Policing men: militarised masculinity, youth livelihoods, and security in conflict-affected northern Uganda

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Relations between militaries and masculinities—and hegemonic masculinity and the state—are well-established in the literature on gender and development. However, there is less research on how militarised masculinities relate to state governance strategies. This paper, based on qualitative research conducted in northern Uganda between 2014 and 2017, offers a gender analysis of youths participating in informal security arrangements. Civilian male youths accept poorly paid or unpaid work in the informal security sector in the hope of gaining access to livelihoods that will enable them to fulfil masculine ideal-types. However, this arrangement denies them the resources necessary to achieve the ideal-type of civilian masculinity, as well as the state’s military masculinity, which produces young men as subjects of the ruling regime. To reconfigure this relationship between civilian and militarised masculinities, one should understand informal security organisations in the context of alternative livelihood arrangements and take a long-term approach to the demilitarisation of the Ugandan state.

Keywords: civil–military relations, governance, livelihoods, masculinities, policing, security, youth, Uganda

Introduction

In northern Uganda, where a 20-year insurgency devastated the civilian population and helped to entrench a narrative of animosity between northerners and southerners, many citizens continue to oppose the rule of President Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM). At the same time, the expectations associated with achieving manhood drive many young men to express support for the ruling regime in the hope of gaining access to economic, political, and social opportunities. Nowhere is this more evident than in the security sector, where young civilian males struggle to meet local standards of manhood in an environment shaped by the state’s hegemonic and militarised form of masculinity.

In Uganda, as elsewhere, masculinities can be ‘competing, contradictory and mutually undermining’ (Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994, p. 12). A 29-year-old Acholi man, recently recruited by a government-sponsored community policing initiative called ‘Crime Preventers’, shed light on how this manifests in northern Uganda in his explanation for joining the initiative:
Way back in 2000, I was taken by the army and tortured. They claimed I was training rebels. . . . I wanted to make sure people like me did not suffer, so I joined Crime Preventers. If possible, [I want to] help those in need. The other aspect is the political part of crime preventing . . . you find that the person who can shed more blood, the person who has enough money to influence people—to corrupt people—is the one who wins. Such people can influence the police, Crime Preventers, even soldiers to do bad things (Gulu, 25 November 2015).

The respondent hints at two competing notions of masculinity: ‘people like me’, or Acholi civilians who ideally should be left to live their lives independently from violent state interference; and the idealised Crime Preventer, whose position as a security actor and affiliation with the state enables him to protect others. At the same time, the respondent contends that both are subject to the whims of the powerful. Recognising that masculinities are complex and multifaceted, this study describes these two ideal types respectively as ‘civilian masculinity’ and ‘militarised masculinity’.

Based on nine months of qualitative research on young men in the informal security sector, conducted in and around the town of Gulu, northern Uganda, between 2014 and 2017, this paper further elaborates on how militarised masculinity is intricately connected with the power of the NRM state, as well as on how ideal types of civilian and military masculinities interact in the informal security sector to produce young men as subjects of the ruling regime. The paper provides insights into how masculinity is intimately entangled with governance and power, and thus how analysis of this is fundamental to explaining the behaviour of young men. Such assessments are particularly important in conflict-affected or fragile regions, where the decision of young men to acquiesce to state power or to oppose it can mean the difference between war and peace.

The paper first defines the key terms of hegemonic and military masculinity, clarifies how they relate to governance, and uses them to frame the broader argument. Next it presents a brief history of the militarisation of state and society under the NRM regime, focusing on the relationship between civilians, civilian militias, and the state security organs of the military and police in northern Uganda. It goes on to trace how the recent conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda shaped Acholi civilian masculinity, and examines the process of militarisation in the informal security sector. Here, the study concentrates in particular on how government-sponsored trainings utilise discipline to reinforce notions of militarised masculinity as superior to civilian masculinity. It proceeds by considering how the production of hierarchised masculinities, particularly in terms of regulating access to livelihoods (and concomitantly, access to violence and women), functions as a tool of governance of the Ugandan state. The paper reveals that contradictory expectations for manhood emerging from tensions between different ideal types of masculinity are intimately connected to disciplining and managing young men, especially those participating in the security sector. This is especially true in conflict-affected environments with significant underemployment.
and social fragmentation. The paper concludes with a critical reflection on potential policy responses, recognising the limitations owing to the political nature of the issues at hand.

### Hegemonic and military masculinities

Although systems of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and militarised masculinity frequently coexist, there are important differences between them. Systems of hegemonic masculinity favour one form of masculinity over all others, producing some men who—unable to achieve the masculine ideal type—turn to violence or other antisocial behaviour (Correia and Bannon, 2006; Dolan, 2011). As Donaldson’s (1993, p. 645) analysis of hegemonic masculinity makes clear:

> Hegemony... is about the winning and holding of power and the formation (and destruction) of social groups in that process. In this sense, it is importantly about the ways in which the ruling class establishes and maintains its domination. The ability to impose a definition of the situation, to set the terms on which events are understood and issues discussed, to formulate ideas and define morality is an essential part of this process. Hegemony involves persuasion of the greater part of the population, particularly through the media, and the organization of social institutions in ways that appear ‘natural,’ ‘ordinary,’ ‘normal.’ The state, through punishment for non-conformity, is crucially involved in this negotiation and enforcement.

Hegemonic masculinity sees gender as a terrain of ideology, social conflict, and plurality, where one version of masculinity is forcibly and pervasively constructed as superior to all others, thereby legitimating and reproducing the social relationships that allow the powerful to dominate (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 1985, p. 592). While Donaldson underlines the role of the state in structuring hierarchies of masculinity via direct discipline and the enforcement of certain norms, the state also has the capacity to mobilise indirect influence via institutionalised structures such as the economy.

Militarised masculinity emphasises dominating and protecting civilians and society, creating a binary between ‘military men’ and ‘feminised society’. In this account, femininity is a social and symbolic foil against which military (and masculine) solidarity and combativeness is produced. Equating warrior-hood with manhood, and contrasting it with the feminised civilian, is one of many strategies to induce nationalism and to entice healthy young men to risk their lives in the service of the state; hence, the arguably universal promotion of authoritarian brands of masculinity in military institutions (Enloe, 1998; Kovitz, 2003).

If hegemonic masculinity naturalises a system of distribution of power among men, then militarised masculinity, while also internally hierarchised, naturalises the dominance of ‘the military man’—a category of men loosely unified under the
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umbrella of ‘militarised’ and excluding non-military (that is, civilian) forms of masculinity. In this way, militarised masculinity has limited space for heterogeneous expressions of manhood. This raises the following questions: in societies where the state’s logic and symbols of governing are militarised—that is, where civil–military relations are publicly intimate and there is little institutional separation between the state and the military—how do heterogeneous masculinities coexist with hegemonic and militarised masculinity? And how does the coexistence of multiple masculinities influence the state’s capacity to govern?

This study addresses these questions from the vantage point of the security sector in post-conflict northern Uganda, with a focus on the experience of male youth engaged in informal security work. It finds that civilian male youths, striving to become men, face a predicament: they need to provide financially for their families while upholding cultural values to become ‘real men’. Paid work is rare; many youths engaged in the informal security sector feel that one of the few viable options they have for employment is the state’s security services. However, historically rooted narratives of animosity between the north and south, and a clear sense that the regime uses the security services to repress political dissent, create potential tensions for those who opt to work in the state’s security sector. Moreover, while many participate in government-sponsored security training, which underlines the state’s military brand of hegemonic masculinity, few make it into the state’s formal security institutions, such as the military or the police. Instead, they continue to struggle in informal security arrangements, hoping for a chance to be integrated someday into the formal state structure. In this way, tensions between Acholi civilian masculinities and the state’s military hegemonic masculinity contribute to producing young men as subjects of the Ugandan state.

The findings presented here can be placed among two key strands of literature. The first takes a primarily political approach to understanding the role of male youths working in informal security arrangements, interpreting recruitment as a mechanism to generate potentially violent forces that will intimidate the political opposition and shore up support for the government (Jok and Hutchinson, 1999; Raleigh, 2016). This is particularly the case in recent analyses of Uganda’s Crime Preventer programme, which recruited tens of thousands of young men shortly before the general election on 18 February 2016. In addition, Crime Preventers have frequently been referred to as a political militia (Abrahamsen and Bareebe, 2016; Ocungi, 2016). The second underscores an economic and socio-cultural approach to frustrated masculinity or gender more broadly, such as in studies that describe a difficult and prolonged youth as ‘waithood’ (Honwana, 2012), ‘social navigation’ (Vigh, 2009), or becoming ‘stuck’ (Sommers, 2012).

This study aims to bridge these two approaches, which are generalised here, framing the political approach within the socio-cultural context and politicising the economic and socio-cultural lenses. The result is an analysis that draws attention to the lived experiences of young men, while foregrounding their political salience.
The militarisation of the state and society under the NRM

Uganda’s current regime, the NRM under Museveni, came to power in 1986 through a violent rebellion, self-narrated as a vanguardist liberation movement (Museveni, 1997). After his forces seized power, Museveni faced resistance from various rebel factions, including the LRA in the north, the West Nile Bank Front in the northwest, and, later, the Allied Democratic Forces in the west (Day and Reno, 2014).

Over the course of his presidency, Museveni has overseen the fusing of the military, the NRM regime, and the Ugandan state. Until 2005, he ruled Uganda as a ‘no-party system’, which ‘gave the NRM a rationale not to institutionalize itself as a political party since it was to be a movement representing the entire population. This left key elements of political control highly centralized in the NRM’ (Tripp, 2012, p. 58).

Uganda’s parliament has 10 seats reserved for military representatives, and many leading military figures have been granted key positions in the government (Kagoro, 2015, pp. 99–101). Even the foundational unit of local governance, the local council system, has its origins in the ‘resistance councils’ that the NRM established to provide intelligence and supplies to its troops during its revolutionary war from 1981–86 (Branch, 2010, p. 59). Some still view the local councils as being politically aligned with the NRM—as of December 2017, elections have not been held for local council positions since 2001 when Uganda was still a no-party political system, meaning that many local-level representatives are by default members of the NRM.6

The NRM state has consistently militarised state institutions and society. Military and police officers undergo similar training and high-ranking personnel serve interchangeably in the two institutions, leading scholars to refer to them as being ‘functionally fused’ (Kagoro, 2015, p. 171). The militarisation of the state is apparent in other ways too: for instance, the NRM regime has long offered free military training for civilians, called mchaka mchaka. A law, proposed in 2007, would have made mchaka mchaka compulsory for all able-bodied civilians. The proposal was made after members of parliament went on a retreat with Museveni during which they donned military fatigues and participated in military drills (The Monitor, 2007). It was suggested in general terms that participating in mchaka mchaka would make civilians more employable (Lanken Verma, 2012, p. 5). The initiative places particular emphasis on the gun as a symbol and object of state power. As Lanken Verma (2012, p. 117) writes:

[T]he gun . . . came to form part of the symbolic engagement between the state and the cadres, acting as a mediating device that would serve as the symbol of access and membership: gun in hand (and with us), you may be ‘inside’, you may be safe from fear. A move towards the right end of the gun barrel so as to not remain ‘target’.

Thus, the training contributes to a common perception that the NRM, the military, and overwhelming violence are closely linked.

In addition to the security training that the government offers to civilians, the regime channels significant resources through the security sector, and utilises military
symbolism in government projects and programmes (Kagoro, 2015). Military fatigues and boots are widely recognised as a symbol of state power and regulated as such; indeed, wearing a military uniform is viewed by some as a mode of intimidation. One male youth, a 28-year-old Crime Preventer, recounted an incident that occurred at the Gulu military barracks shortly before the general election in 2016:

*The other day [military officers] took some Crime Preventers [to the barracks] and trained them. . . . [The higher authorities said] those who put on uniforms should not come back because they will intimidate civilians. Those who went, they have been fired off [from community policing] (Gulu, 4 February 2016).*

Another example is Independence Day celebrations (see Figure 1), where auxiliary forces, civil servants, NGO workers, and many others take part in military parades for hours. Such military organisation, pageantry, and rituals (such as ‘passing out’ recruits at the end of training) represent public endorsement of military values and their institutionalisation in national culture. Moreover, during the interviews for this study, citizens voiced a preference for a president with military experience, saying it is necessary to prevent a resurgence of civil conflict. Museveni himself served as an active army officer until 2003 (Mpagi and Kasasira, 2014). In addition, channelling state resources to and through the military, for example by having veterans implement development programming such as the National Agricultural Advisory Services, has been a strategy of the government under the NRM since Museveni took power (Lumu and Kiwuuwa, 2014).

**Figure 1. Students marching at an Independence Day celebration in Gulu, 2015**

*Source: author.*
Under the no-party system, the party and the state were conflated. All Ugandan citizens officially became members of the NRM. Opposing the party meant becoming an enemy of the state. Indeed, there is a commonly-held belief in northern Uganda, backed by experience and observation, that it is impossible to make money, gain prestige, or enjoy public success without the support of the NRM. Political opposition often is equated with terrorism or treason. After the general elections in 2006 and 2011, key opposition leaders were arrested on charges of sectarianism, sedition, terrorism, and treason (Bagala, 2011). In 2016, NRM Secretary-General Justine Kasule Lumumba threatened political protesters with being shot (Wesonga, 2016); arrests following the 2016 election have followed a similar trajectory to those in 2006 and 2011 (Echwalu, 2016). Police regularly intervene in rallies sporting batons, live or rubber bullets, and teargas. Understanding how members of the opposition, and, in some cases, citizens are narrated as enemies of the state helps to explain how militarisation and militarised masculinity function as tools of governance in Uganda today.

Militarisation has particular resonance in Gulu town, because it was the epicentre of the LRA conflict that terrorised the civilian population between 1986 and 2006. Throughout the 20-year war, international organisations and media coverage depicted a binary narrative of the conflict, describing the LRA rebels as criminal and depraved in contrast to the Western-friendly, donor-darling Ugandan state (Freeland, 2015). Some have argued that Museveni instrumentalised this conflict, using the volatile situation to attract aid and military dollars, to strengthen his base across the rest of the
country, to wage a proxy war on the Sudanese state, and to weaken political organisation of the Acholi people in the north who otherwise might have challenged his legitimacy (Dolan, 2009; Branch, 2011).

Police were largely absent from the north during the conflict—civilians and military cadres were tasked with meeting daily security needs. Civilian men were recruited into paramilitary organisations, serving as auxiliary forces to the Ugandan military. Many were poorly treated, receiving little to no pay, and placed on the frontlines (Omach, 2010, p. 440). This policy of engaging civilians in security provision continues today: civilian youths frequently are tasked with policing their communities under the guidance of local leaders (Tapscott, 2017a). For its part, the LRA relied on guerrilla tactics, abducting an estimated 60,000–80,000 people in the Acholi sub-region (Annan et al., 2011, p. 883). Throughout the conflict, Acholi civilians experienced media blackouts, as well as arbitrary arrest, detention, disappearance, and torture, as a result of allegations that they supported the rebels; at the same time, the rebels targeted civilians for supposedly collaborating with the government (Branch, 2010). The war has left the north fragile, and further heightened suspicion and even animosity between northerners and southerners.

Civilian masculinity and war in northern Uganda

The Acholi enjoyed comparative access to the government’s resources in colonial and early post-colonial times. They were recruited disproportionately into the colonial army, gaining a reputation as innately martial (Doom and Vlassenroot, 1999; Branch, 2011). Via the military, the Acholi benefited from access to state power and resources largely until Museveni took power, ending two decades of northern rule. As Branch (2011, p. 50) argues: ‘the exclusion of the Acholi in recent decades [from the government] has to be seen in the context of the degree of privilege that they formerly enjoyed’. This exclusion continues to shape gendered identities, particularly owing to the Ugandan state’s neo-patrimonial nature of resource distribution, which means that those whom the government disfavours have limited economic, political, and social power (Tangri and Mwenda, 2003).

While the Acholi meta-narrative links livelihoods to military service (Boás, 2004), the Acholi masculine ideal-type emphasises the use of masculine power to provide for and protect one’s family and to father children (Dolan, 2002, 2011; Porter, 2015). An ideal Acholi man respects and upholds social order, including age and gender hierarchies that prefer elders to youths, and men to women. As a 31-year-old security group member explained:

*A real man has an established family and there is nothing they are missing at all. And this is why people say: ‘Coo ma gi tiyo matek’ [a real man works so hard]. If you go [to him] for any kind of assistance, you would be able to get it irrespective of whether your need is physical or just seeking assistance in terms of advice and guidance in certain matters (Gulu, 1 October 2015).*
Another 31-year-old security group member added: ‘[a real] man is capable of hosting his visitors well without making them lack anything’ (Gulu, 29 October 2015). Many respondents stressed responsibility, achieved through steady employment, with one 30-year-old man stating that: ‘[a] man should have something to do. If you don’t have work, then you are not a man because you can’t take responsibilities [such as raising a family]’ (Gulu, 30 October 2015).

Acholi society is traditionally patrilocal and exogamous: men are counselled that they must ‘go far’ to find a wife—a tradition based on a prohibition against intra-clan marriage. Numerous other traditions surround courtship and marriage, including paying bride wealth and establishing a respectable home. A respectable home, among other things, requires that a male figure protect and provide for his wife and children. A 41-year-old man accentuated this point when he pointed out that a wife can demean her husband by insulting their household:

*The woman would simply say: ‘In gang wu ni obedo gang ming mo ata!’ [This, what you call your home, is a place full of stupidity!]. . . . She would say that the man is helpless [konye peke]. She would also say that what she has as a husband is actually not a husband but some kind of a wild dog [ogwang] who is not developmental at all. In this situation, the best thing a man can do is to remain silent and not respond to what she had said so that peace could continue to prevail at home* (Gulu, 29 September 2015).

The respondent further noted the overarching goal of maintaining a peaceful and orderly home, something that Acholi women generally are expected to take responsibility for, by adopting an obedient and subordinate attitude. A 46-year-old woman explained:

*A good woman takes care of the home and respects her husband’s people. For example, I have never gotten into a disagreement with my husband’s people, so I am a good woman. I do all the work [in the house] and I dig [in the garden]* (Gulu, 30 October 2015).

The importance of marriage is also illustrated by the Acholi proverb *labot kilwongo ka dek wi kot* (roughly translated as ‘a bachelor is called to a meal in the rain’). The proverb refers to how an unmarried man has no wife to bring food to his hut, so instead he must go where the meal is prepared to eat, even if it means being caught in the rain. The proverb is used when someone must do something ‘undignified’ (p’Bitek, 1985, p. 7).

During the conflict, dislocation and insecurity limited schooling and work in non-security-related fields. More than 90 per cent of the population was forcibly moved to camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), where unsanitary conditions and close living quarters earned them the moniker of ‘rural prisons’ (Allen and Vlassenroot, 2010, p. 14). In the context of displacement, it was virtually impossible for men and women to fulfil traditional gender roles. Porter (2016) notes that the Acholi concept of a home so central to Acholi notions of masculinity and femininity, including spatial, spiritual, and temporal elements, was thrown into disarray in the crowded
IDP camps. A 31-year-old security group member recalled how scarcity further contributed to the breakdown of social order and immoral behaviour:

*It was hardly possible for one to even get a daily meal [in the camps]. In some circumstances, some parents started to trade on their daughters so that they could be able to survive in the camps. There was prostitution in the camps where the ladies were very busy selling their bodies for the sake of getting something to eat. This was a very big problem* (Gulu, 29 October 2015).

Cattle rustling and looting by rebels and government soldiers decimated civilians’ assets (Dolan, 2009, p. 40). Bride wealth, often paid in part with cattle, became insurmountable, preventing the formalisation of unions (Finnström, 2008; Dolan, 2009; Lanken Verma, 2012). Without the exchange of bride wealth, partnerships remained informal and thus fragile: a woman’s family could reclaim her and her children at any time; men’s families remained suspicious of cohabiting partners. Some men, hoping to provide for and to protect their families, opted to join the military. A 55-year-old man recounted his experience during the war:

*We lost everything . . . The insurgency forced us to flee to Masindi District [to an] internally displaced people’s camp. From there we were working in the sugar plantation but it could not yield anything meaningful to help me take care of my family. I later decided to join the army because it was not easy at all. I went and did the military training . . . I was deployed and I worked but things were not so easy at all* (Gulu, 16 October 2015).

A 31-year-old man who had been part of a Local Defence Unit, and now worked as an informal community vigilante, added:

*During the time of the LRA insurgency, everything was at the brink of collapse and life was miserable for almost everyone in the area. Life in the internally displaced people’s camps was not nice at all. This is one of the factors which forced me to join the military. The LRA would come and abduct people from the camps at will and there was nothing anybody was doing about it . . . When I witnessed the atrocities of the LRA and the killing of my brother, I said to myself that it was no longer bearable to watch the LRA finish us without any defence from our side. So I was forced to join the military so that I could also defend myself. I was in the army for about seven years; and yet life never even changed for the better* (Gulu, 29 October 2015).

Aid organisations further undermined the role of civilian men as providers by giving rations directly to women, who they believed would invest in raising children, rather than in leisure. Hopwood, Porter, and Saum (2018), in this special issue of *Disasters*, similarly explore how such gendered interventions in food provision shape local dynamics in Karamoja, Uganda, today. Without work, alcoholism flourished in the camps (Lehrer, 2009). Civilian men regularly were humiliated by soldiers, beaten in front of their children and wives, or required to perform traditionally female tasks, such as collecting firewood or water for the wives of soldiers (Onyango, 2012,
Women, frequently encouraged by their families, pursued relationships with soldiers whose economic and political power promised a better future (Lanken Verma, 2012, p. 78).

A ceasefire was reached in 2006 and civilians began to leave the IDP camps. However, life did not return to pre-war conditions. Many returnees faced land conflicts with opportunistic neighbours, hindering access to land for farming (Kandel, 2016). Furthermore, youths had become less enthusiastic about farming as a livelihood.

Developers' interest in formalising land titles to promote investment in urban areas, as well as large-scale land acquisition in rural areas, placed additional pressure on the availability of land (Branch, 2013). Despite the significant changes to the economic, political, and social landscape that have reconfigured pathways to achieving manhood and womanhood, many young men and women still value these traditional gender roles (Adams, Salazar, and Lundgren, 2013).

Even though the Acholi have a long history of martial livelihoods and conflict, the normatively appropriate relationship between Acholi masculinity and violence remains ambiguous. Indeed, explicit references to how a man should use violence were absent from my research. Similarly, Dolan (2002, pp. 78–79) asserts that ‘there is relatively little within the model [of Acholi masculinity] which explicitly encourages or celebrates the use of violence. Rather there is a kind of loud silence on the issue’. Dolan interprets this absence by seeing violence as a means to an end rather than a fundamental dimension of Acholi masculinity.

Civilians expressed mixed feelings about how violence relates to authority and masculinity during the interviews for this study. Most respondents said that Acholis admire men who can solve problems peacefully, explaining that formulating an acceptable and non-violent solution—and thus one that addresses individual needs within the Acholi cosmological order—demonstrates cleverness and acumen, as well as moral values and practical interests. A 27-year-old security group member commented on the tensions between this notion of masculinity and the regime’s military masculinity:

> When a man trains as a military officer, he becomes aggressive and hard on other people. I remember we did our training to become Crime Preventers . . . we were being trained by soldiers. . . . [T]he trainings were really not cool because everything was handled with a lot of military style which I really did not like at all. But to me, that does not really [make] someone a man. Well . . . It would make one a man, but at the end of it, if one is trained to be in charge of security how then would one be able to provide that security if he is always just aggressive? It would not be really easy (Gulu, 6 October 2015).

The respondent’s uncertainty as to whether aggression bolsters or undermines masculinity illustrates the point made by Dolan (2002). Furthermore, the respondent grapples with two distinct notions of masculinity, civilian and military, in the same context, which cannot be reconciled easily under a stable norm on the use of violence. The following section further investigates how these ideal-type masculinities are placed in a state of tension among men who participate in informal security arrangements.
Producing subjects: training civilian recruits in the state’s militarised hegemonic masculinity

The NRM government has consistently created opportunities for civilians to receive security training and to join auxiliary forces, including Home Guards, Local Defence Units, and, recently, Crime Preventers. The training, similar to *machaka machaka*, inculcates recruits with a militarised masculinity regardless of their sex. Men and women are similarly taught to follow orders and to view rank as sacrosanct and disobedience as intolerable. Training typically is made up of physical and theoretical (or ‘political’) components. Recruits learn about law and legal procedure, government programmes, and military culture, including pranks, songs, and signs of respect. Trainers emphasise that recruits represent the Ugandan government, and thus should uphold values reflecting militarised masculinity. Formally, these include being respectful, presentable, and obedient to higher-ranking males. A few examples from a recent training for Special Police Constables (SPCs, or a police officer on contract) in Gulu town were narrated to me:

• Smartness while on duty: clothes should be properly washed and ironed, you should have six pairs of socks. Have at least three hankies for your nose and sweat, maybe to dust your clothes.
• When in uniform, no eating on the street. [Imagine] you’re a police constable, eating maize, sugarcane . . . your gun is hanging here [by your side], someone can easily come from behind and grab your gun.
• You should not put [on] shoes [boots] without a whole uniform.
• No ‘balance’ [do not wear pants below the waist]. It is not wanted. People might think you’re a homo[sexual].

The training and the rules suggest that recruits should shed human characteristics, such as eating, sleeping, and even sweating. Security officers should be paradigms of heterosexual military men.

These same norms apply to female recruits as well. During fieldwork, I observed a training for Crime Preventers, which focused primarily on marching and learning Swahili commands—Swahili is used by the Ugandan military, but hardly spoken in the north. Of the 18 youths who gathered for the training at 07:00, two were women. While one fell into line, swinging her arms with confidence and turning left and right in accordance with the commander’s shouts, the other appeared somewhat lost, always a step behind. The male youths watching on the side line were in awe of the first, mumbling repeatedly under their breath: ‘that woman can march!’. Apropos of the second woman, one said dismissively: ‘this girl should be a Crime Preventer’s wife’. These statements illustrate that militarisation is strongly gendered. A woman who can march with men defies civilian gender norms; a woman who cannot is told to return to her civilian gender role.

A male community vigilante expressed the general sentiment that it is not good for women to work in security because they ‘forget their family and lose respect’
(Gulu, 30 October 2015). When asked how such training affects women, a 55-year-old man working as a community vigilante said:

> During the trainings, there is every struggle to ensure that one is rid of all civilian attitudes; somewhat it does not matter whether one is a man or a woman. There are times when people are asked to wake up at 4 a.m. when people are still enjoying their beds. . . . What I know is that a woman who goes and does this training is bound to be unable to settle down in the house with a husband. . . . [H]er attitude and way of doing things would really be manly . . . [it] would make her develop some kind of a man’s attitude (Gulu, 16 October 2015).

The militarised masculinity of the NRM government and the armed forces differs from civilian masculinity in ways that are intentionally cultivated and the result of access to state power and resources. Military masculinity is anchored in loyalty to the government, rather than to the community and family. This is achieved via a variety of interventions. First, soldiers and police officers are physically transferred around the country to hold posts for months or years. In a patrilineal society, leaving the clan’s land uproots a male from his civilian identity. Second, training programmes teach loyalty to state authority. In Militarization in Post-1986 Uganda: Politics, Military and Society Interpretation, Kagoro (2015, p. 196) quotes a senior Ugandan military officer discussing the military’s symbolic power to assimilate recruits:

> There is something special about a military uniform and a military environment. It is habitual that in a military base one gives up his individual aspirations and subscribes to group dynamics. . . . I believe the president is aware of that.

One government security officer said that the militarisation of civilian recruits is an ongoing process that is bolstered with occasional training over the years:

> If the government feel[s] that ‘these people’ are becoming too civilian, [they] can train them again for two months to bring them back into the system (Gulu, 10 October 2014).

Hence, assimilation and discipline are key elements of military training. It follows that recruits adopt dimensions of military masculinity to integrate.

Another young man who had recently participated in Crime Preventer training pointed out that any time a recruit hopes to move up a level within the system (such as from a volunteer Crime Preventer to an SPC to a police officer), he or she is subjected to a new set of hazing rituals—for instance, requiring recruits to wake up at odd hours or engage in arbitrary activities and strenuous exercise, or embarrassing them by giving them impossible or ludicrous assignments. These rituals are intended to generate solidarity and assimilate recruits into the military hierarchy. One youth recounted a time when recruits were told that they would be fed beef for dinner. When they ran to be served at mealtime, they received a standard meal of beans and posho (a local staple). Chastening recruits and ridiculing them for having expressed
a desire for a special meal were meant to remind them that they should control their human desires, make them thankful for the standard meal, and put them in their place, thereby reinforcing obedience to hierarchy within the military structure.

The training for Crime Preventers to become SPCs illuminates the production of a hierarchy of masculinities within the government’s system of militarised masculinities, as well as the formation of a relationship with the NRM state. Material factors, such as access to weapons and money, were used to reinforce this hierarchy. For instance, one young man who trained as a Crime Preventer and later as an SPC lamented that training only included ‘marching and being obedient’; only later were they to be trained in using guns.

The trainers also gave specific instructions about loyalty to the state. Given the long-standing relationship between the party and the state, recruits often interpreted these instructions to mean that expressions of support for the regime would be a condition of their success in the programme. A 29-year-old Crime Preventer stated:

_The [District Internal Security Officer] said, as an SPC, you should commit yourself to your nation. . . . Give honourable respect to the higher authorities and listen to their instructions. . . . You should not be blindfolded by other individuals, organisations, or institutions [outside of government authorities]. You will have already joined the government work, so you should give yourself as a whole to the nation. Be obedient, law abiding, so you do not fall into bigger problems (Gulu, 13 February 2016)._ 

He added that a district-level central government appointee told SPCs that if they accepted bribes like police officers they would be kicked off the programme. Instead, the authority suggested they ‘first stabilise themselves within the police force’ and then they would have ‘the opportunity to be promoted . . . to another position’. Thus, security actors gain status as they become closer to the nodes of power within the central government. Only certain security forces have access to weapons; only some individuals have the luxury of extracting bribes. Military and police officers use their access to weapons and state power to establish their superiority over auxiliary forces or informal security arrangements. A 31-year-old security group member said:

_It is very difficult to know who is security and who is not—we have no uniform, no ID [identification] card. . . . At one moment, we came across the police patrol who said ‘who are you? ID yourselves!’ They are fond of making fun—asking inappropriate questions or things they already know just to scare the group (Gulu, 10 October 2014)._ 

Without the backing of the police, civilians working in the informal security sector are constrained. Use of violence is monitored by the local council and other local authorities, and there is always the risk that as civilians working informally as security providers, they will be accused of using excessive force, resulting in detention and fines. With the backing of the government, civilian security actors have more freedom to use violence and to make arrests. In addition, there is a strong perception
that soldiers can employ violence with impunity. During a security meeting between
soldiers and civilians, one soldier asserted:

_The soldiers are passed out—they know they can kill a mother, a child—soldiers are bad._
_If they change their colour, they can kill_ (Gulu, 22 November 2015).

In other cases, the police use rubber bullets and teargas to disperse protestors
soldiers utilise extra-judicial violence, including executions, in their work. In these
narratives, the police officer or soldier is regularly reassigned to a new location to
avoid accountability, thereby negating the possibility of recourse. The perceived
ability of state security providers to leave behind physically the wreckage of violent
acts conflicts with Acholi tradition in which communities frequently would require
that a perpetrator undergo ritual cleansing or another punishment (Allen, 2006; Macdonald, 2017).

Consequently, state security providers’ access to violence, mobility, and income
establishes a hierarchy of masculinities, and norms regarding future access to power
and violence. Perhaps because of this, community members are more supportive of
civilian security providers that have the support of the military and police, which they
view as more capable of fending off dangerous wrongdoers. The power imbalance
between civilian security providers and state security actors is reinforced through
training, as well as via access to weapons, money, and authority gleaned from the state.
Furthermore, symbols of state authority elicit respect from civilians, while their
absence inspires the converse. This makes civilians want to ‘get into the system’. Yet,
militarised masculinity fails to speak to values that are deeply inscribed in civilian
notions of masculinity, leaving young men feeling inadequate both in relation to
their social obligations and their professional aspirations. As a result, the tensions
between military and civilian masculinities help to regulate and subjugate the popu-
lation of young civilian men, particularly those who participate in informal security
in northern Uganda.

**Analysis: competing masculinities as a tool of governance**
Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994, p. 5) observe that ‘hegemonic forms [of masculinity]
are never totally comprehensive, nor do they ever completely control subordinates.
That is, there is always some space for subordinate versions of masculinity—as alter-
native gendered identities that validate self-worth and encourage resistance’. This
paper has highlighted some of the tensions between civilian and militarised mas-
culinities, particularly those concerning symbolic and material resources, mobility,
and violence. It has also examined how these masculinities are reproduced through
socialisation and institutionalised forms of discipline. The findings suggest that
rather than ‘validate self-worth and encourage resistance’, the tensions between civil-
ian and militarised masculinities produce an environment in which young civilian
males accept the logic of the NRM state’s militarised regime, and yet, owing to their informal role, are unable to achieve the ideals of manhood either as civilians or as soldiers.

The evaluation of militarised and civilian notions of masculinity from the perspective of youths in the informal security sector in northern Uganda reveals a predicament. Civilian youths must have a livelihood to become men, but there are few options. Many participating in the informal security sector feel that joining the state’s security sector is their only viable opportunity. In so doing, however, they must adopt the state’s militarised masculinity, thereby challenging norms of civilian masculinity. The NRM regime leverages this paradox, and the ambiguities inherent in the coexistence of competing masculinities, to enrol male civilians in the informal security sector and produce a dynamic favouring militarised over civilian masculinity. This enables the NRM to justify its militarised and masculinised system to distribute power and resources, while ignoring other competing logics, which, should they gain strength, could endanger the status quo.

The existing system of militarised masculinity enmeshed in the Ugandan state serves two purposes simultaneously: (i) it strengthens state institutions, contributing to the perception that they are the only viable options for upward socioeconomic mobility; and (ii) it underscores the superiority of state authorities and the comparatively weak position of civilians. This draws young men into the NRM system, where they hope that they will advance professionally despite not knowing how this might occur. Here, they are produced as subjects of the militarised Ugandan state, and, in this way, economic opportunities and socio-cultural norms coalesce to generate a political environment that favours the continued rule of the militarised NRM regime.

To illustrate this point further, one Crime Preventer trainee highlighted the regular humiliation that recruits experience as informal security actors:

[The Crime Preventers] were not complaining so much on money issues, but more about how they were handled. . . . They were complaining about being used as tools—like a spanner. A spanner has no work, it is only used to tie or to untie—the spanner is not being paid. . . . People use a spanner because it does a lot of work, and then they throw it away whenever they are not using it. It is [a very bad] insult; it is almost a vulgar thing to say. . . . You feel so very bad. The word comes when you’re angry or annoyed (Gulu, 29 September 2015).

Hence, youths participating in the informal security sector compete for opportunities and engage in training and military acculturation because they believe that the only possible way of gaining access to (even meagre levels of) power, violence, and resources is to integrate into the state’s militarised system. Such hopes are a direct reflection of the ideal type of militarised masculinity that is linked to state power. In the north, this militarised masculinity has been juxtaposed with civilian masculinity for decades. Repeatedly, state actors have demonstrated superior access to power in comparison to civilians, especially to civilians who do not fall in line
with the militarised NRM regime. This situation has been reinforced continually through war, political marginalisation, and the regulation of access to livelihoods.

**Conclusion**

This paper illustrates how young men engaged in informal security are unable to fulfil the expectations set out by the ideal-type of military masculinity, or those of Acholi civilian masculinity. As informal security actors, they are denied the material and symbolic resources accorded to formal state security actors, such as access to weapons, identification papers, salaries, and uniforms. At the same time, their informal and frequently unpaid positions mean that many are unable to get married or support their children, thereby failing to establish what is seen as a proper Acholi household. This failure only generates additional motivation to get into the government system—and, therefore, a patient willingness to endure unpaid and humiliating work in the hope of eventual success.

The findings support the view that, in northern Uganda, informal security operations and civilian militias should be analysed as an economic and socio-cultural strategy to control young male populations, rather than primarily as an instrument of violence to marginalise political rivals (Tapscott, 2016). Indeed, young Acholi males working in the informal security sector are striving to provide for their families in a context of a militarised state and society that is closely connected to the ruling regime’s power. This underlines the importance of interdisciplinary research, in particular collaboration between cultural anthropology and political science.

This paper reveals, through the use of a gendered lens, that even though the Ugandan state has at times been categorised as ‘fragile’ or ‘weak’, the regime actually structures a great deal of young men’s daily lived experiences, especially those participating in the security sector, and, as a result, the experiences of their wives, children, and parents. This makes the prospects for change extremely complex: to demilitarise livelihood options meaningfully requires disentangling the NRM party, military power, and Uganda’s bureaucratic state institutions, and then reducing the reach of the military and the party. In the current political climate, this is untenable—indeed, Museveni has made the building of a resilient and powerful NRM party, which is inextricably linked to the military and the state, the foundation of his long presidency. Moreover, because of these current entanglements, any rapid shift could create a temporary power vacuum, posing a threat to state stability.

The continued offer of ‘livelihood’ programming in the form of training and loans may be helpful and even life-changing for a subset of Ugandan youths. However, it does little to address the broader structural factors that produce a hierarchy favouring the state’s militarised masculinity to civilian masculinities. Nonetheless, a potentially promising way to shift this existing dynamic is to adopt a two-pronged approach that focuses first on developing viable livelihood opportunities for male youths outside of the security sector, and then on establishing a long-term approach to support the gradual demilitarisation of the Ugandan state.
Acknowledgements

The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) generously provided funding for this research through its Justice and Security Research Programme, an international research consortium hosted by the Department of International Development (DFID) at the LSE (DFID grant contract PO5729). Thanks to Deval Desai, Phoebe Donnelly, Julian Hopwood, Dyan Mazurana, Holly Porter, Philipp Schulz, Susan Weinstein, and two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful comments, as well as to Dorothy Atim and Raphael Kerali for indispensable research assistance. Any omissions or errors, of course, remain my own.

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Endnotes

1 There is little by way of divide among the government, party, and state in Uganda. This paper, therefore, uses the terms interchangeably to refer collectively to the government, the ruling party (NRM), and the administrative institutions of the state.
2 Although this paper focuses on the NRM regime, civilians have participated in informal security arrangements from at least colonial times (Omach, 2010; Day and Reno, 2014; Janmyr, 2014).
3 Here, the term ‘peace’ is used inclusively and includes situations that have been categorised as ‘negative peace’ (Galtung, 1969; Finnström, 2008).
4 Similar approaches concentrating on everyday politics as lived by ordinary citizens have been employed by other scholars examining processes of gender and militarisation in conflict-affected settings (see, for example, Mama, 1998; Jok and Hutchinson, 1999; Utas, 2005).
6 Local council elections have been repeatedly scheduled and delayed, with the most recent occurrence in November 2017.
7 Statistics related to the conflict are contested. For detailed studies of the conflict see Finnström (2008), Dolan (2009), Allen and Vlassenroot (2010), and Branch (2011).
8 The story is a lot more complicated, of course: the Acholi were relatively well represented immediately after colonialism as well as during the period of the first regime of Prime Minister Milton Obote (1966–71), and then were purged in great numbers from the military and government under the rule of Idi Amin Dada (1971–79). While they were reincorporated into the military and government during Obote’s second regime (1980–85), their representation has not reached the same levels.
9 Branch (2011) views this as part of a broader generational struggle, where elders seek to reassert their authority over people and land, while youths seek to engage in rural life on their own terms.
References


