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Food and Commensality in Non-state Armed Groups: The Case of the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda, 1987-2008

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Abstract

The subfield of food and eating practices has registered a significant volume of theoretical and empirical studies. However, there is very limited research targeting non-state armed groups. This article contributes to understanding the nuanced role of food and eating practices (or commensality) in conflict, and its significance in the construction and sustenance of sense of community in non-state armed groups that use particularly elaborate means of indoctrination to build a following. Drawing on the case of northern Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) that thrived on mass abduction of children, youth and women between 1987 and 2008, this article argues that being a member of the LRA entailed taking part in its meticulously planned and well-structured food and eating practices. The article further argues that this was an important contributor to the transformation of recruits into followers with a strong sense of community.

Keywords: *Food and commensality, conflict, Lord's Resistance Army, non-state armed groups, northern Uganda*

Author Bio(s)

Eunice Otuko Apio received her PhD in African studies and anthropology from the Department of History and Cultures, the University of Birmingham (UK) in 2016. In 2017, she joined the Law School, University of Birmingham, as a Postdoctoral Fellow in Gender and Transitional justice (from September 2017 - August 2022), and continues to associate with the University as a Honorary Research Fellow at the School at Arts and Law. She has contributed book chapters and articles to several journals about armed conflict, conflict related sexual violence, children born of war, gender, kinship, and transitional justice. She is also a novelist.

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Eunice Otuko Apio

"The difference between two groups—those who are inside and those who are outside—is defined by what or how they eat" (Kilgour, 2014, p.99).

After her abduction from a school in Apac district (later known as Kole) in October 1996 by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda, Apili (pseudonym) explained that she was allocated to Commander Odonga (pseudonym) who was a deputy in Joseph Kony's Command Alter Brigade (Apio, 2016). Apili said her household had a combination of eight wives, some *ting ting* (prepubescent girls), and fifteen male escorts or junior soldiers. They all ate from the same pot, just as family members in peacetime northern Uganda did. Apili's husband, like other LRA husbands with households, had assigned a chief escort from among the fifteen junior soldiers to ensure that the food needs of the fifteen soldiers in the household were taken care of. Whenever any of these fifteen escorts was given a wife, the new wife would be required to help the wives of that household to prepare meals for everyone in the household. A soldier's wife was therefore responsible for providing meals for her husband's household. These included the escorts whose huts stood on a husband's compound. In this article, the author considers the nuanced role of food and eating practices in war, and how it might influence the integration of recruits.

Drawing on the LRA, the article contributes to understanding the "sociology of the meal" (Simmel, 1997, p. 135) in non-state armed groups, by examining the active role of food and it's eating in the recruitment of followers, and the construction and sustenance of a sense of community. This is an important contribution given the limited studies and lack of understanding on the active role of food and eating practices in the culture and recruitment of followers within armed groups that used highly elaborate and institutionalized methods of indoctrination in building a following.

Whereas the subfield of food and eating practices has registered a significant volume of theoretical and empirical studies (e.g., focusing on "eating and ritual", "eating and identities", and "food insecurity") (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002, p. 99), there is very limited research targeting non-state armed groups. When it does, the literature focuses on aspects of food insecurity and war as an agent of dietary changes for displaced populations and soldiers in regular armies during conflict

(Appadurai, 1981; Casillas, 1992; Mintz, 1996; Du Bois, 2001; Cwiertka, 2002; Ikpe, 1994). As Mintz and Du Bois (2002) argue, "The role of war – and the roles of many kinds of social chances – has been relatively neglected in food studies" (p. 105). Important questions about the role of food and its eating during armed conflict, its significance for the eaters after armed conflict, and what related opportunities might exist for transitional justice have remained unexplored. In other words, the lack of studies on food and eating practices within such groups, limits attention on other dimensions of armed conflicts (e.g., disarmament, demobilisation, and even sexual violence), and the understanding of how the post conflict wellbeing of combatants and other followers might be impacted.

Exploring the nuances linked to eating practices within armed groups can contribute to understanding the complexities associated with experiences of ex-combatants during and after conflict. For example, studies demonstrate that ex-combatants associated with non-state actors experienced difficulties reintegrating and suffered stigma and rejection in many contemporary armed conflicts such as in Sierra Leone (1991-2002), Liberia (1989-1997), and northern Uganda (1986-2008) (Coulter, 2009; Denov, 2010; HRM, 2004). The literature partly attributes this poor reception to the brutality that combatants perpetrated on civilian population in their return communities, including forcing recruits to kill and maim community members. In the case of northern Uganda's LRA ex-combatants, reintegration was fraught with hardship with people referring to them using derogatory terms such as dirty, LRA, rebel, Kony (the surname of LRA leader, Joseph Kony) (Apio, 2016; Carlson & Mazurana, 2008; Mazurana et al., 2002; Baines, 2014; Kiconco, 2021). Such references regarding identities of individuals suggest that people in communities of return continued to associate ex-recruits with the armed groups even after conflict.

Drawing on existing literature on the LRA in northern Uganda, this article argues that for recruits like Apili, being a member of the LRA entailed taking part in its food and eating practices and was an important contributor in the transformation of recruits into members of the group. In the LRA, eating practices were meticulously planned and structured to build a sense of community and sustain the group. In other words, LRA instituted familial-like households that served as commensal units, constantly interacting with others at a broader level through further eating practices to form and sustain the group. This article therefore offers that food and eating practices was an important strand in the making and unmaking of the group with long-term consequences on ex-combatants. In the first part, the article will review the literature on food and eating practices in peacetime. The second part

will provide a brief background of the LRA, which is the case study. Part three will examine eating practices in the LRA and how it shaped the group and the lives of recruits.

Food and Eating Practices in Peacetime

Mintz and Du Bois (2002) state that, "food and eating is important…for its own sake since food is utterly essential to human existence…" However, they also note that the subfield served the great purpose of "illuminating broad societal processes such as political-economic value-creation, symbolic value-creation and social construction of memory" (p. 99) (see also Reddy & Van Dam, 2020). Related literature indicates a rich volume in ethnographic studies of food insecurity, food and social change, eating and ritual, and eating and identities (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002; Miller et al., 1998), further illuminating the meanings and importance of food and eating practices in symbolism, and social construction of memory. Studies of food practices among migrants have, for example, examined how food and eating practices enable the "maintenance of migrants' tradition, culture and identity" (Agutter & Ankeny, 2017, p. 531; see also Tuomainen, 2014), through tangible and concrete ways, hence contributing to the social construction of memory and serving as a symbolic way of perceiving and preserving ethnic identities (Reddy & Van Dam, 2020; Beoku-Betts, 1995; D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011). However, the opposite also happens where migrants can instead adopt new food practices as a means of integrating in a new environment (Reddy & Van Dam 2020; Wilson, Renzaho, McCabe & Swinburn, 2010). Whereas this observation is from the perspective of the newcomer, studies have also shown that host communities can trigger incorporation based on food practices. For example, Hula villagers on the south eastern coast of Papua New Guinea "undertake the incorporation of certain outsiders through the ceremonial presentation of food and the act of feeding" (Van Heekeren, 2004, p. 89). In other studies, sharing of food was a non-verbal means of communicating positive or friendly social relationships, as observed, for example, among American College students (Miller et al., 1998).

Through sharing food or eating together (also known as commensality), therefore, an outsider in a diverse migrant community can demonstrate a sense of belonging in an embodied way (Johnston & Longhurst 2012, p. 330). Migrants can thus deploy food and it's eating as a means of assigning meaning to self (see also Fischler 1988). In other words, the migrant example suggests that incorporating food associated with a particular group enables the individual to regenerate and maintain the group – whether in or out of their dominant society. This symbolism is imbued with guidelines and identity markers (Lahlou, 2001), or what other scholars refer to as **"**shared rules and

norms associated with food" (Jönsson et al., 2021, p. 2), or "gastronomy" (Fischler, 1980). To this end, the eating presents as a structured and systematic tool of communication through which a group's social identity is remembered and maintained. This structured and systematic way of eating necessarily underscores the importance of food as a social, cultural, and psychological object (see also Rozin, 1980), which is further demonstrated in themes of ritual eating.

Ritualization of Food and Eating

Ethnographers have explored the ritualization of eating practices to understand the various ways and why people connect food to rituals, symbols, and belief systems (Fieldhouse, 1995; Feeley-Harnik, 1995; Sutton, 2001; Feeley-Harnik, 1994; Curran, 1989). Feeley-Harnik (1995), for example, offers that food binds individuals to their faiths in consecrated spaces (see also Curran, 1989), and it does this through powerful links between food and memory. But scholars also add that, in some cases, the food itself is sacred through its association with the supernatural beings and processes (Feeley-Harnik, 1994; Curran, 1989). In this case, incorporation of food (e.g., the Holy Communion) plays the double role of connecting the eaters to supernatural beings and performing critical social functions (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002, p. 107). In terms of social function, ritual meals, given the contexts, "can reaffirm or transform relationships with visible others" (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002, p. 107), similar to what happens to migrants stated above, and irrespective of the differences in their spirituality. Related to this, ritual eating has been credited as a powerful means of reinforcing cultural and social boundaries, including around ethnicity (Fabre-Vassas 1997). As Goldstein (2013) offered, "eating is a paradox…eating connects people, even when that eating is entrapping, or poisonous, or feeds nothing more or less than the bile of revenge…" (p. 78). In other words, social connections are shaped by how people eat or don't eat together (Mauss, 1969).

Dynamics of Food and Eating

The fundamentality of this connectivity is seen in how eating in common constantly "creates and cements relationships; setting boundaries, including or excluding people according to a set of criteria defined by society" (Kerner et al., 2015, p. 14). Often, food and its eating are addressed literally and metaphorically, as for example held by Goldstein (2013) who in his elaborate analysis of the eating in the *Merchant of Venice* suggests that "those who allow pork in their bodies allow the devil as well; to eat pig is to eat the devil as well" (p. 70). In Tooro Kingdom, western Uganda, Behrend (2011) finds that the skin, sexual organs, ears and the mouth play the same role – of apertures through which food in its various forms are consumed. Here, solids (e.g., meats, cereals), fluids, and

speech become forms of food yoked together literally and metaphorically, as the eaten, and are the material sites at which people (eaters and givers) connect and relationships are forged or severed – uniting, or dividing, dispersing, and destroying. Food, when eaten, not only nourishes and builds the physical body; it is also an important gesture of hospitality. It clarifies the depth of trust between the giver and eater. This social character of food and its eating is broadly explored by Emiko (1993), who states that, "commensality is a crucial cultural institution whereby people who eat together become 'we' as opposed to 'they'" (p. ii).

In his work on gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia, for example, Appadurai (1981) argues that food is a "highly condensed social fact," serving a "plastic kind of collective representation" (p. 494). Plasticity here suggests the unstable and ever-changing nature of relationships between individuals and groups that share similar values and food codes. This suggests that food practices can enable expansion and reduction of collectivity. In other words, in terms of quality and quantity – both in varying degrees – ties of collectivity can be loosened or tightened, expanded or reduced, collapsed or ruptured (broken up) depending on food and eating practices of a particular group. This malleable nature of bonds between people based on eating practices makes food and its eating important in understanding community across time and space. In other words, eating practices can shape ties of connectivity, and ties of connectivity can be entrapping—in varying degrees and varying ways—for those who eat together.

In this article ties of collectivity forged between individuals and groups are referred to as entanglements to illustrate how food traps those who eat together within "relationships of entanglements," leading to different forms of "dependence; one that is enabling and the other that is constraining and entrapping" (Chicoine et al., 2020, p. 9). As Hodder (2014), in his "entanglement theory" offered, people depend on other people, and people depend on things (pp. 19-20). The current article therefore explores food and commensality in the LRA, and the associated relationship entanglements.

Important to note is that literature on ritualized eating covers both metaphoric eating and actual incorporation of food and drink through the mouth, and is limited to peacetime contexts, and rarely is it explored in-depth in the context of armed conflict. When it is considered, the literature explores the relationship between war and food insecurity (e.g., during displacement of populations from their land resources), and war as an agent of dietary change (Mintz, 1996; Du Bois, 2001; Cwiertka, 2002; Bentley, 1998; Tanner, 1999; Ikpe, 1994). As Mintz and Du Bois (2002) argue, "The

role of war – and the roles of many kinds of social chances – has been relatively neglected in food studies" (p. 105). This article addresses this by exploring how food and eating practices in the LRA was deployed as a powerful tool for integration and communal building among recruits.

The Case Study: Background of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)

In northern Uganda, Joseph Kony, a spirit medium and leader of a rebel group – Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) - initiated and sustained a brutal war from 1987 to 2008. Majority of recruits of the LRA comprised children and youth abducted from northern Uganda (Carlson & Mazurana, 2008), and a small number of former soldiers of the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) that had disbanded and joined the LRA voluntarily for fear of their lives at the fall of the UNLA-protected government in 1985 (Behrend, 1999). In this article combatants are collectively referred to as recruits, irrespective of how they joined or what role they performed in the LRA.

In 2002, the LRA was uprooted from its bases in the southern bushes of Sudan (now South Sudan) by the Uganda government army. LRA then relocated to eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and South Sudan, where it continued carrying out its activities. The LRA leader, Kony, hailed from among the Acholi speaking language group that suffered the brunt of the conflict. Throughout its existence, LRA's modus operandi included mass abduction and forced conscription of children and youth as soldiers, forced wives, porters and transporters. LRA was also linked to massacres and maiming of civilians and pillaging and plundering of civilian property. The literature on the war is extensive and elaborate (Behrend, 1999; Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999; Allen, 2006; Lanes, 2007; Pham & Stover, 2009).

At Uganda's independence in 1962, the British handed over an army that was predominantly composed of men from northern Uganda's Acholi and Lango speaking language groups. In 1985 when Tito Okello Lutwa, an Acholi-speaking General in the Ugandan military – the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) - took over government through a military coup, the Acholi became the dominant members of the UNLA. After six months, however, Okello's government fell to Yoweri Museveni's rebel group, the National Resistance Army (NRA). As the conflict raged on, remnants of Okello's UNLA escaped back into Acholi land (Allen, 1991; Behrend, 1999).

Refusal to Eat with the Lineage Elders

It has been argued that the Acholi soldiers returned with impurities and failed to live in harmony with the prevailing socio-cultural order in Acholi land. The impurity resulted largely from the killings they had committed in the course of war, and their refusal to participate in the ritual eating

to which the elders had called them (Behrend, 1999; Apio, 2016). Acholi beliefs and norms required that returning combatants, having killed and encountered polluting spirits of the dead, could only re-enter familial and communal life upon undergoing purification rituals sanctioned by lineage elders. The rituals would reconcile the spirits of the dead, and rid combatants of their impurities to avoid contaminating their communities. Explanations for their refusal to partake of the ritual included their exposure to ways of life that differed from the local peasant Acholi lifestyles they lived before joining the military (Behrend, 1999). In addition, in order to maintain their new lifestyle the military had afforded them, they ravaged their own communities for money and goods, further alienating themselves. Impure, they mixed with their local communities polluting the entire Acholi fabric in their impurities. Their refusal to ritually eat with the elders yet live with them further cast them as outsiders residing within the communities as "internal strangers" (Washington & Manchestro, 1989, p. 223; Fortes & Patterson, 1975, p. 242). The failure to heed purification calls by elders was comparable to a failure in commensality, which inverted the function of the rituals. Instead of lineages absorbing the UNLA soldiers into a pure community, they (UNLA soldiers) consumed the communities in their impurities, compromising normative boundaries – which subsequently collapsed with their pollution. Spirit mediums, including Joseph Kony of the LRA (Meier, 2013; Ward, 2001), subsequently took advantage of this failure in commensality between Acholi elders and the ex-UNLA soldiers. The mediums offered alternative forms of purification to the ex-soldiers and communities by calling them to arms – he who survived death would be confirmed purified (Behrend, 1999). The LRA therefore concerned itself with, to borrow from Goldstein (2013), the "fraught boundaries of community, communion, and otherness" (p. 68); and to do this, it employed commensality as an important tool, which also simultaneously provides an ideal instrument for examining these boundaries.

Commensality in the LRA

For followers of the LRA, life was utterly permeated with different forms and acts of eating, right from the point of joining the group to (at least for some) when the individual left it. Accounts of the war contained numerous references to food and acts of eating in common. Ultimately, the LRA used food and eating, literally and metaphorically, to launch itself, recruit followers, maintain loyalty and sustain itself. In fact, the LRA could be referred to as a vast machinery of different acts of eating or not eating together.

Sharing of meals came in various forms throughout a recruit's life. New arrivals were often subjected to special meals, which included a ritual eating together of shea butter and chicken egg. For example, in her memoir, Acan (2017), a former LRA forced wife recounts how the LRA militants, immediately after abducting her and other people, anointed her with a dash of *moo yao* (shea butter) (Temmerman, 2001). As Temmerman (2001) noted on the abduction of the Aboke girls in 1996 (before embarking on their journey to the LRA bases in Sudan), a commander used shea butter to smear a sign of the cross on the girls' foreheads, shoulders, and chests, and uttered, "Now you are soldiers of the movement and you can eat together with the others" (pp. 28-29). Temmerman further explained that the anointing was followed by a meal of goat, before the recruits were divided into groups of five or six and assigned different units. "These," she added, "were like small families: a commander, his wives and the children-recruits. The wives, who were also carrying guns, had to ensure that none of the newcomers ran away" (p. 29) to avoid indiscriminate punishment of the newly formed family. These practices of eating together in the LRA can be closely linked to communal ideas, norms and ethical practices that approached the "mind from the mouth" (Kilgour, 2014, pp. 99-100) in northern Uganda, where LRA was founded and recruited majority of its followers.

Eating Through the Skin: The Social Function of Shea Butter (*moo yao*)

Moo yao is an important ritual food among Acholi and Lango communities of northern Uganda (Ayugi, 2021). It is used in various local dishes in birth and marriage ceremonies, and it is the anointing oil for cultural leaders. It is also consumed as part of many local delicacies such as *apena agira* (ground pea sauce). It is dabbed on newborns and their mothers in rituals of welcome and health (Okullo et al., 2012), and can generally be perceived as a social skin for fusing contacted bodies. The idea of "social skin" has been used by Behrend (2011, p. 36) to explain the transformation that takes place when the King of Tooro (an ethnically different language group in Western Uganda) gets to wear bark cloth decorated in the blood of his wives, in a show of love and respect for their sick husband. In this way, the king literally wore his wives' blood, which Behrend referred to as a social skin which fused the bodies of the king and his wives, revealing them as one.

Like the wives' blood in Tooro, the *moo yao*, of the LRA, served as a social conductor, fusing the recruit and the LRA. This negotiation of unity continued throughout a recruit's journey into the LRA as Acan (2018) further recounted. She stated that three days later, on their onward journey to the group's bases in southern Sudan in 1996, the LRA leadership took them through a four-stage ritual of eating together in which a spread of *moo yao,* a sprinkling of water and a white substance

were administered on their bodies (Temmerman, 2001). Again, six days after arriving in the LRA bases in Sudan, and just before being allocated to a commander as a wife, Acan (2018) tells of another ritual eating in which *moo yao,* water, and chicken egg were smeared on her and other newly abducted recruits in a ritual moment. The egg, she explained, had the potency of revealing one's health status, and then curing the individual of the disease. It was only after this process, that the commanders allocated the girls to themselves as wives.

The repeat use of shea butter, chicken egg, and water on new recruits by the LRA leadership was therefore part of an elaborate regime of negotiating membership into the LRA, their acceptance of LRA ideology and ways. Here, the LRA cast *moo yao,* chicken egg, and water as prime social conductors to initiate and bind the recruits to the LRA. Through these foods, therefore, the LRA could pass its essence onto its new recruits and expand its followers. This first ritual eating together (or commensality) can therefore be perceived as initiating the recruits into the LRA, drawing them into LRA socio-cosmological realm, and severing ties with their pre-LRA social circles. It rendered them a part of LRA.

The Everyday Meal

Another kind of eating together in the LRA was the everyday meal, mainly of cereals, legumes, meats, and drinks, for the purpose of physical nourishment (Acan, 2017; Apio, 2016; Temmerman, 2001). Often, as stated by Apili, LRA ordered and affiliated recruits to familial formations that served as commensal units. In other words, the recruit ate with those who she or he had been allocated and considered family. These comprised an LRA leader who was often the head of that family, his wife/wives, their children, their *ting ting (ting ting or* prepubescent girls were, more often than not, allocated to commanders' households to perform domestic chores for commanders' wives). Once they reached puberty, they were reallocated as wives to commanders or other LRA recruits) and their escorts (Baines, 2011; Apio, 2016). All these shared food from the same pot.

The sharing of these meals – both ritually and for the purpose of nourishment – rendered individuals a part of the LRA, and redefined them, from being members of their pre-war families in northern Uganda to members of a new family in the LRA community headed by a male commander. Expanding the assertion of Vesnaver et al. (2016) on the effects of eating in common, both the ritual and the everyday meal introduced a boundary between those in the LRA (who ate together) and their pre-war families and communities (who did not eat with the LRA). This boundary elaborated the extent of re-socialization that took place in the LRA, with its familial units' mimicking peacetime

northern Uganda communities' commensal units (e.g., Acholi) where practices and ideas continually re-enforced "social norms including what, how, when and with whom to eat" (Vesnaver et al., 2016, p. 1060).

Relationships of Entanglements

In other words, eating practices in the LRA derived from simultaneous individual and social processes, creating relationships of entanglements, which were enabling on the one hand, and on the other constraining and entrapping. In her memoir for example, Acan (2018) emphasized how her commensal roles as a commander's forced wife afforded her much needed nourishment, and protection from what ordinarily befell a recruit such as hunger, and lack of good advice, so that she found herself trapped rather than attempt to escape the LRA. In the LRA, eating together trapped recruits into relationships of entanglements that were complex and in constant flow. Recruits like Apili and Acan mutually depended on other recruits (e.g., *ting ting*, escorts, and commanders), and the commanders depended on recruits to replenish their food stores so they could nurture and perpetrate the cycles of dependence within the group. Recruits, often driven by their commanders, would locate, transport (or as was often the case, force other recruits to transport), prepare, and consume food that was also demanded for by others, and alongside others inside and outside of the LRA (Acan, 2018).

In the LRA camps, food and eating practices were well structured, regulated, and mirrored eating practices in peacetime northern Uganda Acholi communities – further clarifying ideas that associate socio-cultural contents in armed conflict with pre-existing social cultural dynamics (Olujic, 1998). In peacetime Acholi, food and eating practices was a very elaborate and defining aspect of community and livelihoods. Prior to mass movement into internally displaced persons' camps, a typical Acholi commensal unit was built around an Acholi household made up of "a polygamous extended family and headed by an adult male. His wives would each have their separate hut and fields, but in the evening everyone including the children would come together to eat and share educative stories at the fireplace…" (Vorholter, 2014, pp. 132-133). Peacetime Acholi commensal units therefore comprised a husband's family – husband, wife (or wives), children, husband's parents and siblings. A husband provided labor for the fields and was responsible for ensuring his land was farmed and the yields, supplemented by bush meat, were adequate to feed his household from season to season (Vorholter, 2014). This meant mobilizing every household member to take part in tilling the land, harvesting, and processing the yields. Wives were, by default, responsible for preparing and

serving the meal – until recently, eaten from one plate with members gathered round common dishes. A commensal unit was often widened by members of a husband's extended family. All of the familial commensal units sharing a common male ancestor formed a clan or *kaka* (Girling, 1960). In other words, an Acholi *kaka* was made up of commensal circles that defined the boundaries of the group, a structuring that was observable within the LRA as well. Therefore, meaning making around acts of eating or not eating together and the types of food eaten in times of conflict may mirror realities of sharing food in peacetime. In many societies, acts of eating often evaluate and re-evaluate relationships between the eaters; renewing bonds, expanding and shrinking boundaries.

The LRA's familial-like households were the basic commensal units that made up commensal circles known as the brigades. For Apili, her husband's commensal unit was part of the Command Alter Brigade - there were three other brigades: Stockree, Sinia, and Gilva (Temmerman, 2001). Relationships in the LRA were therefore defined by waves of entanglements represented by permanent eating units (led by a husband and his wives), which could expand or shrink with the exit or entry of visiting members of the same or different commensal circles (brigades). As other studies on the LRA indicate, recruits sometimes tried to escape—some successfully, others not—and would end up being punished and/or killed (Acan, 2017). *Ting ting* and widows could be assigned to new husbands (Baines, 2014). The boundaries of these commensal units and circles were therefore sometimes porous, just as those in peacetime Acholi, where daughters and widows could move to new husbands' homesteads upon (re)marrying, return to her natal family, or move out altogether to live by herself once divorced. By observing food practices that mirrored those in peacetime Acholi, LRA followers appeared to preserve their cultural food practices as migrants often do for fear of cultural identity loss (Reddy & Van Dam, 2020).

Studies indicate, however, that LRA's stated policy was to create a new Acholi, which would replace the original Acholi in northern Uganda (Baines, 2014). Moreover, LRA leadership was noted for discouraging certain Acholi cultural practices, such as the twin ceremony and the use of native medicine (Apio, 2016). Others included suppression of local languages, and use of highly public systematic violence to break ties with home communities, and to reform individuals into members of the LRA (HII, 2015). Such censorship of socio-cultural practices of pre-conflict communities suggests LRA merely borrowed and refashioned food and eating practices similar to peacetime Acholi practices in order to meet its own militarized survival needs rather than preserving Acholi cultural identity among recruits.

Cohesion and Continuity

Eating practices in the LRA had various uses and was an essential activity with which much of social life in the LRA entwined (Harris, 1998). First, it functioned as a means of defining membership and affirming affiliation to a male combatant's household, and therefore served as the glue that held recruits to the LRA. A forced wife was expected to form and run a kitchen to mark her place in her LRA husband's compound. All of the *ting ting* and the bodyguards assigned to a husband were expected to eat from her pot. Being part of a commensal unit was therefore an important identity marker in the LRA camps in Sudan. Eating from the same pot had a binding effect between members. In the LRA locating, transporting, preparation and eating food were all done in a structured and communal way – making it "as much a social activity as it is an individual one" (Reddy & Van Dam, 2020, p. 2).

As discussed in the first section of this article, food has the capacity to bear social messages; some can signal rank, and others rivalry, others solidarity and community, or identity or exclusion, and intimacy or distance (Appadurai, 1981; Firth, 1973; Ortner, 1978). In the LRA, acts of eating had both symbolic and social functions that were critical for cohesion and continuity of the group. The eating of goat after the anointing with shea and water, for example signalled the beginning of a journey of admission into the LRA. Recruits often took part in the social construction of acts of eating (Rozing, 1996).

In the LRA, food was a perishable and limited good. It had to be replenished regularly to ensure the maintenance of commensal units and sustenance of life itself. Every recruit had a role to play; from finding to preparing, and consuming food. Often the pressure of replenishing the everyday food (cereals and meats) engineered brutal raids by bands of LRA recruits across commensal circles (or brigades) on southern Sudanese communities (Acan, 2017). In later years, LRA converted surrounding arable land into crop farms for raising staple foods such as potatoes, sesame and peas (Apio, 2016). Farms and their yields were tagged to male heads of LRA commensal family units who were also responsible for regulating labor to meet demands on the farms. In other words, food provided a suitable tool for "bearing the load of everyday social discourse" (Appadurai, 1981, p. 494), serving well as a form of everyday renewal of membership in the LRA commensal units. Acts of eating thus became a socio-cultural ritual whose reproduction was guaranteed by the militarized familial-like LRA commensal structures. The everyday meal therefore provided an unending means for renewal of LRA membership. As they took part in producing (by raiding or cultivating), preparing

and eating the food together, recruits entered a circle of negotiating and renegotiating commensal boundaries, and with it, relationships within and between individuals and groups in other commensal circles. Eating practices in the LRA provided an "ideal instrument for (shaping and) maintaining boundaries of community, communion, and otherness" (Goldstein, 2013, p. 68), and therefore for communication.

While in their camps in southern Sudan, therefore, food and eating practices was fashioned as "a communication tool" (Reddy &Van Dam, 2020, p. 2). Between members of the LRA, eating practices were a code deployed to create boundaries between LRA households, and between LRA and non-LRA. It was a means of assimilating into the group – forced or not. As Lahlou (2001) offered, taking part in the social representations of eating linked to a particular group can cast the participant as a re-creator and maintainer of that group based on that group's guidelines and identity markers. By taking part in the different forms of eating therefore, recruits were incorporated into the commander's family, and by association, into the LRA, (by incorporating food, recruits incorporated the LRA) thus regenerating and perpetuating LRA's rules and identity. Creating commensal units was therefore an important means by which LRA assimilated and kept track of its recruits. In the LRA therefore, food and its eating could not only be seen as a means of nourishing the body. Rather it was militarized to perform a much more powerful role: assimilation or integration of recruits. In other words, eating as part of an LRA commensal unit was an important tool of organization and "statement of oneness" (Bloch, 1999, p. 142). Membership to the commensal unit, and therefore to the LRA, was emphasized and renewed during the gathering, preparing, and eating of the meal. To borrow from Emiko (1993), commensality in the LRA was a crucial cultural institution whereby recruits who ate together became "we" as opposed to "they" (p. ii).

A New Food Environment

LRA was a new food environment for recruits. To survive in this new environment, individuals had to shed their old eating ways and adopt the new ways of eating that defined the group. Adopting LRA's food eating practices was therefore an important part of a recruit's integration process and could be compared to the case of migrants in a new food environment who adopt new food practices as part of their integration process (Reddy & Van Dam, 2020; Wilson et al., 2010). Recruits who could not adopt the new eating practices failed to integrate and were ever at risk of punishment, including by death. As Kelly (2015) noted, the weak and the very old were often sidelined and could not easily assimilate because they were "disposables," and were worked and

starved to death (p. 12). They were seen as having no military value to the group. That means they were undesirable, could not form part of an LRA commensal unit, and therefore could not be assimilated.

Unlike beatings, killings, and other severe forms of harmful practices the literature associates with LRA's indoctrination of its recruits (Temmerman, 2001), food and its eating practices were softer but very effective forms of resocialization that created powerful relationships of entanglements among members that ate together, helping to give shape, form and a sense of perpetuation to the LRA. Adhering to LRA's commensal arrangement was therefore a powerful embodied means of expressing belonging to the group.

In other words, LRA repositioned themselves as conveners of acts of eating by assuming the roles of families, elders, and cultural leaders in Acholi (northern Uganda). By so doing, they usurped the symbolism in the eating and the foods in peacetime and used them to nurture their own group. Importantly, the LRA was familiar with the meanings, symbolisms, and organization around eating practices in their old northern Uganda food environment(s), and this familiarity lent some sort of moral guarantee in their use. As Bloch (1999) argued, people are likely to forge new bonds in a different environment when they can relate the bonds to representations of more familiar ties they transcend from. Therefore, new bonds forged from commensal acts in armed conflict can owe their existence to familiar ideas and practices in peacetime. Food prepared and offered by members of the LRA carried LRA essence, as would be the case with providers of food in families, and lineage elders in peacetime Lango and Acholi. As the recruits consumed these foods, they were rendered a part of the LRA, as they would be rendered a part of their peacetime communities by eating from the hands of their families and lineages' elders. Acts of eating in the LRA were therefore inverted forms of eating in peacetime communities. Such eating transgressed norms and values in victim communities, and contributed to severing relationships between abducted people, their families and communities. As Goldstein (2013) postulated, sometimes eating destroys, making and unmaking communities. The seriousness of this subverted role in the LRA can be compared to the caste experiences in Indian society, where, for example, refusal of food offered by an Indian considered of a lower caste ensured the refuser the maintenance of his/her higher caste status (Appadurai, 1981), and if accepted, its eating collapsed the caste boundaries and drew the eater into the lower caste (Marriot, 1968). As Bloch (1999) stated, accepting food prepared by another person can be perceived as a "homogenizing act, as well as a form of personal solidarity" in some societies (p. 425). Eating with the LRA therefore

simultaneously drew the recruits into the LRA – as insiders – while casting them away as outsiders in peacetime communities. The current article does not explore the role of food and eating in the post conflict lives of ex-recruits and their communities. However, drawing on other socio-cultural forms of practices in return communities in northern Uganda such as transformation of the lineage identity of a marrying woman from that of her (father's) patriclan to that of her husband upon payment of brideprice to her patriclan, and its reversal upon refund of the bridewealth when she divorces (Apio, 2016; Apio, 2022), there are patterns that suggest a strong sense of continuity in the role and function of food and its eating practices after conflict that should interest both policy makers and practitioners in the field of transitional justice, and especially restorative justice.

Conclusion

Analyzing acts of commensality in groups associated with conflict can offer an important lens to understanding the cultural and social dynamics of war legacies on individuals and groups. In any context, different forms of eating can be understood as enabling or disabling social boundaries. In fact eating itself is a societal ritual that is constantly at work in peace and wartime, negotiating and renegotiating connections, expanding and shrinking social boundaries and with it, relationships within, among, and between individuals and groups. In war, as in peacetime, people eat together to dissolve old alliances and create new ones. These acts of eating further feed into ideas of who becomes an enemy, a friend, a member of an armed group, and subsequently how they are perceived and treated after conflict (experiences linked to acts of commensality after conflict has not been explored in this current article).

Acts of eating together remain a central tenant of communal life, are a major means of connectivity in many cultures, and in turn feed into conflicts. They can also act as essential start buttons for people and their social contacts; to enter, re-enter, re-engage, and sustain relations for their wellbeing during and after conflicts. Commensality's main property of opening and closing, expanding and shrinking social boundaries, has the potential of promoting policies and practices of restorative justice. But this can only make sense when local contexts of eating together in its various forms are taken into account. Further research can consider other forms of commensality in conflict, and the experiences of individuals associated with such acts post conflict.

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