Night Commuting in Gulu, Northern Uganda

From Spontaneous Strategy to New Social Institution

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Master’s Thesis in Peace and Conflict Studies

The Faculty of Social Science

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Executive Summary

Night commuting, as it is occurring in parts of Northern Uganda today, is the social practice of thousands of children leaving their households at night to go and sleep in one of the many night commuter centres that are established in the urban areas of Gulu and Kitgum. The common conception about night commuting is that the children come to the centres solely out of fear of abduction. This thesis challenges this notion and investigates the additional factors that make children in Gulu spend their nights in the night commuter centres. The study shows that children do not only come to the centres to protect themselves against the threat from the rebel group, the Lord’s Resistance Army, but that children and their households also use night commuting as a strategy to cope with secondary socio-economic effects of the prolonged conflict and displacement. It argues that the night commuting has developed from a spontaneous crisis-driven strategy to a social institution serving protection purposes, but also purposes related to the broader issues of subsistence and socialisation in the Acholi society.
Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been written without the generosity and hospitality of the commuters and volunteers at Charity for Peace Foundation’s night commuter centre at Gulu Public Primary School in Gulu, Northern Uganda. Thank you all for letting me into your lives, and trusting me to tell your stories. My gratitude also to Viola, my interpreter, and to all my other informants in Gulu and Kampala that took the time to contribute to this thesis.

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Thanks to my family for always having faith in me, my friends for being patient with me, and all of you for being supportive and interested.

Oslo, May 2006
Henriette Lunde
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<tr>
<td>ARLPI</td>
<td>Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>Community-Based Organisation</td>
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<td>CSOPNU</td>
<td>Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda</td>
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<td>FAC</td>
<td>Formerly Abducted Child</td>
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<td>HURIFO</td>
<td>Human Right Focus</td>
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<td>HURIPEC</td>
<td>Human Rights &amp; Peace Centre</td>
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<td>HRW</td>
<td>Human Right Watch</td>
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<td>HSM</td>
<td>Holy Spirit Movement</td>
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<td>IDMC</td>
<td>Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre</td>
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<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Person</td>
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<td>IGO</td>
<td>International Governmental Organisation</td>
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<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organization for Migration</td>
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<td>IRC</td>
<td>International Rescue Committee</td>
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<td>LC</td>
<td>Local Council</td>
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<td>LRA</td>
<td>Lord’s Resistance Army</td>
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<td>MSF</td>
<td>Médecins Sans Frontières</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRA</td>
<td>National Resistance Army (renamed UPDF in 1995)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRC</td>
<td>Norwegian Refugee Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>RDC</td>
<td>Resident District Commissioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLP</td>
<td>Refugee Law Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWO</td>
<td>Probation and Welfare Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNOCHA</td>
<td>United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>UPDA</td>
<td>Uganda People’s Democratic Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPDF</td>
<td>Uganda People’s Defence Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPE</td>
<td>Universal Primary Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>WCRWC</td>
<td>Women's Commission For Refugee Women and Children</td>
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Map of Acholiland

This map is created by Mark Dingemanse and released under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 license.
http://www.vormdicht.nl/
“We are tired”

Children of Uganda
Wake up, wake up
Our time has come
To develop ourselves and our rights and responsibilities
Togetherness, doctors, teachers, parents
Join your arms and strengthen us
We are tired
We are tired

We are tired of walking long distances
We are tired of early marriages
You are also tired of giving us food
Future generations, future generations
We are the future generations
We want to stop to find abduction and corruption in our country
Stop abusing us
We are tired

(Abkiola Flavia, 12, night commuter at Gulu Public)
1. Introduction

Night commuting, as it occurs in Acholiland today, is the social practice where thousands of children leave their households in the evening to go and spend the night in one of the many night commuter centres that are found in the urban areas of Gulu and Kitgum as well as in some of the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.¹ The first centres were established in Gulu during summer 2003, a time of intense conflict when approximately 40,000 children and adults escaped the rural countryside and the IDP-camps for the safer urban areas every night out of fear of being abducted by the notorious rebel group, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) (UNOCHA & IRIN 2004). International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) entered the scene to facilitate the night commuters and provide them with an alternative to sleeping on the streets. Since then the security situation in the region has improved and the number of commuters has sharply decreased, but still thousands of children spend their nights in the centres instead of staying in their own households. The common conception about night commuting is that the children come to the centres solely out of fear of abduction. This thesis challenges this notion and investigates the additional factors that make children in Gulu spend their nights in the night commuter centres.

The conflict in Northern Uganda between the Ugandan government and the LRA has lasted for twenty years and caused immense suffering to the population living in the region. More than 1.7 million persons are internally displaced, which equals an astonishing 90 percent of the people in Acholiland (HRW 2006). The numbers of civilians that have been killed, molested or abducted during the two decades the conflict has lasted is unknown, but the social circles of suffering affect every member of the Acholi population.² The violence in Acholiland is intermittent, shifting between periods of intense fighting between the belligerents and violent attacks on the civilian population, and periods of relative calm when the rebels stay in

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¹ Unless otherwise specified Gulu and Kitgum will be used to denominate the towns, not the districts. Night commuter centres are often also called shelters. In this thesis the terms will be used interchangeably.
² Acholi is the name of the dominant ethnic group in the region most affected by the conflict.
their bases on the Sudanese side of Uganda’s northern border. Nevertheless, as is the case in most conflicts on the African continent, the majority of the deaths are not caused by direct violence but by the secondary socio-economic effects of living in a conflict zone. In this thesis I will explore how the children and their households are using night commuting as a means to cope with challenges they are facing, not only as a consequence of the direct threat of violence but also as a result of the dire humanitarian conditions in which they live. For a number of the children that are commuting, LRA is only one of the threats they are facing. The levels of alcoholism and domestic violence are high, abuse from UPDF soldiers is a problem (Paul 2006) and their general living conditions as internally displaced are among the worst in the world (Bøås & Hatløy 2005). The night commuting in Gulu must be analysed in relation to the sad fact that Northern Uganda today is probably the world’s worst place to be a child (Batha 2006).

1.1 Research question

As already mentioned, the night commuter centres in Gulu were established to provide the commuting children with a safe alternative to sleeping on the streets at a time when they were facing a constant high risk of being abducted by rebels. That the centres are still serving this purpose is apparent from how the numbers of commuters in the centres fluctuate according to the rebel activity in the area. But even at times when the majority of the children find it safe enough to stay at home, thousands of children continue to commute into town. It is my assumption that the night commuting in Gulu has come to serve alternative functions for some of the children and households in the area than what was the initial purpose. It is when the security situation improves and the number of children drops that these additional functions become apparent. So far very little research has been carried out on night commuting as a social practice. The existing data is limited to a few assessments conducted by humanitarian organisations, which will be presented in the next chapter. The lack of previous research on the topic of night commuting made it necessary to conduct fieldwork to gather the data needed.

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3 Southern Sudan has been the traditional base for the LRA but since November 2005 parts of the group have been located in the northeastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo.
4 Jan Egeland, UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, speaking at Red Cross’ Humanitarian Forum in Oslo on February 7, 2006.
My fieldwork was carried out over five weeks from the end of February to early April 2005 at Charity for Peace Foundation’s night commuter centre at Gulu Public Primary School. When Gulu Public first opened for commuters in July 2003, there were more than 7,000 children spending their nights at the premises. During my stay in early 2005, the number of commuters was down to around 450. The obvious question to me became:

*Why do these 450 children continue to commute to the centre, when more than 6,500 children find it safe enough to stay home or have found other alternatives?*

To answer this question I will look into:

*What are the factors influencing their decision to commute and what purposes does the commuting serve in their lives?*

To understand the dynamics involved in the night commuting, it is necessary to analyse the agency of the commuter, or the person making the decision that the child is to commute, in relation to the structural circumstances framing their decision. The night commuting in Gulu is a unique phenomenon, which can only be understood within the context of a society suffering the social and moral consequences of two decades in a stranglehold, kept hostage in the crossfire between the LRA and the governmental army, the Uganda People’s Defence Force (UPDF).

### 1.2 Definitions

As will be shown, night commuting in Gulu has developed from a crisis-driven individual action into an institutionalised social practice with both informal norms and explicit rules and regulations attached to it. As such, it is something more than just a routine pattern of behaviour. Barnes defines social practices as “*socially recognized forms of activity, done on the basis of what members learn from others, and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly*” (2001: 19). That a social practice has a performance aspect is the main characteristic that distinguishes it from mere
habitual behaviour (Neumann 2002: 314). With the establishment of special night commuter centres, the commuting has become shaped within a structural framework and has become a social institution in the Acholi society. A social institution can be defined as “a social-material structure of social interaction, often complemented with written rules, a physical building or a specialised staff” (Østerberg 2003: 99). All of these elements are seen at the night commuter centres in Gulu town. Social institutions can also be defined in terms of the purposes they serve in the society as “the relatively permanent structural configurations centred around the tasks of meeting the important material and nonmaterial requirements of a society” (Boudreau & Newman 1993: 112). Social institutions are ‘relatively permanent’ but they are not immutable. Being based on fulfilling the needs of a society, or a segment of a society, social institutions adapt to changing contexts, or other institutions replace them. My focus in this thesis will be on how the purposes of the night commuting in Gulu have changed with the altered security situation in the area and why some children continue to commute during periods of relative calm. Anthony Giddens (1984: 6) defines agency as the capability, rather than the intention, of doing something. Both the commuting children and their families are social actors, and as such are trying their best to fulfil their needs and serve their own interests with the help of the limited resources they have available (see Brinkmann 1991: 21). When the children continue to come and spend their nights in the centres, it reasonable to expect that the commuting is meeting some requirement in the life of the children or their family, and as such serve a purpose. As will be shown in this thesis, the children and their households are using the commuting to serve purposes related to protection, but also subsistence and socialisation.

1.3 **Significance of research**

Out of the research carried out on children and conflict, surprisingly little attention is given to all the children that are living in conflict areas without becoming directly involved in armed groups (Krijn, Richards & Vlassenroot 2003). There are exceptions, for instance, research conducted on the strategies adolescent girls use to cope with their sexual vulnerability in conflicts (de Berry 2004; Swaine & Feeny 2004) as well

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5 Author’s translation from Norwegian.

6 ‘Children’ will in this thesis be used interchangeably with ‘commuters’, and as such also include youths up to eighteen-years-old.
as NGO assessments of indicators related to children’s living conditions in conflict regions. However, ‘children in armed conflict’ in general tends to mean children participating in armed conflict.\(^7\) This thesis seeks to add to the limited stock of literature available on the strategies adopted by children that are not directly involved with armed groups.

The night commuting in Northern Uganda is largely an unexplored phenomenon. This thesis is primarily based on qualitative interviews with seventeen night commuters as well as other relevant actors, and I do not propose to make statistical generalisations about the total population of commuters. I will however present some socio-economic factors that I found influenced why my respondents had become regular commuters. This can serve as a basis for theoretical generalisations and provide a point of departure for future research on the topic (see Coffey & Atkinson 1996). It is my hope that this work will present a first step towards a deeper understanding of the social phenomenon of night commuting in Northern Uganda.

The absence of research on the topic of night commuting gives knowledge about the phenomenon an intrinsic academic value, but it also has a more practical value for the children concerned. Gaining a deeper understanding of the motivations these children have for coming to the centres and the social conditions that make some children more likely to commute than others is crucial. Relying on the common but faulty assumption that children come to centres solely out of fear of the LRA would mean neglecting the needs of those that use commuting as a strategy to cope with other kinds of vulnerabilities inflicted upon them by a disintegrating society. It is necessary to know more about the children not only in order to be able to meet their needs when the centres at some stage most likely are closed down, hopefully in the wake of peace, but also to better accommodate them in the current setting.

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\(^7\) It needs to be noted that the distinction between participating in armed conflict and ‘only’ being affected is blurred. According to the Cape Town Principles, a child soldier is “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and/or forced marriage” (UNICEF 1997). The girls abducted by the LRA to become ‘rebel wives’ fall under the definition, and are then also entitled to participate in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes. On the other hand girls that have suffered systematic rape in other conflicts where sexual violence has been used as a weapon, for instance, Kosovo and the Democratic Republic of Congo, are not defined as participants in conflict (see Pedersen & Sommerfelt 2006).
1.4 Case study

Northern Uganda is the only place where night commuting as an institutionalised coping mechanism for vulnerable children is occurring (CSOPNU 2006). The unique character of the commuting makes the topic well suited for a single-case study (Yin 1994). According to Yin, “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context” (1994: 13). A case study is particularly useful when the boundaries between the phenomenon studied and the context in which it takes place are not clearly evident, as with the commuting in Northern Uganda. A typical feature of case studies is that they rely on multiple sources of evidence to reach a holistic understanding of the phenomenon in question and to increase the validity of the findings. For the purposes of this thesis I have triangulated data gathered through qualitative interviews, participant observation, and commuters’ drawings and writings, as well as secondary sources.

1.5 Research design

As I am interested in how my informants interpret and reflect on their own situation and the choices they make, a qualitative research design was a natural choice. Qualitative research makes it possible to start the study with an open and flexible approach (Thagaard 2003), which was essential in framing this study. I wanted the children and other respondents to be given the chance to emphasise what they thought important, and for that reason I chose an iterative and continuous design, where the information I got from my initial round of interviews was used to frame the latter (see Rubin & Rubin 1995). My first interviews were more in the way of informal conversations on the topic of commuting rather than well-structured interviews. As a large part of my data gathering took place at night, I often had time during the day to write out the narratives I had collected and to analyse them in search of repeating themes and topics that seemed important to the informants. That made it possible to investigate these themes with more scrutiny in follow-up interviews, and also to include them in interviews with new respondents.

The stories to tell about the commuting are countless, as are the possible angles of research. During my limited stay at Gulu Public, I was only able to scratch the
surface of the phenomenon of night commuting and the complex set of processes that are involved. Nevertheless, I believe that through the indispensable help of my respondents, and by making use of different methods for gathering data, I was able to collect material that contributes with new and important knowledge of the night commuting in Northern Uganda.

1.6 Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis in this thesis is the child night commuting to centres in Gulu as it was occurring during my five weeks of fieldwork in the first half of 2005. The commuting is related to the overall security situation, and the results I have derived are therefore connected to the particular social context in which the research took place. In Gulu town there are a number of night commuter centres, and I could have chosen to concentrate on several or all of them to see whether I would find patterns of similarity or differences, and possibly draw some generalisations from my material. Because of the little \textit{a priori} knowledge available of the variables influencing the commuting I did not find this approach fruitful. Rather I chose to focus on one centre to aspire for a holistic understanding of the socio-economic factors involved in making the children continue to commute. By concentrating on a limited number of commuters, I was able to follow my respondents over some time, participate in their daily activities in the shelter and let them get used to having me around. Gaining information on topics that may be sensitive to some people necessitates a certain amount of trust. As such, it was important for me that the respondents got to know me, and felt secure that I did not have a hidden agenda that could possibly backfire on them.

Gulu Public, the centre that became the base of my fieldwork operation, was selected first of all because I was warmly welcomed there on my first visit. After asking the centre management for permission to do my fieldwork there, I was accepted and allowed to participate on the same standing as the volunteers spending the night with the children at the centre.

1.7 Interviews with commuters

While in Gulu Public I concentrated on a limited number of children, with the intention of getting as complete a picture as possible of their understanding and
interpretation of their own situation. The main respondents where chosen following preliminary interviews with a number of children, mainly because of their openness and willingness to talk about their own situation. An important factor in the decision was how they reacted to both my interpreter and to me. It may be that these children were easily approachable because they felt comfortable in the centre environment, but the focus in this research was to get the children’s individual stories and not to collect a representative sample of the night commuters.

The interviews with the commuters took place both individually and within focus groups. Focus groups proved to be very fruitful as the setting became more informal and relaxed. My presence was less obtrusive, and the children felt at ease. It was important that the children felt comfortable with having me around, and much time was spent on playing games, dancing and singing songs. An Acholi/English dictionary proved to be a useful tool in interacting with the children, in particular a list with translations of different body parts that could be used for the tactile practice of pointing at each other’s noses, ears and so on, as well as a list of animals where I would try to pronounce the words and the children imitate the animals. These more practically-oriented tasks caused a lot of laughter and made the children feel at ease. They also reduced the perceived differences in power between the children and me as a researcher.

Carrying out interviews in private did turn out to be a challenge. Most of the interviews with the children took place at the centre premises, in the classrooms where the children sleep during the night. Lack of light made it difficult to conduct interviews outside the classrooms, and inside the classrooms was also the environment where the children felt safe and relaxed. During the first interviews I made the other children leave the room while the interviews were taking place, but as the respondents did not seem to be inhibited by being in the same room as the others, after a while I allowed the other children to be around. The respondents were still separated from the others within the room during individual interviews, and once the situation had lost its novelty this did not cause any disturbance. However, I did ensure that the centre staff were not present while the children were being interviewed.
My initial aim of creating the optimal conditions for conducting the interviews had to be reviewed for several reasons. In the beginning of my fieldwork I avoided doing interviews if the generator broke down or if we heard gunshots nearby.\(^8\) I soon came to realise that if I was to get my data collected, I would need to take a more pragmatic stance and adapt to the actual situation. In practice that would in some instances mean interviewing children in the dark, accompanied by gunshots. However, I do not believe that any of the children felt pressured by the situation. On the contrary, I got the impression that the children on these occasions felt safer having me around, and were glad to be distracted from the situation around them.

1.8 Other interviews

Interviews were also conducted with the volunteers working at the centre, the centre management and the board members.\(^9\) The fact that I was spending the nights at the centre together with the children and their carers gave me a special position compared to other researchers that had come, done their interviews and left again. Many of the most fruitful conversations took place at night, either with some of the older commuters or with the volunteers after the children had gone to bed. The purpose of my stay was never concealed and everyone was informed of who I was and why I was there.

I paid home-visits to some of the children who became my main respondents. This gave me a chance both to carry out interviews with their family members, and also to share the experience of the actual commute by walking with them from the centre and to their houses. I also conducted interviews with non-family members living in the same community, and visited some of my respondents at school and interviewed their teachers and headteachers. Other interviews were conducted with representatives from a number of international governmental organisations (IGOs), NGOs and CBOs, the Acholi paramount chief, the LC5 vice-chairman,\(^10\) the District

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\(^8\) When shooting was taking place within the town border it was generally presumed not to be LRA but local thugs.

\(^9\) The board consisted of members of the local community that had participated in establishing the centre and that were supporting it economically.

\(^10\) The paramount chief is the highest ranked customary leader of the Acholi, while the LC5 chairman is the highest elected leader in a decentralised multi-layered system of Local Councils ranking from LC1 (village) to LC5 (district).
Police Commander, a Public Relations Officer in the UPDF and representatives from the religious communities, as well as ‘ordinary’ members of society.  

1.9 Participant observation and positionality  
Being in a dual position as a volunteer at the centre as well as researcher, I was given access to different arenas that gave me insight into how the centre was run as a formal institution. I was allowed to participate in a workshop arranged by Save the Children training night commuter staff, as well as in volunteer meetings, board meetings and meetings with the local authorities. I was also given access to written reports, diaries and budgets kept at the centre.

In all social research it is important to be reflective of one’s own status in relation to the respondents. As in other types of social interaction, how people behave and what answers they give will depend on how they interpret the person they are responding to. People position each other in relation to age, gender, social background, personality and so on. Participant observation and qualitative interviews are no exceptions. The issue of positionality is especially important when doing research on vulnerable groups. If the social distance between the researcher and the respondents is seen as too large, the respondents may find the situation uncomfortable and be unwilling to answer questions, or may be eager to give the answers they think the researcher is looking for (Thagaard 2003). As a researcher it is important to ask yourself how the respondents perceive you and what you represent to them (Lofland et al. 2006).

During my stay in Northern Uganda I was first and foremost characterised as ‘white’. My additional statuses as female, academic, unmarried and so on were of less importance. They became relevant in certain situations, but did not feel important at all times. My being white on the other hand was impossible to escape. Gulu is not a place that is visited by tourists. A few foreign students and journalists have found their way there, but apart from that white people in Gulu are in general associated with one of the larger international aid organisations. White people in Gulu signify power and money, economic assistance and food distribution. They are the ones that have what

11 For list of public respondents see Appendix 1.  
12 For a discussion of ‘whiteness’ as an obstacle when conducting cross-cultural research, see Skelton (2001).
the local population is lacking, and on whom they depend on for survival. Being a *mono*, as white people are called in Acholi, in Gulu, I was immediately thought to be a representative of the aid community.

I was aware that my ‘whiteness’ would pose a challenge to my status as a researcher. Although I explained to the people I met that I did not belong to an NGO but was an independent student collecting data for my master’s thesis, I still had the symbolic power of the white donor community invested in me. In the shelter I was doing my best to limit my respondents’ expectations about what would result from having me staying there. At times I found it difficult to explain both to my respondents and myself why I could not assist them with ‘something small’. The suffering was evident and constantly confronting me, but to be able to complete what I came for it was necessary to make it clear from the beginning that I was there as a researcher and not an aid worker. I needed to negotiate a status for myself in the shelter that made it possible to stay there and do my research, without being interpreted as a representative for the aid community. The fact that I was sleeping on the floor with the children, helping them sweep the classrooms and sharing food with the volunteers decreased the social distance. Learning some phrases in Acholi was also useful in my attempt to level the differences.

The volunteers and commuters expressed understanding that I could not contribute much as an individual, but expected me to use my position as a member of the academic community to raise their concerns on my return to Norway. Being a ‘voice of the voiceless’ is frequently given as a cause and justification for doing social research on vulnerable groups (Smith 2001). In this respect it is important to bear in mind that also the ‘voiceless’ have a certain story that they want to convey, and to be aware that respondents may intend to manipulate data to their own benefits. As the whole population in Northern Uganda find themselves in a state of dependency on the western donor community, it becomes important to strike the right chords. The majority of the population relate to the aid organisations only through their local staff working with food distribution and other emergency relief, but people in higher positions relating to donors at a policy level know the importance of playing their game.
That I was also a part of this game became evident to me during a social gathering with administrative staff from one of the other shelters in Gulu. I was sitting talking with the manager and raised the issue of trauma and psychosocial support, which I had recognised as the buzzwords among the local NGOs. Psychosocial support and individual counselling were also given high importance in the night commuter centres, and were among the main topics in the centre staff workshop I attended. The concern that I raised was that the individual counselling, grown out of western psychology, might be contradicting traditional collective coping mechanisms, and that the money spent on psychosocial support could be better spent in other areas. My conversation partner seemed to agree with my line of reasoning, but when mentioning my idea of writing an article about it, he got visibly stressed and asked me kindly to think through the consequences before I took that step. “It is not that we don’t agree”, he said “it is just that psychosocial support is what they want to spend their money on right now”.

At the shelter it was important for the volunteers to stress the lack of funding, and what they were lacking at the shelter to be able to keep the children well. For the commuters, the lack of school fees was their major concern. Every outsider represents a hope and a potential to improve the appalling standards people are living in, both inside and outside of the shelter. There are few options available for people to escape the hopeless situation they find themselves in, and appealing for assistance from a foreigner is one of their best strategies for social mobility. Even if it was in my respondents’ interest to enhance some aspects of the situation on behalf of others, I do not feel that I was presented with an inaccurate version of their reality. The needs they were pointing out were obvious, and people were emphasising issues that were urgently important to them. However, I was aware that my status as white and a potential benefactor could have a reactive effect and could create a bias in my material. This I tried to avoid by interviewing persons that were related to the commuting and the shelters in different ways, and by triangulating between different kinds of data.
1.10 Collection of essays and drawings

During my stay in the shelter I provided some of the children with paper and crayons, and encouraged them to make drawings of their home and of the shelter. Some of the images they drew were disturbing, and clearly reflected the environment of fear these children were experiencing. The children also used the opportunity to express some of the problems they were facing while commuting, such as the rain and cold. To some of the older children I gave an anonymous written assignment on the topic of ‘What is it like to be a commuter?’ The children were given the option of writing in Acholi or English. Thirteen children replied, some point-by-point other with short essays. Obviously this exercise excluded many of the commuters without the necessary skills of writing, but it became a valuable source of information on how some of the older children and youths reflected on their status as commuters.

Well aware that my time with the children in Gulu Public was too short to complete the narratives of any of the children or to gain the depth of understanding for their situation needed solely through conversations, I found it necessary to gather data stemming from different sources (see Hammersley & Atkinson 1996). Interviewing children also poses different challenges to interviewing adults. The age range of the children in the shelter is from five to eighteen, and the youngest interviewed for this thesis was ten. The oldest children proved to be reflective of their own situation and willing to talk about it, while getting information from the younger children proved to be more challenging. Their language is less developed than grown-ups’, and their reflections are different and less verbal. That does not make their understanding of the situation any less valuable, but I believe it makes it fruitful to give them the possibility of expressing themselves through different channels. Drawing and writing also makes the situation less threatening and takes the attention away from the child (Boyden 2004). The interviews will therefore be analysed in relation to these other sources, as, for instance, drawings and observations.

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13 See Appendix 2.
1.11 Interpreter

While conducting interviews with the younger children, I was dependent upon an interpreter. I hired Viola, a young journalist and student that had been invaluable to me during my first days by helping me gain access to the field. The children responded well to Viola and her skills as an interpreter were impeccable. Unfortunately illness in her near family made her attendance irregular, especially towards the end of my stay. This meant that some of the interviews planned with the younger children did not take place. I did consider hiring a second interpreter, but was doubtful about changing interpreter in the middle of the fieldwork as the children already were accustomed to Viola (see Hesselberg 1998). The volunteers at the centre offered to assist, but since the topics for the interviews were the children’s life at the centre, I did not find that appropriate. However, I did get help from volunteers to translate the folk stories that I collected from the children.

1.12 Tape recorder

Using a tape recorder proved to be a fruitful way of establishing contact with the children. Over the first days I took notes during the interviews, but it was apparent that this created an additional distance between the children and me. Taking notes was also made difficult because of the frequent power cuts. The introduction of the recorder was a great success, as the children were thrilled about hearing their voices on tape. During the first days I only recorded songs, and then started using it for interviews once the children had got accustomed to the device and the initial excitement had abated.

1.13 Secondary sources

As mentioned previously, few studies are currently available on the topic of night commuting. Those that exist are written by humanitarian organisations. When using these sources I have kept in mind that institutional interests may create bias in research. The answers you get depend on the questions you ask and, despite doing much valuable research, NGOs do have their own agendas. For this thesis the reports have mainly been used to supplement my own findings with some quantitative data. Even if there has been little research carried out on the night commuter centres by
academics and international actors, several local NGOs have written reports that I was provided with from people I met during my stay. Although the reports may not live up to the criteria for academic research, they still contributed important background information. However, it is important to note that as the commuting is a phenomenon in constant flux, the data derived from previous studies show something about the situation as it was when the surveys were conducted and are not directly transferable to the context for my research.

1.14 Data analysis

After returning from the field I completed the work of transcribing my interviews and started categorising my material into a few preliminary sections, such as for instance, causes given for commuting, consequences of commuting and vulnerability. These were categories that were inspired by my research question and the themes that I had emphasised in my interviews (see Rubin & Rubin 1995). Most of my material could be placed into one or more of these categories, but they were too broad and overlapping to have any analytical value beyond organising my material and making it more comprehensible. The next step in my analysis was to derive sub-categories that were relevant both to the research question I had set out to answer and to the data in the preliminary categories. Consequences of commuting were, for instance, divided into positive and negative, and vulnerability into vulnerability causing commuting and caused by commuting. Vulnerability caused by commuting was again divided into vulnerability caused by sleeping in the shelter, the actual walk, the separation from family, and so on.

These more finely-tuned categories were clearly ambiguous and only tentative. The motivations for children to commute are individual and complex, and the search for single causations could easily fall into reductionism. Children have a number of reasons to migrate into town at night, of which they may be more or less conscious. Multiple causations are the norm rather than the exception, and the contributing factors are closely connected to the context in which the commuting takes place. Some of the factors found to contribute to commuting in this thesis are anticipated to be reciprocal,

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14 When quoting my respondents I have chosen to give a verbatim account of their statements. Quotes from interviews conducted at the centre are not referred to with time and place.
and as such reinforce each other (see Hoyle, Harris & Judd 2001). That children are weakly integrated into the family is, for instance, one of the factors that make children commute to town. By sleeping away and spending less time at home the children become even more detached from their family and therefore, by following the reasoning, more likely to continue to commute. This research does not set out to prove any direct causation between commuting and independent variables, but to reveal factors that make some children commute or continue to commute when other children stop. For the children to continue commuting, the commuting must serve some purpose for the child itself, or for the family as a decision-making unit. From analysing my data I have found that the purposes the commuting serves for these children can be divided into three categories that will provide the framework for my analysis. These categories are protection purposes, subsistence purposes and socialisation purposes.

1.15 Research ethics

All research poses ethical challenges that need to be included and taken seriously from the early planning stage to the final presentation. Possible implications of the research for the people that are being studied need to be thought through before entering the field, and the concern for respondents should always weigh more heavily than the wish for good data. When conducting research with children in particular it is important to have as a morale imperative that “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”, as established in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 3.1. There are three generally agreed-upon guiding principles when conducting qualitative research: informed consent, confidentiality, and to ‘do no harm’ (Kvale 2002). None of them are unproblematic in interacting with adult or child respondents.

1.15.1 Informed consent

When conducting research with vulnerable groups and children it is a problem that a feeling of dependency or of a large social distance can make it difficult for respondents to refuse answering questions they are uncomfortable with (Thagaard 2003). But the principle of informed consent implies more than the respondents’ right to refuse to answer questions, and at any time they have the option to quit the research project. Informed consent also implies that the respondents ideally are fully aware of what the
project is about and understand how the data are to be used. This poses challenges to a qualitative researcher working from an inductive, or partly inductive, approach. Often the researcher will not be fully aware of what comes out of the data until later in the project when the analysis is starting to take shape. In these cases it is impossible to give the informants detailed information about the expected outcome. Giving respondents detailed information about what the data are to be used for may also possibly contaminate the material. If the respondents are aware of, for instance, a preliminary hypothesis you are trying to test out, they may deliberately confirm or counteract the assumption. Some sound judgement need to be shown along the way, but respondents should always be informed that they are participating in a study, and not be misinformed about the purpose of the study. To the extent it is possible they should also be informed about how the data will be utilised, how it will be presented and to whom (Thagaard 2003).

When I arrived at Gulu Public, I informed the management and the volunteers at the shelter about my project. I did not give the children any details about my research, but told them that I was a student writing an assignment about what it is like to be a night commuter, so as to make my project comprehensible for them. I explained that I would be around in the shelter for a month and would ask them some questions, but that they did not have to answer if they did not want to. None of the children or the volunteers at the centre had any objections to me being there, but some of the children were shy and did not want to answer questions. That was of course respected. Ideally the parents or other caregivers should also have given their consent, but this was difficult to achieve under the circumstances. The children were told to ask their guardians if they would agree to let them participate in the research, but apart from those I visited I had no means to follow this up. I could have chosen to send notes with the children in an attempt to get the guardians’ written consent, but as more than half of the adult population in Gulu is illiterate (Bøås & Hatløy 2005), that approach did not seem very fruitful.
1.15.2 Confidentiality

Confidentiality is the second ethical guideline, and strongly connected with both the first principle of informed consent and the third of ‘do no harm’. None of the participants in my project had any objections to me using their full name for this thesis. They expressed faith that I would present them in a fair way, and would not misuse the trust they had shown me. Obviously I have no intention of placing any of my respondents in a difficult situation or abusing their trust, but sometimes both the outcomes and the consequences of a research project are hard to foresee, both for the researcher and for the respondents. To comprehend what participation in a research project actually means may be difficult for people outside an academic discourse. In particular this is the case when conducting research with children. Respondents may also find it uncomfortable to be made an object of analysis. How people see themselves does not always correspond with how they are seen by an outsider. For this thesis I have chosen to give my respondents at the shelter fictitious names. This means that the persons described will recognise themselves, but people outside the shelter should not be able to identify them. The officials I have interviewed are referred to by name and position with their agreement.

To disguise respondents’ identity is a good way to protect them from possible retaliation or unwanted consequences from participating in a project, but it is also problematic as it makes it impossible for other researchers to control the sources (Kvale 2002). Qualitative research is shaped by the specific context in which it takes place, and can never be replicated in the same way as an experiment where you can control the environment. The researcher is a part of the context that is being studied, and is both influencing the context by her presence, as well as interpreting it in the light of previous experience and knowledge. Even if it is not possible to re-do a fieldwork, the interview transcripts and other field notes should be kept and made available for others who are interested in looking into the findings. In that way it is possible for another researcher to control the logical steps of the analysis. The principle of confidentiality should not only apply to the final analysis but also the interview transcript and fieldwork notes (Valentine 2001).
However, it is a potential weakness that concealing the identity of the respondents, and in some cases also the time and place where the research has taken place, makes it impossible for others to verify the material that is presented. The dilemma arises as the responsibility for protecting the respondents conflicts with the responsibility towards the profession to produce research that is verifiable and controllable. The importance of protecting informants will nevertheless weigh more heavily than the possibility to confirm sources, and conducting research of this kind demands high integrity from the researcher.

1.15.3 ‘Do no harm’

The potential consequences for the respondents from participating in the project should be well thought through during the planning of the project, the actual fieldwork and the final writing up. Some scholars argue that a respondent’s benefits should outweigh the disadvantages, and that it ideally should be a balance between what an informant contributes to the study and what he or she receives in return. This is often hard to attain, and it is also difficult to anticipate and to measure what is felt as an advantage or disadvantage by the informants. At times during my fieldwork I found it morally challenging to acknowledge that I was in the middle of a humanitarian disaster with the purpose of collecting information. I was there to take something from those that had nothing, without giving anything tangible in return. Yet I experienced that for many of my informants it felt rewarding to be given the possibility to tell their story. Several also expressed that the sheer fact that a person would travel across the world to see their suffering was giving them hope and something to fight for. But it is important to be aware that a conflict such as the one in Northern Uganda is a complex context with many actors, and one where a researcher by being thoughtless can place the respondents in situations of real danger (see Boyden 2004). The topic of my research did not make my respondents particularly exposed to physical harm, but jealousy and harassment towards a girl at the shelter after I had made a visit to her home made me realise the delicate balance between the commuters, and how easy it is to interrupt it as an outsider and a mono. Anticipating and avoiding all situations where respondents could come under stress may not always be possible, but it is the responsibility of the
researcher to get as complete a picture of the context as possible, and to miss out on valuable data rather than compromise the respondents’ security (Bøås, Jennings & Shaw 2006).  

1.16 Outline

In the next chapter I will present the theoretical and analytical framework for this thesis and I will make a review of the previous research conducted on the topic of night commuting. Chapter Three gives a brief account of the roots of the conflict. It focuses mainly on how the commuting has adapted to the shifting character of the conflict and developed from a crisis-driven action to the social institution of commuting to organised centres that is occurring today. Chapter Four offers a description of some of the features of the life at the night commuter centre at Gulu Public, and the services that are provided for the commuters. The chapter also looks at issues connected to the actual walking to and from the centre. The three following chapters analyse the purposes the centres serves for the children that are continuing to commute during periods of calm. Chapter Five analyses the purposes the centres serve to provide the children with protection, not only against the LRA but also against threats stemming from the children’s domestic and local environment. Chapter Six analyses how both push-factors in the community and pull-factors in the centres contribute to children commuting for subsistence purposes, while Chapter Seven focuses on the factors that makes children continue to commute for socialisation purposes. In Chapter Eight I will present some concluding remarks summing up the analysis and point out some directions for further research.

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15 See also Utas (2004).
2. Theoretical Approach with Literature Review

‘Children in armed conflicts’ have been an important topic for academic research in the last decade, once Graca Machel’s report to the UN Secretary General on the “Impact of Armed Conflict on Children” (1996) laid the ground for the debate to follow. The focus has in particular been on how and why children get recruited to armed groups, as well as on war’s psychological effect on children, notably debates about war-inflicted traumas. There has been little focus on coping strategies used by children not actively participating in conflict. This also applies to Northern Uganda. The night commuters are often mentioned in news briefs, when the conflict on rare occasions is given attention in the media. Children in tens of thousands fleeing in fear of abduction, violence and sex slavery are extremely powerful images, and have in many ways become both a symptom and symbol of the crisis in the Northern Uganda. The media coverage has helped to raise attention to the problem, but has brought little in terms of contributing to a deeper understanding of the commuting. Several studies have been done on the abductees, their experiences within the LRA and their reintegration back to the community, but the night commuters have not been subject to much academic interest.

2.1 The interventionist discourse

The academic debate on children in armed conflict can roughly be divided into two analytical approaches, namely an interventionist-approach and an agency-approach. The little research that has been done on the commuting has been conducted by NGOs writing from an interventionist, right-based ideological and analytical perspective. That implies that the main focus is on the how the children are affected by their circumstances. The focus of the studies has mainly been to assess the commuters’ vulnerability and to make recommendations to national and international actors about how to best protect the children. The children are the object of the analysis, and are

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18 Some will argue that the interventionist discourse consists of two separate approaches; namely the traditional victim approach and the right-based approach. For the purpose of this thesis I have considered this distinction to be of less relevance.
19 Three relevant branches of international law serve as the guiding frameworks for recommendations to state actors: International Human Rights Law (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Twin Covenants, CEDAW, CVC et.), International Humanitarian Law (1949 Geneva
presented per definition as vulnerable and victims of their environment. Rather than focusing on what the children are doing, or could be doing, to improve the situation they are in, an interventionist approach concentrates on steps that can be taken by an outsider to decrease the children’s vulnerability.

Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU)’s report “Nowhere to Hide” analyses the humanitarian protection threats to the population in Northern Uganda, and points out that poor provision of protection and supervision in the night commuter centres makes the children vulnerable to rape, defilement and violence. They also recognise that the low standard of shelter expose the commuters to malaria and infectious diseases (CSOPNU 2004). International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) have carried out surveys assessing the needs in the shelters and the commuters’ background in Gulu (IOM 2003) and Kitgum (IRC Uganda 2004) respectively. IRC’s survey reveal that 50 percent fewer girls than boys commute for distances of five kilometres and above (2004). This is likely to be related to the issue of gender-based violence, which was raised by the Women's Commission For Refugee Women and Children (WCRWC) in their report “No Safe Place to Call Home” (2004). In the report they assess the female commuters’ vulnerability to sexual abuse and harassment, and reveal that the problem is considerable. A follow-up report the following year showed that the problem of sexual exploitation of commuting girls is continuing, and also raised the concerns of inadequate sleeping, lighting, sanitation, and security conditions for the commuters (WCRWC 2005).

All the reports make recommendations to national government and local and international actors in terms of improving the level of security as well as the facilities of the night commuter centres. Liu Institute’s “The Responsibility to Protect” presents policy options to the government of Uganda. In their ‘Plan of Action for Northern Uganda’ they state that: “The Government of Uganda must recognize child night commuters as IDPs, accord them specific rights and protections, and provide them with essential services such as protection, food, water and shelter, as called for in the

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20 See, for instance, Goodwin-Gill & Cohn (1994) and Human Right Watch (1994).
Guiding Principles and the National Policy. The international community must endeavour to ensure that these war-affected children are able to enjoy the rights afforded to them in the Convention on the Rights of the Child” (Hassen & Keating 2004: 31).

Statements like these have a high face value, and it is easy to give them immediate consent. Few people would argue that vulnerable children should be deprived of food and shelter. However, recommendations based on a superficial understanding of the circumstances may unintentionally worsen the situation. By assuming that the commuting is caused solely by the threat of abduction, the authors of the report are ignoring the additional socio-economic causes for commuting. By bringing into the equation the context of a society in crisis where food security is low, there are good reasons to believe that an initiative like food provision in the shelters would pull new hordes of children away from their families and into town at night. Of course these children have a right to food, but the night commuter centres are not the right arenas for food distribution. There is no doubt that the commuters are exposed to numerous threats, both as a result of the commuting and as a consequence of the general living conditions for the people in the region. Improvements in the commuters’ lives are absolutely called for, but making recommendations based on the night commuter centres as isolated units of analysis might easily do more harm than good.21 A universalistic, right-based approach is important as a guiding principle, but cannot replace a firm understanding of the commuting and the context within which it takes place. A critical consequence analysis needs to be made, in which the children’s own agency is also included.

Several of the reports do recognise the danger of creating pull-factors in the shelters and therefore increasing the number of commuters (Falk, Lenz & Okuma 2004; MSF 2004; UNOCHA & IRIN 2004; WCRWC 2004). Save the Children’s report “Sleepless in Gulu” provides an analysis of the dynamics behind the night commuting and the context in which it takes place. The study is the most comprehensive investigation that has been carried out so far and concludes that the fear of abduction is the main reason for commuting, but does also point to important

21 For an introduction to the “Do No Harm principle” in humanitarian interventions see Anderson (1999).
socio-economic factors that are influencing the commuting pattern. Domestic abuse, drunkenness, family break-ups and orphanage are listed as factors that are contributing to commuting, as well as crowding among the internally displaced population (Falk, Lenz & Okuma 2004). These are also among the factors that were found to have an impact in this study.

The interventionist discourse on children in armed conflicts has its ideological foundation in a western and modern understanding of what it implies, or rather is supposed to imply, to be a child. In such a context children are fragile beings that should be protected by their family or the state, and not made responsible for their own actions until they reach a certain age (Honwana & De Boeck 2005). They are characterised by their dependency and lack of responsibility, and in many ways conceptualised in opposition to adults as ‘unfinished persons’ (Thomas 2000). Children are not expected to work or make decisions that affect their own livelihood. Rather they should go to school and have plenty of time to play – to ‘be children’.  

Childhood is a socially-constructed category, and as such has different meanings in different contexts. Being a child in Northern Uganda is something very different from being a child in Norway today, which again is different from what it was to be a Norwegian child in the 18th century. The meaning of childhood also varies with class, gender, ethnicity and other social variables (Prout & James 1990). ‘Childhood’ is just a word, to paraphrase Bourdieu (1993). Childhood as it is understood in the affluent parts of the western world may be seen as an offspring of modernity. Often the argument of childhood as a modern invention is substantiated with Ariès widely quoted pronouncement that “in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist” (1962: 125). This does not imply, as sometimes argued, that children were not distinguished from adults in medieval times, but they were not conceptualised in opposition to adults as fundamentally different. The expectations of children in the contemporary western world have changed. From having a productive role in a traditional economy, as most children worldwide still do, western children have entered the role of sought-after consumers in the market economy (Cunningham 1994).
1995). Unfortunately this ‘bourgeois conception of childhood’ (Biaya 2005: 216) is not applicable to the reality of the majority of today’s children. Rather than living protected lives, supported and given directions by caring parents, children are every day forced to make decisions crucial to their own survival. They may very well be victims and vulnerable, but they are also social actors trying to make the most out of their own situation. As pointed out by Morrow, the conceptualisation of childhood as a period of a dependency and lack of responsibility prevents us from ‘knowing’ about the cases where children are taking on responsibility (1994).  

2.2 The agency discourse

On the other pole of the axis we find the agency approach. This discourse aims at transcending the children’s status as victims and recognising them as social actors, capable of making rational decisions and interacting with their environment. The agency approach is a response to the one-sided presentation of children and youth given from an interventionist perspective. Rather than seeing vulnerability as an inherent value in children, vulnerability is understood as a structural position in which children might find themselves (de Berry 2004). In particular this perspective has contributed to a better understanding of children and youth’s participation in armed groups. The ‘victim by default’ conceptualisation of those under eighteen has contributed to mobilise the international community against children participating in warfare, but has restricted rather than advanced the understanding of the role of young people in conflicts (McIntyre 2005). Instead of taking it as axiomatic that children are victims and as such are innocent up to the age of eighteen, writers within the agency discourse have shed light on the complexity inherent in the phenomenon of child soldiers. Seen from a right-based perspective, the concept of a child soldier is a contradiction in terms, child equalling the victim and soldier the perpetrator (Rosen 2005). Recognising children’s agency in war means recognising that children are not only suffering the consequences of war, but are also actively participating in war, in some instances to the extent of being the source of rebellion and violent actions (Richards 1996; Utas 2003). Victims and perpetrators of war are not exclusive.

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23 See also Boyden (2004).
categories (Honwana 2006). No place is this paradox more apparent than in Northern Uganda, where formerly abducted and abused children are forcing the same pain on other children that was forced upon them. These complex and utterly tragic swirls of violence raise normative challenges to the concepts of innocence and guilt, victim and perpetrator, with no simple answers (Mawson 2004).

Social actors may be more or less capable of influencing their environment, and often children have less power to do so than adults. Still children also take action to transform the situation they are in. They have an agency, and are not merely victims of their surroundings. The physical and social environment in which a person finds himself at any time restricts the agency, and the capability for action is changing with the circumstances (Utas 2005). When writing within an agency discourse it is necessary to take seriously the structural elements with which the agents interact (Abbink 2005). Research carried out on children participating in combat shows that the majority have not been recruited by brute force. Often children have good rationales for joining armed groups, and it is not incidental which children do so. Numerous studies on child soldiers have shown that children that are marginalised in their societies, either because of poverty or disrupted family relations, are far more likely to become members of armed groups than children that are not.\(^{25}\) Vengeance and social upgrading in a situation of social and economic deprivation are also motivations for children and youth to become fighters (Furley 1995). For some of the most vulnerable children growing up in conflict areas, seeking protection by joining one of the fighting parties seems like their best option for dealing with the insecurity (Bennett 1998; Peters & Richards 1998). However, there are a number of children suffering from the same vulnerability that do not choose to become members of an armed group. Why these children choose differently and which strategies they deploy for protection is still largely an unexploited area. I will argue that the debates about child soldiers and children in armed conflicts are incomplete without also including the strategies developed by the children that do not get recruited, either voluntarily, coerced or by force.

The situation in Northern Uganda represents a special case. The LRA’s extreme brutality towards the local population and their widespread use of abductions, both for recruitment and as an instrument of terror, has made the voluntarily recruitment to the group close to nil. The immensely high level of violence also within the group to a large extent rules out participation as a strategy of protection. It is within this context that the night commuting came into being as a spontaneous coping strategy.

2.3 Social institutions and children

The night commuter centres were established to give the children a safe place to sleep when commuting to escape the LRA, but have also come to serve additional purposes. The night commuting has developed into a social institution that is serving protection, subsistence and socialisation purposes for children in Gulu. As such it is meeting some of the needs of the children that would have been the families’ responsibility under other circumstances. There is a concern among NGO staff in Gulu that night commuting, with the establishment of special night commuter centres, undermines the family as the social institution taking the primary responsibility of the children. There is always a risk that outside intervention will undermine local coping mechanisms and traditional institutions. This thesis will argue that the commuting, in the current setting, complements rather than undermines the family as a social institution. Nevertheless, the tendencies that the children are getting detached from their families as a result of the commuting are present, and problems may arise if the pull-factors from the shelters increase as a result of improved services for the children.

As mentioned previously, social institutions adapt to changing social circumstances, both in their social organisation and in their social purpose. When comparing different cultures, we find a variety of ways in which the family unit is constituted in relation to, for instance, who is included, ancestry and residence, and the number of spouses allowed (Boudreau & Newman 1993). The social functions of a family are also adjusting to social changes in the external environment. This is most apparent when looking at how industrialism and capitalist labour have contributed to changing the family from predominantly being a working-relationship to an emotional relationship that is often defined in opposition to work (Sørhaug 1991). A parent, and
especially a mother, that is not capable of drawing the boundaries between family and work will often suffer social sanctions as a result; not unlike the sanctions that face someone shirking the responsibility to contribute with labour within the context of the family as a producing unit in a less socially-differentiated community. When a family is failing to meet its requirement towards its children because of, for instance, illness, death or neglect, other institutions will resume the responsibility in a well-functioning society. In the fragmented organisation of industrialised societies, specialised units within the state system or private actors will normally be the ones that intervene to ensure that the children’s needs are met (Thomas 2000). In more traditional and collectivistic societies like the Acholi, complementary social structures like the extended family and fosterage ensure that the children are integrated into the community and cared for.

In Northern Uganda today the family as a social institution is under immense pressure. Within the context of one of the world’s worst humanitarian crisis (UNOCHA 2003), many parents find themselves incapable of meeting their children’s need for provision and protection. The population density among the displaced is extreme, traditional authority structures and social order is breaking down, at the same time as the sheer number of orphans is challenging the social safety nets. It is within this context that both the children themselves and their families are trying to cope with the extremely limited resources they have available. As will be shown, night commuting is used both by households as a strategy to complement the functions of a family, and by children with idiosyncratic vulnerabilities in an attempt to replace the functions of a family.

Despite the general suffering in the Acholi region only a minority of the children are regular commuters. Commuting is first of all an alternative to the children that are living at a relatively near distance to the centres. The decision to commute is a trade-off between the perceived advantages of staying at the centre and the disadvantages caused by the commuting. Secondly, for households with many members and little available space, sending some children to one of the centres is a way to cope with the crowding in the household. Children living under these circumstances are more likely to commute than children who are not. Thirdly, there is
reason to expect that children who are loosely integrated in their own family or live in dysfunctional families are more likely to seek the centres than children who have a strong sense of belonging in their households. Although the whole population in the Acholi live under an enormous amount of stress, some families cope better than others. The most vulnerable households will normally be the ones where one or both of the parents are missing, or are suffering from illness or alcohol abuse. For children who are weakly integrated in their family or who do not belong to a household, commuting may serve both protection, subsistence and socialisation purposes. Finally, some children are better integrated into the life at the centre than others and find the commuting personally rewarding. As will be shown, commuting is also used by children and youth seeking upwards social mobility.
3. Development of Conflict and Commuting

To understand the social practice of night commuting, it is essential to have an understanding of the context in which it takes place. This chapter gives a brief account of the background of the conflict, and shows how the night commuting has adapted to the shifts in the nature of the conflict and has developed from a spontaneous, crisis-driven strategy to a social institution.

3.1 Roots of rebellion

The official starting point for the war in the north was an uprising against Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Army (NRA) when he seized power in 1986, but the roots of the rebellion are found in a north/south divide that is deeply entrenched in the Ugandan society and traces back to pre-colonial times (Bøås 2004). The country is physically divided by Lake Kyoga, which also constitutes an ethnic and linguistic line of demarcation. The people north of the lake are Nilotic speakers, who before colonialism mainly sustained themselves in small groups as hunters and gatherers. The southern region, on the other hand, was dominated by four highly centralised Bantu-speaking kingdoms. When the British arrived they established their colonial administration in the south, while the north mainly became a labour reservoir for plantation workers and soldiers. Because the British colonial powers found it safer to arm people from the egalitarian and dispersed tribes in the north, rather than those from the kingdoms in the south, the majority of the soldiers in the colonial army, the King’s Rifle, were from the northern region (Kokole & Mazrui 1988). The north got the weapons and military training, while the south got the infrastructure and socio-economic development. At the time of independence in 1962 the northerners were economically and numerically inferior but superior in regard to military power. By virtue of their military superiority, northerners like Milton Obote (1962 – 1971 and 1980 – 1985) and Idi Amin (1971 – 1979) dominated the political scene in Uganda until Museveni and the NRA toppled the Acholi-by-tribe president Tito Okello in

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26 The National Resistance Army (NRA) was renamed the Ugandan People’s Defence Force (UPDF) in the 1995 Constitution.
1986. The sudden concentration of power in the south created a high level of insecurity in the northern regions, which remains today.

3.2 The Lord’s Resistance Army

The rebellion in the north grew out of this collective insecurity and the main original actor, the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM), was a millenarian movement with massive popular support. Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army was not a part of the initial rebellion, but rose in the power vacuum that came into being after the HSM were defeated by the government force and the other main actor, the Uganda People’s Democratic Army (UPDA), broke a peace deal with the NRA. The LRA was made up of remnants of the earlier opposition groups, and, as will often be the case, the new group had a particular attraction to the more brutal commanders that were fearing revenge for atrocities committed and were short of return options (Cline 2003). Due to the Acholi population’s distrust in Museveni’s southern-based government, the LRA enjoyed considerable popular support during the first years, but this support has steadily declined as the LRA increasingly has made the local population the target of their violence. Today the LRA enjoys practically no support in the Acholi population.

In addition to being an enemy of the Museveni government, Kony also claims to represent the new generation of Acholi. He asserts to be possessed by holy spirits and to have a quest to purify the Acholi society and implement a new moral order (Van Acker 2003). The religious ideology of purifying the Acholi is adopted from the predecessor, the HSM, who had as its objective to purify the Acholi of the evil they were exposed to both externally from the NRA and also from impure soldiers, witches and sorcerers among them. Kony has pursued the idea of cleansing the Acholi society and the religious symbolism invested in it. The idea of a new moral order and a

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27 There is no agreed understanding of the LRA’s political agenda. The official discourse of the Museveni government is that the LRA intends to overthrow the government and rule the country after a constitution based on the Ten Commandments. This is not, however, reflected in the limited official statements that are available from the LRA. Rather it seems to be a myth repeated so many times that it has become the truth and is now provided as background information to almost every news alert or press briefing on the conflict. While some have claimed that the LRA is in total lack of a political agenda (Gersony 1997; Veale & Stavrou 2003), or that their political agenda has got lost along the way (Doom & Vlassenroot 1999), others argue that written manifestos demanding the dismantling of IDP-camps, end to genocide of the Acholi, integration of the Acholi in national politic, multi-party elections and a negotiated end to the conflict prove that the LRA in fact has a political agenda (Dunn 2004; Finnström 2003). Others again claim that the manifestos are written by Acholi in Diaspora, mainly Kenya and UK, who are not authorised to talk on behalf of the rebels and do not represent the view of the LRA (Nyeko & Lucima 2002). For a discussion of Museveni’s rationale for continued conflict see Lunde (2005).

28 The concept of cen is central to Acholi traditional belief. Cen is the spirit of a murdered person that if not reconciled will contaminate the killer and also the people he or she comes in contact with.
new purified generation is used by Kony as a mean to legitimise the abduction of children to be re-socialised into the righteous living, and also the killing and mutilation of old people practising ancestral beliefs contradicting the ‘new order’ (Finnström 2003; Van Acker 2003). Violence and death are conceptualised as divine devices separating the pure from the impure, and are as such central to the LRA-ideology. The idea of purification by killing the impure contradicts the traditional beliefs of the Acholi, and led to the Acholi elders rejecting Kony as a false prophet.

The Acholi’s rejection of Kony and the LRA became pronounced during the NRA’s first big military offensive against the LRA in 1991 – 92. During ‘Operation North’ many Acholi chose to participate on the side of the government and fight against the LRA in the government-sponsored ‘Bow and Arrow’ civil defence militia. Kony perceived this opposition as a grave betrayal committed by his own kin, which is given as one of the explanations for why he turned his guns against the people for whose cause he claimed to be fighting (Lomo & Hovil 2004). Another rationale for using violence against the civilian population has been to prevent them from supporting the government. As the LRA could no longer trust the Acholi to take their side in battle, it became important to prevent them from taking the other side and the way to do it became through spreading fear and terror (Lunde 2005).

3.3 Abductions

The LRA’s strongest weapon for preventing the Acholi from supporting the government forces is the abduction of the local children. A few abductions by the LRA were reported before 1991, but it was after the Acholi’s collaboration with the NRA in ‘Operation North’ that child abductions emerged as an essential element of the LRA strategy (Branch 2005). It is reasonable to believe that the LRA’s dwindling support also affected their supply of volunteers, but the abduction of children are not solely a result of lack of voluntary recruits. Many armed groups around the world recruit children with a greater or lesser extent of force (McConnan & Uppard 2001). But the LRA is particular in seemingly relying for their recruitment solely on abductions (Veale & Stavrou 2003). By implication the local population knows that by supporting the government in the war against the LRA, they are supporting a war against their
own children. No one knows how many children have suffered the fate, but estimates varies from 20,000 to 25,000 (World Vision 2004). The high number of abductedees in the LRA causes an extremely complex relationship between the rebel group and the local population. Although repulsed by the actions of the LRA, parents are still concerned about the welfare of their children, creating what Behrend describes as an anti-social network of support (Behrend 1999).  

3.4 Rural/rural commuting

The night commuting started as a spontaneous reaction to the atrocities and abductions committed by the LRA in the period following ‘Operation North’. Despite having fought side by side with the NRA during the military operation, the Acholi did not enjoy the protection of the government in the aftermath and the local population was left to fight for themselves (Branch 2005). Unable to withstand the LRA, many civilians chose to escape to the bush at night, as a strategy to avoid attacks from the LRA who prefer to attack in the dead of night. During this period of commuting both adults and children were hiding in the bush, some regularly, others when rumours were spreading about rebels in the area. One of the officers at the Probation and Welfare Office in Gulu explained how he had built a hut in a tree, where he slept every night for months in a row to seek protection. Some people built semi-permanent structures in the rural areas surrounding their villages, while others found new hiding places every night in an attempt to trick the rebels. Parents left their children naked or dressed them in dark clothes and told them to hide in the bush surrounding their villages, as they knew they would be unable to prevent the rebels from abducting them if they were raiding the village. Often families would split up during this nightly migration to diversify the risk. In that case if the rebels found their hideout, at least some family members would survive.  

3.5 The ‘protected villages’

Hiding in the bush as a spontaneous strategy for protection, as the commuting was experienced during this period, is not an unusual response pattern to extreme

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29 See also Van Acker (2003).
30 Interview conducted with officer Samuel Ouma, at the Welfare and Probation Office in Gulu on March 23, 2005.
insecurity, and is seen in many conflicts. When people find themselves faced with the threat of violence on their doorstep and without any chance of defending themselves, the most natural reaction is to flee. According to the officer at the Probation and Welfare Office, the commuting to the bush lessened in scope because the bush turned out to not provide the protection that people were searching for. The LRA frequently moves around in the rough country and are accustomed to the terrain. The fact that people got killed also while hiding in the bush made many prefer to take the risk of sleeping home despite the frequent attacks. But the main factor that made people stop commuting to the bush was the government’s decision to move the population into ‘protected villages’ as a part of their military strategy against the LRA.

The intentions behind the forced displacement were to protect the civilians from rebel attacks, cut the rebels from their resource base and also isolate them from potential supporters in the local communities (Bøås & Hatløy 2005). President Museveni officially announced the creation of the camps on September 27, 1996 and one week later the army started forcibly moving people and clearing the villages in Gulu district with the help of military means. Artillery and mortar bombs were fired into the villages to scare people away from their homes and into the newly established IDP-camps (HURIFO 2002). A number of people from the areas hardest hit by rebel activity also escaped to the camps on their own initiative (Finnström 2003).

In 2002 there was a new campaign forcibly moving 300,000 people within two days. The village residents were told that after a deadline set at 48 hours anyone found outside the ‘protected villages’ would be perceived as a rebel or rebel collaborator and treated accordingly. Words were followed by action and 48 hours after the announcement was made, the governmental army, the UPDF, started bombing and shelling the areas surrounding the camps (HRW 2003a). Since then almost the entire northern region has in practice been a military operational zone.

The IDP-camps were supposed to be a temporary arrangement but after nearly ten years the camp population is still steadily increasing. The population in camps and other displaced settlements has now reached approximately 1.7 million, constituting practically the whole Acholi population in the region (UNOCHA 2005). Instead of bringing the conflict to a swift end, the displacement has become a permanent situation
of humanitarian disaster for the Acholi people. The IDPs' freedom to move outside the camp is restricted to limited security zones around the camp. The establishment of security zones render commuting to the bush impossible as a strategy to avoid abductions and attacks, but has not replaced it with a safe alternative. Contrary to the original intentions, the camps have replaced the villages as resource bases for the rebels, and while in camps people are still experiencing abductions, killings and attacks. The outskirts of the camps particularly are considered unsafe areas. For many of the inhabitants the camps are experienced as traps where they are still being attacked by rebels but without any chance of escape (ARLPI 2003).

3.5.1 In-camp commuting

As a response to this insecurity a new commuting pattern established itself within the camps, with children migrating from the outskirts to the centre of the camps as a strategy to avoid abductions (CSOPNU 2004). Some are sent by their parents, others make the decision on their own. In some camps fenced-in shelters have been erected for the children to spend the nights in. The paradox of the protected shelters within the ‘protected villages’ is a strong symbol of the UPDF’s inability to bring security to the population in the camps. The UPDF soldiers deployed to protect the camps were until recently stationed at the camp centre, making the IDPs feel like living shields between the UPDF and the LRA. Some camps only had military protection during daytime even though the LRA are known for attacking at night or in the early morning (Bøås & Hatløy 2005). The threat from the LRA towards the camp population decreased once the UPDF moved their soldiers to the perimeter of the camps instead of them being in the middle of the people they are there to protect, but protection is still inadequate in many of the camps.

3.6 Rural/urban commuting

Some children are reported to have been night commuting regularly to Gulu town since 1996, but rural/urban commuting as an institutionalised coping strategy did not come into being until the security situation for the population in Acholiland gravely deteriorated in the aftermath of the ‘Operation Iron Fist’, launched by the UPDF in March 2002 (Falk, Lenz & Okuma 2004). ‘Operation Iron Fist’ came after an
agreement between the Government of Uganda and the Government of Sudan, allowing the UPDF to pursue the LRA into their bases on the Sudanese side of the border. The military operation was of a massive scale, involving 10,000 Ugandan troops, and with a two-fold objective of eliminating the LRA and facilitating the release of the 6,000 abducted children believed to be held hostage by the LRA at the time (HURIPEC & Liu 2003). By the criterion of increased security for the people of the region, ‘Operation Iron Fist’ was not successful. Rather than ‘wiping out’ the rebels in their camps in Sudan, the UPDF got outflanked as the LRA escaped back into Uganda and right into the arms of the local population. The LRA found themselves under heavy pressure from the Ugandan army, and cut off from their resources in Southern Sudan. Their answer to the situation was to relocate in smaller groups and dramatically increase their attacks on civilians in the Acholi region on the Ugandan side of the border. Lootings, killings and abductions sharply increased and gravely affected the humanitarian situation in the region. While the UPDF claimed to be successful in killing a number of LRA fighters and around 2,000 abductees were said to be retrieved, captured or managed to escape, the LRA’s response was to increase the number of child abductions to replace their loss. From March to June 2002 approximately 5,000 children were abducted, more than twice as many as the children recaptured by the UPDF (HRW 2003b).

The steep increase in violence and abductions was what forced tens of thousands of children and also a number of adults to flee to town areas to seek shelter. The LRA did not have the military strength to attack the urban areas, which were better protected by the UPDF than the dispersed villages and the IDP-camps. Approximately 40,000 people escaped to Gulu town every night in the period following ‘Operation Iron Fist’ when the violence was reaching its highest levels (UNOCHA & IRIN 2004). Most of them were children. Public places like the bus stop, Gulu Hospital and the Ministry of Work harboured some of the commuters, but were not well suited for caring for the children. The places were overcrowded, sanitary conditions were inadequate, and if there were adult staff present they did not have the

31 In the official discourse of the Ugandan government and the UPDF, members of the LRA are referred to as rebels if they are killed and as abductees if they are taken alive. Seen in relation to the fact that 80 to 90 percent of the LRA are assumed to be made up of abducted children (Veale & Stavrou 2003), this rhetoric is highly pragmatic.
spare capacity to care for the commuters. Private and church-owned buildings like Lacor Hospital, Holy Rosary, Layibi Procure and Layibi Chapel were also taking in both children and adults for nightly protection, but could not absorb the masses of commuters, and thousands of children were left with no other alternative than sleeping in the streets (Falk, Lenz & Okuma 2004). Unable to protect themselves against the cold and the rain, many of them got seriously ill from the outdoor living. The children were coming into town every night, and norms and codes for social behaviour developed among the children that were of major concern to the adult generation. Fighting and sexual abuse were widespread and those who had blankets would have them stolen while they were sleeping. The District Police Commander described the situation as the ‘survival of the fittest’ – a situation where every child had to fight for itself.32

What brought the world’s attention to the desperate situation for the hiding children in Acholiland was a campaign from the inter-faith peace-promoting forum the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI). Three bishops and leaders from the Catholic, Protestant and Muslim communities decided in June 2003 to participate in the commuting. They walked with the commuters and slept with them out in the streets for four nights to show their compassion and sympathy, and to tell the world what was going on. The strategy worked. After two days the BBC were on the spot, and other foreign television teams and news agencies followed. On the third day the religious leaders held a press conference in the bus park. The response from the media was overwhelming, but the Ugandan authorities were displeased with the exposure of a problem that had been swept under the carpet. The Spanish priest Father Carlos Rodriguez in ARLPI describes the reaction from the authorities: “[…] then the third day we entered the campaign, organising a press conference in the bus park, with all these thousands of children, calling for an intervention from the United Nations to put an end to this. The RDC, the LC5 they were so angry with us! Only that they could not do anything, I mean what are they going to do? Are they going to send the police

32 Interview with District Police Commander Richard Mule at his office in Gulu Police Station on March 24, 2005.
33 Uganda is divided in 56 administrative districts, of which Gulu is one. The RDC, the Resident District Commissioner, is a representative for the national central government while the LC5, the District Local Council V Chairman, as mentioned previously, is the highest locally-elected executive.
to arrest us? As the archbishop was saying, ‘do we need permission to sleep on the street? What about all these 40,000 children, do they need permission? Oh.. What to see, you are not protected, anything could have happened to you’ and he’ll be telling them that anything could happened to the children”.

As the commuters’ extreme vulnerability, and the government’s inability to protect them, became known to the outside world, local and international organisations intervened to facilitate the commuting. Blankets were distributed, and the first night commuter centres established for the sole purpose of caring for the commuters came into being. Initiatives for establishing more suitable places for the children to spend their nights came both from the local and the international community. The Charity for Peace Foundation that started the shelter at Gulu Public Primary School is an example of the former, while international NGOs like Noah’s Ark and Save the Children are among the latter. With the establishment of the specialised night commuter centres, the commuting became shaped within a structural framework and developed into a social institution. The children got a fixed place to stay with adult supervision and rules and regulations to obey. Today there is a high number of night commuter centres in Acholiland. Gulu and Kitgum have 19 centres each, while some additional shelters are found in the camps and the rural areas. In the next chapter I will take a closer look at one of them.

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34 Interview conducted at St. Monica Tailoring School on March 27, 2005.
35 When I was doing my fieldwork there were 21 operating centres in Gulu, but two of the centres, St.Jude and Koro Centre, were closed down in April 2006.
4. Life at Gulu Public

The constant dilemma the centres face is how to best facilitate the children that need to be there for protection, without pulling additional children from their homes and into town. To be able to discuss whether the centres create strong pull-factors towards the local community, I will in this chapter give an account of the conditions for the commuters at Gulu Public where I conducted my fieldwork.

The night commuter centre at Gulu Public Primary School was founded at the initiative of local people who wanted to create a safer alternative for the children who were sleeping in the street. Richard, one of the originators of the Charity for Peace Foundation and a volunteer, gives this description of the situation preceding the establishment of the shelter: “I saw that children were spending nights under the verandas, in churches, anywhere they found that there was some room for them, they were sleeping. There were a lot of abuse, sexual abuse like rape and defilement. Children were living, their home was on the street”. With the permission of the local authorities to use the school building to shelter the commuters at night, Charity For Peace Foundation established the first community-based night commuter centre in Gulu, with support from Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief (CPAR) Uganda, other NGOs and individual well-wishers.

Gulu Public differs in some respects from the other shelters in Gulu town. It is the only shelter that is not fenced in and, outside of girls and boys sleeping in different classrooms, there is no physical divide between the sexes. Since the premises are used by school children during the day, the commuters have to bring their belongings with them, and do not have the possibility of storing the blankets they use at night. While the shelters run by external NGOs have skilled staff hired to care for the children, Gulu Public are dependent upon the effort of volunteers willing to spend their nights with the commuters. The volunteers do not receive any salary, except small gifts such as soap or a blanket when this is occasionally distributed to the children following donations from benefactors.

As the shelter is unable to pay the people working there, they have lost many of their initial carers. Some have been employed by the other centres, while others have
returned to sleeping at home as the security situation has improved. Of the around 200 volunteers that signed up in the beginning, there are now between 15 and 20 volunteers left who come and spend the night at the shelter regularly. A matron and a patron are in charge of the volunteers and have the daily responsibility at the shelter, while a board consisting of the initiators of the Charity for Peace Foundation is involved in administrative decisions.

The regular commuters that stay there during the calm periods have a strict spatial order among them and designated sleeping spaces in the classrooms. I became aware of this on my first night, when I put down my sleeping bag on a free spot in the room. The girls that were to become my new roommates started giggling and pointed to a perplexed face next to me, which belonged to the girl whose sleeping place I had occupied. The girls pointed out to me a square metre that was uninhabited where I could place my belongings. During violent periods when the number of commuters multiplies, this system is not possible to uphold and commuters sleep wherever there is space. Each room has a room captain with the responsibility for keeping order and reporting irregularities like fighting and tardiness. In addition there is a head girl and a head boy that are democratically elected by the children. They are the commuters’ spokespersons and their official links with the volunteers. There are also other prefects among the commuters with the responsibility of making sure that children do not run away during the night, and that people without authorisation are not mingling with the commuters. As the area is not fenced in and the classrooms where the children sleep have no doors or windows, the physical structure provides little protection. Men looking for commuter girls have several times been caught on the premises. Soldiers from the UPDF sleep outside some of the classrooms, and volunteers inside, to guard the commuters against both rebels and molesters. Some of the children staying at the shelter are as young as five, while the upper age-limit is eighteen.

4.1 Health and sanitary conditions in the centre

The conditions offered at the shelter are far from luxurious. The children sleep in crowded classrooms. Initially there were 19 classrooms occupied by commuters, but as the number of children has decreased so has the number of rooms they have available.
When I was there around 450 children were dispersed in five classrooms of variable size, the biggest being around 120 square metres. Normally the commuters had one more room at their disposal, but during my stay this was occupied by students from a teachers’ college having their practical training at Gulu Public Primary School.

The children sleep on mats that were provided for them by a benefactor. Before that they were sleeping directly on the damp, cold concrete. The smell of moist concrete and urine is distinct, despite the draught caused by the lack of doors and windows. All the children have blankets that they cover themselves with during the night, but the cold is still what the children said bothered them most while staying at the shelter. During the wet season, which started towards the end of my stay, heavy rain was bothering the commuters on their way to the shelter. On their arrival their clothes and the blankets they were carrying were soaking wet, and they had no means to get dry before going to sleep. Several of the children were suffering from bad coughs during the nights. Bedbugs and lice are frequent visitors in the crowded sleeping spaces and contagious diseases spread rapidly. In a survey conducted by IOM shortly after the opening of the shelters, 44 percent of the night commuters in Gulu responded that they had suffered from malaria during the last three weeks (IOM 2003), but a year and a half later mosquito nets and repellents were still not available for the children. There is a borehole on the premises, but this belongs to the school and is closed at night. Water is filled in jerry cans, but the water available for each commuter is very limited and far below the 2 – 6 litres per day per person recommended by UNICEF. There are gender-separated latrines available at the school premises, but these were about to be filled up during my fieldwork. The school wanted the night commuter centre to pay for the emptying of the latrines, but as the centre did not have the necessary resources this was still an unresolved issue when I left.

Electric light was available sporadically after a private sponsor donated a generator to the centre. Normally there was supposed to be light in all the classrooms, but during my five weeks one room with children was left in darkness because their lamp had been given to the student teachers occupying one of the classrooms.

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36 See drawing in Appendix 2.
37 Recommended in UNICEF’s draft guidelines on minimum standards for operating night shelters in Gulu district, July 2004.
bulbs were collected by the matron every morning and kept in her office until the evening so that the school would not use them during the day. Lack of gas for the generator was a recurring problem, as was its need for repair, and the generator often broke down or was not turned on. Besides the unreliable generator, the only light source was one flashlight that the matron had at her disposal and that the volunteers could borrow.

4.2 Activities arranged for the commuters

According to the centre’s schedule there are supposed to be activities arranged for the children every night, but the activities that are offered depend on the individual volunteers. The volunteers utilise their personal skills when interacting with the children and, as many of the initial volunteers have left, the number of activities has also been scaled down. The Charity for Peace Choir is one of the activities that has survived its founder, thanks to the effort of two of the older commuters. With the help of one of the volunteers, they arrange rehearsals twice a week. The choir performs songs that they have learned at school and in church, but also songs that are written at the centre. These songs reflect the hardship of the Acholi people caused by the war and the Aids pandemic, and are also used to welcome visitors and to praise the volunteers for taking care of them and giving them proper guidance. The songs written by volunteers and commuters give the children a way to express their problems, and they also strengthen the children’s common identity as commuters at the Charity for Peace Foundation’s centre. “We the children of Charity, we take our time to thank, the elders and the teachers who keep us”. 38 The choir does not involve more than 10 to 15 of the commuters but for those who are involved it has become possible to also participate in activities outside the centre. The choir has been entertaining at local events like the celebration of the National Peace Day and the Youth Celebration Day, together with the dance group.

The dance group consists of 40 – 50 children who are taught traditional dances that used to have a central role in the Acholi culture. When people were still living in their villages, dance festivals were arranged regularly during the dry season when the

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38 See Appendix 3.
grasses were burnt and the country was open (Girling 1960). The children at Gulu Public are taught larakakara and lalobaloba. These dances are performed by groups of young, unmarried people and were socially important as culturally-accepted forms of courtship. Because of the displacement these dances are not arranged anymore, which is a concern for the elders in the community. The volunteers at the centre also occasionally tell the children traditional stories, myths and riddles in an attempt to compensate for some of the cultural loss caused by the commuting and displacement. In addition there is a drama group. The activities are arranged to keep the children busy and give them moral and cultural guidance, but also to make the centre attractive so that they will come there instead of hanging around the town.39

4.3 The commute to and from the centre

The children arrive at the centre after sunset in the dark. Most of them are barefoot and wrapped in the blankets they cover themselves with during the night. For the children living far from the centre the daily walk is time-consuming and tiresome, making the children inattentive at school and frequent latecomers according to the teachers that I interviewed.40 Children coming from the same neighbourhood often walk together to the shelter, but none of my respondents were accompanied by adults. According to centre regulations the children have to be on the premises before 8.30 pm, but the volunteers are constantly urging the children to come earlier to avoid walking in the dark. Walking in the dark increases the risk of traffic accidents and assault, and several of the girls reported that they had been beaten up or chased by local boys and men on their way to the shelter. Ten-year-old Betty gave this account when asked whether anything bad had happened to her on the way to the shelter: “Yes, I was scared by a man with a panga, a weapon, a big knife, which is used, which is used to cut. They can harm”.

Both the volunteers at the shelter and local politicians have been appealing to parents and guardians to accompany the children on their way to the centres, but without much success. Many of them are staying with grandparents whose weak health prevents them from making the commute with the children. This issue is also

39 Interview with Janet, volunteer at Gulu Public.
40 Interviews conducted with teachers and headmasters at Layibi Techo Primary and Mama Care Primary in Gulu on March 21, 2005.
recognised by Kerobino Ojok Paul, the Gulu LC5 vice-chairman. The causalities of the war combined with the devastating Aids pandemic are taking a heavy toll on the parental generation, making a large number of the children orphans. He also explains the fact of adults not accompanying the children by a general problem of dependency. The many years of war and displacement have made the parents lose faith in their own abilities as carers, and instead they rely on external assistance. “[The] parents are traumatised, and have become dependent upon help from officials. They are not longer taking responsibility. [They are saying]’I am helpless, what can I do?’”

Joseph Kilema, officer at the Probation and Welfare Office, is also concerned about the adult generation disclaiming liability for their children and placing their trust on external actors. “Many parents are running away from their responsibility”, he claims, giving examples of parents sending their children to get items from NGOs rather than trying to maintain the family themselves.

But when it comes to providing security on the commute, no other actors are taking the responsibility for the children’s safety. The Public Relations Officer in the UPDF admits that they have a shared responsibility for the commuters’ safety, but claims that they are in no position to be present on ‘every road all the time’. My argument that this was a question about protecting specific and known routes at a certain time a day was met with little understanding. “The UPDF’s responsibility”, he said, “is to protect any citizen”, in an awkward line of argument ruling out special arrangements for the commuters.

4.4 Summary

Commuting increases the children’s vulnerability in a number of ways. Apart from the deplorable conditions at the centre and the risks connected with the actual walking, the commuting reduces the time the children have available with their family and makes it difficult for them to reach morning classes. But despite the obvious disadvantages of being a commuter, several thousands of children continue to come to the shelters even during periods of calm. This indicates that commuting to the centres nevertheless is

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41 See song in Appendix 3.
42 Interview conducted at his office in Gulu on March 23, 2005.
43 Interview conducted at the Probation and Welfare Office in Gulu on March 23, 2005.
44 Interview conducted with the Public Relation Officer in the UPDF at his office in Gulu on March 16, 2005.
perceived as being in the interests of the individual commuter as a social actor, or for the family as a decision-making unit. In the following chapters I will analyse the purposes commuting serves for protection, subsistence and socialisation respectively. The analysis will be done in the light of the social and physical contexts defining their alternatives for action, hence their agency.
5. Protection Purposes

The search for protection from the LRA was the initial cause of the commuting, and remains an important factor today. The night commuting can be seen as a disturbing barometer of the intensity of the conflict. When rumours start to spread of rebels in the area, the number of children coming to sleep in the shelters immediately multiplies. Data collected from the Probation and Welfare Office (PWO) in Gulu shows that the number of commuters at the shelters in Gulu dropped from 21,000 in November 2004 to 7,000 the following month when there was a ceasefire between the UPDF and the LRA and negotiations were in progress. The peace talks broke down on December 31, and fighting resumed the day after. In January there was again a steep increase in the number of commuters according to the PWO officers. As such the shelters still serve their original purpose in the periods of violence, but what about the 7,000 children that continued to night commute, even during the ceasefire? What purposes do the night commuter centres serve for them?

5.1 Fear of abductions

The violence in Acholiland is intermittent and a period of calm, as during my stay, is expected to be succeeded by renewed violence and waves of abductions. Most children stay at home until rumours of forthcoming attacks start spreading in the community or rebels enter the area. But the children that continue to commute when the others stay at home may also be motivated by fear. Younger children are primarily relying their risk assessment on elder members of their household, and as I will show later household members at times have their own motivation for making children continue to commute. It needs to be noted however that how the children and their families estimate the risk of abductions to some extent is individual. It is reasonable to expect that, for instance, children that previously have been abducted have a higher threshold for feeling safe than others. Two of my seventeen respondents among the commuters at Gulu Public were former abductees, and the volunteers told me that the abductees were many, although they did not know how many at the time. Some of the children

\[\text{45 Unfortunately statistics for the period from January to May 2005 are not available.}\]
had physical scars from being tortured while in captivity, but the mental scars cut deeper and remain hidden from outsiders.

The drawings made by some of the children of their home environment clearly indicate that the fear of the rebels and images of violence are deeply entrenched in their lives. A minority of the drawings portrayed war and destruction, but the disturbing images of rebels shooting, children being abducted and huts set on fire clearly show the children’s fear. Seen in relation to the extent of the violence and abductions that have been occurring in the area during these children’s lifetime, the pictures are not necessarily a result of the children’s imagination but might be pictures of real-life experiences. That the night commuter centre represents safety is particularly clear on one of the drawings where the rebels with their guns are drawn on the left side of the paper, and the centre on the right side. The rebels have set huts on fire and abducted young children and adults. All the abductees are tied together, and the adults are forced to carry the rebels’ loot. Between the rebels and the centre is a sharp line, making a distinct division between the image of danger and the image of safety.46

5.2 Breakdown of traditional safety nets

Some of the children that continue to commute during the calm periods have other threats to their security than the LRA. While the risk of abductions is a security threat to the children directly caused by the war, the war is also threatening the children indirectly through the social disintegration of the Acholi community. The years of conflict and displacement have made it impossible to uphold the Acholi way of life, and the society is suffering from cultural and social decay. The Acholi are traditionally farmers and accustomed to life in dispersed villages where social life was organised around clans and lineages (Girling 1960). Herded into camps, the population has been deprived of the possibility of continuing their subsistence activities and have very limited opportunities to engage in alternative means of occupation. The displacement has led to a rapid urbanisation that has broken down the traditional social organisation, as people are crowded together regardless of affiliation. The elders and the traditional

See Appendix 2.
rulers, the *rwots*, have lost many of their functions as the group of people they have been representing have dissolved. The traditional safety net of belonging to a clan and lineage is withering, a tendency that it is further reinforced by the resource scarcity forcing people to become increasingly individualistic (Liu Institute for Global Issues & Gulu District NGO Forum 2005). The extended family used to take on the responsibility for orphans and other vulnerable individuals not in a position to support themselves but, according to the Acholi Paramount Chief, these groups are now often left to fend for themselves.

Out of my seventeen respondents, six of the children did not have an adult guardian in their household. Five were girls living in child-headed households and one boy had Gulu Public as his only place of belonging. Rose (10), Alyce (12) and Ann (13) were sisters and made up a household in Korombe, one of the displaced villages around 30 minutes’ walk from Gulu Public. They were staying in a hut built by their deceased elder brother with an additional hut for cooking, in a household kept remarkably well by three young girls. Their mother was dead, but their father was still alive although not living together with his daughters. In asking Alyce why they were not staying with their father, she replied, “*That one has gone to the village to dig and says he will come back next year*”. The village where the father was staying was out of reach without a vehicle and the girls had no possibility of visiting him. The sisters said that they were sleeping at the centre every night out of fear of the rebels, and had been doing so since the centre opened 20 months earlier. Yet one night, all of the three sisters failed to show up. I asked their friends why they were not coming, and was told that their father had come to stay with them over Easter. Their friends explained that as long as the father was home, the girls did not need to sleep at the centre. The fact that the girls sleep at home when their father is there might indicate that having him in the house makes them feel safe and that abductions are not what they perceive as the biggest threat. Parents are not capable of defending their children against rebels, which was what caused the commuting in the first place. Nevertheless, having an adult in the

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47 For a controversial anthropological classic of how famine led to extreme individualism among the Iks in Northern Uganda see Turnbull (1972).
48 Interview with the Acholi Paramount Chief Rwot David Onen at his office in Gulu on March 5, 2005. This is also happening other places in Africa, primarily as a result of the Aids pandemic killing the parental generation and distorting the adult/child ratio.
household may protect the girls against other threats in their local environment. The risk that thieves may break into their house at night, for instance, was mentioned in five of the thirteen written responses to ‘What is it like to be a commuter?’ The existence of night commuter centres gives the girls a safe place to spend the night when their father is away, and as a consequence also makes it easier for him to leave them to farm in the rural village when the security situation allows it.

Angela (18) and Cathy (16) were also sisters. They were total orphans and lived together in a house in the middle of town.\textsuperscript{49} The location of their dwelling ruled out the need for protection from rebels as a motivation for sleeping at the centre; nor was lack of space a cause for commuting. Both girls were coming to the centre every night, despite being regularly harassed by locals for sleeping in ‘Baghdad’.\textsuperscript{50} As I will show, the level of violence and sexual abuse has increased in the Acholi region as a result of the prolonged conflict and it is reasonable to expect child-headed households to be particularly exposed to abuse. Also the soldiers there to protect them represent a security threat to many. Complaints from locals of violence and abuse committed by UPDF soldiers against the local population are numerous, but very rarely lead to convictions. In the few cases where any action is taken, the soldier in question is usually just transferred to another area. The \textit{de facto} impunity has led to high occurrences of soldiers raping local girls, and commuting to the centres is a strategy for girls to protect themselves against sexual abuse by soldiers at night (Suarez & St.Jean 2005). However, it needs to be kept in mind that commuting in itself also renders the girls vulnerable to sexual harassment, especially while walking to the centre in the evening (Paul 2006). The risk of being attacked on the way must be weighed against the risk of nightly attacks at home, but for the girls that have company on the way or, as Angela and Cathy, live within town, sleeping at one of the centres can be a sound strategy for children living without adult protection.

But the soldiers do not constitute a threat only towards young girls. Simon, a sixteen-year-old boy and the only one of my respondents not belonging to a household, returned to the centre one night all shaken up after a meeting with the UPDF. He had

\textsuperscript{49} At the centre children who had lost both parents were termed ‘total orphans’, while the term ‘orphan’ was also used for children who still had one parent alive.

\textsuperscript{50} ‘Baghdad’ is used as a pejorative generic term for all the night commuter centres in Gulu.
spent the day working on a farm in a village outside of town. In return for his work he had been given some potatoes, and he was baking them on an open fire when the soldiers came over to him. The soldiers were aggressive and started asking him who he was and what he was doing there. He told them his name and explained his purpose, and one of the soldiers was a local boy from the area who could confirm his identity. Still the commander of the group ordered that he be given 20 strokes with big sticks and threatened him with getting shot if he returned. Faced with the barrels of their guns, he was forced to escape, leaving the hoe he had borrowed behind. According to Simon this was not an exceptional occurrence and soldiers had several times harassed him.

5.3 Domestic threats

These children are particularly vulnerable because they do not live in households with adult members; but being a part of a family does not equal safety for all. As pointed out by Jesse Newman, the family may, even if it is a protective force in peacetime, represent a threat to children when it comes under pressure and stress during times of war (Newman 2006). In Acholi the physical division of labour in the household has been an important marker of the relation between men and women. While women’s activities mainly have been related to the domestic sphere, men have had much of their gender identity invested in being providers for the family. As the displacement has made it impossible for most people to continue with subsistence activities, the role of men has lost much of its importance. Food is distributed by external aid organisations, and as such is replacing the men’s role as providers. By not being able to possess livestock and land, men have been deprived the most important symbolic markers defining manhood and social status (Paul 2006). Women are generally coping better with the displacement than men, as they are still able to keep up with some of their regular tasks such as cooking and caring for children (Bøås & Hatløy 2005). For Acholi men the idleness and lack of social status have become a major problem, and many resort to drinking. According to Okema Emmanuel from the Acholi Religious

51 The use of open fire is prohibited after dark as the UPDF are afraid they may attract rebels, but this was before dawn.
52 For a discussion of how the relief operation’s policy of equality are challenges traditional hierarchies of authority, see Turner (1999).
Leaders Peace Initiative, the parents have “*lost their visions*” as a result of the situation they are in. The fathers have lost their positions in the families and are these days “*reduced to nothing*”. The LC5 vice-chairman argued that alcohol is stealing the time that the parents could have spent with their children and has replaced the gathering of the family around the fireplace. Instead drunkenness, together with the general desperation and feeling of hopelessness, is resulting in a high level of domestic violence and sexual abuse (Liu Institute for Global Issues 2004).

The context of conflict and displacement is causing tension between the generations, as the parents are not in a position to fulfil their expected role as protectors. Okumu Odongtoo John, regional manager in Save the Children and himself an Acholi, explains the present situation as following: “*Parents are the same as security, and it is through providing the children security they are gaining the children’s respect. In today’s situation where the parents are not longer able to protect their children, the basis for the children’s respect for their parents is disappearing*”. Both community members and public officials argued that the parents’ frustration over lack of control of their children is leading to domestic violence. As often seen in western settings, fear and threat of violence become compensation for natural authority and respect. There is also reason to expect that the many years of living with the threat of external violence has had an effect on the level of internal violence in the Acholi community. Many among the local population are psychologically and emotionally affected from being victims of LRA actions, in particular former abductees, returning from a situation where they actively have been attempted socialised into an environment where violence is a normal part of the daily life. The reintegration of these former abductees is causing tensions in the Acholi society, and may also increase the level of domestic violence. Often they bring with them unbearable experiences and subversive norms that makes it difficult for them to return to civilian life and to subordinate themselves to the authority of parents or

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53 Interview conducted at Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative’s office in Gulu on March 24, 2005.
54 Interview conducted with Gulu LC5 vice-chairman Kerobino Ojok Paul at his office in Gulu on March 23, 2005.
55 Interview conducted at Save the Children’s office in Gulu on March 24, 2005.
56 Traumatised is a diagnosis that is often made for both individual members and the entire Acholi population, but should be used with caution. The concept of trauma is strongly connected to its roots in western, individualistic psychology, and it might be discussed if the diagnosing criteria and the one-to-one psychosocial treatment are fruitful in a collectivistc context as traditional Acholi. There is no word in the Acholi language corresponding to the one of trauma. For a critical discussion of the diagnosing of trauma and use of psychosocial support in non-western settings see Bracken (1998).
members of the adult generation in general. They lack coping mechanisms that are socially acceptable, and may easily react with aggression and frustration (Brett & McCallin 1998).

Domestic violence and abuse is an increasing problem among the displaced population and is, according to Michael Copland, UNICEF’s Child Protection Officer in Gulu, one of the reasons why children seek protection in the shelters. During my fieldwork I did not ask my respondents directly whether they were being abused at home, as that might have felt intimidating or placed the children in a position of conflicting loyalties. Instead I chose to ask them if they knew about other children that came to the shelter because they were mistreated at home, and several of the children confirmed that they did. In Save the Children’s survey referred to previously, 27 percent of the commuters reported that they were experiencing abuse in their own household. 40 percent of the commuters did not live with either of their parents (Falk, Lenz & Okuma 2004). It is to be expected that children not living with their parents run a bigger risk of rejection or abuse than the children that do, as moral responsibility is dependent upon emotional proximity (Vetlesen 1996). In a society like Acholi, where people are living on the margin of existence and individualism is increasing while traditional protective structures are breaking down, this is likely to happen.

Night commuting may be used as a strategy to avoid abuse both by the children themselves and their family. The child exposed to violence at home may act as an agent on its own behalf and decide to spend the nights at one of the centres rather than risking abuse at home, or the decision might be made by other persons close to the child. In cases where, for instance, the child’s mother find herself unable to protect the child against a violent father or stepfather, sending the child to one of the centres becomes an alternative means of protection. According to an informant cited in a report published by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), night commuting is also used by adult women as a way to escape abusive husbands (RLP, NRC & IDMC 2006). In Gulu Public and most of the other centres in Gulu there is an

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57 Interview conducted at the UNICEF-office in Gulu on March 24, 2005.
58 These numbers are not directly comparable to the situation during my fieldwork as the survey was conducted during a time with much higher numbers of commuters. I have reason to expect that the percentage of orphans was even higher during my stay, but this is not documented in numbers. Of my seventeen respondents that were not picked for other criteria than being outspoken and willing to participate, only three were living in a household together with their mother. None of the children were staying with their father. Four were staying with their aunt, three with their grandmother, one with another non-relative and six of the children were living on their own.
upper age-limit of eighteen and, for reasons that I will return to, few girls commute to the centres once they have reached puberty. During my stay only three of the commuting girls at the centre were above fifteen and none of them were married. But Gulu Public offers an opportunity also for adults to come to the centre for protection by joining as volunteers. This is not possible in the other centres, which demands special qualifications and formal procedures for employment.

5.4 Summary

In a context where the institutions that should have been protecting the children are lacking or constitute a threat in themselves, the night commuter centres represent an alternative. It is not random which children come to the centre for protection during periods of calm, and their domestic environment frames the decision to commute. Children that are threatened by abuse at home may use the centres for protection purposes. There is reason to expect that children not living in the same household as their parents, as well as children living in households with substance abuse, are more likely to suffer abuse at home than other children. Some children may also have experiences that make their threshold for feeling safe sleeping at home higher than for other children. The children that choose to commute, or are sent by others, to protect themselves against violence from family, neighbours or soldiers in their home community clearly belong to a vulnerable group, but they are still not as vulnerable as the children that are experiencing the same without having the alternative of finding refuge in one of the night commuter centres. It needs to be kept in mind that the night commuter centres only represent an option for children that live within walking distance and are not prohibited by members of their household. This excludes out the majority of the children in Acholiland, who live in remote IDP-camps without in-camp shelters or access to town.

But the search for protection is not the only reason why children come to the centres. In the next chapter I will analyse how commuting is used both by commuters and by their families to serve subsistence purposes.
6. Subsistence Purposes

Although the shelters do not distribute food to the commuters, commuting for subsistence purposes is nevertheless a motivation both for the individual children and for their households. This chapter analyses the subsistence purposes the commuting serves, and whether they are related to pull-factors created at the centres or caused by push-factors in the domestic environment.

6.1 Distribution in the centres

The provision of services varies among the centres, but none of them contribute much in terms of material assistance to the commuters. The children are given water to drink, blankets for sleeping, and occasionally soap and other minor presents from benefactors. Rural Focus Uganda (RUFOU), one of the NGOs running a centre in Gulu, on one occasion stated in advance that the distribution of blankets was to take place. Not surprisingly, word got round in the community and the number of commuters multiplied in the days when the distribution was to take place. The lesson from that experience was not to report beforehand when material items are to be distributed, and no material items are at the moment given out to the commuters on a regular basis. Several of the commuters at Gulu Public mentioned the availability of clean water for drinking as one of the benefits of staying at the centre, but all the children have access to water sources near to their home that they use during the day. Access to water is in itself not a sufficient reason for the children to come to the centres.

Nevertheless, every service provided, regardless of how minor, will work as an attraction to some in a society such as Acholi where nearly everything is lacking and some pull-effect is inevitable. In the written responses to ‘What is it like to be a commuter?’ six out of thirteen commuters mentioned the distribution of items like soap and blankets as an advantage of coming to the centre. Still it does not follow naturally from the fact that the commuters see the material support as a benefit that the distribution is a sufficient motivation for continuing commuting. Both the commuters and officials in the area said they knew about parents that were sending their children
to the centres hoping that they would be given something they could bring home to their families. One of the respondents wrote “[…] other children whose parents are poor, they send them to sleep at the centre because their parents have many children. So they hear that when they give things, then they come to get the things. But if they are not giving things, then they don’t come to sleep. […] other children their parents are in the camp and they go to the camp to get things which are being given at the camps, so they don’t come to the centre”.

In a focus group with eight commuters, two of them had siblings that were staying at Noah’s Ark, one of the other centres in Gulu. Eleven-year-old Evelyn told me that her mother had instructed Evelyn and her other siblings to split up while commuting. The reason they were given was that she could not bear to lose them all, so if one of the centres was attacked, at least one of her children would survive. As mentioned previously, the guardians also used this strategy for diversification of risk during the early phase of commuting, while children were hiding in the bush. It might be that this was the initial reason why the siblings split up, and that they continue to sleep separately because they have become integrated into the social life of their respective centres. Another possible explanation is that some parents place their children strategically in different centres in an attempt to diversify the potential yield rather than the risk, as having children staying at different centres increases the likelihood that some of the children will get something that they can take back to their household. This might happen even if the commuting increases the children’s vulnerability. In the extreme situations that often follow from a violent conflict, it is not uncommon for a family’s agency to counteract the well-being or safety of some of its members for the survival of others (Newman 2006). In Northern Uganda this is also seen through the growing trend of premature marriages. By marrying off the girls at an early age, the family reduces the number of offspring to care for, get a profit through the bridewealth, and in some cases is also able to make useful alliances. Abkiola Flavia illustrates this in her poem quoted at the beginning of this thesis when stating “we are tired of long walking, we are tired of early marriages, you are also tired of giving us food”. It is showing that the issues of commuting and premature marriages
come up in connection with the parents’ struggle and inadequacy to sufficiently support their children.

6.2 Contact with relevant actors

In a society totally dependent upon external assistance, getting close to NGOs is an attractive coping strategy. Staying at one of the night commuter centres is an efficient way to get in direct contact with NGOs doing humanitarian work in the area and it is an alternative open to all children within walking distance. Lutara Philip, District Coordinator at the Concerned Parents Association (CPA), expressed his worry that the children no longer go to their families when they are in need of, for instance, medicines. Instead they seek out the organisations, as they are perceived as the ones responsible to protect them. The dependency is inherited from the parental generation and is further weakening the relationship between the generations. Although the chances of being seen and given special attention by an NGO are not large, the possibility is still there that something might trickle down. One of the commuters answered explicitly in the written response that the possibility of getting a job was an advantage of commuting.

It was a dilemma that the occasional visits by monos like myself in the shelters may create a pull-factor in itself. The night commuting children are a strong symbol of the suffering of the Acholi people and journalists, representatives of the international humanitarian organisations or foreign politicians that come to Gulu often visit one of the centres. They usually go to see one of the more organised shelters run by the international organisations, but Gulu Public has also been visited by foreigners. It is impossible to witness the conditions in which the night commuters stay without being emotionally moved by it, and the natural reaction is to want to contribute with something that can make their lives easier. One of the visitors that had been at Gulu Public had donated money for the purchase of a generator and another had signed up for paying the children’s hospital bills. Some of the children were getting their school fees paid by foreigners they had met in the centre. One visitor had even promised to return with bicycles for all the children and the volunteers. Nearly a year had passed

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Interview conducted at the Concerned Parents’ Association’s office in Gulu on March 23, 2005.

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since he was due to come back with the bikes and the hopes that he would return were not high, but they were still alive in some of the children.

6.3 Crowding

The major subsistence purpose of the centres, however, is not created by services provided at the centres, but caused by the extreme population density among the displaced. When discussing which factor contributed the most to making the children come to the centres during calm periods, the issue of crowding was the theme that repeated itself most frequently. Both volunteers and leaders at the Gulu Public, public officials, politicians, and representatives from local and international organisations emphasised lack of physical space as the main push-factor in the community making children come to the centres to sleep. The congestion is worst within the camps, but even in the more informal displaced settlements around Gulu lack of space is a significant problem. In the camps the huts are sometimes built with less than a hand’s length between them. A living condition survey conducted by Fafo used 25 x 25 metres as a selection area for sampling, and one-third of the households interviewed were situated on a sample square with eight households or more on the square (Bøås & Hatløy 2005). Converted into the area of football fields, this would equal 90 households or more living per field.\(^{60}\) The majority of the commuters come from the displaced communities outside the camps, but the same congestion can be witnessed in areas all the way into the town centre. You will find open spaces within and around Gulu, but the land is privately owned and not available for building huts.

The lack of physical space for sleeping makes it an alternative for the families to send some children to the centres in order to relieve pressure on the household. In a focus group with four girls aged from 10 to 13, two of them reported that they had siblings of the same age, both boys and girls, who were sleeping at home. They had been commuters previously, but had now decided that they did not want to come to the centre anymore. When asking the girls the reason why they were still sleeping at Gulu Public when their siblings were not, they replied that they were there because they were afraid of the rebels and that their families wanted them to be safe. They did not

\(^{60}\) Using the international standard of 68 x 105 metres.
give the impression that they had been reflecting much on why they were still commuting while their sisters and brothers were sleeping together with the rest of the family. I asked if their siblings were not also scared of the rebels and they confirmed that yes, they were scared, but still chose not to come to the centre. None of them could give a good reason why. “I don’t know their interest”, was the answer given by ten-year-old Betty.

When the youngest children come to the centre because of lack of space in the household, it is usually a decision made by their adult guardians and not a result of the children’s own agency. The adults’ need for privacy was an often-mentioned reason for sending children to the centre. “A man needs to make love to his wife”, as it was put by one of the board members in Charity for Peace Foundation. A traditional Acholi household would normally consist of at least two huts. The head of the household would have his own hut, often his former bachelor residence, and the wife would have a separate hut where she could keep her belongings and cook for the family. In addition there was usually a hut for storage and one for keeping animals. In polygamous households all the wives would have private huts, and additional huts could also be erected for a maturing son or for members of the extended family such as a mother-in-law (Girling 1960). Today many households are confined to one hut, some with an additional hut for cooking. In a survey conducted at Médecins Sans Frontière’s night commuter centre in Lacor Hospital in November 2005, 32 percent of the children came from households with one hut available and an additional 30 percent from two-hut households (Gulu District 2005).

The officers at the Probation and Welfare office argued that it was not coincidental as to which children were commuting because of lack of space at home. According to them, this was mainly an issue for children from the poorest households, which did not have 5000 Ugandan shilling (almost $3) a month to spend on an extra hut. Seen in relation to the fact that almost 70 percent of the population have no income at all, with an additional 10 percent making less than $3 a month (CSOPNU 2006), it makes more sense to turn the argument around. Commuting because of crowding may not be a concern for the small minority with access to capital living in an area with huts available for rent. The part of the population with access to some
financial resources is over-represented within the urban area of Gulu compared to the majority of population who are living in the IDP-camps, but renting extra room still represents an option for very few.

6.3.1 Maturing girls

The lack of housing forces family members that according to traditional customs should have slept separately to share a hut at night. Having to sleep in the same hut as their children is an obstacle to the parents’ need for privacy, but it also means breaking cultural taboos. The social order in traditional Acholi villages was strongly correlated with physical space, both in relation to physical placement of houses and arrangements within the house. Maturing girls are, for instance, not to sleep in the same hut as their parents. It would be reasonable to expect to find many girls above the age of puberty in the centres as a result, but this was not the case. While I was staying in Gulu Public there were only three commuting girls above fifteen, but many boys in their late teens. As in most societies, controlling girls’ sexuality is seen as more important than controlling the sexuality of boys. There is a general concern in the public that commuting is making the children prematurely sexually active, both as a result of the communal sleeping and the parents’ lack of control. According to the District Police Commander, many parents prevent their daughters from going to the centres after they have reached puberty, as they are afraid that they will get defiled as a result of the commuting and as a consequence will not get married. That a girl does not get married also means that her family loses out on the bridewealth, which at least traditionally used to be a substantial sum. Rather than letting their maturing daughters sleep at the centre, the girls are placed with other relatives or friends if that option is available. This was confirmed by Richard, volunteer at Gulu Public: “[Parents] are concerned when a lady becomes mature, they put her under restrictions. They are mostly guarded by their mothers. But most of them don’t mean they do not run from where it is dangerous to town. They come to town, but they go to beg from relatives to allow them to sleep in their rooms. If two, the younger ones will

[61] Interview conducted with DPC Richard Mule at Gulu Police Station on March 24, 2005.
[62] According to tradition the bridewealth is to be paid in cattle, but as cattle have become scarce as a result of the conflict the bridewealth these days is usually paid in money. Money and cattle are not exchange equivalent, and accepting money as bridewealth is seen as converting down the value of the bride. See also Bohannan (1959).
be staying here, because the rooms will not be enough for all. So most of them are within the town located to relatives, to take care of them. These ones [the three mature girls at Gulu Public], you see them around now here. They don’t have anywhere to go. Their relatives are not there, so their relatives are... Like the girl was saying, their parents and a lot of people have died, so nobody taking care of where to sleep. That is the difference”.

All of the three ‘big girls’ at Gulu Public were total orphans. Two of them were Angela and Cathy, who as mentioned previously were staying by themselves. Without contact with any relatives they had no one interfering with their decision to commute, but they were feeling the judgement of people in the area. On their way to the centre at night they would frequently be insulted by people they met, questioning why they were going to the centre when they were ‘so big’. Adult women in particular were harassing them, accusing them of being immoral for commuting in their age. For the adolescent boys, the commuting did not entail the same moral stigma. “You see the mature boys around, cause in the Acholi culture they don’t take concern over men, cause you know, what do you do? So they are here, they are sleeping. So the girls are kept in a good... You know this is inherited in the culture. In the love culture of the Acholi, ladies were followed for marriage. It gives you resources, it gives you dower, it brings you money. So you have to protect properly so that the ladies marry. That is what you still see. But in boys there are no value, you have to do manual work. ‘Go to the garden and dig!’” (Richard, volunteer at Gulu Public).

**6.3.2 Maturing boys**

There is also an additional cultural factor contributing to the over-representation of mature boys in the centre. According to Acholi tradition a boy is expected to move out of his father’s household once he has reached puberty (Girling 1960). To become the head of his own household is an important part of the transition from child to man, but the lack of available land for building huts is threatening the boys’ possibilities of entering the social status of ‘men’.

While the mature girls in the centre were clearly under-represented, there was a number of boys in their late teens. One of them was Michael. He was eighteen and as
such too old to sleep at the centre according to the centre regulations. The management at Gulu Public had suggested that he joined the group of volunteers instead, but Michael was enjoying his position as the oldest among the commuters and did not want to change his status to volunteer. His mother was one of the regular volunteers sleeping at the centre together with her youngest son, a six-month-old baby. This might have been an additional factor that contributed to his decision to remain with the group of commuters, rather than making the generation of his mother his peers. Michael had been staying at the centre since they first opened during the summer 2003, but lived less than a five-minute walk from the premises of Gulu Public. It was obvious that fear of abduction was not his reason for being there, since his household was well within the town centre in an area that was perceived as safe from rebel attacks. The rebels had killed Michael’s father when he was a young boy, and his mother had remarried another man. Michael, his mother, stepfather and grandmother were now living in his uncle’s household. In addition to the uncle’s wife and children, the uncle’s sister was also a part of the household together with her husband and children. The extended family was occupying two small huts in a densely-populated displaced settlement in the middle of town, where there was no room available for putting up new huts.

The lack of physical space for sleeping made Gulu Public within short walking distance a sound alternative for both Michael, his mother and the baby. In addition to relieving some pressure on the household, his mother found it rewarding to contribute with something valuable to the community by caring for the commuting children at night. For Michael it also gave him an opportunity to detach himself from the status as a child in his uncle’s household. Michael was creating his own role as an adult in relation to the younger children in the centre. He was leading the choir together with one of the other ‘big boys’, he was guiding the younger children’s behaviour and passing on the cultural knowledge he was getting from his grandmother. In the mornings he would go back to the uncle’s household. This was where he had his family and his meals and was participating in domestic tasks. As such he was still a part of the household, but the centre gave him an alternative social arena that made it
possible to combine being eighteen and still a part of his uncle’s household with taking a first step into adulthood.63

6.4 Unaccompanied children

The vast majority of the commuters have a home where they belong and visit daily, at least for the consumption of food. Among my seventeen respondents, Simon was the only one who did not belong to a household.64 Simon was a total orphan and, something unusual for an Acholi, an only child. His mother had died of meningitis when he was seven, and the rebels had killed his father three years later. After his parents died he had no other relatives that were willing to take on the responsibility for him, but the headmaster at the primary school where he was a pupil allowed him to continue in school despite the lack of money for school fees. He was sleeping at the school and surviving on food given through the World Food Program’s school-feeding programme, but after finishing primary school he had no means to continue into secondary school.65 Left on his own, he was living on the streets, while he continued to go to his former primary school at lunchtime to pick up a portion of posho and beans at weekdays. The rest of his meals he got through begging and going through restaurants’ garbage. When the night commuter centres opened during the summer of 2003, he started sleeping there instead. He has continued to seek out his former school, where the teachers reluctantly let him participate in the school meals. “When I leave Gulu Public I usually go to where I studied, the primary school, because that is where I survive. I eat food, they give to pupils. So I go and hang around the school to wait for lunchtime to eat, and after that I have to come back, so that I sleep in Gulu Public. But I get a lot of problems because both teachers and pupils at that school they really don’t accept me there because they say that ‘you already sat P7, why are you coming back to eat our food?’ I have a lot of problems when I go there to eat”(Simon, 16).

63 An Acholi youth will not be considered a complete adult before he or she is married. The lack of resource for paying the bridewealth poses an additional obstacle to young Acholi men’s passage into adulthood (WCRWC 2001).
64 Another of my respondents who was also a total orphan had been in this position earlier, but had been taken into foster care by the patron at the centre. He was now included as a member of the patron’s household who also paid his school fees.
65 Uganda initiated an Universal Primary Education programme (UPE) in 1997, where the target was that primary education should be provided for free to four children in every family, including orphans. The UPE has been a success and primary education is today available to most of the children for minor costs, but the high fees of secondary education makes it impossible for most children in the north to continue with further education.
Recently Simon has been staying with an elderly woman in Unyama, one of the IDP-camps right outside Gulu town, during the weekends when school is closed. She had agreed to share her ration with him, but was now moving to another district to stay with her daughter’s family. "She is going to see her daughter who has eight children, and she can’t take me with her because she says that I will go on her burden. So what I should do I should look for somewhere to go and survive. She can’t take me with her". Simon was worried about how he would sustain himself during the weekends after the woman had left, and also concerned that they soon would prevent him from getting more food through the school-feeding programme. Since he was only sixteen, he was too young to register as an IDP and get his own hut and ration card in one of the camps. In times of peace orphans like Simon would have been integrated and supported by the community, but as recourses dwindle everybody is forced to prioritise themselves and their nearest family. “People even don’t, cannot accept you, to go and stay at their houses because they find it is a burden. You know with shortage of food and poverty, people can’t really take care of you, and you know, you give them more burden, plus the children they have” (Simon, 16).

For children like Simon, the centre represents an alternative to life on the streets. Simon is not satisfied with his life at Gulu Public, but he does not see any better options. “Actually I still think I am going to sleep at Gulu Public until the day they say that they have stopped people now from sleeping in Gulu Public, so what people should do is just to go and find a place to sleep somewhere else. Then what I will do, I will start looking for somewhere to sleep and anywhere where I can go and eat. The best place I would resort to is to go and sleep under the verandas and continue begging for residues from hotels’ garbage to eat". The centre serves a subsistence purpose in giving him a fixed place to stay, as well as a social environment where he has a feeling of belonging. He has a good relationship both with the volunteers and his fellow commuters, but the centre does not compensate for a family. “It is not really like a home to me because even I went and tried to ask the matron and she said she can’t really allow me to sleep with her, because she also is not paid salary. She is a volunteer. They don’t pay her. So she can’t really feed me, because the food they give her is from home and it is very little. She can’t really. So it is not a
home to me, I only sleep here, and that is all”. Since the centre does not distribute food, it does not fulfil the commuters’ most essential subsistence need. As such it is not an appropriate facility for children that are not integrated into a household. However, as long as children belonging to this group lack the knowledge of or access to better opportunities, commuting might seem in their best interests. It meets some of their subsistence needs, such as blankets and a place to sleep, but must be combined with complementary strategies, like attending the school-feeding in Simon’s case, for covering additional basic needs. Often the coping strategies available to the children are detrimental, such as theft, prostitution and begging, and are not accepted by volunteers and children at the centre. The street children have internalised their own norms and values that contradict the rules and regulations at the centre, and children trying to sustain themselves on the streets easily get integrated into ‘street life’. Both volunteers and commuters told me of children who used to come to the centre but now were back sleeping on the streets. When asking one of the street boys why he did not sleep at the centre he replied that “no one decides over me”, a statement I believe is representative of the feeling of many of these independent survivors.

6.5 Formerly abducted children

In addition to being an orphan, Simon is also a former abductee. As mentioned previously, formerly abducted children (FACs) may have a higher threshold for feeling safe. Another factor making them potentially more likely to commute is their fear of social exclusion. The former abductees inhabit a liminal position in society by being both perpetrators and victims of violence. Many of the abductees have been forced to commit atrocities against their own kin and neighbours, and return with a feeling of guilt and fear of rejection and revenge (Amnesty International 1997; HRW 2003a). The former abductees are offered participation in a limited re-integration programme at one of the FAC centres before returning to the community, but some returnees feel that joining the programme singles them out and adds to their social stigma and for that reason choose to avoid the FAC centres. Others have gone through the programme but face rejection from their local community on completion. These children are another vulnerable group for which staying at the night commuter centres represent an
alternative (Paul 2006). However, as discussed earlier, former abductees often have a problem in subordinating themselves to adult authority and rules and regulations, which potentially makes integration into the centre environment difficult.

### 6.6 Summary

The non-food items that are distributed do attract children to the centres, but the distribution is so sparse and infrequent that it is not perceived as creating a strong pull-factor. For most children the disadvantages of the daily commute outweigh the potential material gain, but in cases where the children have other causes for coming to the centre, the distribution of non-food items constitutes an additional motivation. Even if children themselves would not have chosen to commute, family members may take the decision for them in attempt to strengthen the chances for survival of the household. The fear of abduction permeates the social environment of the Acholi and it is easy for parents to persuade their children about the importance of sleeping in town, especially the younger children. The centre constitutes an arena where something unexpected might happen. The fact that some of the children are getting their school fees paid by people they have met while commuting shows that a few succeed in using commuting as a strategy to make themselves relevant to NGOs and foreigners. Although they make up a small minority, their success has a strong signal effect on their environment. The fact that some youths come to the centre hoping for a job or to enter manhood also shows that commuting is a strategy for social mobility for some. The main subsistence purpose the centre serves is still generally agreed to be relieving the pressure on physical space in the household. As such it is reasonable to expect an over-representation of children from big households with little space available among the commuters during calm periods. Due to the cultural mechanisms described, it is also likely that there will be more boys than girls among the oldest commuters. Unaccompanied children may come to the night commuter centres for a roof over their head, but the centres are not filling their subsistence needs. They need to adopt additional coping strategies for survival, which often are socially stigmatising and place them at risk of becoming street children.

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66 This was also the conclusion reached by Save the Children when they conducted their survey (Falk, Lenz & Okuma 2004).
7. Socialisation Purposes

For the children commuting regularly, the centres have come to play a central role in their lives. As most of the children are in school during the day and have to leave their homes early in the evening to reach to town before it gets dark, the actual time they spend with their families is very limited. The centres, together with the schools, have therefore become the commuters’ primary arenas for socialisation.

7.1 Initial socialisation purpose

The night commuter centres had a socialisation purpose from the very beginning. When Gulu Public first opened for commuters it was not only to give the children a roof over their heads, but also an attempt to restore the moral order of the Acholi society. It was a grave concern among the local population that the children commuting were becoming morally depraved from the communal sleeping in the street. Rural children, not accustomed to the urban life, were gathering around the video parlours and discos, and got into habits of drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes and marihuana. “The dancing halls are changing the brains of boys from school to disco”, was how it was put by the District Police Commander.67 The main concern was nevertheless that the commuting led to premature sexual activity among the children. Without supervision and correction from adults, the children were developing social norms among themselves that were counteracting traditional values in the Acholi. Young girls discovered transactional sex as a coping strategy, either in return for petty money or simply for a safe place to spend the night. Thefts and violence among the commuters was also a growing concern. Many of the children got involved in detrimental coping strategies, learned how to survive on the street, and became increasingly detached from their families.

To control the children’s sexual activities and prevent them from becoming street children was one of the main purposes for establishing night commuter centres. Richard, volunteer at Gulu Public, explained it like this: “From the beginning our objective was to relocate these children from the shops to a safer place, where they were able to be divided. Girls are put separately, boys are put separately, for sexual

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67 Interview with DPC Richard Mule at Gulu Police Station on March 24, 2005.
ways of handling themselves. This was the first objective, the aim that we thought we should do first. Haul the children from the streets”. After the opening of Gulu Public volunteers were doing nightly rounds in town, gathering children from the verandas and bringing them to the centre. At the centre it is the responsibility of the volunteers and prefects to make sure that children are following the centre regulations. That implies among other things arriving and leaving at the right time, and not leaving the premises during the night. Alcohol consumption and fighting is prohibited, and the children are to respect the volunteers and each other. Any improper behaviour is reported to the centre management and sanctioned through reprimands or corporal punishment. Files kept at the centre also show that children have been suspended for improper behaviour.

7.2 Upbringing and socialisation in centre

The volunteers at the centre see it as their task to create a social environment that compensates for the children’s detachment from their families and counteracts the pernicious influence from life on the streets. With the help of the limited resources they have available, they are attempting to guide the children and raise them into ‘good citizens’. Twice a week the volunteers arrange an assembly where the children are taught good behaviour, from general cleanliness to the importance of respecting their elders. It is a general concern that the children growing up today are raised outside their culture and do not know what it means to be ‘true Acholi’ (Liu Institute for Global Issues & Gulu District NGO Forum 2005). The children do not learn to cultivate land or keep livestock, and are alienated from their people’s origin. The wang oo, the traditional gathering around the fireplace at night, is the most fundamental institution in Acholi upbringing but is now about to disappear both as a result of the displacement and the UPDF’s prohibition against use of open fire at night.68 With the loss of wang oo, the most important mechanism for transferring cultural heritage, as well as social codes and conducts for behaviour between the elder and younger generation, is being lost. The volunteers are trying to compensate for some of the

68 I asked some of my respondents why it was not possible to continue the cultural teaching without the open fire. The general response was that stories were closely linked to the fireplace, but also to the daily life in the village as it was before they were forced to move. The stories are context-bound and to be told in an atmosphere of peace and harmony, not displacement and family break-ups. The grandmother of one of the commuters illustrated the feeling by asking me rhetorically, “How can we tell folk stories when there is no happiness?”.

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cultural loss by occasional storytelling and by teaching the children traditional dances and drumming, but the adult/child ratio makes it impossible to replace a functioning family context. The centre is also twice a week visited by preachers from the missionary organisation Action International Ministries, which gives the children religious teaching. Gulu Public does not have a religious affiliation, but the majority of the volunteers are born-again Christians. The volunteers see the spiritual guidance of the children as an important part of transforming them from ‘almost street children’ to ‘good citizens’. The grandmother heading the household where Betty (10) and Florence (11) were staying mentioned their recently acquired interest in religion as the biggest change in the girls’ behaviour after they started commuting. She told me that since they started sleeping in the centre ‘they have been very committed to religion and they pray a lot’. In the eyes of the grandmother this was a positive change as the norms and values the girls were internalising at the centre corresponded with what they would have been taught at home, but there is a concern that practices taught at the centre might contradict family values. In their written responses one of the commuters wrote; “Children are becoming good of what they got from the centre, like pray. Other children at home they don’t pray but if you are in centre you will pray even if you want to or don’t want”. The majority of the Acholi are Christian, with a minor Muslim community, and various degrees of influence from ancestral belief; but even if the commuters’ families are themselves Christians, they may nevertheless disagree with what and how the children are taught about religion as well as Acholi culture. As was pointed out by Okumu Odongtoo John in Save the Children: “All parents want their children to be like themselves in their faith, and the children getting their core values shaped by somebody else might lead to problems in the family”.

The well-intentioned upbringing from the volunteers is only part of the environment the commuters are socialised into while staying at the centre. Children raised in different domestic environments meet in the shelter and need to adjust to each other. Children and youths are often more easily influenced by, and eager to adapt to, their peers than the ‘responsible adults’, and the social competence promoted by the

69 Interview conducted in their home in ‘For God’ on March 19, 2005.
70 Interview conducted with Okumu Odongtoo John, regional manager Northern Uganda in Save the Children, at his office in Gulu on March 24, 2005
volunteers is not necessarily what proves to be successful among the commuters. This tendency is recognised by Richard, one of the volunteers: “And also, the worst part is that these children come from different families and different backgrounds. So they are mixed up together. Somebody is not teaching a child, he is teaching with abuse. A child comes with it in the centre, starts abusing the children. Children think that is their culture! All of them adopt that”. But the children do not only influence each other in a negative way. During my stay I observed several of the older commuters taking responsibility for the younger ones by helping them with their homework, telling them stories and correcting them if they misbehaved. Keeping in mind that 450 children were gathered together in the dark with very limited adult supervision, my impression was that the commuters were surprisingly well-behaved. After an hour or two of playing outdoors they went to their rooms when told so by the volunteers, and fell asleep in the crowded classrooms without making much noise. I did not witness any occurrence of fighting and only a few arguments between commuters while I was there.

The commuters inhabit a low social status in the local community, and the majority of the children I spoke to said they had been harassed for being commuters. When asking people in Gulu what they thought of the commuters, their response was almost exclusively negative. “They are nearly street children”, “the commuting girls are not like ordinary girls staying with their families”, and “the commuters are not acceptable to society”, were among the responses I got. Few of the adults expressed compassion for the children. Instead the commuters were held responsible for the moral decay in the society. Prostitution, promiscuous behaviour and street children were frequently mentioned as phenomena that were supposedly non-existent in the Acholi society before the night commuting started. The night commuters have become scapegoats for deteriorating tendencies in society that people do not want to acknowledge and, together with street children, make up the lowest rank in the social hierarchy. For the children sleeping at Gulu Public, their blankets become a visible stigma. “Some other children who stay near to town and don’t go to sleep in the
centre, they like teasing us that we sleep in alub, which shames us because we are carrying even our blankets.” The harassment is troubling to the children, but the external pressure may also strengthen the in-group feeling and their identity as commuters (see Bjørø & Carlsson 1999). Both the children’s teachers and locals in Gulu argued that the commuters at times acted as a group that were exclusive towards other children, by, for instance, refusing to play with them.

While the locals group the commuters together with the street children in opposition to ‘normal children sleeping with their parents’, for the commuters the street children were ‘the others’ in opposition to whom they identified themselves. The children staying at the centre characterise the street children as ‘stubborn’ and ‘bad’, not willing to subject themselves to the rules and regulations that apply to staying at the centre. When asked what they thought of their own behaviour, the children in general replied that their behaviour had improved while they were staying at the centre. “Here, as we are night commuters, we get teaching from teachers. They are looking after us in the centre and they tell us to do good things. That is how we change our life” (Sarah, 13). The volunteers also argued that being at the centre has improved the children’s manners. “Their behaviour has changed, because when they first reported, they never wanted to do this general work, the general cleanliness. They used to have bad language, they used to have abusive language also, fighting and doing some other things which are not good for the life of the kids, but as time went on they changed” (David, volunteer at Gulu Public). Despite the centre’s official aim to prevent the commuters from becoming street children, the volunteers were very reluctant to accept children that had been living on the streets at the centre. The last campaigns gathering children from the street that were recorded in the centre files were in June 2004, and the volunteers spoke in derogatory terms about the children sleeping on the street, fearing their influence on the ‘good’ children if they were to start sleeping at the centre. On one occasion during my stay three young boys were picked up from the street by the police and brought to the centre. The boys had been arguing about a shirt that had gone missing, and the police wanted them off the streets.

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71 An Acholi word for not sleeping at home, used as a term of abuse in relation to the commuting.
72 Written response to ‘What is it like to be a commuter?’.
73 The children often called the volunteers lupwonye, which is Acholi for teacher.
In the centre the boys were verbally abused and threatened by volunteers, and forced to sit at the front of the classrooms to act as a warning to the commuters of what they would become if they strayed into town at night. It was made very clear that these children were not welcome to sleep in the centre.

7.3 Centre as an alternative social arena

My respondents expressed appreciation for what was done for them at the centre. When questioned about what they liked about being there, thirteen-year-old Sarah replied, “When we are here they always dance with us, sing with us, it is a way of really making us forget. Comforting us so that we forget what bad things that have happened at home and what the war has cost us. And it makes us happy”. The other girls agreed, and added that the volunteers were teaching them good behaviour and to respect their elders. “They teach us to grow happy, and respectable and disciplined citizens” (Laura, 11). None of the children mentioned anything negative about staying at the centre. The fact that the children have good feelings about the centre corresponds with the impressions from the drawings that the children made of Gulu Public. A striking feature repeating itself on the drawings of the centre was that most of the children projected an image of the centre as more physically appealing than its actual appearance. The naked, grey concrete structure has got pleasant colours, and a couple of the girls have added curtains in the windows and flowerbeds outside.74

During individual interviews with the children I rephrased the question from what was bad about being at the centre to what was bad about not spending the nights with the family. The only girl that saw any disadvantages with not sleeping at home was ten-year-old Emma, who was one out of two girls that was staying in a household together with her mother. “I am not happy, because I don’t sleep at home”, she said. When following up on what she missed from home, her response was that she missed light for reading. “That there are times when power is not there, so we read bad. From home I would read every night and I would be encouraged to read”. Other children mentioned the electric light, although erratically, and the possibility of doing their homework at the centre as advantages of being there. At the centre they did not have to

74 See Appendix 2.
participate in domestic tasks at the expense of study-time, and occasionally the volunteers and other children would help them with their homework. In the written responses I collected, one of the commuters wrote that the centre gave her an ‘easy life’, while two others specified that being at the centre gave them time to be with friends. This might indicate that some of the children get so many tasks at home that there is little spare time for playing, and that the centre to some represents a retreat where they can spend time with their friends. It is likely that the dancing, drama group and choir arranged for the commuters works as a pull-factor on some local children. This was also confirmed by Joseph Kilema from the Probation and Welfare Office. At Gulu Public I met two girls from the neighbourhood who were not commuters but simply living close by and were coming to play at the centre. Since the area around Gulu Public is not fenced in, there is reason to believe that some of the local children gather there in the evening, without necessarily spending their nights there. The regular commuters at Gulu Public appreciate what is done to entertain them and keep them busy, but it is not to be expected that these activities by themselves are strong enough incentives to make children walk long distances or spend every night there. Some children may choose to show up to participate in activities that are arranged and there were small fluctuations from night to night in the number of commuters, but there was no pattern during my stay that indicated that days with special activities were more attractive than others. I was told, however, that this had been the case previously when missionaries from Action International had shown videos in the shelter once a week.

None of the children mentioned that they missed their family while spending the nights at Gulu Public. In Save the Children’s survey 48 percent of the commuters at the centres in Gulu replied that there was nothing good about staying home, and only 12 percent mentioned time with their family as a benefit (Falk, Lenz & Okuma 2004). These results were derived at a time when the number of commuters was around eight times higher than during my stay. It is reasonable to expect that the commuters staying at Gulu Public while I was there were even more emotionally

75 Interview conducted at the Probation and Welfare Office in Gulu on March 23, 2005.
76 There were 3,623 commuters at Gulu Public when the survey was conducted on April 1, 2004.
detached from their family – both because the prolonged commuting might have weakened the links to their homes, and also because children who are weakly integrated in their families or are facing domestic problems are more likely to continue to come to the centre during calm periods than children who have a strong sense of belonging to their household.

7.4 Social practice

Alyce (12) was one of the girls who was living in a child-headed household. She was well integrated into life at the centre, and enjoyed a high ranking in the social hierarchy by being captain in the room where she and her sisters were sleeping. The other children would listen to her corrections and come to her with their problems. When I asked what she thought about sleeping at the centre, she responded, “I find sleeping here is good, and also I am used to these children sleeping here, so that I can’t even leave here”. To the direct question of why she was sleeping at the centre, she replied that it was out of fear of the rebels. However, Alyce chose to stay home for two nights after she felt that she was treated unfairly by one of the volunteers. She delivered a formal letter of resignation to the centre management, and proclaimed that from now on she would be sleeping at home. Her temper cooled down after an apology from the volunteer in question, and she returned to sleeping at the centre. As mentioned earlier, Alyce and her sisters also chose to stay at home when their father was staying in the household.

The mechanisms that make children start coming to the centre are not necessarily the same as those that cause them to continue to come to the centre. For many of the regular commuters at Gulu Public, the commuting to the centre has become an institutionalised social practice about which they ask few questions. After nearly two years of coming to the centre every night, both the children’s and their families’ daily routines are organised around the commuting. In a focus group with eight commuting girls aged from 10 to 13, they all told me how dinner was prepared for them before they left, and all but one had an arrangement to meet friends along the way for company to the centre. In the mornings they returned to their families and had breakfast with the rest of the household. The girls had domestic duties they were
expected to perform in the morning like doing dishes and sweeping the compound before they would leave for school. The walk to the centre is an internalised practice, but when the commute does not correspond with other routines or interests, some still choose to stay home. Two of the girls told me that at times they did not come to the centre because dinner was prepared late and they were scared of walking in the dark. When the level of violence and fear of abductions is high, a missed meal is not enough to keep the children from the shelter. All the girls had friends that had been commuters but that currently were sleeping at home. When asked why their friends had stopped commuting, early lessons in school was given as an explanation: “Well first they teach them morning lessons, so if they are to leave [for the centre] they have to go home [before they go] to school. They will reach school late, so they better sleep home so that they wake up very early to go to school”. The problem of combining commuting and schooling was also mentioned in one of the written responses as one of the reasons why children stop commuting. Other reasons given were that they were prevented by their parents or tired of walking for hours every day. The fact that children stop coming to the centre because of a changed timetable shows that at times the commuting is seen as an option and not as a necessity. During calm the children have the possibility of using the centre as long as it fills a purpose, and does not conflict with other important tasks.

7.5 Personal development

Commuting is a social practice that can be done well or badly, and some of the children are more successful than others in developing the social competence necessary to handle the centre environment. In periods when security concerns are less pertinent, the commuters that have been able to use the commuting as an arena for personal development are more likely to continue than others. Edward (16), the head boy explained to me; “When I first started coming here I couldn’t even speak to a crowd of three persons without being shy. Now I am comfortable with speaking to several hundreds!”. Also Angela, the head girl, expressed that the responsibilities she was given at the centre had made her grow and become a better person. She had the respect of the other children and was caring for the younger ones with great
consideration. But it was not only the prefects that felt that staying at the centre was rewarding for their personal development. Of the thirteen written responses on what it was like to be a commuter, eleven mentioned the fact that they were being taught things, both by volunteers and by fellow commuters, as an advantage of staying at the centre. Others specified that they got the chance to make friends from different communities and learn how to ‘live in a society’.

7.6 Summary

Particularly for children with weak connections to their families, the centre represents a social alternative that potentially fulfils some of their needs of social belonging. After nearly two years of sleeping at the same centre, the children are integrated into a social environment together with other children in the same situation. Some of the children are so adapted to commuting that they do not question why they are doing it, while others reflect on their choice and the situation they are in. “You know you visitors, you come and visit for a while, and stay and then you leave again, but for me I am doing this every night. I am here in the morning, I walk home and back to the centre again in the evening and I sleep here. I have been doing this now for more than two years. This is my life, and I am happy” (Michael, 18).

Even though the conditions at the centre appear appalling to western outsiders, it must be seen in relation to the overall standard of living in Northern Uganda, which is among the worst in the world. Most of the children said that they were satisfied with staying there. They felt that they were well taken care of, enjoyed spending time with their friends and appreciated the activities that were arranged for them. There is reason to expect that among the relatively few children that continue to commute during calm periods there is a high degree of children that have been successful in adapting to the social life at the centre and that find it rewarding in one way or the other.
8. Conclusion

The popular understanding of the night commuting in Northern Uganda is that children are escaping to the urban night commuter centres to protect themselves against the LRA. As this thesis has demonstrated, this is only part of the truth. While commuting from the outset had a very clear purpose, the rationale for continuing to commute in an altered security situation is more multifaceted. The children do not only come to the centres because they are forced to by their circumstances, but also as a result of their own agency. It is beyond doubt that the children in Northern Uganda are in an extremely vulnerable position. They are suffering the socio-economic consequences of war and displacement, and are also the primary targets of violence. Yet their vulnerability does not exclude ability (Swaine & Feeny 2004: 65). In a context of extreme marginalisation with very limited options available to the majority of the population, going to night commuter centres represent an alternative to people in Gulu and as such increases their capability for action. From being a spontaneous survival strategy motivated by a context of crisis, the night commuting has developed into a social institution that both children and households use to cope with the challenges they meet in their daily life. But despite the general suffering in the Acholi region, only a minority of the children become regular night commuters. The daily commute is tiresome and increases the children’s vulnerability in a number of ways. Whether commuting is perceived as a good alternative depends on the social context in which the individual child finds itself.

The main factor in deciding whether commuting is a good alternative or not is the proximity to the centre. How far the children are willing to walk depends on the purpose for which they are walking. When the children are escaping the threat of abductions they are forced to walk for hours, but as the situation cools down the children living far from the centre are the ones that are more likely to stop commuting. Not only do the children get tired from the long walks, but staying long on the road also increases the risk of traffic accidents as well as the risk of attacks and rapes. Children that are walking from afar are also more likely to have to sacrifice supper to be able to reach the centre before it gets dark. The need to reach morning classes is
another factor that makes it difficult for children living far away to use the centre. In order to get breakfast before school, the commuters need to go to their homes, and the girls I spoke with also had domestic tasks they were expected to perform before leaving for school. During calm periods the children living close by are therefore likely to be over-represented at the centres.

In this thesis I have discussed three categories of purposes that commuting serve for the commuters and their households. The first category I considered was the children’s need for protection. The children in Northern Uganda are raised in an environment where violent conflict is their social reality and a backdrop to their daily lives. Fear is not something that is turned on and off, and I do not question that fear of the LRA was an important motivation for children to commute, including during my stay. However, this leaves us with the question as to why these children are more scared than the majority that sleep at home. Previous experiences are one factor that may influence the perception of safety, but for the younger children their parents’ assessment of the situation is the most influential factor. Children’s perception of fear is easy to manipulate, and the children that are told to commute by their parents will do so until they are told otherwise. The other household members are accustomed to the commuters spending their nights elsewhere and may also find it difficult to make the decision that it is safe enough for the children to return to sleeping home. Family members may also send children to sleep in the centre because it serves a subsistence purpose for the household.

For some of the children their local environment constitutes a threat in itself. These are the children that have an idiosyncratic vulnerability that makes them seek protection in the centre. Domestic violence is a factor making the children come to the centres of their own volition and in force of their own agency, and is also a reason why household members send children to the centres to protect them. Children living without an adult in the household are particularly vulnerable to harassment and sexual abuse from neighbours, drunkards and soldiers, and the night commuter centre represent a safe place to spend the night.

The second category I considered was the subsistence purposes that the commuting serves. The main subsistence factor making the children commute is lack
of space in the household. My public respondents all agreed that crowding was the strongest push-factor in the community making the children come to the centre, and the extreme population density in Gulu district makes this very likely. For households within acceptable walking distance to a centre with only one or two huts available, commuting may seem like a good solution both for the children commuting and for the rest of the household. The children escape from domestic duties, they get time to spend with their friends, and activities to participate in. The rest of the household gets more space at their disposal and there is the possibility that the children might meet an external sponsor or be given something they can bring home. Often the parents are the ones sending their children to the centre to relieve pressure on the household, but commuting is also used by the commuters themselves to reinstate a traditional order that the population density is counteracting, as when older boys stay at the centre rather than in their guardians’ household. If there was the possibility of renting or building an additional hut, the maturing boys would not have chosen the provisional solution of sleeping in the centre but would rather have taken the full step into adulthood by establishing their own household. Nevertheless, in the current situation sleeping at a night commuter centre is a way to avoid the embarrassment of remaining a child in the parents’ household.

There are several reasons why parents or guardians are likely to prevent the children from commuting if lack of space is not an issue. The commuting is socially stigmatising and there is a strong worry in the community that children will get morally corrupted from spending their nights in town. Their families have little control over whether the children actually stay at the centres during the night and, particularly regarding maturing girls, pregnancy and defilement are major concerns. But even if controlling the sexuality of boys does not have the same priority from a moral and cultural perspective, the fear of HIV is prevalent in a society where the number of children orphaned because of Aids is steadily increasing. Another factor in making parents keep their children at home is that children are a part of the working relationship that the household constitutes. Often they have responsibility for tasks like cooking, fetching water, washing clothes and looking after younger siblings. The fact that commuting gives the children less time to meet their domestic obligations makes
some parents encourage their children to stay home when there is no need to go to the centres for protection against the LRA or because of lack of space.

For the children there are both advantages and disadvantages connected with coming to the centres, and changes in their perception of life at the centre or of their domestic environment may make them reconsider commuting. However, the regular commuters do not weigh up the pros and cons on a daily basis. The children are first of all social actors and are influenced by the people they are interacting with in their social life.

This brings us to the last category of purposes that have been discussed, the socialisation purposes. All my respondents had been sleeping at the centre since it opened almost two years earlier. Although they started commuting as a reaction to an immediate crisis, the act of leaving their homes in the evening to go and spend the night at the centre had become a social practice and part of their daily life. As it was put by the Father Carlos Rodriguez in ARLPI, “I mean, you begin because of an emergency, you don’t want to do it, and you cope with the situation. You get used, you adapt yourself, you are developing your social life”. For the regular commuters their interaction with the other commuters and the volunteers at the centre is an important part of their social life. The centre is a place to seek protection, but it is also a playground and a place where something is happening. They have their friends there, and are integrated into a social environment where they have a sense of belonging. Some children are more successful than others in adapting to life at the centre and when the initial protection purpose is less pressing, these children are likely to continue coming to the centre because they experience it as rewarding and as an arena for personal development. Particularly for children that are not well integrated into a family, their interaction with volunteers and other children at the centre fills some of the children’s social needs. The children that have institutionalised the social practice of commuting do not need a reason to sleep at the centre, but rather a reason not to. There is a big likelihood that these children will continue to commute until the centres close down, or other changes appear in their environment, for instance, that friends stop commuting, or their family moves or prevents them from coming.

77 Interview with Father Carlos Rodriguez from Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative at St. Monica Tailoring School on March 27, 2005.
What this research shows is that the main reasons why children continue to commute to the centre during periods of calm are not primarily the pull-factors created by services provided at the centre. Activities and distributions attract some children to the centre, but the main feature of the centre during calm periods is simply as an alternative space for the children, which they and their households can use to cope with the challenges they are facing in their domestic environment.

Much more research is needed on the night commuting in general, but the most pressing issue is to gain more knowledge about the children who use commuting to cope with idiosyncratic forms of vulnerabilities. Several groups of children have been discussed in this thesis who are likely to commute by the force of their own agency to cope with challenges they are faced with, such as children living in child-headed households, unaccompanied children, formerly abducted children and children suffering from domestic abuse. These children’s motivations for commuting do not necessarily disappear with an improved security situation, and the children need to be located before the centres eventually close down. Research need to be done on the alternative coping strategies that are available for these children, not only in a post-war context but also in the current setting. As shown, night commuter centres are not sufficient to facilitate children that do not have a provider in their households, and these children are likely to become involved in detrimental coping strategies, which can potentially exclude them from the life at the centre and push them into the ‘street life’.

More research is also needed on the majority of children who are not regular commuters. Investigating the factors that make the children stop commuting and the alternative coping strategies these children and their households have available will also contribute to a broader understanding of the factors that make some children continue to commute.
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Appendix 1: List of Respondents

Public respondents in Gulu:
Rwot David Onen Acana II, The Acholi Paramount Chief
Richard Mule, District Police Commander
Kerobino Ojok Paul, Gulu LC5 Vice-Chairman
Joseph Kilema, Probation and Welfare Officer
Samuel Ouma, Probation and Welfare Officer
Lutara Philip, District Co-ordinator, the Concerned Parents Association
Michael Copland, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF
James Odong, manager, African Medical and Research Foundation’s night commuter centre
Okema Emmanuel, Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative
Father Carlos Rodriguez, Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative
Okumu Odongtoo John, regional manager Northern Uganda, Save the Children
Public Relation Officer, Gulu, Ugandan People’s Defence Force
Mrs. Onen Milly Grace, headmaster, Mama Care Primary School
Atto Betty, teacher in P5, Layibo Techo Primary School
James Oringa, deputy head-teacher, Layibi Techo Primary School
Auma Rose Anne, teacher in P6, Mama Care Primary School
Kevin Akumu Irine, teacher in P4, Mama Care Primary School

Public respondents in Kampala:
Marcel Carlos Akpovo, researcher, the Africa Programme, Amnesty International, Kampala
Sheila Keetheruth, country researcher, the Africa Regional Office, Amnesty International, Kampala
Jean Lokenga, campaigner, the Africa Regional Office of Amnesty International, Kampala
Appendix 2: Drawings

Twelve-year-old commuter’s drawing of how she experiences her home environment. The persons in front are abductees, tied together and forced to carry the food rations that the rebels have looted from the displaced.
This picture illustrates well how the centre represents safety for the commuter. The rebels have abducted both adults for carrying looted goods and young children for recruitment, and set huts on fire. The centre is drawn on the other side of the dividing line with an adult caretaker inside and the football field in front.
In this picture the shelter has been given a pleasant appearance with a curtain in the door opening and flowers outside. The commuters are carrying their blankets and are bothered by rain while walking.
Appendix 3: Songs from the Charity for Peace Choir

“A song to thank our teachers”

We the children of Charity
We take our time to thank
The elders and the teachers who keep us

We the children of Charity
We take our time to thank
The elders and the teachers who keep us

We thank Madam Matron
For welcoming our visitors
We thank all the teachers
for respecting our rights

We thank Robert Oketa 78
for giving us good guidance
To change the lives of the children
who are in problems

78 Robert Oketa is the patron of the centre.
“A speech about poverty in Acholi”

Come and we go and listen to a speech About poverty in Acholi
Kony\textsuperscript{79} abduct children
And take them to the bush
And then he also abduct us Acholi
He plants landmines on the way
And it hurts us
This shows that the world has died
If we see the schools
That war has destroyed
It has stopped us from schooling
And it prevents development
We thank those of Charity
For keeping us until today

We request to the RDC\textsuperscript{80}
To help the children

We request Vincent Otti\textsuperscript{81}
To bring back the children home

All our good children

\textsuperscript{79} Joseph Kony, leader of the LRA.
\textsuperscript{80} The Resident District Commissioner.
\textsuperscript{81} Vincent Otti is the second-in-command of the LRA.