

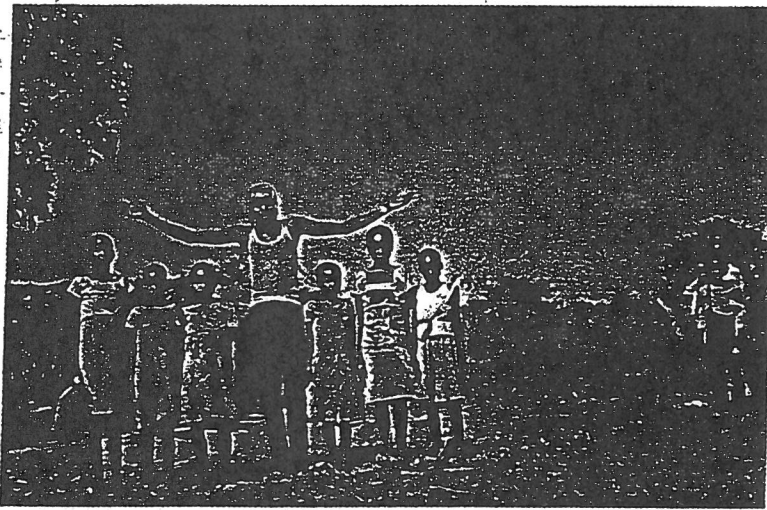
## OUR CHILDREN ARE KILLING US

*A society lives in fear of the rebel leader who is abducting its children and turning them into obedient guerrillas.*

BY ELIZABETH RUBIN

**S**HORTLY after midnight on October 10, 1996, the girls of St. Mary's, an elite boarding school run by Italian Catholic missionaries near the town of Aboke, in the Lango region of northern Uganda, were awakened by the sounds of

formed them into soldiers, bandits, and, in the case of the girls, L.R.A. "wives." After the second raid on the school, Uganda's President, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, visited St. Mary's and assigned Ugandan soldiers to protect it perma-



*Joseph Kony with abductees. When some girls were ordered to hack to death a girl who had tried to escape, they protested, were beaten, then did as they were told.*

shattering glass, clomping boots, and gunshots. Peering out the windows, they could see dark figures with flashlights moving toward the dormitory. "They are coming for us!" one girl cried. The students had heard rumors the previous day that the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army were back. The L.R.A. had attacked St. Mary's in 1989 and again in 1991 to raid the well-stocked school for supplies—medicines, food, bedsheets, radios, and clothing—and, above all, young new recruits. In the first attack, they had captured thirty-three seminary students and ten schoolgirls and marched them north into Acholiland, a region of vast savannas which stretches up into Sudan and has been devastated for the past twelve years by the L.R.A.'s guerrilla war against the Ugandan government. Joseph Kony, the leader of the L.R.A., who is now thirty-two, has kidnapped some twelve thousand Ugandan boys and girls, mostly from his own tribe, the Acholi, and trans-

nently. The dormitories were secured with steel doors and steel bars at the windows. And life on the cloistered campus, with its bucolic Italianate gardens and pastel-colored dorms, returned almost to normal. Accustomed to years of upheaval, parents continued to save money to send their brightest children to St. Mary's. The teen-age girls also accepted the risks, and learned to run on a moment's notice through eucalyptus groves behind the school to spend the night in the bush.

At 2:15 A.M., Sister Rachele Fassera, an Italian who is the deputy headmistress, was awakened by the knocking of the night watchman. "Sister," he said. "They are here." Most of the Ugandan Army's soldiers guarding the school had been removed for rotation ten days earlier, and Sister Rachele had been promised that new soldiers were on the way. But, as she told me when I visited the school recently, "the way he said it, I understood." And she said, "We reasoned that for sure they

BILLIE OKADAMERI

were not going to break the steel doors, so the girls would be safe." Fearing that the rebels would force her to unlock the dorms, she crept outside into the elephant grass with the other sisters and prayed.

But the rebels banged and chiselled away at the window frames for hours. They shouted to the girls to unlock the doors or they'd blow up the dorm. Grace, a fourteen-year-old, was hiding under her bed, in her nightdress, when a frightened girl opened the door and the rebels burst in. They pulled the girls from under the bed, tied them up in groups of five, and beat any who cried with rifle butts, flashlights, sticks, fists. The L.R.A. commander ordered silence as the rebels—most of whom were abducted children themselves—marched the girls out of the school and into the bush. It had rained earlier that night. Girls were slipping and falling, and were beaten for their feebleness.

Sister Rachele emerged from hiding at dawn. When she discovered that most of the thirteen-to-sixteen-year-olds had been abducted, she set out in pursuit of the rebels with a Ugandan teacher named John Bosco as her guide. Tracking the rebels wasn't hard: they had left a trail of candy and biscuit wrappers and soda bottles. Sister Rachele and Bosco caught up with them, and were greeted by some thirty children down on one knee, with their AK-47s ready to fire. The young soldiers agreed to lead the two to Marianno Ochaya Lagira, the L.R.A. commander who had orchestrated the raid. Sister Rachele offered to buy back her girls, but Lagira didn't want money—he wanted girls. He drew the number "139" in the dirt. "The girls are a hundred and thirty-nine," he said. "I will give you a hundred and nine. I will keep thirty." Sister Rachele offered to stay as a hostage if all the girls were released. He said that that was up to Kony and then asked Sister Rachele for an image of the "Blessed Mother." Meanwhile, Lagira's officers were inspecting the girls—for strength, height, and fine features, often choosing lighter-skinned girls—and selected thirty, including Grace and a girl named Barbara, to sit apart from the rest. "If they see you are a bit fine for them, they take you away just like that," Barbara later told me. When the chosen girls realized they were being taken away, they burst into tears. The rebels stomped on Grace and beat all the girls with branches. Sister Rachele dropped to her knees. "Please, Marianno,

give them all to me," she said. "If you act like this, I won't give you any," he said. Then, in a gesture of absurd hospitality, he took Sister Rachele and Bosco away for tea and biscuits.

When the nun and the teacher returned to St. Mary's, the next morning, with the hundred and nine filthy, exhausted girls, hundreds of parents and villagers were gathered at the school awaiting news of the children. Sister Rachele saw Barbara's mother, Sarah. "Is Barbara here?" she asked the nun. When Sarah saw the expression on the faces of the girls behind Sister Rachele, she threw herself down on the grass and wept.

Sister Rachele, a slight fifty-year-old with a soft Italian accent, told me her story one evening in January in the musty office of St. Mary's, where she sat surrounded by photos of the Pope, books about missionaries, Harlequin romances, and E. M. Forster novels. Rain tapped against the windowpanes as we spoke; next door, in the library, schoolgirls were bent over their composition books. The cozy school looked now like a cozy prison, with almost as many heavily armed sentries as students. Sister Rachele was an animated storyteller. She often broke down in tears, gasped to replay her fear, or grabbed my wrist to express her horror. She seemed hounded by a need to tell her tale. She had promised the thirty girls left behind that day in the bush that she would return for them. As of last June, nine had escaped, but twenty-one were still said to be in Sudan, along with thousands of other kidnapped Ugandan children.

I HAD come to northern Uganda to find out what it meant for an entire society to live under the threat of having its children abducted and either killed or turned into killers. Perhaps one of the most terrifying sights in the dozens of post-Cold War insurgencies around the world is that of a thirteen-year-old with a loaded Kalashnikov. There are now some quarter of a million child soldiers worldwide serving in militias, such as those in Cambodia and Afghanistan, but Joseph Kony's L.R.A. is probably the most sinister instance of child-soldiering. It is estimated that as much as eighty per cent of his troops are children between the ages of seven and seventeen, who have been stolen from their homes, classrooms, churches, and their mothers' sides. Between three and five thousand have escaped; UNICEF estimates

that an equal number remain in captivity; an unknown number have died.

Kony preaches his own warrior religion—a syncretic brew of charismatic Christianity, Acholi tribal religion, and bastardized Islam—and claims to be under instructions from the Holy Spirit to keep on killing until Uganda is ruled by the Ten Commandments or until he has overthrown Museveni. When volunteers for his insurgency tapered off in the late eighties, Kony started abducting adults. But they proved difficult to indoctrinate. Ugandan children, he knew, already believed in magic and spirits and didn't ask questions. They were malleable, easily intimidated, and eager to please. Kony's commanders put new captives through a hideous initiation, to frighten them away from deserting and revealing L.R.A. hideouts, and to inure them to violence. About a week after the raid, Grace and her twenty-nine classmates were smeared with holy oils and white ash, in a kind of L.R.A. baptism, and then Lagira ordered the girls to finish off the job begun by veteran rebels—hacking to death, with hoes, axes, and branches, a recently kidnapped girl who had been caught escaping. The students protested, were

beaten, and then did as they were told.

Because the L.R.A. is a relatively small army, consisting of a few thousand soldiers, whose attacks are confined to the north, it does not pose a serious military threat to Uganda. But it has become a key factor in mounting tensions between Museveni's Uganda and the Islamic military regime of Omar el-Bashir, in Sudan. Museveni, who is one of Africa's most influential leaders, has been called a visionary—albeit an authoritarian one—for creating a model of African economic and political stability out of the wreckage left by the Idi Amin Dada and Milton Obote regimes. For years, he has supported the southern Sudanese rebels—mostly black Christians or animists—in their liberation struggle against the repressive regime in Khartoum. Bashir, bent on spreading Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, has sponsored numerous border insurgencies against Museveni, and he has found in Kony an ideal client to destabilize Uganda—an economically viable, mostly Christian, black African state on its border. Kony's rebellion could not survive without the support of Bashir, who supplies him with bases and weapons. Bashir also has food delivered to the L.R.A.

about once a month. He must know that it isn't enough, and that hunger will drive the Ugandan children to steal food from and kill Khartoum's main enemies, the Dinkas, the dominant tribe in the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army. The L.R.A. kids have become so brutal in their search for food that the Dinkas have taken to calling them Tong Tong, which means Cut Cut in Acholi.

With Sudan as his godfather, Kony, the son of peasants, has become a warlord, who rules by whimsy and keeps, at last count, eighty-eight wives. He is known to wake up in the morning and say the spirit told him a certain boy and a certain girl in his army had had unsanctioned sex. The two are then tied to a tree. Kony's priest prays to God to receive their souls for breaking the Tenth Commandment. And then they are shot.

Trained by such terror tactics, the children become obedient guerrillas and trek back into Acholiland in bands of between twenty and thirty, usually led by adult commanders. There they roam the bush, attacking Ugandan government soldiers, burning and massacring villages (sometimes their own), and ambushing buses and cars, killing the people and stealing their belongings. Kony is purportedly fighting Museveni, yet it is his own people, the Acholi, upon whom he is visiting his wrath. He is angry, he has told them, because they stopped supporting him in his crusade; he has abducted a child from nearly every extended Acholi family. While I was at St. Mary's, a newspaper headline announced that Kony was threatening to kidnap thousands more, and in the past few weeks he has started to fulfill his promise.



*"I do listen to that quiet, inner voice, but it just keeps talking about Monica Lewinsky and the Asian crisis."*

As the Nile River courses through Uganda, it makes a giant bend that separates much of the northern part of the country from the rest. The divide is not merely geographic; for more than a century, the rest of Uganda regarded "the north" as a politically and culturally distinct territory. Some Ugandans speak of the bridge over the Karuma Falls—a hundred and sixty-five miles up the main road from the capital, Kampala, where the Nile takes its western turn before elbowing north into Sudan—as the symbolic line of demarcation for this national schism. As one acerbic Acholi member of Parliament told me, "We are thinking of putting a sign up on the south side of the Karuma bridge that reads 'Leaving

Uganda." While I was in Kampala, Joseph Kony and the trouble in the north did indeed seem a remote, foreign affair, the way that the Branch Davidian siege in Waco, Texas, seemed for most Americans. Despite the shock of occasional headlines—"KONY ABDUCTS 48 FROM WEDDING PARTY"—people were preoccupied with economic privatization, school fees, road repairs, soccer matches, a cholera epidemic, and the graduation ceremony of the President's wife, Janet, the first sitting African First Lady to receive a university degree. But when you drive north, as the lush southern hills flatten into wide savanna, flourishing Uganda gives way to an impoverished battle zone of burned-out schools and land-mined roads, where hundreds of thousands of people have left their homes to live in so-called protected villages—sprawling camps of huts, each with an Army detachment. As the pick-up I was travelling in trundled over the Karuma bridge, swaying under the weight of some twenty passengers and sacks of beans, grain, and charcoal, the driver laughed, and shouted above the roaring Nile that it was time to start praying to God. Any God, he said, would do. The little rebels of the L.R.A. love to ambush vehicles, and have turned road travel in Acholiland and parts of the Lango region into a game of Russian roulette.

Acholis, who are only one of many tribes in the north, feel particularly excluded from the benefits of Museveni's new Uganda. Joseph Kony and his L.R.A. are at once the most prominent symptom and the main malingering cause of the collective Acholi sense of injury. Consequently, Kony must be understood not simply as a monstrous individual but as a product of Uganda's extraordinarily bloody past—a stubborn vestige of colonialism and of the dictatorships of Milton Obote and Idi Amin. The trouble goes back to the late nineteenth century, when British colonizers exerted their authority by exploiting what they perceived—in crudely racist terms—as the "natural" differences between northerners and southerners. As a rule, the British favored the south in most things—economic and agricultural development, education and civil-service advancement—and reserved for the north the privilege of military service in the King's African Rifles. Acholis counted for just four per cent of Uganda's population, yet as early as the mid-century they made up an estimated sixty per cent of the indigenous army, and much

of the rest of it was filled by their northern neighbors, among them the Langi.

With independence, in 1962, northerners rose to power, and after an initial respite Uganda chafed under successively more brutal regimes for the next twenty years. Whether as agents of terror or as its victims, Acholis were invariably at the center of the worst of it. Uganda's first president, Milton Obote, who was a Langi, used the Acholis as one of his main enforcers. When his military chief, Idi Amin, a Kakwa from the northwest, staged a coup, in 1971, he rounded up and massacred many of Obote's old officers as well as the élite in Lango and Acholiland. Soon after Amin's ouster, in 1979, Obote was restored to power, and Acholis and Langis once again had the run of the Army, and state-sponsored looting, torture, and massacres intensified.

By the time Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army took control of Kampala, in January of 1986, the combined Obote and Amin regimes had murdered an estimated million Ugandans. As the Acholi soldiers fled home, looting and killing as they went, humiliation and fear swept through Acholiland. Assuming that Museveni's forces would seek revenge, thousands of former Obote soldiers and terrified civilians fled into Sudan. At his swearing-in ceremony later that month, Museveni promised that his revolution was not simply a changing of the guard but a new national order. He offered amnesty, reconciliation, and economic rehabilitation. When his army arrived in Gulu and Kitgum—the two districts that comprise Acholiland—the civilians were surprised. The first lot of soldiers were educated, respectful, and decent. But Museveni's army was composed largely of southerners and westerners who spoke alien languages; and, when an announcement went out over the radio for all former soldiers to report to barracks and hand in their weapons, alarms went off. Acholis remembered Amin's slaughter of Obote's officer corps. Guns and machetes were distributed by ex-officers and Acholi leaders. The exiles marched back from Sudan and attacked the N.R.A. And so began the Acholi insurgency.

Babies in Acholiland are named by the circumstances of their birth, and you can tell a lot about Acholi history from the popularity of such names as Omony

("born in times of war") and Achan ("born in times of difficulties") and Omona ("born in times of feuding"). But, while Acholi fighters grew famous for their brutality—especially during the two Obote regimes—their cult of the warrior was accompanied by a respect for and fear of the dead. "We have a deep cultural feeling that if I kill you your spirit will haunt me until it is appeased," an Acholi member of Parliament told me in an effort to explain the profound sense of bad conscience that afflicts Acholis.

At certain moments in history, a particular land and its inhabitants can seem to become infected, to become a repository of accumulated poison, and a metaphoric or literal battle—often bloody—must unfold in order to create something out of the turmoil. People have different ways of defining the causes of this phenomenon: collective psychosis; angry ancestors; evil spirits; divine retribution; the confluence of economic, historical, political, and cultural forces. The Acholis' confusion and their terror of Museveni's new regime left them ripe for exploitation by appeals to their traditional belief that affliction—whether crop blight, plague, famine, or political ostracism—is the work of malign spirits, and that deliverance depends on the assistance of a powerful priest or witch doctor.

JOSEPH KONY was almost twenty years old when Museveni took Kampala. He had been reared in a devoutly Catholic peasant home, one of ten children, in Gulu. People who remember him from childhood described him to me as a timid boy, who, unlike most village kids, didn't like to fight. He loved to dance and to play lukeme (a wooden plucking instrument), and he was fascinated by the rituals and hymns at church. He dropped out of primary school, worked on the family farm, and was an altar boy at the local chapel. In February, 1986, an ousted Acholi general formed a rebel group called Acholi Are Annoyed, and Kony joined up. But after a few days he returned to his village, and fell sick. At this point in Kony's biography, facts and lore begin to merge. "Kony was possessed by traditional spirits," a former L.R.A. commander and close friend of his told me. "He couldn't eat. He couldn't talk." A witch doctor was called and diagnosed his affliction as possession by an ancestral





*"Don't listen to her—she's a control freak. Now, let me tell you what you're gonna do."*

spirit. In the Acholi culture, the family can then decide to have the witch doctor expel the spirit by cajoling and offering sacrifices and thus cure the child, or else it can call in another, more powerful witch doctor, who will install the spirit of healing in the child for good. Kony's family chose the latter, goats were slaughtered, and he became a traditional healer.

So Kony might have remained if it had not been for his cousin Alice Auma, a fishmonger and faith healer from Gulu, who often counselled Acholi generals. As the rebellion against Museveni gathered momentum in 1986, Alice emerged as a prophetess, with an urgent warning: Acholi sins—raping, looting, killing—had brought on the wrath of the spirits. She said that Lakwena, an Acholi word for a messenger of God, had possessed her at the Murchison Falls, on the Nile River, and, through the medium of an Italian doctor who had been buried near the Nile at the turn of the century, commanded her to cleanse Acholis of their evil ways, to eradicate witchcraft and sorcery, and then to defeat the soldiers of the world—Museveni's N.R.A. Thousands of demoralized young Acholis flocked to the charismatic Alice Lakwena for salvation. They volunteered to be initiated into her Holy Spirit Mobile Force as "soldiers of water," and they adhered to her commandments: no alcohol, no stealing, no sex, no smoking, no quarrelling, no charms or fetishes, no killing of bees

or snakes, no greeting of non-initiates, no harming of civilians, no taking cover from enemy fire. The Holy Spirit crusaders followed her into battles against the N.R.A. "occupiers," carrying crosses and calabashes filled with holy water, and singing hymns. Their chests were smeared with shea-nut oil and water and herbs, to protect them from bullets. Some had guns. Some had stones that Alice had said would detonate like grenades. By November of 1987, several thousand of her followers had been killed by Museveni's modern Army, and Alice escaped across the border to Kenya, where she remains in a refugee camp, claiming to cure AIDS.

Joseph Kony was inspired by Alice, not to join her, but to steal her followers. When she fled into exile, he founded what he called the Holy Spirit Mobile Force II (he changed the name several times before settling on Lord's Resistance Army), rallying thousands of his cousin's followers and many rebels aligned with former Obote officers. For the first few years of the rebellion, Museveni was preoccupied with rebuilding Uganda, and by 1991 Kony's forces were overrunning Acholiland. In March of that year, the government launched Operation North, a scorched-earth campaign intended to wipe out the rebels. The effort was marked by extensive human-rights violations. But David Tinnyefuza, the major general who commanded the operation, and who was later recalled for his abuses,

remains unapologetic. "If you have an enemy who will abduct five thousand children, raping girls and cutting women, and you're faced with that situation, do you think you will use humane methods?" he asked me. "Despite the excesses," he added, "we recaptured the north."

After nearly five years of fighting, Kony slunk into hiding. Enraptured and wounded by the betrayal of the Acholi leaders who had once blessed his fight and by the Acholi people who had given his army food and cattle, he flipped through the vengeful pages of his Bible until he alighted upon the punishments he was looking for, in Mark 9: "And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off. . . . And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off. . . . And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out." Jesus' metaphors provided Kony with a useful instruction manual. He unleashed his few hundred remaining followers, and they set about cutting off lips, ears, legs, hands, breasts, and genitals of suspected government informants. Word went out that anyone caught on a bicycle would have his legs hacked off. (Bicycles are the most common form of transportation in Uganda, and a villager on a bike can quickly inform the Army of a rebel sighting.) Hospitals filled with mutilated Acholis. Few now volunteered to join Kony's ranks, so, I was told by a former L.R.A. commander, Kony issued a new directive through one of his war spirits, Wrong Element: "If you commanders don't take captives, you will all die." What had begun as a popular insurgency against Museveni's rule had degenerated into a gruesome punishment spree. One Acholi politician summed up the Alice and Kony phenomena to me as follows: "These people are all mental cases. But Alice believed only in oils, stones turning into bombs, and prayer, while Kony also believes in guns and military science." The crucial difference, the politician said, was that Alice did not abduct children.

In 1994, after a brief period of stability, Museveni's Minister for the North arranged peace talks in the bush. The proceedings, which were videotaped, provide rare footage of the elusive Kony. Twenty-seven years old in the film, he is tall and lanky, wearing Sudanese combat fatigues, beaded dreadlocks, and dark glasses. He plays the prophet of fire and brimstone before his audience of Acholi politicians and elders, gesticulating wildly, quoting the Bible, comparing himself to Jesus and Muhammad. He blames the Acholi lead-

room, a barnlike space with three small desks and chairs on either side, and shutters banging back and forth in the Har-mattan, the wind that chases cold Saharan air from northern Sudan down into the savannas of Uganda. Susan wore a green-yellow-and-white plaid jumper and flip-flops. Her arms were bare and muscular. She curtsied and held out her hand in greeting; it was a strong hand but a shy handshake. She'd escaped from L.R.A. captivity about a month earlier; cuts and scrapes and welts on her legs from life in the bush were healing, but her mind, she said, was still a little disturbed.

In September of 1995, Susan was on holiday from primary school, and early one morning she and her brother were harvesting sorghum in the garden of their home, in Kitgum. The light was soft, and their sister was on her way back from fetching water when rebels suddenly appeared and marched all three children to Sudan. Susan gave herself a nom de guerre to deceive the rebels—Susan Alum, which means “delivered in the bush, or in exile.” And now, in Gulu, she could tell herself that her two years with the L.R.A. happened to Susan Alum, not to Susan Akello.

Susan was twelve when she arrived at the training camps, and she hadn't started menstruating yet, so her commander, Matata—nicknamed after the huge Tata truck—assigned her to the older girls, with babies, who would teach her how to be with a man. Like the rest of the

children, Susan learned the consequences of disobedience, hesitation, disgust, fear, or contrition: canings or death. (You'd get a hundred lashes if you were slow to file in when the whistle was blown. And if you were a girl and you talked nicely to an Arab you'd get a bullet in the head.) Susan wanted to survive. But more than that she wanted to excel and be praised, and so she became a brave, agile soldier, and a very good shot. She was a quick study with the gun—an AK-47 with a folding metal arm instead of the usual fixed wooden handle—and she figured out how to fit a bayonet on it. “If you want to shoot, you bend the knife down, and then you press the trigger,” she said. She was in Control Altar brigade, with Kony. She said that Kony was a jolly man and she didn't fear him. “I believe he has the power,” she said, giggling, “because when you are near him he can tell you what you are thinking—especially if you are thinking of escape.”

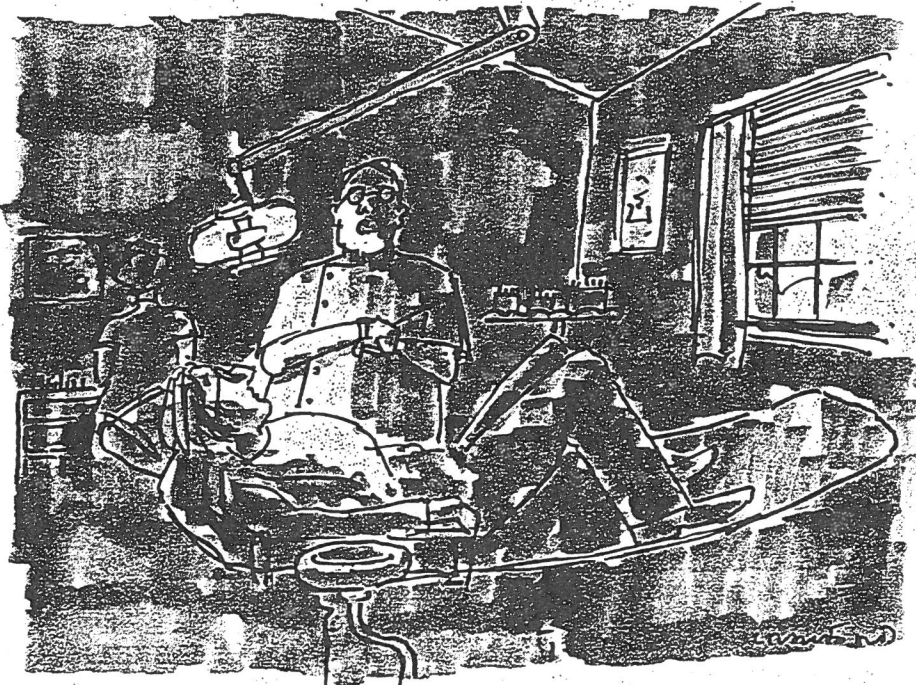
Susan set about mastering the mechanics of warfare. She came to hear the difference between a hit and a miss. The shot bangs louder when it hits the air but makes a dull thud, or “poo” sound, she said, when the bullet hits a body. At the sound of the thud, Susan would dash to the dead soldier, remove his uniform and gun and boots, and leave the body naked. Praise was bountiful when you snatched a gun. Susan recalled a time when her battalion was cooking supper in the bush in Uganda and gov-

ernment soldiers opened fire. She stood up tall, as she'd been taught, and fought back. “We lost four and they lost two, and I killed one of those two,” she said. “At first, when I saw the dead body, I trembled. But I never felt sorry.” If a shoot-out was successful, she was happy, because she and her comrades could then raid shops and she could get herself dresses, soap, shoes, handkerchiefs.

Susan had a high, soft voice, and it never changed as she recounted her story. Being young, she said, made her very obedient and quick to respond, and so she was often chosen for nasty tasks: “When the big man chooses you, it means you are the best among the others.” Once during a raid in Acholiland, Susan's commander ordered her to execute a village woman whom he had accused of being an informant. When she hesitated, she felt the cold, hard thwack of a machete's flat side on her back. “So I shot her dead,” she told me. “I gave her two bullets. One here and one here.” She touched her chest and the right side of her collarbone. Susan said she didn't know what she would have done if the woman had been her mother; she'd seen L.R.A. commanders order people to kill their own mothers. As it was, she felt confused afterward, especially when the woman's three little children went shouting and crying and running into the hut, where they tried to stay quiet. “But I recovered fast,” she said. “You can't show to your boss you felt something bad after killing.”

The woman's ghost stayed in Susan's dreams. She would walk toward Susan with blood on her chest, saying, “I am dying, I am dying, I am being killed for nothing.” But now that Susan was safe in the center in Gulu with her counsellor, the woman's ghost had gone away, and she dreamed mostly about being carried on her mother's back while she harvested in the garden. Her brother and sister were still in Sudan.

I WAS often awed by the aplomb and courage that the girls showed in their ordeals and in telling me of them. One of the counsellors said that for some children Kony's world was almost like a game: pull the trigger, hit the target, and you win—praise, promotion, or just your life. Others I met were too battered even to speak. And yet, despite the benumbing power of Kony's indoctrination, nearly all the children I talked to dreamed of



*“What’ll it be—Novocain or Yanni?”*

breaking away. While in Sudan, Susan always had a getaway plan: she would slip off for a pee, tarry awhile, and then fly through the bush. And one day she did. Almost without exception, the children became animated and excited as they described to me the daring and cunning that guided them home. The moment they were snatched by the L.R.A., they entered a moral universe where everything they had been taught was flipped on its head. Killing was good. Kindness was bad. Blind obedience was good. Questions were bad. Florence, an eighteen-year-old who had been a member of Kony's harem, described to me how she taught survival techniques to some of the St. Mary's girls when they arrived in Sudan, paralyzed with despair. "We told them to face reality—don't think too much, because thinking alone can kill you." As the children recounted their escape stories, however, their minds quickened, the spirit returned to their eyes. In outfoxing their captors by using the very skills and ingenuity that they had been taught in that "Lord of the Flies" world, they were breaking Kony's spell.

The odyssey of Grace, one of the thirty St. Mary's students whom Sister Rachele had left behind with Commander Lagira, began one day in Sudan when she sat down under a tree and waited to die. When I spoke with her, back in the school's library, she was wearing a green-and-red floral print dress, and reading a Kenyan novel. Upon her arrival in Sudan, she told me, she was given to a commander. He raped her, and she became his. Her only form of resistance was to abuse him in English, which he didn't understand. Six months into her captivity, in April of 1997, Sudanese rebels and Ugandan soldiers, hoping to rescue children, attacked the L.R.A. bases in Sudan. Many of the children—and Kony along with them—fled further north. But Grace just sat with her gun under a big tree where they used to pray, and watched the bombs exploding, the people running, the dead accumulating. With dusk falling, the heat subsided, and "something came into my head," she told me. She said to herself, "You want to die, but maybe this is your time today to go home." She got up, took her gun, and walked away from the battle toward Zaire.

For days, Grace wandered alone—eating clay from the riverbanks, sleeping little at night, for fear of leopards—until she saw a group of rebel village children,

two boys and eight girls, talking by a tree. As soon as she walked up to them, a power struggle began. They all had guns. There were no commanders. And everyone was a potential enemy—the L.R.A., the northern Sudanese, the Ugandan Army and its allies the Sudanese rebel Dinkas. The challenge snapped Grace back to life. Her resourcefulness reemerged, and she seized control. When she told the group that she was running back to Uganda, the boys insisted that they should all follow Kony, and they wanted to shut her up with a bullet. Grace dared them to shoot her, and her defiance intrigued the girls. One of them took her side, then two, then three, then all eight. "The boys refused," Grace said laughing. "They said they couldn't follow a girl's idea." The girls trekked after Grace, but with great mistrust. Life under Kony had whittled their range of thinking down to two options—killing or dying. When she led them to a river, they thought she wanted to drown them, and they threatened to shoot her. When she discovered footprints and led them toward two Dinka women, they were certain that she was plotting to have them killed, and again they threatened to shoot her. Each time, Grace said, "Go ahead and shoot me," whereupon her followers became confused and indecisive. According to their logic, if they shot their new leader, they, too, would die. Finally, Grace saw a Dinka compound and suggested that it was time for all of them to give themselves up. "I told them, 'If we die, it's fine. It's God's will.'" The others tried to run but were captured by the Dinkas. Grace was no longer willing to surrender herself to Providence. As the Dinkas were about to execute the girls, she stood in her dirty dress, hands above her head, and shouted in English, "You are going to shoot us, but we have come for you to help us!" An old Dinka understood her, and listened as Grace told her story. He judged the girls to be innocent, and told his clansmen to bring them porridge. Once safe on Ugandan soil, the girls showed their respect and appreciation for Grace by calling her Mammy.

THE goals of the trauma centers are modest, and therefore fairly realizable. Group therapy, game playing, reenactments of life in the bush, tradi-

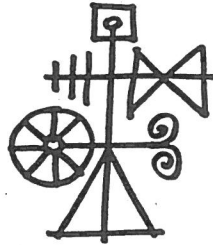
tional dancing, drawing are all designed to teach the kids to forget. It is a challenging concept: remembering to forget. And in place of guns they are given vocational training. Instead of little bush warriors, they looked like an army of recycled apprentice tailors, mechanics, and carpenters. But there are thousands of kids who never made it home.

One government newspaper reported that during Kony's first year in Sudan he had sold a hundred and ten Acholi children into slavery, trading them to Sudanese Arabs for a hundred and nine AK-47s. Richard, a twelve-year-old orphan who had been with the L.R.A. in Sudan, told me, "They in-

ject the children with some herbs, and we learned that it's to make them forget." The Arabs' plane, he said, would "take about ten children away." Many children who did escape never passed through the trauma centers. A counsellor at GUSCO told me about a boy who escaped from the L.R.A. and went straight home. Shortly after his return, he was sitting under a tree, and his sister was grinding maize. He got up, hacked her to death with an axe, and went back and sat under the tree.

The war in Acholiland is a bizarrely intimate affair, a kind of Biblical family feud. Parents in the villages have impossible choices to make. If they inform on the rebels, their children can be killed by the Ugandan Army, and they themselves will risk being killed in retribution by the L.R.A. rebels—their own children. If they don't inform, the Ugandan Army may suspect them of collaborating. For every mother who told me, "Our own soldiers are killing our own children," there was another who said, "Our children are killing us."

Acholi society remains devastated, and the recycled children, without an inhabitable world to return to, are likely to resort to the skills they learned from Kony. The day before I left Gulu, Beatrice, the counsellor, told me that a few days earlier some schoolchildren had been taunting a group of "bush" kids playing ball outside the trauma center. The reaction was instantaneous, animal self-preservation. The ex-rebels surrounded the schoolchildren, spitting, circling, menacing. One ex-rebel boy grabbed a machete from a man passing by. "Let's start!" they shouted. One



of the counsellors ran through the gates and into the playground just in time to prevent the slaughter.

WHILE I was in Uganda, Acholi politicians and international-aid donors were pressuring Museveni to reopen talks with Kony and the Sudanese government. The debate on whether to negotiate or to fight was taking place all over Acholiland. To my surprise, I found that many people regarded the rebels, and even Kony, as prodigal children, and thus wanted to heal their society in accordance with traditional Acholi jurisprudence—compensation and forgiveness. But the parents of missing children were not so eager to make amends. “This business of forgiving encourages people,” the father of one of the kidnapped St. Mary’s girls told me, adding, “The children are killed, and someone must pay for what they’ve done.”

Museveni agrees, and for now he has chosen to stick to military confrontation. When I met the President in Kampala, he refused to dignify the L.R.A. with the name of “rebels,” which might imply that they had a political cause; he prefers to speak of “bandits” and “terrorists.” Museveni received me one evening at his home, in a hilltop State House compound that had been built by the British. Dressed casually in trousers and a checked shirt, he projected an air of supreme confidence about eliminating the L.R.A. problem, though it was clear that the war in the north is not his favorite subject. When I asked him if he felt he’d made any mistakes over the years in his handling of the L.R.A., he leaned over his mahogany desk, widened his eyes, and said simply “No.” He sees his fight with Kony as one of the final campaigns in his original struggles against Amin and Obote. “What they are doing in the border areas now, at one time they were doing in the whole country,” he said of the L.R.A. His forces had already negotiated with and absorbed into its ranks ten rebel groups during its first ten years in power, and he contended that Kony, too, could be “cleaned” from the political landscape. He didn’t care how long it took. “They were here. Amin was in this house,” he reminded me, jabbing his desk. “So if you have swept the house all the way from here to the border, I am sure we shall also sweep the border.”

In 1996, Museveni put his younger brother, Major General Salim Saleh, in charge of that sweep. At the same time, Saleh was working to integrate the

Acholis into the new Uganda. “Acholis were made to believe that the government hates them, and I wanted to change that perception,” Saleh told me. To that end, he had started a foundation, with two prominent Acholis, to get people—especially women—to plant crops instead of political mischief. “Human beings are our most recyclable and our biggest asset,” he said. “That’s why my focus is not on Kony anymore but on the human beings.”

Leaving the troubles of Acholiland to his brother’s team, Museveni himself was preoccupied with the regional dimensions of the conflict with the L.R.A. “We don’t want to go to war with Sudan, but Sudan has no right to harbor terrorists against us,” Museveni told me. As for the pressure to negotiate, he said, “Those who put pressure on me, whoever they are, they are naïve. They think that you can smile at evil, and evil will smile back, and you have a nice dialogue. Our experience shows that, yes, sometimes evil may talk peace, but evil will talk peace under pressure, not out of choice.”

ONE afternoon, I visited Ben Pere, whose two daughters had been abducted with Grace and the other St. Mary’s girls, and were still in Sudan. He lives in Lira, the capital of Lango—far enough away that he is not afraid to speak out against the L.R.A. As a young man, Ben had gone to technical college and had built on his farm a spacious, three-bedroom Mediterranean-style house. We were sitting on a veranda overlooking mango and palm trees and bougainvillea in his gardens. “Beautiful land,” he said. He had worked hard over the years to provide his children with an education. “I wanted my children to speak better than me,” he said. The older one, Jacqueline, had wanted to be a doctor, and the younger one, Susan, who was a tomboy, had wanted to be a pilot.

In June of last year, the Sudanese government invited a small Ugandan delegation to search for the St. Mary’s students at L.R.A. camps near Juba. Ben and Sister Rachele were among the group. The Sudanese drove them to the main camp, but the L.R.A. had been forewarned, and

it was completely abandoned. At dusk, they came to a small camp where some forty-five Ugandan girls in combat fatigues, carrying AK-47s, paraded and knelt in rows before them. Ben was sickened when he recognized their commander, an ugly old rebel named Vincent Otti. Ben and Vincent had been squad mates in the liberation struggle against Amin, and he knew that Vincent had now taken his daughter Jacqueline as a wife. “I wanted to kill him,” Pere told me, “or for him to kill me.” Vincent was ashamed, and muttered that he didn’t have Jacqueline, and that even if he did he couldn’t release any of the girls without Kony’s permission.

The next morning, the delegation showed up unannounced at the main camp. Ben saw what seemed like thousands of Ugandan kids shouting, chanting, marching. They scattered when they saw the visitors: Kony had warned that anyone who uttered a word to the outsiders would be killed. To Ben, every girl looked like one of his daughters, and he chased after a few who ran to hide in a hut. He squatted at the entrance, and recklessly promised that if they told him where his daughters were he would take them back with him. A girl named Monica came forward. The girls, she said, were locked in a hut somewhere in the camp. Just at that moment, the Sudanese ordered the delegation to leave, and Ben later learned that his daughter Susan was crying out for her daddy from a hut nearby. He also found out that as soon as they drove away Monica’s face was smashed with a log and she was bayoneted to death. “I lost my head,” Ben told me. “I was just thinking about the lives of my girls.”

As we walked into Jacqueline’s and Susan’s old bedroom, Ben said quietly, “It would be better to bury a person than to just imagine the state she is living in.” It was a small room, with two single beds and a picture window looking out at a rocky outcropping. The room had a feeling of absence which reminded me of a drawing I had seen by one of the escaped children in Gulu. In the foreground, armed children in uniform were leading away bare-chested children with their hands tied behind their backs. Two arms clasp- ing an axe came down from the top of the page onto the head of a prostrate girl. The picture, I learned, was a self-portrait. The disembodied arms swinging the axe belonged to the boy who drew it; he had, in effect, absented himself from the killing. ♦



ers for the anguish he has visited upon them. He ridicules their flip-flopping loyalty. He compares them to double-headed snakes and unfaithful wives. "You encouraged your children to come home from Kampala with guns, agitated for rebellion," he shouts, and then mocks them as a bunch of hicks who concoct their "lousy plans" while "urinating, scratching your buttocks while at the same time eating cold potatoes with unwashed hands." Two elders were so scared of Kony that they defecated in their pants.

The peace talks failed. Bashir, many believe, had already offered Kony a deal, and the L.R.A. crossed into Sudan and established permanent bases. Kony then began to enact the apocalyptic tableau he painted for his audience in the bush: "God said in the Bible, 'I will unleash my wrath upon you and you will suffer pain. And in the end you will be killed by the sword. Your children will be taken into captivity and they will be burnt to death.'"

WHEN children manage to escape from the L.R.A. or are captured in battle, the Ugandan Army hands them over to one of two trauma centers set up

in Gulu, the largest town in the north, some fifty miles from the Sudan border. Gulu looks like many other Ugandan towns, with dust-covered prairie-style shops and stately mahogany trees lining the roads, but as dusk falls it becomes a giant safe house for surrounding villagers. Families converge on the town with bundles on their heads to sleep with friends or inside St. Joseph's Cathedral. The Italian-run hospital called Lacor, on the outskirts of Gulu, has turned into a village, with thousands camping out on the grounds to avoid the attacks of the rebel children.

Down a red mud road from the hospital is the Gulu Support for Children Organization, or GUSCO, which is funded by the Danish branch of Save the Children. When I visited in January, some thirty girls and two hundred and forty boys were receiving counselling there, and Beatrice Arach, a counsellor at GUSCO, told me that most of the children seemed numb to the atrocities they'd committed. They said things like "That hammer would be great in the bush for killing," and "Fat people like you are easy to hack to death. The skinny ones take more

time." Parents came to Gulu every day seeking news of their children. Beatrice recalled one mother who approached a group of new girls to ask them if they knew her daughter. "Oh, that one," one of the girls said. "We killed her."

In the past year, more than seven hundred kids have passed through GUSCO, and three thousand through the other trauma center, organized by the international Christian group World Vision, and set up in the old Ministry of Works. One sweltering afternoon, I was in the World Vision center's yard when an Army truck pulled up and unloaded fifteen wild-looking rebels. One boy, probably not older than ten, folded his gashed legs under him, exposing leathery feet that were swollen like footballs. He never blinked his enormous eyes; he just stared out at his new surroundings like cornered prey. A few feet away, some sixty children, who had been back awhile, sat on the grass under a tarp, laughing, slapping their knees, and clapping as they watched a video of "The Gods Must Be Crazy II."

I met Susan Akello, a fourteen-year-old Kony veteran, inside the counselling

