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Two marriages, two speeds. Disruptions and connections in post-conflict Gulu cityscape

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Abstract

Drawing from urban studies and conflict studies with specific focus on transitional justice sphere of return and reintegration, the paper elaborates on the existing complex disruptions and connections in coupling among former Lord's Resistance Army returnees in Gulu city, northern Uganda. Deploying new conceptual tools, namely, the materiality and vitality of "kavera (polythene bag) that the men instrumentalise to negotiate a relationship with the women and also how women use "browning" technique (a metaphor built on a local emphasis on "brown is beautiful") to attract and retain men, we think through coupling in the post-conflict Gulu cityscape to understand and enhance the complex dynamics involved and negotiated, making coupling among the returnees, fleeting and therefore, swinging in a centrifugal manner. Consequently, we contend that coupling amongst the returnees in the everyday cityscape of Gulu is open-ended and that the concept and the persons oscillate between "narrowing and expansion, ambiguity and precision" (AbdouMaliq and Pieterse 2017: x). In that sense, both the concept and the persons are elusive and has its own logic, with its terms of reference expanding and contracting as far as it can bend (AbdouMaliq and Pieterse 2017: 159). Therefore, instead of a normative or ideals of coupling, rather, we should think in terms of the everyday production and practices of 'couple-making'.
Keywords: Return, coupling, disruption, connection, Gulu cityscape

Introduction

Building on the various sites of encounter with precarity and uncertainties in Gulu city, the paperarticulates the production of coupling among former Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) returnee men and women and a sub-culture of maneuver and pursuit to enhance social becoming. Drawing on the works of AbdouMaliq; *City of Potentialities* (2016) and, *Urban Circulation and the*

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Everyday Politics of African Urban Youth (2005), the paper seeks to articulate how precarity and uncertainties triggers a simultaneous undoing and remaking of coupling among them and the unsettled articulations (AbdouMaliq 2016: 8). Similarly, utilising the theoretic frame of Mats Utas' *Victimcy, Girlfriending Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone* (2005), and Henrik Vigh's, *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea - Bissau* (2007), it establishes how tactic agency in the coupling through processes of circulating and navigation, does not only make coupling amongst this group dynamically in a state of fleeting circulation but also, in the bid to circumvent precarity through processes of alterations, the city of Gulu circulates as well, making it a moving thing in all the directions of alterations.

Accordingly, the paper elaborates on the existing complex disruptions and connections in the coupling. It visualises how coupling or co-habiting *returnee* men define and relate with 'beautiful' *returnee* women and also, how their women articulate a 'responsible' man and how that fluctuates between concepts of 'trustworthy' to 'unreliable' husband(s). Deploying new conceptual tools to think through coupling in the post-conflict Gulu cityscape, the paper elaborates on the materiality and vitality of "*kavera* (polythene bag) that the men instrumentalise to negotiate a relationship with the women. But also how women use "*browning*" technique (a metaphor built on a local emphasis on "brown is beautiful") to attract and retain men. The paper argues that this group is accordingly caught up in the endemic post-conflict renegotiations, resulting into relying more on provisional status (AbdouMaliq 2004: 5) and aesthetics of beauty to negotiate coupling and livelihood (Calves 2016: 421), making it fleeting and therefore, swinging in a centrifugal manner.

Consequently, the paper argues that coupling amongst the returnees in everyday practices in Gulu city is open-ended. The concept and the person, to use AbdouMaliq's words, oscillates between "narrowing and expansion, ambiguity and precision" (AbdouMaliq and Pieterse 2017: x). In that sense, both the concept and the person, are elusive. Coupling here is outside the juridical, the legal, or the court, and outside religion. Implying that, 'coupling' status is not formerly recorded and that the only claim is the trajectory of it. In this case, coupling among the returnees in Gulu cityscape, has its own logic, with its terms of reference expanding and contracting as far as it can bend (AbdouMaliq and Pieterse 2017: 159). Therefore, instead of a fixated idea or ideals of a "couple", rather, we should think in terms of 'couple-making'.

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Therefore, coupling amongst the returnees in Gulu cityscape is experimentation without ideals, and yet should be allowed as a new form of practice in the everyday navigation. However, even when opaque in instances of being overpowered by the workings and dealings of the cityscape, the 'couples' nevertheless re-imagine their valued futures and therefore, mobilise and intensify their value to each other, re-making in a centrifugal manner, their relation. This means that we need to deploy a flexible notion of coupling. In the section that follows, the study tries to situate the phenomenon of returnees, tracing from the historical processes of the Juba Peace Agreement and the subsequent demobilisation and reintegration into civilian life. This historical tracing is to bring into context the returnees as a research group and the subsequent flight to Gulu city. But before, we reflect on the methodological approach used.

Methodological framing

By shifting focus beyond the general literature on urbanity, entanglements and intricate decisions to specific everyday uncertainties emerging from the reality of post-conflict return and flight to urban scapes and the uncertainties in this new space and return from active rebelling combat, it allowed the paper to interrogate a more mundane and everyday practices. Building on this, we targeted the former LRA returnees (both women and men) as our interlocutors in enhancing the complexity of post-conflict coupling in a city (or urban centres). The paper randomly sampled individuals from the population and populated the sample with the following interlocutors; six (6) female returnees and six (6) male returnees.

The research work is a result of five month's fieldwork carried out in Gulu cityscape between June to November, 2019. Drawing upon primary data of in-depth ethnographic field case stories, interviews and studies, the paper located this study in the broader coupling and family studies, establishing an intersection with urban studies and post-conflict, return and reintegration. While building on direct observation, we did foreground and address the complexity of coupling among returnees in Gulu cityscape. The geographical area of Gulu city was chosen to provide empirical basis and data to appreciate the complex nature of the phenomenon.

The research drew on a range of formal and informal engagements with a total of 12 respondents. Data was obtained through observation,

listening to stories and narratives, interviews and discussions. We also held casual conversations and the informal engagements such as the jokes, remarks, individual or 'special' requests (for money or school fees or jobs or connections), were fruitful as well. It was the case that, the less structured the engagement, the natural, relaxed and therefore, the better the replies. Similarly, the opportunity offered by informal engagement allowed for asking and clarifying many more questions, making the perspectives clearer or deeply reflected upon.

To be able to appreciate and understand the field data, the researcher sought interpretation and translation within the local town setting. In the same vein, the observations were reinterpreted in the context in which the behavior, actions, words and voices were performed. The cityscape of Gulu was not simply a geographical place of being located, but space to read and learn. To protect informants, their identities were anonymised by use of pseudonyms. Lastly, the study makes no claim to total insights. Rather, it tries to capture some amount of insights as much as possible.

Contextual framing

In this section, we focus on agenda item V of the Juba Peace Agreement on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) that was signed in 2006 between government of Uganda and the rebel group of Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). It was specifically to address issues regarding to return and reintegration of the LRA fighter groups. Clause 2.1(a) of the agenda requires that all necessary actions are taken to achieve the overall purpose of the DDR process. Clause 2.7 provides for government's commitment to implement a return and reintegration programme associated with the LRA. This, in its view was to harnesses national and community ownership and in conformity with relevant international standards, including the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups. Clause 2.9 of the Juba Peace Talk for example, provides for reintegration support that emphasizes educational and livelihood opportunities, with particular attention to the special needs. Clause 2.10, on the other hand, seeks to address the special need to be reconciled with their families and communities.

Accordingly, and on its part, government of Uganda enacted Amnesty Act 2000, as a tool to end rebellion by encouraging renouncing of rebellion in

exchange for no prosecution for picking up arms against the state (although this did not cover the top commanders who were already indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on account of crimes against humanity). The core areas of the Amnesty Act were; providing amnesty to rebels to renounce rebellion, facilitating an institutionalized resettlement and repatriation process, providing reintegration support like skills training for ex-combatants and promoting reconciliation. The Act also established the Amnesty Commission to implement the provision and issuing of the amnesty certificates.

Although the act elapsed on 20th May 2012, an almost immediate public outcry, particularly from the northern part of Uganda, forced government to renew the act on 25th May, 2012, for more 12 months. However, Part II of the renewed Amnesty, "Declaration of Amnesty", was removed by the Minister of Internal Affairs. This effectively ended the amnesty and left the Amnesty Commission with only the task of concentrating on the reintegration of ex-combatants already amnestied (Kasper Agger 2012: 2).

Nevertheless, by the end of the Amnesty Act, the Amnesty Commission (2013) estimated a total of 12,971 former combatants of LRA were amnestied and benefitted from the amnesty. This point to the role it played in the military and civilian defection and escape from LRA, respectively. In addition, through the financial and technical support from World Bank and Multi-Country Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme (MDRP), the Amnesty Commission was able to provide those amnestied with the reintegration package in form of cash and household items (MDRP 2007). Besides, through Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF), government through NUSAF mobilized former combatants and returnees to form groups and write fundable proposals. What is however critical in our field study is that, the study found out that the Amnesty Commission had frequent indistinction between the experiences of combatants and non-combatants and how combatants experienced differently the post-conflict reintegration challenges as opposed to non-combatants and yet, most were treated as though the same. In addition, many former LRA combatants and civilian returnees simply demobilized themselves on their own by going straight to their families or communities. This in many ways raised the question of targeted and systematic DDR or at most, the problem of reintegration.

What is generally common is that, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) largely focused on the reception, counseling and family tracing or reunion of the returnees and former LRA combatants. This formed

the most singular episode concretised in the infrastructures of reception centres, co-produced by the government of Uganda and the non-governmental organizations. Reception centres therefore functioned as what Allen (2005) calls, liminal space, atransition from bush or captivity to 'normal' life. Those most mentioned in the field were; WorldVision reception centres, Kitgum Concerned Women's Association (KICWA), Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO), etc. When probed further on the mentalities and rationality for popularizing 'reception centres', the study realized that the long held intellectual tradition and practices was the popular and dominant narrative on the threat to "social dislocation" and "lost generation", leading to a much more focus on 'psycho-social care' and 're-uniting families'.

However, the feelings from returnees on the terrain of return and reintegration, is plagued with uncertainties, making 'home' to which they returned too, unviable. We need to add here that whereas the subject of 'home' features prominently and needed to be assembled coherently particularly within the returnees' purview and imaginations of an ideal home, we shall treat this issue in the subsequent paper. For now, we touch on this aspect very briefly since the interest here is more on the flights to townscape with a view of valued presence more generally as a home and a family.

The episode of flight after return - going (to towns and urban centres) instead of staying (in the villages) and therefore a second displacement (re-displacement), need to be recognized and appreciated as a new normal. Two things here; the flight is necessitated not exactly by the fact ofhardships and the everyday that looks uncertain, but rather, the political re-reading of the situation as a state of no political will, no political recognition and lack of government's targeted recognition. This has made 'home' and 'family' unviable and equally so, waiting for possible interventions, is an uncertain activity and no longer believed in. That implies that re- displacement in towns and city is to be read politically as a result of unfulfilled political promises drawing feelings of no political will to assist the returnees. The second is the normalization of re-displacement in the townscape as a new wave of fleeing the unviable return space of the villages,making flights and repositioning in towns, a subject of inquiry, a new reconceptualisation of return- not only return from captivity but also from unviable spaces. In that regards, towns or cityscape in Acholi sub-region are spaces hosting return and on a big scale (this requires another research to ascertain the exact or working figure of return / returnees in the townscapes). It means, towns and not villages, is the new sites for returnees

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to try out return and reintegration. Inthe sub-section below, I case study a very specific terrain, Gulu cityscape. I choose Gulu city not arbitrarily but for the reasons I shall establish shortly.

Understanding Gulu cityscape

Gulu city as the context of this study, emerges from a protracted civil war that started in 1986 to 2006 (Adam Branch 2013; Sverker Finnstrom 2008: 1), between the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government of Yoweri Kaguta Museveni and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony. Gulu in the northern part of Uganda became the urban epicenter ofthe war. In this warfare, the government military counter attack on the LRA incursions involved spatial mechanisms of logistics, supplies and tactics, and through the war the city turned into a humanitarian space. Strategic defense around Gulu had required slowing down enemy(ies) speedof assault. But also, the war and logistics required speed to counter the enemies (Virilio 1986, 1997), leading to the intensification of built environment including communications, transport, roads circuits and better funding of the military and military installations. All these also protected, supplied and supported individuals and groups gathered within its spaces, fueling urban development of Gulu. Gulu town forms the spatial starting point of our paper, and more particularly its manifestations and contestations of post-and persistent conflict and its positioningfor displacement into and emplacement in, necessitating an intensified perceptivity and tactics. Our focus on Gulu cityscape is to understand its circuit as a social space of coupling, households and family life, from the perspective of returnees. We seek to articulate how returnees maneuver and circulate in the city.

Gulu city is the main urban centre of Northern Uganda. With a population of 146,858, while Kampala tops with a population of 1,353,189, Gulu is the second largest city in population wise, followed by Lira with a population of 119,323 and Mbarara comes third after Gulu with a population of 97,500 (World Population 2018). Compared to its surroundings, Gulu stands out by its built urban infrastructural circuits of roads, electricity, water, rail and air transports, while maintaining a relatively better and vibrant economic activities, businesses and vitality of its demographic concentration. However, compared to Kampala the capital city for example, this regional city remains small and characterized by persistent 'rurality' in terms of its dense streets,

subjects, housing infrastructure, livelihoods, and the everyday transactions. The history of the city, and the ways in which the city has developed in the context of war and post-war dynamics has been described in detail by Branch (2008), revealing the complex effects ofthe city becoming an urban IDP camp during the war, hosting more than 100 000 displaced people by 2008 and since, it has shot up to the 146,858. These long-term effects cited by Adam Branch are for example concentrations of young, landless people struggling to build a livelihood,increasing inter-generational tensions between urban youth and their parents and a strong dependence of urban livelihoods on the (dwindling) aid-sector. This last aspect has been elaborated further by Büscher et al. (2018) who have demonstrated continuing logics of humanitarian urbanism in terms of urban governance, urban economies and social service delivery.

As a de-facto northern Uganda city populated by majorly the displaced, Gulu city offers us an elaborate purview and from which tendencies of navigating the enduring and chronic conflict is intelligible. In this shifting from 'state of emergency' to 'situation of emergency', there is a constant improvisation in a terrain of chronicity. For example, the dynamics of return and reintegration of formerly abducted or ex-LRA soldiers and wives have added to the complex challenges of post-conflict cohesion, as has been described in detail by a number of researchers (Baines 2014, 2017; Dolan 2009; Porter 2017). Several ex-combatants have chosen to reintegrate in the urban tissue of Gulu instead of returning to their rural homes. In the middle of all these, people are weary of each other and therefore, there is a minimal interaction. Worse still, those considered or known as former LRA combatants, are gazed at with a look of contempt while the former combatants try at that moment to tactically elude the contemptuous gaze by looking elsewhere or hurriedly walking pass. While women who were abused as sex slaves by LRA are for most part shunned by the male town dwellers as 'overused' and with 'little' value left. But there is still a segment of the former LRA combatants who are also considered very useful; they are called the 'bouncers' (for their skills of dispersing riots or stampede and their physical build- up) in the mushrooming discotheques and social places in Gulu, to quell any possible violations in the dance arena. While at the same time, the security companies have hired many former LRA combatants to work as night guards in certain establishments or installations. In sum, the experience of Gulu city by the former LRA returnees and ex-LRA combatants is not only considered as dense with challenges or uncertainties but also opportunities.

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With little attention from humanitarian aid agencies and organisations and much less from the government of Uganda, the LRA returnees became structurally and humanitarianly invisible, creating more complex fright. At the same time, an ambitious mobilisation of skills to get oneself away from this, occasioned flight. Two scenarios of flight happened; the first was an immediate return to the villages once the 'peace' was declared in 2006 around the time that IDPs were also destroyed. However, stuck with other displacements in the villages namely, getting to one's village and finding it more and more unfamiliar with its frightening surroundings (probably because it had changed a lot or for reasons such as traumatic flash backs of episodic events). In this not-so-familiar a terrain, life was no longer possible, particularly that the process of return and reintegration was haphazardly done. Being far from the center and somehow forgotten, it was yet another moment of invisibilisation and being rendered opaque. It was this reality both as perceived and actual, that drove particularly the returnee youth into a second period of emplacement or social becoming that the drive for a displacement to Gulu city had to happen. It is in this context that Branch (2013) wondered how come that after the war, instead of expecting a tumultuous drop in number of inhabitants of Gulu city, many more added to the already many numbers in the overburdened city.

Upon return, many returnees became disillusioned. Many got their loved ones dead, a number reported non-acceptance by their own families, while others were ridiculed and called 'Kony' (a slur to mean, an accomplice to Joseph Kony's LRA killings). This continuation of victimhood and victimization persisted (Huyse 2009: 24). Many times, they were framed as 'wild and belonging to the bush'. Coulter (2010: 91) observed in a different study that, the conduct or behavior of the former child soldiers was framed within the discourse of "taming" or "domesticating" their 'bush-like' behavior. Consequently, they became the lowly, the invisible and opaque in their communities and in the sights of their peers. In these complexities, home and the village turned out not to be a place holder anymore but strange and no longer familiar. In that case, a moment of additional displacement needed to take place to Gulu city, in search of crafting a new, acceptable and viable life.

It is also not entirely correct that those who stayed in the city prior to the IDPs and during the war were not displaced. In the conventional meaning of displacement discussed earlier, that would seem so. But as Vigh (2008: 9) correctly argued, they probably did not get physically uprooted but were also displaced relationally and socially. By losing their livelihoods or means of

survival to the war, for example; cows, money, houses and so forth, the relations and social positioning was no longer guaranteed. In that case, they were also displaced. Accordingly, the 'post-conflict' Gulu city was also 'new', strange and frightening to them as well. In this process, they became unnoticed and no longer in any significant relational standing and so, became invisible in the everyday interactions. There was therefore need for a flight, a displacement into a new cityscape, a new emplacement in which they can become socially positioned and visible once again. To this group like to the IDPs and returnees, the village turned out to be strange and terrifying as well and no longer supportive. This flight or return to the city is of a heightened moment of no retreat and no surrender but to remain grafted in and carefully observe the cracks in the city for opportunities to restart or rebuild live(s).

Bodies displaced and dislocated in the unfamiliar, the strange and frightful have now converged in Gulu city to wrestle invisibilisation. This convergence, this presence in the registry of Gulu city is not only the crowding but also the alterations of the speed of Gulu cityscape, making city life unfold in a spectacle of many things; streets with moving people, animals like goats, dogs and cows who are themselves in a fast-moving mode, speeding vehicles, communications, information and gossips across vectors of navigations of all kinds, but with little trade and slow commerce. This slow commerce means, there is a narrow path into the city while at the same time, necessitating sharper lenses of viewing the cityscape for hidden or erstwhile unnoticed opportunities. For that matter, engaging the city into another gear of speed mode, necessitating further acceleration to try and catch the city or catch up with the city. While those whose ways of things are slow or yet to unfold, are in a state of brakes; a 'brake and go', and a 'go and brake', trying to slow the city. It is this complex character Gulu has gained over time as a city with two speeds that made Branch (2013) to proclaim it as a city with layered cityscape. In situations a fleeing the villages, Gulu city has to be held with a firm grip and not to be lost since there is presumably no any cityscape in the Acholi sub-region to try out life. This makes Gulu city in a dire as well as privileged position. It is dire because, it is the alternative moment of displacementand emplacement and no other. While also in a privileged position as the only alternative and so, its dense registry intensifies its transformation in all directions and circuits. It is here that war and post war uncertainties have mobilised returnees like many other categories as infrastructures with attributes of the war, post and persisting conflict, embedded in the everyday.

It is in these complex dynamics that the trappings of a family life among returnees now fled to Gulu city are pronounced. Without structured certainties, returnee couples make intricate decisions to circulate in the urban circuit, moving around, around and around. For example, the following returnees give us a general purview of the state of coupling.

Okello, a boda boda rider, aged 32, tells me that he has not travelled abroad, but that his wife and himself, are leaving in different worlds and trying to make different worlds in this town of Gulu. Okello wakes up at 6 am to ride his customers to their different locations. Sometimes, Okello sneaks as early as 4 am to avoid quarrels with his wife over what to leave home to feed the family. In his view, his riding boda-boda is not only business but also to ride away from stress. In his words; "You think people only migrate to 'Ulaya' (Europe) ? We also, migrate here by ridingaround, around and around".

Anywar, a University graduate, aged 28, negotiates with the wife, to add another 'wife', a white woman. This second 'wife' becomes their bread winner who also doubles as placeholder should there be an emergency like sickness and school fees. Anywar recounts moments when the first wife insists if he has visited the white 'wife', especially when supplies seem to dry up. Feeling pushed, and noticing shortage of supplies of the daily routines of the family needs, Anywar would retort, " I will go. What is your problem now". Interested in the answer of the wife, I inquired about the replies of the wife to his remark. Anywar tells me, the wife just smiles and sometimes when there is real shortage, she would even encourage me to spend the whole night at the white 'wife's house. Anywar confirms that his sexual engagement with the white 'wife', pays off, as he is given a lofty amount of Ugandan shillings and sometimes dollars, as his transport money back home and some items to cook or feed on since he is 'single'.

Obita, a mechanic, aged 42, sends off his family of three children and their mother (his wife) every weekend to his mother who lives in Koro, about seven (7) kilometers away from Gulu town. As his routine, early around 7 am on every Saturday, he sits the last born in front of his motorbike while the two children are half seated and half carried by their mother on the behind seat that barely accommodates more than one person. Once seated, the family runs away from town to the village. Once reached and empty handed (a situation the mother of Obita is accustomed too), Obita hurriedly disembarks the family and as usual, tells the mother that he is hurrying to "yele (to struggle)". Once I asked him why he sends his family to the mother every weekend. Obita

remarks with a broad smile and sarcastic laughter; "eh, are you the only one who does not know what life is in this town of ours? Do you stay in Gulu?" To these questions, I answer in the affirmative. In that case, Obita opened up to me saying; "when I take them to my mother, I am assured of nobody going hungry at least. Second, I also rest from the so many demands from my wife. She is normally troublesome, asking for too much. She wants; lotion, nice food like cabbages, wants to buy a dress every day and so forth. Third, I move around and find extra income which I save to take the family from Monday to Friday. As for me, once I am alone in the house, I figure out and live like an 'animal'. You see, ' I am a soldier'!".

Two things happen simultaneously here; in the trappings, Okello, Anywar and Obita, disrespect confined sense of things and as they circulate ' around, around and around', these 'confined things' or 'values' are also to circulate and therefore, to cease to have a fixed meaning. Second, circulating 'around, around and around' is a tactic and re-strategising for social becoming. In this movement or circulation, they collide, meet or gather with others as 'strangers'. In this forum or space unlike households, there is no discussion on daily earnings and obligations or responsibilities fulfilled or unfulfilled. This is a corner where many retreat to, away from those they owe money and from inconsiderate circulating women who are temporary wives but expensive to sustain in the trappings (Abdou Maliq 2005: 521-525).

In this scenario of 'stop-go' as a result of numerous traffic jam of constraints and contestations (AbdouMaliq 2014: 15), normal pursuit of life and livelihood is retired. It is in this context that Schilling and AbdouMaliq expressed as, "when life is not taking you anywhere, then they take their lives into directions, any direction (2015: 8). In that case, they pluralise their maneuvers, as the city is also reconfigured as one with proliferating doors of social becoming. Many opportunities or cracks present themselves in the urban, so that one can either or simultaneously become; a teacher as well as a boda-boda rider (local name for commercial motor bicycle transport), disco joker (DJ), rapper, informal coffee barista, bus stage turn boy, and all that whichcirculates as he circulates. In this sense and as AbdouMaliq's radio interview with Radio Netherlands suggests, it means, "...taking the chances to move through the city, ...to deal with walks of life that are unfamiliar..., because within those kinds of unexpected or unanticipated chances, some new opportunity and possibility might ensue (AbdouMaliq 2007). In a sense, it is about 'living here and there', or, no tying things down but keeping up following whenever the city leads

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(Cowherd 2015: 2). In the section that follows, we deploy the technique and production of *kavera* and *browning* as a specific case of navigation by some coupling returnees.

Production of Kavera and browning: disruptions and connections

In this section, I deploy the materiality and vitality of "*kavera* (polythene bag) and "*browning*" (ametaphor built on a local emphasis on "brown is beautiful"), as new conceptual tools to think through the production of coupling among the returnees and how they re-define 'beautiful' woman and also how their women articulate 'responsible' man and how that fluctuates between concepts of 'trustworthy' to 'unreliable' man. We frame two very specific mundane practices borne out of this post-conflict reproduction of coupling among returnees in Gulu city. There isthe framing of 'reliable' and 'trustworthy' man, what in the everyday practices and as an analytical category, the paper refers to here as "*kavera husband*", while failure to hold a 'kavera' as a symbol of provision, one is categorized as 'unreliable' husband. This elaborates the entanglement that coupling amongst returnees actually are. Similarly, the study shows the regenerative tactics women deploy to assume "wifehood" and the extractive enterprise, what is termed here as, "browning" because in the eyes of many returnees and in the common parlance among the local community, *"brown is beautiful"*. This is re-rooted as technique in the dual temporality of movement into the socially immediate and the socially imagined. It reconnects us to the space-moral, conceptual geographies, and serves as a very significant reminder of the dynamic coupling which is simply ignored in classical studies on predefined marriage and familystudies. As a result, we have been missing out in capturing the vibrant 'circulations' that shape coupling, marriage and family in the post-conflict urban space. In that case, this section tries to enhance a chance of capturing 'coupling' as a process, and not just only as a status. In the section that follows, the paper focuses on these two speeds in the everyday mundane practices within precarious network and negotiating relation between coupling returnees. Accordingly, the paper takes two cases each, and builds on to understand the phenomenon of coupling among the returnees.

Kavera husband

We deploy the materiality and vitality of *kavera* as a technique that the returnee men instrumentalise to negotiate a relationship with the women. The centrality of k*avera* is enhanced to draw a complex dynamics involved and negotiated in couple making among the returnees.

Episode1: When I tell boss that food is over and that I need to go to saloon to plait my hair, boss normally shouts at me. But when he is coming back in the evening, he carries something for us and sometimes boss surprises me with money for saloon. That night, we are all happy. (A returnee woman aged 34 residing in Kanyagoga B).

Episode2: These women in town have endless material and emotional needs. When you return home without anything or tired, she is tense, moody and irritating. When I get enough money, I will leave her. I am so tired with all these. I pray (to God?) that I get money. This woman disturbs me a lot. We found each other here in town, but she disturbs me a lot. Women of these days, if you trust them or open up too much to them, you will be stupid…. These women are not marriage substance. We just stay, provided we are happy with each other. What is important is, that there is everything in the house, and therefore, no woman will refuse you (A returnee man, aged 42 residing in Coo-pe).

In an event of being overpowered by both the city doings and entanglements, on one hand and on the other, the unending list of demands from the wife, the husband shouts but also groans. Whereas the woman does not detail aspect of groaning, it is implied in her narrative. What is important is to understand this reaction. Food and saloon are both material properties marked as criteria of a reliable man. Whereas food is mobile in the *kavera* in as far as being carried home, saloon like many symbolic gestures may also be carried in the *kavera*, except as its extension seated in the man's pocket, making *kavera* both a definite, symbolic and an elastic concept denoting provision and husbandhood. Drawing from Lacan (2018) on the problem of the "real", the shouting and groaning over demands for food and saloon is a test to his status as a 'real' husband. Here, 'real husband' is not necessarily a normative behavioural issue or a normative concept but a swinging concept which he is drawn to as long as

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he provides and yet retired from, as long as he fails to provide, making 'real husband' a fluid concept and practice as well.

The calm of the *kavera* in the message of *"he carries something for us and sometimes boss surprises me with money for saloon"*, recreates a night that is full of 'blissful joy'. In otherwords, creates a sense of subjective material fulfillment and draws the 'wife' and 'husband' closer in a happiness mode that borders erotic and masculine love, making the night blissful indeed. This is a connecting point in as much as material provision and subjective fulfillment intersects. But also, there is seemingly a simultaneous rupture and disruptions witnessed. The complaint that *"...these women in town have endless material and emotional needs"*, are such moments of disruption. A little more verses shows more significant narrative of entanglement; *"When you return home without anything or tired, she is tense, moody and irritating. When I get enough money, I will leave her"*. The story of 'leaving,' 'disturbing' and being 'stupid' are only qualified as contestations amidst getting stuck with 'endless' demands from the 'wife'. Once stuck in the endless circuit of the wife's list of wants, the husband goes undercover, prompting him to deploy instantiations of an uncertain wonder, example; will the wife today allow me to sleep peacefully without reminding me about the endless wants? Will she receive me with a smile? Will I find her asleep so that I tip-toe to the bed? Is the land lord already asleep orawake waiting for me, and what new excuse will I give him? In this sense, there is cold war at home, home turning into "mission impossible." In this moment of disruption, energy of reconnection through *kavera* is intensely mobilized.

But also, does that suggest that the 'wife' is unrealistic? We at this point recall Deleuze's sense of meaninglessness, a contrapuntal between sense and nonsense. The ambivalence of meaninglessness provides an insightful reading of whether the 'wife' is unrealistic, in the sense that this question in light of post-conflict navigation is not a moral but an economic issue. The category, 'meaninglessness' therefore is a subliminal of yet another category. Zygmunt (1989) elaborates this idea of 'meaninglessness' in his notion of the *strange* and the *unfamiliar* that always entices and yet produces a stranger who becomes so enticed that one can no longer be controlled or ordered. In that case, the 'wife' is outside the normative of being 'unrealistic' and much more a victim as well of being enticed by the 'strange' and yet 'nice' material reproduction of commodities in the Gulu cityscape. Pervading her every day, these mundane reproductions, enhances its geographies with new meanings and

values, getting normalized and therefore determining and negotiating relations. Determined to get these commodities, the 'wife' leverages on her browning as a technique of beauty to attract and trap a man for a 'husband' and thereby transferring most of the burden of acquisition of the city commodities onto the 'husband'. In the section that follows, the paper takes a little bit of time to elaborate on this technique.

'Brown is beautiful'

As it were, modes of visuality, vitality and materiality of self-improving techniques are deployed by the women and the 'wives' such as and not limited to; dressing well, use of lotion, oil, facial, leg and thigh massage. This self-recreation to remain attractive pushes the 'husband' to work harder and yet in a fleeting journey to impress the 'wife'. Her demands swells instead, compounding the husband's precarious situation, entangling him further and pushing him to add speed and elongate his antennae in 'seeing' what the cityscape has to offer, or cracks in the cityscape to take advantage of. Deploying the regenerative tactics to assume wifehood and attendant extractive enterprise, she mobilizes and intensifies the nascent terminology and practice of *brown is beautiful* to occupy the advantaged position as a beautiful 'brown woman' although most of the time it is enhanced by bleaching lotions to captivate imaginings of a beautiful lady in the context of Acholi and enhance the man's or husband's speed, to provide for her.

Episode 1: Men no longer want to get tied down. We have also accepted them that way, provided he has time for me and can provide for us. I don't care if he has two or three women. I get my share. It is you men. You don't want to marry us. You don't want to go to our parents or properly marry us. Well, what can we do? We cannot run away. It is hard to get a good man who can provide for your needs. So if you get one, just concentrate and make it work (Housewife aged 25, wife to a Boda-Boda friend who was once a rich man before the war made him poor).

Episode 2: Parents know men of these days. What is important is, if you can live a life. Men these days are
irresponsible. You just have to live with it because there is no any other way out. If God blesses you with a marriage, that is God's plan. If not, you don't have to die because you have not been married. You can live by the roadside and life goes on (a female returnee coffee mate and an NGO Social Worker, aged 37).

Episode3: For me, I have no time for a man who is irresponsible, I leave him. Men who want me are many. The one who is not serious, I walk out. I don't have time to waste. I want a man who talks big, who shows me love. I am so tired of poverty and I don't want to see it any near. I also do not want men who have no plans (A returnee female, coffee mate and a Civil Servant aged 33).

Statements such as *"you don't want to marry us, we cannot run away"*, *"it is hard to get a good man who can provide for your needs"*, "*so if you get one, just concentrate and make it work*", are detection framework of a "bad surrounding" (Finnstrom 2008), that calls for techniques of capture and retention of the elusive men for 'husbands'. Qualifying a man as good man who can provide for your needs, is not a moral but an economic qualification. Meaning that, concepts like 'reliable' and 'unreliable' men, is to be read as such. Marriage as resigned to a plan from God, is to show how laborious it is to get properly married. But even then if one is not married, one should not think it is the end of the world. This calls for exercise of restraint with the view that marriage as a phenomenon is uncommon and therefore, not a big deal.

What is of significant interest is this phrase; "*You can live by the roadside and life goes on"*. This begs a question- in what sense is it articulated? The term, "roadside" in an urbanscape in Acholi, denotes the improper, the detestable, the damned. In other words, it is the socially and culturally an unacceptable practice. In this context, one accepts to live a curved life, cutting corners and flexibly coming to terms with the real life situations and becoming elastic to swing in all directions that the everyday life course takes her. In the coupling context, it is a symbolic gesture of accepting 'husbandhood' and 'wifehood' in its different nuances, including having a 'husband' in any way possible. Of particular interest is the argument; "*Men who want me are many. The one who is not serious, I walk out. I don't have time to waste. I want a man who talks big, who shows me love. I am so tired of*

poverty…". This is a very specific articulation with two broad categories- a *kavera* criterion of a 'husband' and second, a deep sense of 'self-imaging' and 'confidence'. These two, form our brief elaboration here.

Noticing men's propensity towards one who is 'brown', the followings are mobilized- bleaching oil, lotion and soaps including saloons, as new infrastructure for browning, making them central in the lists of demands. However, even when central, the paper presents lessons from the data that they are not to be displayed or loaded in a *kavera*. Its journey to a household is discreet and placed in a space rarely reached by the 'husband' so that detection of 'bleaching" is minimized. Nevertheless, with a bleached body (browning), attractions as well as retention, happens here. It is also a form of infrastructure for negotiating demands to be detailed in a *kavera*. This infrastructure, this technique, seems, in the view of the respondents, able to navigate the "bad surrounding" by improving visibility, improving chances of attraction and network. Once a network is enhanced, she swings relentlessly, detecting possible 'reliable' and 'trustworthy' men to choose who to couple with. It is this swinging moment that creates uncertainties on the 'husband,' making him to circulate and return with a *kavera*, while also remaining in a constant mood about today's 'wives'. Two things draw our attention here- the 'wife' increases her profiling amidst 'bad surrounding' while the man remains in a precarious position, necessitating further navigation

Conclusion

There are an existing complex disruptions and connections in coupling among former Lord's Resistance Army returnees in Gulu cityscape. From the careful study of flight from the country sides to Gulf city and subsequent trappings of livelihood uncertainties, we showed the navigation tactics deployed by the coupling returnees to stay afloat. Deploying very specific techniques of production of *kavera* that men instrumentalised to negotiate a relationship with their women and also how women use "browning" technique to attract and retain their men, we conclude that coupling among returnees in the post-conflict and particularly in post-conflict Gulu cityscape is fleeting and therefore, swinging in a centrifugal manner. Consequently, "coupling" as a concept is therefore elusive and has its own logic, with its terms of reference expanding and contracting as far as it can. This has a wider ramification, namely, instead of ideals of coupling, rather, we should think of it in terms of

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the everyday production and practices of 'couple-making'.

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