

Colonialism and Conflict: A Brief History of Uganda

In 2012 a YouTube video entitled “KONY 2012” went viral. The short film was part of a campaign to have Joseph Kony, the founder and leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), arrested. The video accused Kony of abducting and enslaving tens of thousands of children and displacing more than 2.5 million people in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic.¹ While the film was successful in spreading awareness, it was criticized for oversimplifying a complex war and viewing Africans as a monolith.² Additionally, the film was accused of having a Western interpretation of humanitarianism that perceived Africans as brutal, and therefore more capable of committing mass acts of violence.³ While the LRA is responsible for committing atrocities, it is also pivotal to understand the lingering colonial legacy in the region and how it has contributed to resistance groups, such as the LRA.

In 1890 Britain and Germany signed a treaty giving Britain rights to govern the modern country of Uganda as a British protectorate. Uganda is home to 65 legally recognized ethnic groups, including, but not limited to, the Acholi, Alur, and Langi in the north and the Bantu tribes in the south.⁴ British development deepened ethnic divisions among tribes. While the south received more economic and infrastructure development, including civil service jobs, northerners remained unskilled laborers and soldiers. Additionally, the British favored the Bantu’s physical complexion and their political and economic organization, which was used as an extension of British rule.⁵

Even after Uganda gained independence in 1962, the north-south divide continued to prevail in politics as presidents filled their cabinets with members of their ethnic groups. The military dictator Idi Amin (1971-79), ousted Uganda’s first president, Milton Obote in 1972. Similar to Obote, he proceeded to fill his ranks with men from his own homeland.⁶ After Amin was overthrown, the southern backed National Resistance Movement (NRM), led by Museveni, competed with the Uganda People’s Democratic Army, led by General Tito Okello, for power. In 1986, Museveni defeated Okello, a change that was not welcome in the north.⁷

In wake of the overthrow of Okello’s government, remnants of the former Uganda National Liberation Army, mostly from the Acholi, Langi, Lugubara, Luo, and Marcha tribes took up arms against the new government.⁸ Furthermore, in 1986 a movement known as the Holy Spirit movement led by Alice Auma Lakwena emerged. Lakwena claimed that she was a prophetess guided by the Holy Spirit. She preached an ethnic war gospel that called upon the

¹ Emma Madden, “‘Kony 2012,’ 20 Years Later,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2022.

² Ibid.

³ Sam Dubal, *Against Humanity: Lessons from the Lord’s Resistance Army* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 5-6.

⁴ Dubal, *Against Humanity*, 14.

⁵ Fredrick Kisekka-Ntale, “Roots of the Conflict in Northern Uganda,” *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 32, no. 4 (2007): 426-428.

⁶ Dubal, *Against Humanity*, 16.

⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸ Kisekka-Ntale, “Roots of Conflict in Northern Uganda,” 430-431.

Acholi to recapture power. Although the movement was defeated in 1987, it led to the emergence of Kony and the LRA.

Similar to Lakwena, Kony claimed he was sent by God to “liberate humanity from disease and suffering” and establish a new government based on the Ten Commandments.⁹ Kony’s rhetoric appealed to the Acholi who were suspicious of Museveni and the NRM.¹⁰ The fighting between the LRA and NRM resulted in a bush war that lasted for more than 30 years, with northern Uganda becoming the heart of the conflict. According to Human Rights Watch, at least 20,000 children were abducted between 1987 and 2006.¹¹ Young women and girls were trafficked and trained as rebel soldiers, sometimes having to kill their families or friends.¹² These young women have become what is known as “complex victims” as harm was inflicted upon them, but they also were forced to commit violence.¹³ Following the war, many women who were forced into marriage and motherhood were not welcomed back into their communities.¹⁴ To provide a safe space for women and children fleeing and recovering from the war, Saint Monica’s Girls Tailoring Center was established in Gulu, Uganda in 2002. Since then, thousands of young women have enrolled at St. Monica’s, where education, safety, and unconditional love are offered to help heal the victims of war.¹⁵

⁹ Dubal, *Against Humanity*, 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16

¹¹ M. Gustavsson, J. Oruut, and B. Rubenson, “Girl Soldiers with Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda Fighting for Survival: Experiences of Young Women Abducted by LRA,” *Children’s Geographies* 15, no. 6 (2017): 691.

¹² Reggie Whitten and Nancy Henderson, *Sewing Hope* (Oklahoma City: Dust Jacket Press, 2013), 95

¹³ Erin Baines, *Buried in the Heart: Women, Complex Victimhood and the War in Northern Uganda* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ “Sister Rosemary,” Sewing Hope Foundation, accessed November 30, 2023, <http://www.sewinghopefoundation.com/sister-rosemary.html>.