The Colours of Our Lives

Masks By Female Returnees

(Girls Formerly Abducted by the LRA)

Northern Uganda
The Colours of Our Lives

The next pages contain images of masks created by young females who were abducted and held by the Lord’s Resistance Army. Many spent eight years or more in captivity.

These masks were part of a workshop process created by Children/Youth as Peacebuilders (CAP) where female returnees shared their experiences as the basis for a collective portrait of the LRA’s forced wife system. The masks served two purposes. They provided a measure of security as workshop participants provided information. The making of the masks – and the use of colour as a code to illustrate feelings and memories – helped participants explore complex memories and to identify those specific aspects of their experiences that they were willing to share with others.

The following pages include photographs of the masks as well as the interpretation of their meaning by the makers, both individuals and groups. Their stories and descriptions explore the personal meaning of this war and the LRA’s use of sexual violence as a weapon of war.

After the workshop was completed, the group of 85 females decided to create their own organisation which they named “Watye Ki Gen”. In English this translates to mean “we have hope”. The members of Watye Ki Gen have decided to focus their efforts on the rights of their children who were born inside the LRA system. We are working to ensure that their children are treated as equal citizens of their communities, culture and country.

Children/Youth as Peacebuilders (CAP) & Watye Ki Gen
1. The colours that we have put here represent the things we have been hearing and saying to each other. The colours in the mask represent this.

The black represents the bad memories that we still hold in our minds and hearts. The grey is the back and forth between the memories and the present. The green represents our future from the dirty memory to something better.

We hope that our future is opening. It is a kind of joy – we are becoming more happy and happy for our future.

So that is why we put on the lipstick and the bright colours around the mouth. It is for what we have to say.

2. The black is for my experience in the bush, all the things that happened there. The red is for the blood that flowed because of torture and killing.

The blue is for when I was able to escape.

The other colours – the green and orange and also the blue star is about my situation now. There are some good conditions. When I came back I was able to go back to school. So all the darkness I was experiencing, I am forgetting them.

If all goes well and I complete my studies I am going to have a brighter future. I am going to forget everything that happened in the past. I am going to have hope for my future.

3. The black is for my first experiences when I was held in captivity. I was abducted when I was nine years old.

I was in Primary Two – I was taken. They tied my hands behind my back, very tightly and that hurt my chest. And the black is also for the memory of the attack when I was injured by the bomb fragments – they are still there in my leg and also in my knee there is a bullet up until now.

The green is for the movement in the bush – every day marching long distances with no food or water. You just had to always be moving, climbing the mountain too. So much hunger.
The white is for when I came back. Somehow it is fair compared to the time of the bush. At least there is no torture happening. But when I got back I found that both my parents were dead, they had been killed. So I am working hard now, doing a small business to get something to eat and also to pay the rent for the grass hut.

The pink colour is to show that memories are still within, still there inside me.

4. **The black is for my experiences in the bush, the pain and torture.** The torture was from both the first wives and the rebels. It was not easy.

I have also put it on my eyes to represent the things that I saw. The red is for all the blood, all the blood everywhere: from the fighting, from the torture, from the killing in the headquarters. I thank god that I lived through it.

You can see on my mask I have also put stars and flowers. They are for my hopes. It is not easy to have hope, there are many difficulties. But we are working for that.

5. **The black colour around the eyes represents the things that we saw when we were in the bush.** When we were abducted we thought that our lives were over. It was very grim.

The red is for the blood of people who died.

The green colour on this mask is for the bush and the animals. We were living with animals and wild fruit – fruit that we didn’t know. Hunger, hiding – that was our life. Still with green and the feather in the green part – it is also for our survival. Because if the grass and the leaves hadn’t been there, we would have died.

The yellow is for coming back. Somehow we were seeing life, so it represents the release from the time in the bush. The white mark in the middle of the yellow is for hope and peace.

The pink colour is for our children, our land. We want to have a stable home; we want to speak for our rights and our history. We want people to listen to us.
6. I had hoped to become a doctor.

But the rebels came and grabbed me. That is why I used the black colour – for my feelings about that. It represents the darkness I was undergoing and thinking that there was no more hope in my life.

The pink is also for my feelings and the danger I was going through when I was in the bush. It is for that and to represent the bloodshed. Because so many people were dying – people were dying right next to me, just like that.

The green colour is for when I was in Sudan. At least the situation was somewhat fairer there. I started thinking that I had to accept that this was my home now; this is where I belonged, where I had to be.

But there were bad things. I was given to an old man and he tried to have sex with me. But I was too young and it hurt me too much.

The blue colour on my forehead is for the time when I started thinking about escaping. I was wondering if my parents were still alive, if there was anyone left at my home. The more I thought about that, the more the idea of trying to escape and going back home was in my mind. So I escaped but when I got back I found that my mother had died. My father would not accept me. He said, “My daughter, you were with the people who had the demon spirit. I cannot take you back.” This shocked me so much.

Now I am thinking that I can look after myself, look after my children. And I feel that there is a light coming in my life. I can speak for myself and for my children. I have nothing else to say – thank you.

7. I will begin by explaining the black colour. It is for the day that I was abducted. I went through a lot of pain. I thought that they were going to kill me. But they didn’t and when we reached the camp I found many other people like me.

I have put a lot of grey on my mask. That is for the time when I was in the bush and also in South Sudan. Once we arrived in South Sudan I was released from having to move up and down. My work was limited to digging and doing other things like that.

Then you see the orange colour with the flower on top. I put the flower for the time when I had some children. I was lucky then, I was released from having to go fighting. I was just with my children so somehow I was gaining a bit, it was not as hard.

The red is for when I was trying to come back home. I was shot and got some bullets in my body. The white on the other side is for when I came back home so I was released from the pain of being with the rebels.

The feathers are for our work together as formerly abducted females. With our work together we are having more hope for our children.
8. We have used many different colours.

The black and white feathers are for the difficult times that we had. It represents the ones who suffered because of being abducted by the rebels and forced to be in the bush with them. We saw a lot of things while we were there, the death of many people. There were so many people dying. So we have put red and red feathers to represent their blood.

The green feather indicates a leaf. The leaves helped us hide from the gunshots, the airplanes, the bombs and other bad things. We also used these leaves for food to keep us alive.

The yellow is the sun and for hope. The white and yellow on the second half of the mask is to show that now we have some freedom and can use our voice. It is not the whole mask yet, but we have hope for the future. So we put the butterfly.

9. We have used black, red, yellow and a green feather.

The black is for the difficult time that we had in the bush. It is for the suffering. We saw a lot of bad things and the death of many people. We saw many people die in the bush and we know that many people were dying at home – the red represents their blood.

The green feather is for the forest and the grass where we used to hide so they wouldn’t kill us. It was also for the food we used to eat – that is why we put it next to our mouth.

The yellow is for the sun. We see that we have freedom now and can use our voice to speak for our children.

10. I have used different colours.

The black colour is for Africa, because we are a black skinned people. The brown and green is to show that we have rich soil in Africa.

The red colour next to the mouth represents the blood that has been in the war – and showing the death of many people also. The blue colour is for the life that we are hoping for and the peace. Because the war is not as it was in the past, although Kony is still in the bush.

There is also a blue star there – that is a sign of peace.
11. My name is Lily. I have tried to create a beautiful design on my mask. I have used many different colours.

I will start with the green. For me, it is for the time when I was just abducted. This is for the grasses, the trees and the constant movement. This was not a good time. The black represents the time after I had been in the bush for a while. I was in the darkness. You could not be free. I was full of worry about my family, everything I had left behind. The red around my eyes is for all the problems and death that I saw. There was fighting, people getting wounds, people dying, and all the things about captivity.

The blue on my nose is for my thoughts about escape and coming back home. That is why I put it there. The grey is for how I used to cry a lot and that I was feeling so alone.

The yellow, as you can see, is very bright. When the sun is rising it changes the weather and you find that there is a lot of light and brightness. That is for the change when I was able to escape and come back home. I am working so that our children can benefit. With all the visitors, no one asked about our children. So we are the ones, ourselves, who are creating this organisation to work for their rights. And that is why I have put the lipstick on my mouth – for happiness and for us speaking together.

12. My name is Monica. I made a mask with many colours and feathers.

I want to start by talking about the red colour near my mouth. This means a lot to me because it is for the time when I was abducted by the LRA. It was the first time that I saw someone being killed. So the red is for the blood that I saw on that first day. Also it is for the time when I was first raped.

The green is the colour of the bush – the grasses, the trees. We were moving through it. When you are with the rebels you have to move in the forest, you have to move through very thick grass. And you have to sleep under trees. I had to do all that – I was not in a good situation, there was a lot of pain. The black is for that pain and the darkness that I was inside. I felt totally lost, I had lost all hope for my life, and I felt that I had lost everything. I did not think it would ever be possible to come back home. So I put black to represent all those feelings.

The other colours – the white, pink and blue as well as the feathers – represent other kinds of feelings. I started to see a bit of light. The pink feather is for when I started to think about escaping, about being able to come back home. The blue colour is for the escaping. The white colour and the feathers are for my freedom now. I am very free, I can make up my own mind, do my own things. There is no force, no torture anymore in my life.

I feel very free in my mind – I am happy because there is light in my life now.
13. The red represents the difficult times in the bush. On the forehead, it represents the pain from carrying heavy loads on our heads.

Our heads were really wounding, they were bleeding and no hair could grow on the top because of that. There were a lot of luggages. Also we have put yellow and orange colour there to represent the flu and colds that we had in the bush, because most of us were suffering with that – always having a runny nose.

The black and different colours on our skin are to show that our skins could not glisten. We were not allowed to wash so we were always dirty. We have made the area around our eyes black to show that our eyes saw a lot dirty things in the bush. Up to now we still remember them. The dots from the feathers are for the hard parts, the difficult things - the hunger and thirst.

The green colour is for the bush and how we had to walk with no shoes so our legs would be wounded. The blue colour on the sides indicates the time when we came back home. It shows that there is still a struggle even though now we are not fearing death.

The white colour from the feather is to show that at least now we can speak out. It has a butterfly with it. Like us, the butterfly is only small; we have to work hard to make people hear us.


I begin with black. This is for the time when I was abducted and was in darkness. I was moving in darkness all over.

The grey with the red on the top is to indicate the journey to the mountainside. It was not easy; I had to climb the mountain carrying luggage on my head. The circle of red is for the wounds I had on my head. That was the worst part – our hair wore off. Then there would be bruises on your head, and holes where the hair would not grow.

The green above it is for when we were settled in South Sudan – we started growing crops so it was a bit fairer. The red is for the feeling of danger when the government soldiers came and were chasing us. There was so much bloodshed - I escaped to Uganda.

Lastly I want to talk about the yellow – it is in the centre of my face. It represents my future. We all know that everyone loves this colour so much. It is for lightness and hope. So we are hoping that our work for our children will be like that, that people will love us like they love flowers and the yellow colour.
15. This is our mask with many colours.

The black colour is all the suffering during captivity – the serious caning, we were suffering terribly. The green represents that even though we suffered we had our hope. Most of the people died in the battlefield but we were able to live. We used to cry for them – our friends and relative. The grey colour is the time in the bush but also sometimes we were able to talk to each other.

The blue shows that we came back home and are now able to live with some peace, away from the time in the bush.

The pink is for how we have been laughing and talking to each other. The heart is to show that we have love for one another. More especially our family members and friends even though some have been rejecting us. And there has also been stigmatizing of us.

The yellow colour says though we were under difficult conditions, god is still there, we can still pray and he can still listen to us. And we want others to listen to us, to respect that our time in the bush was not of our choosing.

16. I have four colours in my mask: red, black, blue and white.

I begin with the red colour. It is for the time I was abducted and taken into the bush by the rebels. It is for all the difficulties of that time – lots of fighting, lots of bloodshed. And in my memory so much is the time when so many people were killed in Atiak sub-county. There was so much blood flowing up and down, I can still feel and see it.

The black colour is for the difficulties and the torture of life with the rebels. You had to move the whole day without food. We had to cook for them in the night but we were not allowed to have any smoke, for fear the government soldiers would find us. So there were many bad experiences because you would be punished for that.

The blue colour is for the time when we were settled in South Sudan. At least there we could eat twice a day, it was better.

The white colour is for the time now, when I am back home. I have found a lot of light at home. There is freedom – I am free. I can interact with other people; I can speak without fear of being punished. I no longer have the bad dangers and the sights of the bush. I don’t hear gunshots anymore. I am released from all those bad things.

And for me the most important thing is now that we are working together for our children. I am really hoping that my children will have a bright future.
17. The black and dark green colours are for the conditions that I went through in the bush. You had to carry hot food on your head and in the case of an attack you had to move quickly. In my case the soup spilled and it burned so much. I still have the scars on my back because of that.

There also was the torture from the first wives and the commanders. The dark colour, the dots, just below the eyes next to the nose are for tears - we kept on crying when we were in the bush – the pain, tears were just flowing like that, there was no peace. The red colour represents the many people who were wounded in the bush, so much and there was a lot of blood. Actually it should have been bigger than this.

The yellow colour is about finding a way to go back home. From the yellow there is the green to show that we are now back home and there are improvements in our lives.

The blue colour is for the present time. It says that I am forgetting all the bad experiences in the bush and I am working to improve my life. I am doing tailoring and getting some little money. The lighter blue is for my children – I want them to go to school.

18. I have used three main colours: orange, red and green. The orange colour on the bottom represents the hard times in captivity. We were moving up and down, no food, no water and all that. The red above that is for the blood.

Lastly I want to talk about the green on the top. It is for my hopes for the future and also thinking about the past.

Before I became a fighter I was really scared about it, what it meant that I would be forced to do. How many people would I have to kill? I don’t really know the answer to that question, even now, because you go to the front and you just fight.

Afterwards there are a lot of dead people lying around everywhere. I would be wondering, “Am I the one who shot this person? Am I the one who killed him?”

When I came back home I promised myself that none of my children would every go to fighting. Now I know what fighting is – I don’t want my children to feel that.
19. The black colours around the eyes are for the things we were seeing when we were first abducted.

The green colour on this mask is for the bush – the life inside that with animals, hunger, hiding, and thirst – all those things. It is also for the grass – we would have died without it – for hiding, for eating.

Then there is the yellow colour. The Uganda flag also has yellow -so this represents our coming back, back to our homes.

The pink colour is for how we are set free.

20. My mask has mostly dark colours and that is for my feelings.

The black and dark blue are for the dark time I was in – it was a dark place. As you can see from that colour I experienced a lot of pain.

The yellow is for the present situation I am in – at least there is some improvement from that time.

But the other colours are for my hard condition that I still have. I came back infected with HIV/AIDS. I have four children from the bush. I am trying to look after them but life is not easy because I am doing this on my own.

I have put white on different parts of my mask to show that I am struggling in many different ways. But I am hoping.

21. I am Vicky. I want to explain the different colours and feathers I put on my mask.

The blue is for the time when I was still at home. I was really very happy with my family and all of our life together. The yellow colour is about cruelty – because it was cruelty that made the LRA come and get me and take me into the bush.

The black colour is for that time. I was in darkness; I thought I would never come out of it. The red colour is for when I was moving with the LRA, all the danger. There was a lot of bloodshed, a lot of death, a lot of suffering. So I put red colour for that.

Then there is the top part of my mask with the feathers, the greenish colour and also the butterfly. It is for the time when I flew back like a butterfly to my home. Now I think there is going to be a lot of things that will be good in my life. I have a feeling of a new life.
22. My name is Monica. I have tried to make a beautiful mask with many colours and feathers.

I want to start by talking about the red colour. This means a lot to me because it is for the time when I was abducted by the LRA. It was the first time that I saw someone being killed. So the red is for the blood that I saw on that first day. Also it is for the time when I was first raped.

The green is the colour of the bush – the grasses, the trees. We were moving through it. When you are with the rebels you have to move in the forest, you have to move through the very thick grasses. And you have to sleep under trees. I had to do all that – I was not in a good situation, there was a lot of pain.

The black is for the pain and darkness that I was inside. I felt that I had lost everything. I did not think it would ever be possible to come back home. So I put black to represent those feelings.

The other colours – the white, pink and blue as well as the feathers – represent other kinds of feelings. I started to see a bit of light. The pink colour is about escaping, about being able to come back home.

The feathers are for my freedom now. I am very free, I can make up my own mind, do my own things. There is no force, no torture anymore in my life. I feel very free in my mind – I am happy because there is light in my life now.

23. My colours are about my memories, my past and my present.

The grey color with red – this is for the journey to the mountain. That was not easy; I had to climb the mountain carrying luggage on my head. The red is for the wounds on my head.

The brown is to represent my skin when I was in the bush and walking with no shoes, no boots and how our legs would get wounded. The black colour is for my thoughts about my parents and also my friends who were killed.

The blue colour is for coming home. It is not as bad as before in the bush, I feel somehow more free, though there is always a problem of stimatizing. People won’t talk to me. They say I was a LRA wife.

And the white is for asking others to listen to us and my hopes for my children. For me, I think my future is spoilt. So I am hoping for them.
24. Here is our mask and our thoughts.

The black colour is around the face – the dirty things we saw. The brown is to represent our bare skin while we were in the bush. The red colour around the mouth is for our talking about the horrible memories – the death not only in the bush but also throughout our homeland.

The green colour represents Amnesty when we came back home.

Although we are still struggling, we are hoping that something good will come. That is why we put the white flower on the forehead. Flowers smell so good, they are beautiful and so people love them. We want to be those flowers.

25. I will explain the colours of my mask.

The brown and red colours are for the memories of the bush. I will never forget the canning. They were also stepping on me. I cannot forget that one. Another time a bomb came and hit me in the lower abdomen. I had an operation for that when I got back home. But I still have pain from it – that is why I cannot forget the past, it walks around with me.

The blue is for coming home and the rivers that we had to cross.

The yellow and white is for the brighter future. I really want my future to be like that. I am really hoping my children will go to school. I don’t have any knowledge about education because I was taken. I don’t want the same thing to happen to them. That is why I put white there, for my hopes for them.

26. My mask has four colours: green, black, blue and pink. I also put a blue star on the pink part.

The black around the eyes and mouth is for the past. It was not a good time.

The green is a kind of dark colour sprinkled with gold. It is for the good and bad times – the good times because the grasses helped us live – we could hide and also eat some things. But it also represents the long distances of walking barefooted and how the grass would cut into our legs and feet.

The pink is for my memory, the times that I cannot forget. They wanted to kill me. One time when they were canning me I stopped
breathing but then I revived afterwards. They made me go to the front too many times – I still have a bullet in my ribs.

The blue is for the present. It isn’t perfect yet but I am hoping that it is going to improve. I am not sitting, I am doing some tailoring and I can go and dig for money. If I struggle like this in the future I will be able to pay for my children to go to school and also for their basic needs. The only thing I want is for my children to study. You see the blue star – that is for those hopes.

**27. The black colour on the top is for the dirty things we saw and when we were abducted.**

The ash colour under the eyes is for when we saw that those people who came to abduct us. We were so confused. The other dark colours are to represent our bare skin while we were in the bush.

The red colour around the mouth is for when we talk about the horrible memories and the death around us in the bush and also all over our homeland.

The brighter green colour – the feathers - represents the time when we came back home. The blue colour is for the time when we were back home and were free, no longer hearing gunshots.

That is why we have put the butterfly. We are like butterflies – butterflies go to flowers that smell good – so from the blue colour we are moving to good things and the hope that in the future maybe we will be fine.

**28. The main colours in my mask are green, yellow, red and white. I have also put black at top near my brains – it is for the memories of the darkness. One time I was injured and lost a lot of blood. The red is for that memory.**

Then you see the yellow. It is for hope, hope that I had even when I was in the bush.

Then you see green – it is thinking about a better future. That is why we are working together. It is good to be together and also to make people respect us.

The white is for my hopes for the future. I have put feathers there to say that our future will be beautiful and soft.