people back to ensure less rejection,’ one explained:

We tell them that the former abductees were forced to do atrocities in their own communities and that time heals. DPRT is supposed to neutralise people’s minds about revenge. We are trying to neutralise the minds of the community.<sup>10</sup>

NGOs running the reception centres and the religious leadership under the banner of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) re-enforced this message. As a World Vision staff member explained:

sometimes the community will realize that the boy has worked in the area . . . then they realize, it is this boy who killed my relatives. In that kind of situation we bring in the religious leaders, they will bring in Christianity and call for forgiveness and we will ask those people that are resisting: ‘what if he was *your son*’?<sup>11</sup> (emphasis added)

Despite this, since 2004, the Amnesty has coexisted awkwardly with the GoU’s decision to refer the ‘LRA situation’ to the International Criminal Court. The investigation resulted in arrest warrants for the LRA’s five top commanders.<sup>12</sup> The subsequent setting-up of Uganda’s International Crimes Division in 2008 re-intensified legal and political tensions around the relationship between amnesty and prosecution—a debate that severely disrupted its only war-crimes trial to date. Other transitional justice mechanisms, designed to break down the dichotomy between amnesty and prosecution, were inscribed into an Agreement on Accountability and Reconciliation (AAR), signed by LRA/M and the GoU delegations during the Juba Peace Talks in 2007. In addition to the establishment of the ICD, these recommended a ‘truth body’, a range of ‘traditional reconciliation’ processes and reparations. The Agreement was supposed to form the basis of a National Transitional Justice Policy but, due to a lack of political will at the level of the executive, over 10 years later, most people in Acholiland have had sporadic or non-existent experience with kinds of processes outlined in the AAR.

Rather than meta-narratives of anti-stigma, forgiveness and transitional justice, the best place to begin interpreting how Acholi society is coping after war are everyday ‘co-existence situations’ (Prieto 2012). Since decommissioning of the camps and a return to villages or resettlement elsewhere, the legacy of the war looms large. Our respondents readily acknowledged that returnees were abducted against their will. But, while they rarely blamed them openly for wrongdoing committed while in the bush, they strongly maintained the moral authority to both judge and manage the moral *implications* of that wrongdoing in the *present*. As Baines (2009: 166) argues:

When violent conflict becomes a ‘normal’ part of everyday life, people struggle to redefine themselves and their relationships within that landscape . . . . Social and spiritual problems are attributed to the presence of former combatants and so the community copes by marking out their presence through marginalisation, exclusion and purification or cleansing.

Stigmatization is a form of social accountability and control that happens in all those coping processes and it does not map neatly onto the ‘implicit teleological temporality’ of anti-stigma and transitional justice discourses (Mueller-Hirth and Oyola 2018: 3). It is rooted in a broad repertoire of social norms and cultural practices, including, but not limited to, ideas about the spirit world. Its manifests as part of the moral experience of ‘govern[ing] the lived surroundings’ (Finnström

2008: 26). In the next section, this argument is developed by examining the concept of stigma and stigmatization in the Acholi vernacular.

### Stigma and Stigmatization in Acholi Culture and Language

Whereas the etymology of stigma emphasizes physical manifestations of perceived deviance: ‘mark made by a pointed instrument’, the terms used in Acholi focus on the act of stigmatization itself. The most common terms are embodied: *cimo tok*, meaning to point at someone’s back, or *kwoto lawoti*, which literally means ‘person who walks with you’ but translates as to gossip about someone. The two quotes below are illustrative:

Stigma is gossiping, talking something bad where you point at that person, talk about a person and that person will be hurt because of it.<sup>13</sup>

Stigma is like, when I am passing by, someone will say, you see him, walking there? He stayed in the bush. That is stigmatisation because some people might not have known I stayed in the bush.<sup>14</sup>

The most commonly used ‘ill words’ were *dwog cen paco*, meaning ‘return back home’, which became pejorative slang for LRA returnees and *olum, olum obino gang*, meaning ‘the rebels have returned home from the bush’. Other terms were used that related to possession by bad spirits.

As Phelan and Link (2014: 25) note in other contexts, ‘people know it is not socially acceptable to stigmatize others’. The English word ‘stigma’ first came into popular usage in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and latterly in anti-stigma programmes designed to educate populations about the need (moral and statutory) to reintegrate LRA returnees. As such, the word ‘stigma’ is linked in people’s minds to authoritative efforts to combat it. Agreement lay in the fact stigma happens in the shadows, *lapiny lapiny*, meaning ‘in secret’, and that it was not a ‘proper’ way of acting towards someone. Often, to stigmatize was associated pejoratively with ‘feminine behaviours’ in polygamous households, where finger-pointing and gossiping were said to occur regularly between jealous co-wives.<sup>15</sup> It was also linked to ‘drunkenness’, where your ability to exercise restraint is compromised. Stigmatization, then, was understood as embedded in social relationships even if it sat uncomfortably with idealized social mores. It was widely disparaged, but also widely practised.

As with discussion of any social practice, the conceptual boundaries of stigma and stigmatization are broad. In this sense, two important nuances emerged. First, while stigmatization was commonly described as ‘a very bad and painful act of disregarding someone’, many people also had a more neutral understanding of it as singling out an individual for any reason, be it good or bad: literally just talking about someone when they are not present. According to one woman:

We can say it is stigmatisation because you extended your fingers but I would see it as having a discussion or sharing ... such talks are inevitable, they are things that happen.<sup>16</sup>



Because the definition of stigma was interpreted so broadly—*talking about someone behind their back*—most people, returnees or not, recounted personal experiences of stigmatization. The second important point (developed more below) is that it was not the shame that stigma conferred on the stigmatized that was necessarily at issue; it was the mode of communication (doing it behind their back) that was regarded as not ideal.

As Theidon (2018: 153) argues in relation to the distressing names given to children born of war across many contexts,

the concept of stigma is frequently applied to these children, yet is that really all we can say about these names? Stigma seems a thin explanation for a thick phenomenon, and forecloses a broader repertoire of potential meanings and motivations.

While this is certainly true in our context, so too is the opposite. Often, the word ‘stigma’ is used to describe behaviour that is not ultimately designed to reject or to exclude. As we demonstrate below, this re-emphasizes the importance of understanding the social processes underpinning stigmatization.

### **Stigma and the Social Politics of ‘Being Normal’ in Post-war Acholiland**

While there is little agreement on whether returnees should be blamed or punished for crimes and moral transgressions committed in the LRA, there is consensus that, on return, their individual behaviour must be ‘normal’ and, relatedly, their presence must be conducive to the ‘normal’ functioning of social and economic relationships and spiritual balance. Those returnees who transgress the boundaries of ‘normal’ male behaviour, or pose a threat to normality, are likely to experience stigmatization.

So what does it mean to be ‘normal’? In Acholi society, there exist strong (albeit contested) normative ideals and moral boundaries, which imbue relationships with meaning but also function to regulate social order. In her ethnography of sexual relationships and sexual violence in Acholiland, Holly Porter has conceptualized this as ‘social harmony’, which, she argues, ‘denotes a state of “*normal*” relations among the living and the dead, an idea of cosmological equilibrium, and social balance of power and moral order’ (2017: 3, emphasis added). Social harmony is a relational concept, not a taxonomic classification. It is akin to what Fuller (1971) described as a ‘programme for living together’ and informed by what Dresch (2012: 1) describes as ‘the explicit use of generalizing concepts, and a disposition to address in such terms the conduct of human life’. This is underpinned by a conscious morality that recognizes a common standard of behaviour that has its own ‘normative terminology’ for expressing both the ‘oughts’ and ‘musts’ of conformity as well as the moral distinction between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ (Hart 1994; cf. *ibid.*: 12).

In Acholi, notions of the ‘normal’ human being and the ‘normal’ social setting are pervasive. Both Porter (2017) and Finnström (2008) underline the importance of achieving ‘good existence’ or ‘good surroundings’—*piny maber*—and the extent

to which this ideal is made possible through people and, by extension, relationships being ‘normal’. This is a broadly universal aspiration, recalling Goffman’s assertion that ‘we and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call the *normals*’ (1963: 15, emphasis in original).<sup>17</sup>

The English word ‘normal’ was a translation of a handful of related phrases. ‘*Bedo maber*’ was most common, literally meaning ‘existing well’, but also carrying a broader meaning: ‘proper coexistence in the community.’ Being a proper person, a ‘human’ person has an overarching relational dimension: your individual behaviour has deep symbiotic associations with the material, social and cosmological health of your surroundings. As one man explained:

When people talk about normal, they look at your behaviour, how your behaviour conforms to what is expected, so they would talk about *bedo maber*, meaning peaceful co-existence in the community; *ngadi bedo ki dano maber*, meaning so and so is well conversant in relating to others in the community, *ngeyo bedo I kin dano*, literally meaning someone who understands and knows how relate with others in the society, *pe ki ayella mo ki keken*, meaning does not have any problems (society issues) with anyone ... and this can bring about *kwo maber*, meaning living well with others.<sup>18</sup>

There is something approximating a moral schema, highly gendered, which forms the basis of social understandings and contestations. In the 1960s, for example, Anna Apoko wrote about the Acholi’s ‘ideal people’: those who are ‘liked and valued by the whole community’ (1967: 47). A ‘successful man’ should have acres of cotton, millet and sim sim. He should be a skilled hunter and his house must be large and robust.<sup>19</sup> Apoko recalls the songs composed by women to describe and pay respect to such men: ‘Our Odai/The only great one/He was absent for a day/and the house went to pieces’ (*ibid.*: 46). The individual character of the man is celebrated in this short verse, but the emphasis is also on the way in which his ‘good existence’ modulates the ‘good surroundings’. Equally, there is a sense of fragility, of things falling apart when the equilibrium is disrupted. An ideal situation, Okot p’Bitek explains, is when ‘things are normal, the society, thriving, facing and overcoming crises’ (cf. Porter 2017: 3). This is only attainable through respectful and appropriate coexistence both between the living and with the dead (*ibid.*: 3). As one man explained:

I think normal ... there is a point where there is no activity ... you do not excite people either in negative or positive, you are just there, you know, just there ... if your behaviour tends to the negative too much, then that is abnormal, and then if it gets excitable too much, on the other side, it also attracts a description, so if you are a plain simple person ... then that is normal ... if you do everything that is expected within the community, you live a normal life. But if you deviate from that, there is a lack of normalcy, deviant behaviour and deviation from established trends.<sup>20</sup>

Writing about the social mores and moral codes of any society raises more questions than it answers. The biggest risk is that we revert to degenerate cultural essentialism or that we romanticize an ideal, rural form of social regulation that

erases the contestation and the heterogeneity of social existence, everywhere. This is all the more sensitive in the Acholi context, where the politics of social ‘facts’ have been so deeply intertwined with the politics of war and state formation in Uganda. When people reflect on the war, and on mass displacement and encampment, they talk about how camp life undermined Acholi traditions, cultural practices and social institutions (Finnström 2008: 146). As a source of social unease, it is important to remember that the degradation of prototypical Acholi tradition and practices has been a perennial concern, and was written about extensively by Girling in the mid-century, by Apoko in the 1960s, by p’Bitek in the 1970s and by Behrend in the 1980s. The ideal of social harmony, as Porter argues, stays afloat upon ‘a loosely constructed repertoire of contested norms’ that are anchored in references to *cik Acholi* (unwritten moral principles) and *Acholi macon* (the olden days). This way of seeing the world, ‘people just take it for granted’, explained a young man. ‘That doesn’t mean it is uncontested,’ he continued, ‘you might disagree with any aspect of it, but it is there.’

### **Moral Experience, Social Suffering and the Stigmatization of LRA Returnees in Post-war Acholiland**

In our interviews and focus groups, there were different aspects to broad-brush narratives about returnees who have ‘not settled back well’ and are therefore stigmatized as part of the moral experience of reconstructing ‘the normal’ and protecting ‘what matters most’ in post-war relationships. Before these are explored below, an important caveat is necessary. As already noted, there are scores of studies detailing the prevalence of stigmatization and the harmful effects it has on those at the receiving end in post-war northern Uganda. What follows below is not an attempt to question these experiences or to seek to justify the stigmatization of returnees in any normative sense. Rather, it is an effort to understand and articulate how those doing the stigmatizing interpret their own collective and individual actions and what this can tell us about moral experience of social suffering and social repair in our context.

#### *Bad Behaviours and Unwanted Lifestyles*

A perceived inability to contribute productively to village life: to work hard in the fields and to be with respect for others generated stigmatization of male LRA returnees. In a gerontocracy, where social currents are moving in different directions, young men are always treading the line of perceived social nonconformity. The register is different for those who returned from the bush. There is an extra spatial and moral dimension to their experience that make acts of ‘bad behaviour’ more threatening. The ‘bush’ has complex associations. On the one hand, it provides the firewood and game that sustain daily life in the village. But it is also a dangerous moral space. It is believed that journeys into the bush must be undertaken with care and vigilance because, in contradistinction to the home, in the village, the bush was not a place of human habitation and order, but a turbulent,

ungovernable place where wild animals roamed free and formidable cosmological forces worked through and above nature.<sup>21</sup>

Despite plenty of evidence that life in the LRA was highly regulated by rules and codes, these tended to subvert ‘normal’ social practice and, in any case, were inculcated in a context widely perceived as inimical to order. The notion of a disciplinary system in a space so formless and unpredictable as the ‘bush’ was paradoxical to most people. People who had not experienced life with the LRA imagined it in terms of its rawness: its lack of boundaries and lack of restraint and were deeply concerned about the transmission of ‘bush’ behaviour back into the village. Not surprisingly, on their return, those who have spent time with the LRA are ‘monitored’ carefully.

People made reference to ‘two categories’ of male returnees. It was said that those who came home and ‘behaved well’ were not stigmatized.<sup>22</sup> But those who engaged in petty crime, aggressive behaviour, drunkenness and those who were idle and refused to work were not trusted and could not be accepted. A young man explained:

Those that are not finger pointed at live in the rightful way according to the set values and norms of society, but those that are being finger pointed at do not listen to the teachings of society and do not respect the societies values and norms.<sup>23</sup>

This sentiment was widely echoed. As a youth leader working in Gulu municipality explained: ‘once they came home [from the bush], their ways of life do not match with the community’. Returnees have to demonstrate that they can live a ‘good kind of life’, that they have a ‘good character’, otherwise they will ‘always be finger pointed and even avoided in the community’.<sup>24</sup>

‘Aggressive behaviours’, often described as the ‘bush mentality’, were widely cited and commonly illustrated via the spectre of the returnee who intimidates community members by proudly boasting that violence committed in the bush could easily be perpetrated back home: ‘I can beat you, I am from the bush, and do you know what I did there? I killed so many people therefore killing you is quite simple.’<sup>25</sup> Linked to this is a concern about returnees stealing and destroying other people’s property—another behaviour learnt from the bush, where the LRA would loot people’s food and belongings during attacks and ambushes. Those who engage in aggressive behaviour and crime are judged severely and command little sympathy: ‘it is why people still stigmatize them, and say this person has not reformed,’ explained a young woman.<sup>26</sup>

There are also those returnees who ‘remain idle’, who drink too much and do not dig, and whose lifestyle is perceived as disorderly and parasitic. They might be referred to as ‘defeated in life’, living a ‘kind of hopeless life’, and are also compared unfavourably to those who have returned from the bush and ‘behaved well’:

The reason as to why it [stigmatization] is still happening is that there are other people who are still living a kind of life which is not all that normal . . . for the others who are not being stigmatised . . . you cannot even say that they were once in the bush because the kind of life they are living are good and no kind of drunkenness . . .

And they have become an example to the other returnees to live that kind of exemplary life. And when you don't live those kind of hopeless life, people just forget about you quickly, about your returning from the bush.<sup>27</sup>

Those returnees who drink and do not engage in economic activity are maligned for transgressing social norms and expectations. They may not be feared to the same degree as those described as aggressive, and their behaviour is more easily camouflaged, because lots of men were described as 'idle drunkards' and the camp gave rise to the same problems. But, ultimately, they are also socially devalued because of their 'not being normal'.

Whether because of a lack of repentance and threatening behaviour or idleness and drinking, there was a common view that 'moral obligations' central to the regulation and balance of village life were being violated by certain returnees and further that, because these obligations were 'existentially indispensable to constituting subjects in the first place' (Englund 2008: 45), these returnees had—to varying degrees—stopped being 'human'. It was common to hear people saying that LRA returnees should 'be as humans', to 'live like humans'. Heald (1998: 215) writes about this in relation to the Gisu in eastern Uganda: those who are 'confused', 'disobedient' and disrespectful become 'animal like'; they are seen as having 'opted out of responsive human society' because 'rule following ... provides the way in which the essential *constitution* of the person can be judged' (emphasis added).

### *Stalked by Bad Spirits*

Cosmological forces—'Acholi spirit worlds'—are deeply embedded in social exchanges and relations of power (Victor and Porter 2017: 592). Whilst people ascribe labels to spiritual phenomena, definitions are fluid and mutable. In their study of 'spiritual pollution' amongst LRA returnees, Victor and Porter (2017: 594) write that 'Ajwani, as a broadly applied term for cosmological upset, are the "dirty things" ... often instantiated by gross misfortune or the presence of rancorous spirit forces'.

The most common manifestation of *ajwani* is referred to as *cen*. *Cen* refers broadly to those spirits of the dead that seek vengeance. The malign influence of *cen* lies partly in its restless and diffusive quality, which threatens to permeate, pollute and propagate unless appeased. When we asked what *cen* means, a common response was 'to be possessed by evil spirits'. Some spoke of *ajiji*, 'the after-shock of something'; others used more religious terminology such as 'to be haunted by the souls of the departed' or 'demons'.

LRA returnees are widely suspected to carry *cen* because it can be provoked when a person perpetrates or witnesses a killing and/or mishandles or steps upon a corpse. Because of what they saw and did in their time with the LRA, they are censured: 'you with your *cen* in your head'. People are labelled as 'you have something in your eyes'; or 'there is something that attracts/comes into you'. The word '*libo*', which was directly translated as 'sneaking' or 'stalking', was used to describe the malevolent quality of the bad spirits: 'like when a poacher tries to get an

animal,' one man explained, 'there is something that is stalking you, and when it takes over you, you become violent . . . you are being stalked by the spirits.'<sup>28</sup>

This represents a significant danger to the community as a whole because *cen* 'contaminates' relations and can bring misfortune to the wider community (Meinert and Whyte 2017: 273, 279). There is therefore a pressing need to chase away or appease the spirits through ritual or prayer. As one man explained:

In Acholi culture, when you are to go somewhere and took a long period of time . . . they will say that you have come back with bad omens . . . or you have killed someone . . . or you have been stepping on corpse of people while in captivity, it might be that the bad spirits caught you. So, there will be a cleansing ritual, whereby goats might be slaughtered so as to repair what happened that was bad. And the religious leaders pray for the victims whom they just think will be cleansed by the power of the Lord.

Whether through traditional ritual or prayer, appeasing the spirits is a flexible, uncertain and processual undertaking (Baines 2009; Meinert and Whyte 2017; Victor and Porter 2017). Problems linked to *cen* might continue or resurface, so that afflicted returnees remain under careful watch. Broader perceptions of peaceful coexistence with the spirit world were fragile and contingent on things being 'normal'. One man explained:

there remains a degree of suspicion and that suspicion can be triggered by observation of people's traits . . . if the person is not behaving, or if the behaviour contradicts what the society expects of him then the stigma would still continue, but . . . if they come back and start living a normal life, then they would assume the cleansing worked.<sup>29</sup>

It is in the social and temporally unpredictable space between abomination, contaminant *cen* and the search for appeasement and spiritual balance that the stigmatization of returnees becomes possible. The hazards of the contemporary environment render LRA returnees who exhibit unusual behaviour, or who exist in proximity to misfortune, as a clear source of social danger. As one woman explained:

there are those who will say, what she or he did in the bush still haunts them . . . so while people do stay with them . . . they are alert.<sup>30</sup>

'Bad spirits', explained an older man, 'are fighting with our souls' and 'the idea and thinking that something is going to happen will cause much damage . . . and finger pointing'.<sup>31</sup> Here, stigmatization becomes meaningful as 'moral experience' in the present, rather than as a 'free-floating' phenomenon linked to a specific act or a historic event (see Kleinman 1997: 324).

### *The Issue of Land Is Bad*

In his writing on moral experience, social suffering and stigma, Kleinman argues that 'it is in local worlds that the relational elements of social existence in which

people have the greatest stake are played out' (*ibid.*: 327). What is at stake—or 'what really matters'—diverges even within the local worlds we studied. As argued above, for many, it was the social requirement for returnees to 'live well' and coexist productively and peacefully with the community and the spirit world. In other instances, however, community members wilfully instrumentalized a person's status as a 'returnee' in order to reject customary claims to land and resources and secure 'what mattered most', usually as part of the political economy of land disputes, which are rife across the Acholi region in the aftermath of mass displacement. As Whyte *et al.* (2013: 294) explain, these are driven by a combination of post-conflict factors: the commodification of land; concerns about land-grabbing by, for example, powerful state actors and agro-business; variation in the interpretation of 'traditional' land tenure; disruption of customary boundaries during displacement and, indeed, the doubling of the northern Ugandan population between 1980 and 2002—an upward curve that shows no signs of settling down any time soon.

As the conflict ended, camps were decommissioned and IDPs and returnees were routinely told by international agencies and the government to 'go back to where the war found you' but this presented a profound set of challenges (*ibid.*: 285). Claims to land are regulated through patrilineal social relations, which are affirmed and protected through social institutions, most clearly customary marriage, and, relatedly, through kinship links strong enough to guarantee your social position. This customary tenure system was heavily disrupted by conflict and displacement.

The impact this has had on women returning from the LRA and their children born in the bush has been widely studied (see e.g. Baines and Stewart 2011; Baines and Gauvin 2013; Amone-P'Olak *et al.* 2016; Denov and Lakor 2017; Mukasa 2017; Atim *et al.* 2018; Kiconco and Nthakomwa 2018). But land insecurity impacts heavily upon male returnees too. It limits their access to income-generation and livelihood resources, but also makes it much harder for them to fulfil the ideals associated with being an Acholi man: being able to provide for, and to protect, your family. The monetary value now attached to land, combined with its relative scarcity and a population increase, means those without the most robust evidence of patrilineal descent are vulnerable to exclusion (Mckibben and Bean 2010; Hopwood and Atkinson 2013). Part of the problem is that 'the strength of the patrilineal argument depends on the strength of the protagonist' and, because so many returnees lost parents and close relatives during the conflict, they now have 'weak or missing links' (Whyte *et al.* 2013: 298). Without a father or a trusted uncle demonstrating your 'first-order link' to the land under question, you remain highly vulnerable to exclusion (*ibid.*).

During our interviews and discussions, the stigmatization of LRA returnees was linked to 'land matters' and a communal concern that returnees 'have come home to take land'. Others acknowledged the widespread problem of community members 'bullying [returnees] on land' and excluding them from family discussions around 'land matters'. Returnees whose parents had died were most vulnerable to this kind of treatment because, as one woman explained, often relatives

‘will not show him the piece of land that was for his father’.<sup>32</sup> In such cases, the returnee’s identity is brandished against him in the struggle for scarce or valuable resources. The available evidence confirms this, pointing to the fact that many LRA returnees give up on securing a livelihood at ‘home’ and migrate to Gulu, or trading centres further afield, in search of employment.<sup>33</sup>

Bad treatment by relatives had a knock-on effect on how returnees were viewed by the broader community. As one man explained:

the returnees that have been successfully reintegrated into the community, well, it solidly depends . . . on how their families have been taking them, for instance, giving them land for cultivation . . . they will give you the love of the family, share things together, and the returnee will know that he is being loved and taken care of.<sup>34</sup>

This ‘good family background’ will help the returnee to be ‘reintegrated into the community well’. There is an Acholi saying that goes ‘we see how to beat a dog from its owner’. Those who returned to find close relatives dead, and the land they were staying either ‘grabbed’ or under the control of more distant family or clan members, are more likely to be stigmatized by the wider community. If your own family refused you access to land and rejected your presence, then there was a feeling that ‘if the family cannot be bothered, can we really have faith in this person?’.<sup>35</sup> Because this level of rejection is perceived to be ‘extreme’, it aroused suspicions, not only about the returnee whose ‘behaviour could have been unacceptable’, but also the family, illustrated by another proverb shared with us: ‘witchcraft begins at home’, more loosely used to warn that ‘if the family is doing bad things, the child will also do bad things’.

### **The Functions of Stigmatization: Re-constituting ‘What Matters Most’**

So far, we have seen that LRA returnees are stigmatized because they exhibit behaviour that deviates from social norms and threatens social order and/or because they represent a strain on scarce material resources in contexts marked by serious poverty. There is fluidity between the different factors driving stigmatization because it occurs as part of moral experience ‘in the inter-subjective space between people at the level of words, gestures, meanings, feelings etc. during engagement *with what matters most*’ (Yang *et al.* 2007 1532, emphasis added). ‘What matters most’ might be ensuring that the returnee exists peacefully and respectfully with the community and with the spirit world, or it might be ensuring that the returnee does not pose a threat to land claims. Because of this, stigmatization—the social process by which an LRA returnee is ‘devalued’—has a range of social functions, depending on how and why it happens. Below, we elaborate more on the social function of stigmatization in our research sites.

#### *Community Warning Systems and Regulating Village Governance*

Stigmatization or ‘finger-pointing’ was described as a ‘warning to the community’—a way of ensuring people knew about your past but, more importantly, any



dangers you might present now: ‘Someone who had not known about you will get to know when you are stigmatised.’<sup>36</sup> Many people said they felt frightened of LRA returnees, particularly those who exhibited aggressive behaviour. One man expressed a common concern to us that

community members . . . have the fear that these returnees might again do bad things on them, thus they must first of all stay away from him or her, because to prevent is not to fear.<sup>37</sup>

When the function of stigmatization was cast as a community warning system, it extended to excluding ‘abnormal’ returnees from the governance and economy of village life. Being excluded from farming groups and saving and loans groups, as well as from discussion of family issues, community social gatherings and collective village meetings, had a deliberately negative effect on social and economic standing within the village. ‘In Acholi’, it was explained:

if people are going for any gathering they tend to leave you and they will not inform you . . . . People are not happy with you so they don’t tell you what is in the community.<sup>38</sup>

This exclusion might also extend to engagement in external development and NGO projects. Several people told us that, when ‘projects’ are brought to the village, those returnees with an ‘unacceptable lifestyle’ will not be included. Stigmatization, argued one young man, functioned to ‘limit’ returnees from

normally accessing the things that others get . . . they don’t get assistance and support that the others get to help them live together with the rest . . . like for instance when the government brought the NUSAF . . . they are not included in such groups . . . they are even excluded out of any family talk issues but they will just find out that something happening in the family without their consent.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, those returnees perceived as ‘normal’ faced few problems when it came inclusion in village life:

If you love people, relate well with them and share with them, no one can exclude you from the society . . . but rather would want you involved in all the activities of the community. They say ‘write his or her name to take part in this particular project’ no one will exclude you but if you have unacceptable lifestyle then it is impossible.<sup>40</sup>

In all of our research sites, people spoke of returnees in authority positions in the village. One older man talked of ‘several local council leaders’, who were returnees: ‘if you are to do an investigation,’ he said, ‘you will realize that all were killers but now they are good people.’ Others explained that ‘when it comes to leadership, the community members look at the capability of an individual, not whether the person was in the bush or not’.<sup>41</sup> Aside from local councillors, people named, for example, Sunday-school teachers, savings and loans group chairmen and clan guards. This of course challenges the narrative that LRA returnees *uniformly* face stigmatization and social exclusion and is worthy of further research.

*Stigmatic Shaming and Reintegrative Shaming*

In many instances, stigmatization functioned to *exclude* returnees from the economic and social fabric of village life. Exclusion, however, is not the only function of stigmatization. Communities also stigmatize as part of social processes designed to *reintegrate* returnees back into the fold of village life. In his book, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, Braithwaite (1989: 100) defines shaming as ‘all social processes of expressing disapproval which have the intention or effect of invoking remorse in the person being shamed’. He goes on to make a crucial distinction—highly relevant in the Acholi context—between ‘stigmatic shaming’ and ‘reintegrative shaming’. ‘Stigmatic shaming’ is exclusionary because it is degrading and humiliating, and deliberately ‘makes things worse’ for the wrongdoer by treating them like a ‘bad person’, whereas ‘reintegrative shaming’ ‘communicates shame to a wrongdoer’ in order to reintegrate them back into society.

When respondents described it as having a ‘resocializing’ function, stigmatization was associated with a broader set of cultural practices that made it meaningful as something that exists above and beyond pure finger-pointing, ‘back-biting’, gossip and exclusion. Grouping stigma together with other important social concepts related to shame, one elder from an area where there had been a serious massacre during the LRA war explained:

The reason as to why people are stigmatising and shaming [the returnees] is because the kind of lifestyle they are living is not accepted by the community and so that one helps a person change.

Another explained that

there are some people, if you don’t beat on them they don’t learn, but if you beat on them, they will realize, so stigma is good because it reminds them that I should stay in the family like this, and respect the community.

In this interaction, shame becomes a ‘central possibility’ (Goffman 1963: 18) and is understood to contribute to an individual’s perception of his or her actions as morally wrong and thus playing an important function in the reassertion and regulation of ‘normal’ social relations.

The correct balance is delicate here. As was explained to us: returnees should not have too much shame, but they should also not be *shameless*. The word most commonly used was *lawic*, which also means to feel shy. Returnees should have shame ‘like a car should have brakes’; however, too much shame will make them *bedo keni* or stay alone, or *poke*, which means to isolate yourself from a group, which creates suspicion.

Traditionally, we were reminded that public, reintegrative shaming played an important role in Acholi society. As one woman explained: ‘many ways are used to help people learn from their mistakes and change accordingly.’<sup>42</sup> For example, people ‘feared’ the village *nanga* players, who would compose songs about individuals who had behaved badly with the broader purpose of trying to ‘reform’ them. As one man explained: ‘any deviant behaviours, bad behaviours in the

community, they would immediately compose a song about you and would sing and everyone would listen and laugh about it.<sup>43</sup> This ‘joking’ element was also very important. As the Heald noted in eastern Uganda, ‘joking relationships’, which often involved ‘tentative abuse’ and a ‘combination of friendliness and antagonism’, set ‘the parameters for moral discourse and behaviour’ (Radcliffe Brown 1952: 91; cf. Heald 1998: 216–217). Often, explained one man, if you are in a bad situation or you have done a bad thing, people will ‘laugh at you, not in a way that they are mocking you or that they are being callous about it’, more he explained, as a way of dealing with individual deviance and then ‘accepting you’.<sup>44</sup>

One group gave us lots of examples of songs and riddles that singled people out for a range of moral and social transgressions, from stealing to a lack of personal hygiene, but ultimately had an educative, socializing function. It meant that your wrongdoing was out in the open—that the community took it seriously, but also wanted to help you see the error of your ways and improve. In the ‘olden days’, we were told, this kind of ‘shaming’ was good because it would help ‘people to start leading better lives’. The right level of shame amongst LRA returnees, not debilitating shame, but not *shamelessness*, was healthy and would help the community manage the moral implications of their time in the LRA and any worrying behaviour back home.

What unites stigmatic shaming and reintegrative shaming of LRA returnees is that both processes allowed people some agency and control over how to deal with LRA returnees, and, by extension, how to manage their own feelings about the war and its legacy. Many who had experienced LRA violence directly or indirectly explained how their grief and anger had been censored and suppressed by the stringency of the Amnesty Act; the demands for forgiveness and forgetting; and a lack of other forms of justice. Akello (2019) writes about ‘acts of resistance by survivors’ who feel trapped by what they regard as state-sanctioned impunity and the criminalization of victims who dare to confront returnees. Stigmatization of returnees—whether exclusionary or reintegrative—becomes part of the moral experience of asserting some agency in a situation characterized by disciplinary forms reintegration promotion, which may contribute to, rather than assuage, social suffering. This is not to question or negate the harmful impacts of stigmatization on those at the receiving end. Nor is it to suggest that many of those abducted by the LRA do not also feel a keen sense of injustice about what happened to them and how life is now. Rather, it is to point out that, like any social practice, stigmatization carries logics and functions that need to be understood.

## Conclusion

Whether through the Amnesty Law, NGO ‘sensitizations’ or religious forgiveness, the focus of anti-stigma efforts in the Acholi context has been on programming or preaching the stigmatization of LRA returnees out of existence. This is based on a narrow conception of stigmatization as an epiphenomenal practice that exists beyond cultural and social norms and processes.

Interventions to reduce stigma have been based on individualized notions of stigmatization as a form of unreasonable, untenable behaviour that can be addressed through programming. This programming has focused on ‘educating’ communities about the innocence of returnees and ‘disciplining’ communities through attempts to suppress stigmatizing behaviour. This is despite the fact that, across contexts, there is no empirical link between increased ‘knowledge’ and a reduction in stigmatization (Gronholm *et al.* 2017). As evidence-based studies elsewhere have shown, ‘continuing to focus on education likely represents a waste of valuable resources’ that might be deployed elsewhere, for example to address the root causes of the social suffering that produces the conditions for the most harmful forms of stigmatization (*ibid.*; Pescosolido and Martin 2015: 101). Disciplinary techniques meanwhile serve to intensify people’s feelings of disenfranchisement and powerlessness in negotiating the reintegration of returnees.

Contrary to the logic of anti-stigma interventions, our findings suggest that stigmatization is deeply embedded in the ‘moral experience’ of post-war Acholi ‘local worlds’. It serves to regulate the presence and behaviour of LRA returnees in order to restore ‘normality’ in the context of sustained social suffering. Depending on ‘what matters most’ and ‘what is crucially at stake’, it can happen as part of the ‘moral experience’ of appeasing *cen*; protecting community members from physical attacks; guaranteeing access to land; regulating village governance; or a combination of these things. As such, stigmatization manifests in different ways and carries different functions: sometimes it is exclusionary, at other times it is reintegrative. This umbrella term can be either a ‘thick’ or a ‘thin’ descriptor, depending on the circumstance.

While it is true that anti-stigma programmes in Acholiland have raised awareness about the undesirability of stigmatization, this has not translated neatly into a reduction in the social processes associated with it because these are part of the moral experience of everyday life. As Yang *et al.* (2007: 1528) argue:

this is what makes stigma so dangerous, durable and difficult to curb . . . for the stigmatizer, stigma seems to be an effective and natural response, emergent not only as an act of self-preservation or psychological defence, but also in the existential and moral experience that one is being threatened.

This is not to justify stigmatization of LRA returnees, nor is it to underestimate the harmful effects of stigma on this heterogeneous group. Rather, it is to argue that community reintegration in spaces of social suffering can only be helped by interventions that seek to understand first and foremost how and why stigmatization functions in social relationships and ‘local worlds’ rather than addressing it abstractly as a conflict-induced malfunction that can be modified and fixed through education and discipline.

## Acknowledgements

Research funding for this article was generously provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/P004911/1) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/P005454/1). The authors would like to thank Francis Abongo, Moses Adonga, Tim Allen, Dorothy Atim, Jacky Atingo, Julian Hopwood, Melissa Parker and Holly Porter, as well as two anonymous peer reviewers, for extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts. We would also like to express our deepest gratitude to everyone involved in this study who generously took the time to talk with us.

1. See e.g. [Amone-P'Olak et al. \(2016\)](#); [Atim et al. \(2017\)](#); [Baines and Gauvin \(2013\)](#); [Baines and Stewart \(2011\)](#); [Denov and Lakor \(2017\)](#); [Kiconco and Nthakomwa \(2018\)](#); [Mukasa \(2017\)](#).
2. While most studies focus on the experience of women and girls, there have been a handful of important studies on male experiences of the conflict and post-conflict life; see e.g. [Aijazi and Baines \(2017\)](#); [Blattman \(2009\)](#); [Mergelsberg \(2010\)](#); [Schulz \(2018\)](#).
3. See note 1.
4. See e.g. [Jones et al. \(1984\)](#); [Crocker et al. \(1998\)](#); [Major and O'Brien \(2005\)](#); [Link and Phelan \(2001\)](#), [Corrigan et al. \(2004\)](#).
5. [Link and Phelan \(2014: 24–25\)](#) have developed the concept of 'stigma power', in which stigma is a symbolic 'resource' and 'power mechanism' wielded by people who 'have an interest in keeping other people down, in or away'; [Pescosolido and Martin \(2015: 101–102\)](#) draw on complexity theory to present the idea of a 'stigma complex', in which stigma 'emanates' from a 'set of interrelated, heterogeneous system structures . . . and processes'; and [Tyler \(2013: 212; 2018\)](#) uses the concept of the 'stigma machines' to argue that the manufacture of stigma is a deliberate disciplinary technique and 'core organ' of 'neoliberal governmentality'. See also [Parker and Aggleton \(2003: 15\)](#).
6. See [https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter\\_article/the-evolving-understanding-of-stigma](https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/the-evolving-understanding-of-stigma) (accessed March 2019).
7. All of Uganda's post-colonial leaders had come from the north of the country, even though the northern region itself was hardly unified; see [Finnström \(2008\)](#). For excellent analysis of the background to the war, see [Finnström \(2008\)](#) and [Branch \(2011\)](#).
8. The reception centres were set up on an ad-hoc basis during the conflict to provide 'a safe area, basic supplies and basic counselling' for people returning from the LRA. [Allen and Schomerus \(2006\)](#) and [Pham and Vinck \(2007\)](#) have done important studies on the work of the workings and role of the receptions centres.
9. See <https://ugandaradionetwork.com/story/govt-renews-amnesty-commission-man-date> (accessed March 2019).
10. Author interview, 31 July 2012.
11. Author interview, 2 October, 2012, emphasis .
12. The warrants were issued for Joseph Kony (at large); Dominic Ongwen (on trial); Raska Lukwiya (deceased); Okot Odiambo (deceased); Vincent Otto (deceased). See <https://www.icc-cpi.int/uganda> (accessed March 2019).
13. Author interview, 25 June 2018.
14. Group discussion, 7 July 2018.

15. Competition and 'back-biting' were said to be structured into these relationships, signified by the word children historically used to describe their mother's co-wife: *nyek-maa*, 'derived from *nyek*, meaning jealously and *maa*, meaning mother' (Girling 1960: 92).
16. Author interview, 25 June 2018.
17. In the US context, Goffman (1963: 17) describes popular understandings of 'normalcy' as the 'acquisition of a spouse and children, and, oddly... spending Christmas and thanksgiving with them'.
18. Group discussion, 10 July 2018.
19. More recent studies provide insightful elaborations of 'hegemonic models of Acholi masculinity' (Schulz 2018: 1114); see e.g. Dolan (2002); Schulz (2018); Tapscott (2018). These studies also emphasize the gendered male responsibility to 'protect and provide for their families' (*ibid.*).
20. Group discussion, 10 July 2018.
21. Both Dubal (2018) and Porter (2019) use the idea of 'moral geography' to explore the 'bush'/'home' binary in Acholi.
22. It should be noted here that the situation for women, particularly those returning from the bush with children born in captivity, was different. As explained in the introduction, their very 'presence' disrupted and threatened patrilocal and patrilineal norms and customary land tenure, and induced much reported forms of stigmatization. For a personal account, see Amony (2015). For other accounts, see references in note 1.
23. Author interview, 2 June 2018.
24. Author interview, 2 June 2018.
25. Author interview, 25 June 2018.
26. Author interview, 27 June 2018.
27. Author interview, 30 May 2018.
28. Group discussion, 10 July 2018.
29. Group discussion, 10 July 2018.
30. Author interview, 31 May 2018.
31. Author interview, 10 July 2018.
32. Author interview, 2 June 2018.
33. See e.g. McKibben and Bean (2010); Branch (2013).
34. Group discussion, 10 July 2018.
35. Group discussion, 10 July 2018.
36. Group discussion, 5 July 2018.
37. Author interview, 30 May 2018.
38. Author interview, 2 June 2018.
39. Author interview, 31 May 2018. It is interesting to note here that LRA returnees have reported experiencing stigmatization as a result of aid agency/government support allocated directly to them as part of 'reintegration' or 'peacebuilding' projects. In particular, the Amnesty resettlement packages were controversial, and were often perceived by those who were not entitled to access them as a form of unfair special treatment.
40. Author interview, 25 June 2018.
41. Author interview, 15 July 2018.
42. Author interview, 2 June 2018.
43. Group discussion, 10 July 2018.
44. Group discussion, 10 July 2018.

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