



Concerning Violence: With Fanon in Uganda

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ABSTRACT: In 1986, Yoweri Museveni seized power in Uganda. Fighting his way to the state house, he argued that Uganda's political system was colonial and that this "old order" could be overthrown only "by force of arms." Inspired by Frantz Fanon and a visit to the liberated parts of colonial Mozambique, Museveni concluded that Ugandans who gained independence without fighting the British had missed out on "the cleansing effect of revolution." This article compares the civil war in Luweero, central Uganda (1981-1986), with that in Acholiland, northern Uganda (1986-2006). By highlighting three differences in the general description of these two wars, the article illustrates that control over the definition of war, including how it is discussed, is integral to waging war. It argues that Museveni's legacy is one of violence and interconnected conflicts. If violence can change man and make him free, as Fanon famously claimed, the article concludes that the most likely change in Uganda is a man who is more violent and more unfree than before.

Keywords: Acholi, Baldwin James, child soldiers, Fanon Frantz, internal displacement, Luweero (Luwero), Museveni Yoweri, Uganda, war

War in Uganda

I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one's own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright.

– James Baldwin

Northern Uganda was torn by war from 1986 to 2006, with the Ugandan armed forces fighting several armed groups, the most prominent and violent being the Lord's Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony. I first arrived in Acholiland, the epicentre of the war, for fieldwork in 1997. I have returned regularly since then, including in the post-war period, most recently in 2025. The intensity of violence, terror, and suffering during the war in northern Uganda is difficult to comprehend fully. For example, in 2005, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for five rebel leaders. Since then, three have died, Kony remains at large, but a fifth, Dominic Ongwen, abducted as a young child, surrendered in 2014. In 2021, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison for 61 war crimes and crimes against humanity (ICC 2021; see also Allen 2006; Clarke 2009; Eltringham 2021; Finnström 2010; Kersten 2016; Nouwen 2013).

In this article, I discuss the civil war in central Uganda that preceded the one in northern Uganda. In complementing the debate on justice and impunity, I select for comparative discussion three troubling characteristics of the war in northern Uganda that have stayed

in most observers' minds and have also been thoroughly described and analysed. First, the Lord's Resistance Army emerged from a complex history of uneven regional development in Uganda; however, it is also alleged to be a movement without a clear, legitimate political cause. If people joined the resistance, it was for religious rather than political reasons, because they were forced, or because they saw this as their best chance of survival (e.g., Behrend 1999; Dolnik and Butime 2017; Jackson 2002). Second, wartime internal displacement reached extraordinary levels, as did camp-related deaths and suffering. Government troops forced most people to leave their villages (e.g., Branch 2011; Dolan 2009; Finnström 2008; Janmyr 2014). And third, thousands of rebels were minors, boys and girls, the great majority abducted into rebel ranks. Indeed, if anything, the war in northern Uganda is known for its many child soldiers (e.g., Amony 2015; De Temmerman 2001; Oloya 2013).

Here, I add another twist to the argument. In revisiting the war in central Uganda that preceded the one in northern Uganda, I trace the travails of war in Uganda back in time. The main protagonist in my article is Yoweri Museveni, the president of Uganda since 1986. Besides being part of the forces that ousted Idi Amin in 1979, Museveni has won two wars, and these form the foundation of my comparative argument: the war in central Uganda in the early 1980s and the subsequent war in northern Uganda. Ethnographically, I argue that they form part of the same unresolved conflict, and analytically, I survey Museveni's claim that the colonial order, which was built on an anthropological understanding of the world, had to be overcome through violence, "the highest form of political struggle" (Museveni 1971: 2). As a guerrilla with a revolutionary agenda, Museveni drew inspiration from Frantz Fanon's writings, and he followed the liberation struggles in Africa, particularly in colonial northern Mozambique, which he visited in 1968.¹ There, he interviewed Mozambican freedom fighters, who offered training in guerrilla warfare (Museveni 1971: 24; see also Mamdani 2025: 271-272). Building on his Mozambican experience and in referencing *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1963) and to a lesser degree also *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1967), Museveni argues that the attitudes of any oppressed people must be unpacked through "their sociology" and a "materialist approach" that focuses on living and labour conditions, as well as the larger production structure. "Anthropology" and an "anthropological approach," Museveni argues, would only reproduce colonial and belittling stereotypes about African peoples; the so-called tribes whose lives are seen, by themselves and by the colonisers, as determined by cultural beliefs. Ultimately, only a violent revolution can purify and free colonised peoples and societies. With violence, the colonial legacy of the "anthropological approach" can be transcended, and people can be liberated, Museveni concludes. Uganda's independence in 1962, Museveni suggests, was too easily achieved. "One is bound to have a more mentally liberated population in the liberated areas of Mozambique than, for instance, in any of the so-called independent Republics of East Africa. This is because the peasants in Northern Mozambique have undergone the cleansing effect of revolution while some of the East African peasants are still as backward ideologically as the peasants during the Middle Ages" (Museveni 1971: 5-6, 14; see also

¹ Museveni chaired a student group in Dar es Salaam, which identified with the liberation movements in Africa. The group's intellectual inspiration expanded beyond Fanon. Museveni's political awareness "became more focused during the three years, 1967 to 1970, that he spent at the University of Dar es Salaam. His wide reading, which covered Fanon, Lenin, Marx, Rodney, and Mao, as well as liberal Western thinkers such as Galbraith, shaped his intellectual and political outlook" (Kanyogonya 1992: 16; see also Mamdani 2025; Oloka-Onyango 2004).

Fanon 1963: 147). Museveni's examples of the "anthropological approach" build on Fanon's ethnographic gaze. If "barbed-wire entanglements" kept the colonised at bay, Fanon writes, then "the zombies are more terrifying than the settlers." A problem, Fanon continues, is the belief in the supernatural, "of considering three times before urinating, spitting, or going out into the night" and so on. For the young revolutionary, "the zombies of his ancestors" have offered only "the emotional outlets of dance and possession by spirits." And this "muscular orgy," Fanon suggests, "is exhausted in fratricidal combats." But with a machine-gun in his hand, the young revolutionary "does not hesitate to pour scorn upon the zombies of his ancestors" (1963: 56-58).

War and comparison

Museveni's appraisal of Fanon was selective, but it was also characteristic of the time, and this, too, is a part of the Fanonian legacy, something I will return to. Perhaps a parallel to Museveni is Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Fanon and Bouteflika served together in Algeria's anti-colonial struggle, and Bouteflika assisted Fanon in typing *The Wretched of the Earth* (Benabid 2006: 151, 161). Bouteflika became a leading Algerian politician and the country's president from 1999 to 2019, when mass protests against his corrupt and undemocratic rule, combined with his deteriorating health, finally compelled him to resign.

The Ugandan example suggests that if violence is about changing or revolutionising the social order, any violent change is likely to lead to an even more violent social order. Theories are suspect, to paraphrase novelist and essayist James Baldwin (1955: 9), a contemporary of Fanon, especially when applied militantly in ways that close rather than open the analysis, pulverising the demands of life rather than the other way around. If not, Baldwin adds, "people discover that they have merely betrayed themselves" into the revolution (1963: 104). Indeed, today, critical appreciation of Fanon's thesis on violence tends to nuance and broaden the analysis (e.g., Castelli 2022; Mbembe 2017). Here, Ugandan scholar Mahmoud Mamdani offers a conclusion relevant to my argument: if Fanon famously discussed violence as serving to dismantle the (colonial) state apparatus, Museveni came to see violence as a state-making project (Mamdani 2025: 272). Furthermore, in examining Museveni's claim to have revolutionised post-independence politics, replacing an old and essentially colonial order, I draw on Candea to present "an argument made *through* comparison" (2019: 18). To recap the three war characteristics introduced above, northern Uganda saw people join rebel ranks, yet so did central Uganda, not primarily because of political mobilisation, but because it was seen as the best option for survival during the war. Second, the state-orchestrated enforced encampment of civilians was institutionalised in northern Uganda, but it was first initiated in central Uganda. Third, the systematic use of child soldiers reached unprecedented levels in northern Uganda, yet it was common in central Uganda as well.

In anthropology, comparison is central yet always tricky. "There's only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method," Evans-Pritchard once declared, "and that's impossible" (in Needham 1975: 365; Candea 2019: 29). Historically, the entities anthropologists have compared – small-scale societies of the cultural other – tend to be "convenient shorthands and fictions," Candea (2019: 10) notes. Comparison reveals similarities and differences, and, if anything, it can only be preliminary. My comparison focuses on how the three war characteristics in Uganda have been analysed and either condemned or condoned, depending on whether the focus has been on the war in central

Uganda or the war in the country's northern parts. The different conclusions reveal that control over the definition of war, including how it is discussed and even analysed, is integral to waging war (Finnström and Nordstrom 2015: 377).

A rough guide to revolutionary accountability

In Uganda, Museveni is popularly known as M7. He was born in 1944, as the Second World War drew to a close. The Seventh Battalion, the Ugandan section of the colonial King's African Rifles, returned to Uganda from distant warfronts. The Seventh Battalion, called *Abaseveni* in Runyankore, Museveni's family language, lent its name to him. He was also given the Runyankore version of Joel, his baptismal name, and Kaguta after his father (Museveni 1997: 1). Yoweri Kaguta Museveni grew up as a pan-Africanist and a strong anti-colonial activist. Yet today, many of my young adult Ugandan informants have described him as "a typical coloniser," even an "African coloniser," a paradox I unpack in my comparative analysis.

In 1986, after five years of civil war, Museveni's National Resistance Army guerrillas captured the Ugandan capital, Kampala. He took up arms in 1981, arguing that Uganda's political system was colonial and that the "old order" had to be overthrown "by force of arms" (Museveni 1992: 37). He claims that his takeover was a revolution that promised a new start for Uganda and a complete break from the country's troubled and violent past. "No one should think that what is happening today is a mere change of guard," Museveni famously said in his 1986 swearing-in address. He proclaimed, "a fundamental change in the politics of our country" with the government no longer "the master, but the servant of the people" (Museveni 1992: 21-22). His National Resistance Movement, the NRM or the Movement for short, was now in charge. The Movement was the political wing of the National Resistance Army, the NRA. The Movement was defined as a no-party system, and other political parties were banned (cf. Fanon 1967: 165-166). In 1995, the National Resistance Army (NRA) was renamed the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF), and in 2005, when the multiparty political system was restored, Museveni's Movement was transformed into a formal political party, dominating Uganda's political landscape.

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, there was genuine hope in Museveni's revolution and a more peaceful Uganda. Museveni emerged as one of the "new breed" of leaders in Africa (Oloka-Onyango 2004). From South Africa to Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Uganda, the new breed of leaders was seen as young, energetic, and eager to break with the past, as exemplified by Julius Nyerere's foreword to a collection of Museveni's speeches, published in Uganda by the Movement (Museveni 1992), and later re-published for an international audience by the University of Minnesota Press (Museveni 2000). Anthropologist Kristen Cheney opens her comparative book on child citizens and national development in central and northern Uganda by describing Museveni as a visionary who ended twenty years of civil war and government abuse: "Uganda has risen from the dark night of postcolonial civil conflict to become a shining star among nation-states in Africa" (Cheney 2007: 1). However, in the book's epilogue, she adds that Museveni's international star status was increasingly tarnished. Cheney lends voice to a complex Ugandan reality, perhaps irreconcilable, in which hope is inextricably linked to despair, and peace is intimately connected to violence and war.

For example, in 1986, British journalist William Pike was invited to Uganda to run the *New Vision*. This newly established government newspaper aimed to break with the

country's history of government-controlled media. In 2006, Museveni publicly declared that he would "sort out" the same paper. Pike left his job, and Uganda, before he was sacked (Pike 2019: 152, 264). Four decades into Museveni's rule, journalists, human rights activists, and representatives of the political opposition are systematically harassed and arrested, in some cases even tortured and murdered, and human rights non-government organisations are banned (e.g., UN 2026).

In 1991, Museveni declared that a problem in Uganda had been that "armies belonged to individuals and not to Uganda" (Museveni 1992: 96). By the 2020s, his presidential guard, created without the required parliamentary approval and for long periods commanded by his first-born son Muhoozi Kainerugaba, had grown into Museveni's personal army, controlling all Uganda's strategic military assets, and parallel to the country's regular forces (Rolls 2021; Rwengabo 2013; Titeca 2026). In 1990, Museveni declared that corruption "is a cancer which, if it is not checked, will hinder progress in all sectors of society" (Museveni 1992: 92). Some thirty years later, kinship networks, patronage, and corruption had become crucial to the daily maintenance of his regime. State institutions are drained as their funds are used to finance Museveni's ruling party and its campaigns (Mamdani 2025; Rolls 2021). In 2024, Museveni's son was appointed chief of Uganda's armed forces. A Ugandan opposition parliamentarian described the move as yet another example of Museveni treating Uganda as "a personal enterprise of his family" (in Kupemba 2024; see also Titeca 2026).

Ugandan historian Mutibwa provides examples of the irregularities that preceded the 1980 general elections, which ultimately led to Milton Obote's return to power after the fall of Idi Amin. For example, candidates in opposition to Obote's ruling party were systematically arrested and detained, and prevented from campaigning. Indeed, combating irregularities was part of the official rationale for Museveni's launch of his guerrilla movement in 1981 (Mutibwa 2016: 325-326; see also Amaza 1998: 5-6; Museveni 1997: 118-119). Yet, and especially in northern Uganda, irregularities were violently re-enacted by Museveni's own government, and increasingly so from 2005, when it opened up to oppositional political parties standing for election and campaigning (Otunnu 2017: 63-64; Tripp 2010: 85-86).

In 1990, Museveni declared it illegal for army personnel to "get involved in import or export trade businesses." For any transgressions, he threatened to dismiss, demote, and imprison the culprits (Museveni 1992: 91). Yet in 1997, he ordered the Ugandan army to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). There, high-ranking Ugandan officers "skilfully exploited the opportunities offered by the Congolese war to further expand their economic and political power" (Vlassenroot and Perrot 2012: 35; see also Mamdani 2025: 254-258; Pike 2019: 273). A United Nations investigation eventually identified a Ugandan military elite network close to Museveni that trained local militia groups, provoked conflicts, and exploited Congolese resources. Over the years, Museveni's presidential campaigns have benefited significantly from logistical and financial support from the Ugandan army, and from resources amassed from Congo. By the 2020s, business success in Uganda had become dependent on proximity to the military, which was increasingly involved in civilian institutions (Mamdani 2025; Titeca, 2026).

After this rough guide to Uganda's revolution, to which can be added the removal of the two-term presidential limit in 2005 and the presidential age limit in 2017, I proceed to discuss the three war characteristics, including Museveni's insertion of Fanon into Ugandan politics. Mbembe (2017: 163-164) points out that Fanon distinguishes between "colonial

violence” and “the emancipatory violence of the colonized.” Anything but emancipatory, colonial violence is all-encompassing, more or less permanent, with everyday consequences that are difficult, if not impossible, to overcome. Mamdani (2025: 272) argues that violence in Museveni’s Uganda, especially after his 1986 takeover, is “colonial-type.”

Wartime politics and displacement: central Uganda through comparison

In 1981, Museveni took to the bush in central Uganda. On February 6, with only 27 guerrilla fighters, he launched the first attack on the Obote government. A bitter war soon broke out in central Uganda. The war’s epicentre was the so-called Luweero (or Luwero) Triangle. With their homeland being turned into the epicentre of war, many civilians in Luweero joined a rebel-led initiative to evacuate to a place called Ssinga. Kato Jacob Kalibbala tells the story of his father, Salongo Zakayo Kalibbala, who was killed during the war:

On learning of his wife and children’s ordeal during their long trek to Ssinga, Salongo Zakayo Kalibbala almost collapsed in his tent. He cursed the politicians who had brought suffering to thousands. All around him, people were either dying of starvation or being killed by government troops. The rainy season has also brought with it untold suffering. The flat terrain of Ssinga made it susceptible to flooding and when the stagnant water dissolved human waste, a cholera outbreak ensued, leading to many deaths. (Kalibbala 2022: 1)

Another witness recalls that the “suffering in Ssinga was almost unbearable” (Kalibbala 2022: 192). After a year, the war reached Ssinga, and soon government troops forced people to embark on another trek, this time to a government-run camp. For two days, they walked, being forced to carry the boxes of ammunition for the government soldiers who walked with them. Zakayo Kalibbala and many others who refused to go to the camp were shot dead (Kalibbala 2022: 20-21).

William Pike, the British journalist appointed editor-in-chief of the *New Vision*, was one of the first outside witnesses to wartime suffering in Luweero. War and repression often go hand in hand, Pike notes, as Museveni’s guerrillas secretly escorted him deep into war-torn Luweero at the height of the conflict. “But in the Luwero Triangle there seemed to have been an attempt to eliminate the rural population altogether, first by herding them into camps and then by wholesale slaughter,” Pike writes. “The evidence was the bodies and bones littered everywhere.” To illustrate the point, he took a photo of an elderly couple murdered in their house, but first, Museveni’s guerrillas helped him carefully organise the light. Next to the decomposing bodies, Pike placed a framed studio photo of the couple that he found in the house. He “propped it up beside the bodies” and took the picture. He regrets that no British newspaper would publish it. “The artifice was too obvious,” he admits in retrospect, yet he remembers it as “the most powerful photo” he took (Pike 2019: 95-96).

Indeed, the war in Luweero was devastating, with the government troops not only killing but also systematically dehumanising “the native,” turning “him into an animal” (Fanon 1963: 42; Museveni 1971: 2). Post-war researchers would eventually support such conclusions, but they also acknowledged the difficulty of getting behind the official story, using Museveni’s vocabulary, of the “protracted people’s war” in which the “basic weapon” against “the dictatorship” was “the support of the people and their political consciousness”

(Museveni 1992: 133; see also Schubert 2006: 96-97). Tidemand, who arrived for fieldwork in Luweero in 1991-92, could not access any in-depth accounts from people who had resisted Museveni's guerrillas, or anyway had supported Obote's government and the ruling Uganda People's Congress party. But those who did offer their perspectives agreed that massive state-orchestrated repression in Luweero essentially drove people to support Museveni and his guerrillas. As a local functionary of Museveni's Movement told Tidemand: "What 'killed' Obote's government was that his soldiers were always killing people" (2013: 72).

Schubert conducted interviews on demobilisation from 1992 to 1997. He, too, found it difficult to hear from anyone who had resisted Museveni's guerrillas. He concludes that many people in Luweero felt caught between two fronts. Especially young men who tried but eventually failed to dodge the war would accept being recruited into Museveni's guerrilla movement, fearing that they would otherwise be treated as traitors. Political mobilisation was less critical. For many men in Luweero, the "agenda was to protect themselves with a rifle and thereby attempt to survive the war" (Schubert 2006: 101, 98; see also Kalibbala 2022: 19).

Some 300,000 civilians were killed in Luweero alone, while about one million Ugandans were forced into internal displacement (Bernard 2017: 189; Mutibwa 1992: 159; Ofcansky 1996: 55; Pike 2019: 20). According to official state statistics, at least 188,000 civilians were forced to live in state-controlled "relief centres," places Ugandan scholars have described as virtual "concentration camps," comparable with "the Nazi death camps" (e.g., Kasozi 1999: 180, 183; Mutibwa 1992: 159). This state-sponsored oppression would be repeated and eventually reach unprecedented levels, as the war travelled from Luweero to Acholiland in northern Uganda, and as Museveni's guerrillas became rulers. In the north, the government referred to the camps as "protected villages" rather than "relief centres." Ugandan historian Kasozi's description of the camps in Luweero could as well describe the camps in northern Uganda, the difference being that Museveni's army would not put up any barbed wire around the "protected villages" in northern Uganda, but instead use civilians forced into camps as a buffer against frequent rebel attacks:

Whenever the government 'reclaimed' a part of the Luwero Triangle it concentrated civilians into camps, ostensibly for protection but actually to control the population. Anyone found outside these camps was presumed to be a guerrilla. All civilians who tried to leave the Luwero Triangle were rounded up and moved into the camps... The camps were surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by soldiers under order to shoot anyone breaking the dawn-to-dusk curfew. The huts were thatched with grass, there were no medical facilities, food was poor, and there was often very little firewood. Inmates had to forage for miles for what little water and food they got and were often escorted at gunpoint. (Kasozi 1999: 183-184; see also Otunnu 2017: 105-107)

Another difference between the camps in Luweero and those later established in war-torn northern Uganda was the pressure from international organisations such as the Red Cross and various United Nations agencies. These organisations compelled the Obote government to close the Luweero camps in 1984 – approximately a year after their establishment (Kabera and Muyanja 1994: 99; Kasozi 1999: 184-185). In contrast, the camps in northern Uganda became institutionalised between 1996 and 2006, a process of forced displacement enabled by substantial support from the same international organisations and United Nations

agencies that had previously criticised encampment in Luweero. With outside organisations intervening to provide aid to the northern camps, Museveni's government had greater freedom to manoeuvre. External humanitarian aid helped facilitate the brutalisation of the Ugandan army's violent counterinsurgency campaign (Allen 2006: chap. 3; Branch 2011: chap. 3; Dolan 2009; Finnström 2008: chap. 4; Janmyr 2014; Mamdani 2025: 220-229). In both northern Uganda and Luweero, individuals found outside the camps by government forces were treated as rebels (Finnström 2008: 141; Mutibwa 2016: 344).

War memorials, remembering war

Officially, Museveni's fight was a non-sectarian struggle for democracy. Yet in Luweero, he and his fellow commanders also sought support by preaching a Bantu commonality against a non-Bantu invader from the north, very much along the "anthropological approach" that Museveni, as a student, had dismissed as colonial (Museveni 1971: 16). In actively recruiting from the Baganda population in Luweero, for example, by promising to restore the royal institution of the Buganda Kingdom, Museveni's guerrillas left the northern Ugandans living in the area increasingly estranged from them (Kalibbala 2022: 170-171; Kasfir 2005: 283). Pike, the British journalist escorted by Museveni's guerrillas to interview people in Luweero, found that people there were "unanimous in blaming the killings on the 'serikali ya Obote' or the 'Acholi soldiers'," that is, the government of Obote and, more specifically, the Acholi soldiers of that government's army (Pike 2019: 96). Museveni's fighters commonly referred to the enemy army as the *Bacholi*, a Bantu language version of the Acholi (Amaza 1998: 62).

Inserted into this narrative were the thousands of human skulls from Luweero, put on display, as Bernard shows, "to mark the contrast between the terror of the previous Obote regime and [Museveni's] ruling NRM government" and for the international diplomatic, development, and journalist community to see. It was a government-controlled, "centralized public policy" intended to grant legitimacy to Museveni's rule, a voyeuristic display that was eventually made more famous when replicated by the regime in post-genocidal Rwanda (Bernard 2017: 188-189; see also Pike 2019: 147).

Inspired by Frantz Fanon's famous thesis that, regardless of the form decolonisation takes, it is necessarily violent – in short, violence is the language and practice of the colonialists and the only language the colonialists understand – Museveni promoted the instrumental visualisation of violent death as a way to arouse support and anticolonial passion. The skulls in Luweero testify to this. In 1968, as Museveni visited the liberation fighters in colonial Mozambique, he developed his version of Fanon's thesis on violence. "Once the peasant sees guerrillas holding the head of the former master," Museveni, the university student, writes, "the white man's head cold in death, the white skin, flowing hair, pointed nose and blue eyes notwithstanding, he will know, or at least begin to suspect, that the picture traditionally presented to him of the white man's invincibility is nothing but a scarecrow" (Museveni 1971: 8; see also Adyanga 2015: 393; Mamdani 2025: 271-273). In the famous original, Fanon writes that for "the native" – colonised, suppressed, tortured, and ultimately killed – "life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler" (1963: 93).

In Luweero, as the twists of history would have it, the skulls held up were not those of the enemy killed, but of those killed by the enemy, Museveni claimed. "It is necessary to create social convulsions," he argues, because there can be "no fundamental changes without a violent shake-up" (Museveni 1971: 17). Mbembe argues that Fanon's anticolonial violence was to be directed against those "who had always only submitted others to death." Yet he also notes that Fanon was acutely aware of the fact that "the colonized were opening the door to

a disastrous reciprocity, a ‘recurring terror’” (Mbembe 2017: 166). Importantly, for Fanon, the anticolonial struggle was to offer tombs for the fallen victims of colonialism, proper burials (Mbembe 2017: 168).

“If you go to a place like Luwero now,” Museveni said in an address to an audience of Acholi elders in Gulu town in 1986, “you will see skeletons and skulls upon skulls of human beings.” In one place, he told the elders, he encountered the enemy “in their trenches, eating and drinking with 237 skulls of their victims around them.” All over Luweero, Museveni continued, the story was the same. “If you saw these skulls, you would understand why we fought Obote, Okello and the rest” (Museveni 1992: 28-29).

Museveni’s new government claimed that the public display of human skulls had occurred spontaneously, a claim often accepted by outside observers (e.g., Pike 2019: 147). Even if many of the human skulls in Luweero were gathered from the trenches or the hilly, war-torn rural surroundings, others were coercively exhumed from graves. When Museveni’s newly installed government formalised the war memorial sites in Luweero, graves were exhumed, to the resentment of surviving relatives, who wanted to have their dead properly buried and thereafter left in peace. However, Uganda’s new political leadership insisted, in the process assuming authorship of the stories of these deceased individuals and redefining their qualities for recognition. These victims of war were now to function as instruments of the state.

In a way, Museveni’s anticolonial agenda morphed into “the quintessential colonial method,” which, in Faridi’s description, involves waiting for people to die to “make a museum” of their deaths and to “set up departments of decoloniality over their mass graves” (Faridi 2023). In Luweero, this reached a point when even the museum conservator in charge of the Ugandan government’s skull and bone collection programme reacted, calling it a disgrace to the dead and to the survivors. “It’s not our tradition to leave the dead unburied,” he told a reporter in 1988. “The Baganda believe (that) the dead are not completely dead. If you leave those people unburied, they are cursing you. That’s the social feeling” (in Bernard 2017: 196; see also Adyanga 2015: 393). If the dead are not given a proper burial, Bernard adds, “the grief of the deceased can become dangerous, not only for those who caused their death, but also for their surviving relatives” (2017: 196; see also Finnström 2008: 24, 88, 159-160).

The surviving relatives of the dead in Luweero were denied the chance to grieve. They were denied any closure, and in cases where the Catholic Church had helped people who returned home after the war to bury their dead, such closures were undone. The war had taken hundreds of thousands of lives. Now, after death, Museveni’s propaganda machinery continued the process of dehumanisation. As a Luweero elder remembered it, when talking to the historian Onek Adyanga in 2013, “when I saw the exhibit of human remains, I felt sad, for it is anti-Baganda tradition to put on public display human remains. Our culture respects the dignity and rights of the deceased for a peaceful and decent burial. We utterly reject any form of displaying human remains.” Another Luweero elder added to the resentment. “There was not a single public consultation in Luwero that I am aware of about what to do with the human remains that Museveni dug out for public exhibition” (quoted in Adyanga 2015: 393).

In unearthing the dead and in collecting and piling up these skulls, thousands of war casualties were made nameless. They were dehumanised and made “ungrievable,” to borrow Judith Butler’s phrase. In other words, the collecting of skulls established the limits of human

intelligibility, what Butler calls “the unmarkable” (Butler 2004: 35). And with the making of the unmarkable, history is written, and the unmarked dead were re-marked and categorised in ways that suited the new government. “This monument is in memory of the freedom fighters who died during the people’s protracted war NRM/NRA struggle 1981-1986,” reads the inscription on one such permanent monument with human skulls, inaugurated by Museveni in 1995 (Bernard 2017: 198). Ugandan scholar Laury Ocen argues that the Luweero war mausoleums totalised the memorialisation of war time deaths in ways that are “forensically questionable” (2022: 49). Even if the great majority of collected skulls came from dead civilians rather than from Museveni’s rebels, at play was a “performative interpretation of the historical facts by the government” (Bernard 2017: 197).

A photo accompanying a cover story in the January 2000 issue of *Tarehe Sita*, a monthly revolutionary magazine of the Ugandan armed forces, shows two children standing behind a pile of human skulls. I bought the magazine in Gulu town, five years after the inauguration of the Luweero memorial monument mentioned above. “Two orphans pose before skeletons,” reads the caption. “New generation do[es] not know the evils of party politics” (Okei-Rukogota 2000: 9). A similar photo appears in journalist Pike’s memoirs. Two children “with distended bellies” stand next to “eight skulls hovering on poles” in a most Kurtzian way (Pike 2019: 156).

Travelling images of war: from skulls to the small ones

As history would have it, any human skull found or unearthed and displayed in Luweero would, posthumously, be defined as belonging either to a civilian or to a fallen freedom fighter, in any case, and by definition, killed by the forces of the previous government. At the same time, the often-photographed children standing next to the human skulls were not merely representatives of a new generation. If now made part of post-war propaganda, perhaps they had a past as *kadogos*, anglicised Swahili for “small ones.”

The small ones were child soldiers in Museveni’s rebel movement. “I heard that Museveni’s people were collecting boys and girls, so I joined them,” one of them said (in Furley 1995: 37). Schubert estimates that Museveni captured Kampala with the help of some 3,000 *kadogos*, which would mean that 25 to 30 per cent of his fighting force consisted of minors (2006: 106; see also Mamdani 2025: 231). Cheney (2007: 168) reports that the number of post-war *kadogos* was 6,500. Citing media sources, Furley writes that of Museveni’s 10,000 troops in 1986, almost 50 per cent were under the age of 15, with many of the armed frontline fighters as young as eight, while “the rest were mostly under 20, and even the commanders were in their early twenties” (Furley 1995: 37).

According to an often-repeated official version, Museveni’s rebels came to the rescue of these children. For example, Furley argues that the *kadogos* “form an extraordinary episode in Uganda’s history, but Museveni surely deserves praise for his humanitarian and protective role towards them” (1995: 39; see also Kalibbala 2022: 74). Mutibwa adds that children in Luweero joined Museveni’s “freedom-fighters” out of desperation. With their parents being “butchered,” he writes, these children had been orphaned by the “backwardness and death” of Obote’s army, an army “totally alien to a civilized society.” In Luweero thus, it was “natural” that those who supported Museveni’s rebels were “Bantu-speakers, mostly Baganda,” while the enemies “were the Luo-speakers, mainly from the north.” Mutibwa then excuses any possible war crimes committed by non-northern soldiers in Obote’s army,

the Uganda National Liberation Army, the UNLA for short. Especially Luo-speakers such as the Acholi are to be blamed, he writes, “the non-Luo soldiers in the UNLA had to match their Luo masters in cruelty, otherwise they would have shared the fate of their victims” (Mutibwa 1992: 157). Following this logic, being a Bantu speaker from central Uganda is naturalised as civilised and associated with freedom. The Luo-speaking Acholi of northern Uganda are naturalised as the opposite, in terms of death, butchery, and backwardness. This, if anything, must be what Museveni in his young days dismissed as the “anthropological approach” of analysing things.

Tidemand concludes that the children in Luweero had no alternative but to join the rebel army. He quotes an old woman: “They knew that even if they did not join the war as fighters, they were at one time to face death. So they joined to fight and die brave” (in Tidemand 2013: 72). Cheney adds that most kadogos were orphaned because of the war, and that Museveni’s guerrilla movement was providing for the basic needs of these orphaned children. “Though they played auxiliary roles in the conflict,” she writes, “much was made in the international media of the gun-toting children on the front lines on the eve of liberation” (Cheney 2007: 168-169; see also Pike 2019: 92; Tidemand 2013: 78-79). In one TV interview, from around the time of his takeover in 1986, Museveni parades three uniformed and anxious-looking kadogos in front of the journalists. “In Africa here, even by the age of four, you learn how to fight. It is our tradition, if you don’t know,” Museveni tells the journalists. “Fighting with sticks, with spear, with arrow, that’s the tradition. So, if you try to think that this might disorient them psychologically and so on, that is not the case. They are never deployed until the right age, but they learn, they learn the skills of war, warfare.”²

Again, one could argue that Museveni falls back on the “anthropological approach” he so vividly dismissed as a political science student. Despite his claim to the contrary, the kadogos were regularly armed and deployed on the battlefield and on reconnaissance missions beyond enemy lines (Kalibbala 2022: 190-193). These children became seasoned fighters. China Keitetsi wrote an account of her life as a child soldier and rebel bush wife under Museveni’s command. The book was banned in Uganda, and a government committee dismissed Keitetsi as a criminal and a hoax (Nakazibwe 2003). Her account offers a graphic counter-narrative to the more common claim among observers that Museveni only came to the children’s rescue. Short of soldiers and unable to spend much time training their recruits, Keitetsi writes that Museveni’s guerrillas sent her into battle after only rudimentary military training:

A month had passed since I’d left the training grounds. I was then picked for a special assignment along with a few other children. I was excited because I would be seeing the action I had heard so much about from the other children. We walked through the bush, getting our instructions along the way. Soon we hid on the perimeter of the bush that surrounded the dirt road. The commander told us to go to the middle of the road, sit down and pretend to have a good time playing with the sand. After a while, government troops approached in a huge convoy, but we continued playing as though we were alone. The convoy stopped – the first cargo truck was right in front of us. When most of the soldiers jumped out, we did as we

² The interview with Museveni appears in the film *In a Soldier’s Footsteps* (dir. Mette Zeruneith; 2005), and can also be seen on YouTube (accessed 26 March 2024): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upITVcXw_Gk.

had been instructed, running back into the bush to our fighting group, who then opened fire on the enemy. (Keitetsi 2002: 97)

After the ambush, Keitetsi's comrades rushed to strip the dead enemies of their clothes and equipment. "I stood and watched from a distance as the enemy's boots and underwear were shared out," Keitetsi recalls. "I was confused, having been told that I was fighting for freedom. I never imagined that it would include stealing from the dead." Surviving enemy soldiers were tied up, abused, kicked, and spat at before being taken to a rebel camp. There, captured enemy officers were shot dead. Keitetsi and her fellow child soldiers were celebrated as "the heroes of the day," with Museveni himself welcoming them and inviting them to dine with him. There, Keitetsi and her child comrades were given the uniforms and boots that had belonged to the enemy officers just executed (Keitetsi 2002: 97-98). After another battle, Keitetsi recalls, captured enemy soldiers were told that "no bullets would be wasted on them." Instead, they were forced to dig their graves before they were all killed, hit on the head with a hoe (Keitetsi 2002: 101).

During the final attack on Kampala, Furley adds that Museveni's child soldiers were sent in advance, dressed in civilian clothes to mingle more freely with the city population and report back on the positions of government troops. Later, when Kampala fell, the child soldiers again appeared and "threw grenades into the trucks of the fleeing [government] troops" (Furley 1995: 37).

The wretched, in conclusion

In this article, I focus on three characteristics of war and political violence in Uganda, tracing them from northern to central Uganda. First, while the Lord's Resistance Army rebels in northern Uganda are said to have had no legitimate political cause, the opposite has been said about Museveni's rebels in central Uganda. In dissecting Museveni's understanding of the "anthropological" versus his "sociology," I nuance this either-or argument, suggesting a both-of perspective instead. Second, influential international humanitarian agencies condemned government-initiated forced displacement in central Uganda but condoned and even supported it in northern Uganda. Third, for northern Uganda, child soldiering has been condemned, whereas in central Uganda it was condoned, even explicitly excused (see also Finnström 2012: 130-131). More specifically, for central Uganda, former child soldier China Keitetsi was condemned, but not those who ordered her to fight. Overall, I show that controlling the definition of war, including how war and its consequences are described, is integral to waging war, as illustrated by Museveni's Uganda.

Colonisation, and therefore also decolonisation, are necessarily violent, Fanon famously suggested in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). His thesis on violence was published around the time Uganda gained independence. In 2025, which marked the centenary of Fanon's birth, Museveni, in power since 1986, announced that he would again run for the presidency. The posters I saw in Kampala in November 2025 announced that Museveni – M7 – was running for a 7th term. Government-initiated intimidation, violence, arbitrary arrests, and heavy military deployment defined the campaign period leading up to the January 2026 elections, with Museveni again securing the presidency.

In closing, I return to Museveni's article on Fanon's theory of violence. "To say that one

can introduce fundamental changes without a violent shake-up is to say that one can turn ore into iron without melting it,” Museveni argued, adding that to melt iron ore, one needs fire of a “very high temperature” (1971: 17; cf. Fanon 1967: 11). Yet for Uganda, it seems, violence cannot be used to transcend violence. Rather, violence has continued to colonise most aspects of Ugandan politics. And violence colonised Museveni’s thinking and being, at least if we are to believe Jha’s critical appraisal of Fanon. If violence may change man, “the most probable change would be a more violent man.” It is also likely that revolutionary violence becomes institutionalised “as a mode of social control in the post-revolution era” (Jha 1988: 363-364; also Arendt 1970: 80).

Frantz Fanon and James Baldwin attended the same congress of Black writers and artists in Paris in 1956, but it is unclear whether they met, or whether Baldwin listened to Fanon’s speech. In his congress report, Baldwin (1961) does not mention Fanon. In commemorating the centenary of Fanon’s birth, Shoki (2025) wisely proposes that “Fanon’s work was never meant to offer comfort or closure.” Perhaps, if Fanon and Baldwin could meet in Uganda today, they would agree with Baldwin’s appeal that theory must be treated with suspicion. Indeed, theory must always be open to modification, while ideological principles may have to be pulverised by the demands of life, but not the other way around, as in Uganda.

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