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# INHUMANITARIANISM: The Case of Northern Uganda

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Spring 2015

Dedicated to my Q. Thank you for your tireless support in everything I do, and for always pushing me to do more.

## Introduction

It is nighttime and a fourteen-year-old girl's heart races as she skillfully sneaks past the armed soldiers and into the camp. Despite the fact that she has done this many times before, it still terrifies her, knowing that if she is caught outside the camp's borders she will be imprisoned, or worse- murdered. She still remembers the day she watched as a young boy was fatally shot by a UPDF soldier while attempting to return to the camp. That was three years ago and there are days when the pain and suffering is so immense she wishes that the bullet was for her. Once again, she is coming back empty handed after spending the entire day trying to find anything for them to eat or barter.

She returns to where she lays down at night dreaming of her former life at home. Her AIDS stricken mother's condition is worsening and their bloated bellies grumble as she prepares the small amount of grain left to share with her mother. It has been weeks since the plane delivering food aid and medical supplies has come by and the rations have nearly run out. It has been nine days since her mother has been given ARV drugs. The girl fears her mother's time will come to an end before she is given necessary medical attention.

Life in her home was difficult, but nothing compares to the agony in the protection camps. At age 7 she watched as her brothers were abducted by the LRA and her father was murdered by an angry Acholi accusing him of stealing in the camp. Now, she watches as her mother dies. Soon she will be alone. She wonders to herself, "how much suffering am I meant to bare? What have we done to deserve this?" She sees the UN workers in their blue uniforms talking about helping them, but she doesn't understand how they are helping. Why are they forced to stay in the camps like prisoners in their own country? She dreams of her life at home where they had a garden that produced enough food to feed them, a cow for milk, friends nearby and the freedom

to explore her village. Now, she isn't sure if she'll ever see her home again or when this life filled only with devastation will end.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This work is largely driven by three relevant international development theories. First, the dominant development theory, the capability approach, is explained along with a critique, then anti-development ideas, and finally, post-development theory.

## **Thesis**

The case of the forced displacement of the Acholi population in Northern Uganda demonstrates that the enterprise of development, including the institution of humanitarianism, is not only a failure, but can also be harmful to vulnerable people.

## **Explanation of Thesis**

When a human population is faced with mass violence that violates their human rights, humanitarian aid agencies often intervene to provide temporary aid to the affected population in the form of food, shelter, medical supplies and assistance, and other life necessities. Yet, conflicts are often prolonged far longer than expected and that temporary aid turns into a more permanent international development intervention. In 2013, \$22 billion was spend on humanitarian aid efforts around the world and this number is only expected to increase annually.<sup>1</sup>

The intention of humanitarian aid is to help adversely affected populations, but often the result is more violence. Due to the nature of crises and the logistical necessity of delivering aid,

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<sup>1</sup> "Humanitarian Assistance in Numbers." Global Humanitarian Assistance. <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/ExecSumm-infog-2014-M-V2.png>.

<sup>2</sup> "Uganda Data." World Bank. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/uganda>.

agencies, despite the fact that most claim to be neutral, must form an alliance with one side of the conflict and more often than not, they side with governments.

Humanitarianism and international development follow a neoliberal Western model in carrying out aid projects, which is highly problematic considering the vast majority of these aid recipients are Third World, Global South nations that do not partake in the Western model. When these cultural differences are ignored in humanitarian efforts, a new enterprise is formed: the oppressive and violent enterprise of inhumanitarianism.

### **Statement of Outline**

Through the examination of Acholi internment in Uganda starting in 1996, this paper will reveal the hypocrisies and problems with the institution of capitalist driven development and the dire need for a systematic reworking of the enterprise. This is exemplified through the exploration of the Ugandan government's forced displacement of the Acholi population in northern Uganda into 'protection camps.' First, I will detail the background history, then I will provide a review of the prevailing literature on the topic, a critique of relevant development theory, an explanation of the internally displaced peoples (IDP) camp conditions, an analysis of humanitarian complicity in carrying out the government's agenda, and how the humanitarian enterprise failed Uganda.

### **Background History**

To support my thesis, the historical case of the humanitarian failure in the northern Ugandan region known as Acholiland will be explained and analyzed. As one of the poorest

African nations with almost a quarter of the population living in poverty<sup>2</sup> and a hot bed of rebel and militant violence, Uganda is a prime target for development intervention. The Ugandan government, led by Yoweri Museveni since 1986, forcibly displaced the Acholi population into the so-called 'protection villages' in September of 1996.<sup>34</sup> The government used practices such as 'scorched earth' policies of burning down Acholi homes and farms, aerial bombings, mass killings and imprisonment to move the population into these camps in an effort to deal with the attacks by the prominent rebel group known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). By the end of 1996 the camps had grown to a few hundred thousand and by the mid-2000s they totaled one million people in over 150 camps, encompassing almost the entire Acholi population in the northern Uganda region.<sup>5</sup> The displaced population was not permitted to leave the camps nor receive visitors from the outside, rendering the population completely dependent on humanitarian aid.

The LRA is a militant rebel group that has been wreaking havoc on the Acholi, neighboring populations, and the Ugandan government. The rebel group is known for child abduction tactics, mass killings, raping, and bodily mutilations in addition to a variety of other atrocities.<sup>67</sup> This paper will not focus of the specifics of the LRA nor other Uganda based rebel

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<sup>2</sup> "Uganda Data." World Bank. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/uganda>.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Dolan, "Documents on War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity Committed by Yoweri Museveni 1970-2008" (Museveni War Crimes. December 27, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> Adam Branch, "Humanitarianism, Violence, and the Camp in Northern Uganda" (Civil Wars, 2009) 477-501.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Dolan, *Understanding War and Its Continuation: The Case of Northern Uganda*. (Doctoral dissertation), 2005.

groups.<sup>8</sup>

During British colonization development of northern Uganda was neglected while the south saw much political and economic development, thus creating a deep ethnic division between the Acholi dominated north and the Bantu dominated south. Uneducated and left with very few social programs, the north became the supplier of the nations manual labor and the home of several violent rebel groups, including the LRA, and government-led violence inflicted on the Acholi.

### **Literature Review**

The lack of security protections in the IDP camps left the Acholi to develop their own strategies of protection: neutrality tactics of knowledge of specific passwords to use with rebels and the military enabled them to bypass conflict; avoidance of soldiers; and making deals with armed groups in exchange for physical protection.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, the humanitarian aid received in the camps was inadequate - lacking a necessary supply of water, food and necessary healthcare, which merely sustained life and in some cases led to slow, torturous deaths.

This 'refugee' situation is unique because, unlike typical refugees who voluntarily flee to seek refuge in camps, the Acholi were forced into encampment through violent acts of murder, burning of homes, and faced imprisonment if they did not leave their homes. Therefore, the argument that they are not refugees, but instead victims of 'social torture'<sup>10</sup> and 'enforced

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<sup>8</sup> For more info about the LRA please see Frank Van Acker, "Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army: The New Order No One Ordered" (African Affairs 103, no. 412, 2004) 335-57.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Dolan, *Understanding War and Its Continuation...*

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

domination’<sup>11</sup> holds true. Local Ugandan media source, the Monitor accused the Ugandan government of genocide.<sup>12</sup> Not only did they leave their personal belongings, but also their crops and farm animals, which are an integral part of Acholi life.<sup>1314</sup>

Adam Branch, a prominent scholar on this subject, argues that this ‘internment’ furthered the government’s agenda and humanitarian agencies involved were accomplices responsible for perpetuating the crisis.<sup>15</sup> Was it better for humanitarian agencies to do nothing, leaving the Acholi without any resources in the camps, but also possibly ending the encampment earlier or should they have kept their money out of it to avoid becoming an accessory to the very crisis they were attempting to heal?

Humanitarian aid, by many scholars’ definition, must be neutral, but this is problematic for a number of reasons. Aid in Acholiland was far from neutral. The World Food Program (WFP) reported having to pay soldiers from the Uganda People’s Defense Force (UPDF) to ensure aid was safely delivered.<sup>16</sup> Branch also calls for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to prosecute not only the LRA and the Ugandan government but to include all the parties responsible for the suffering of the Acholi – humanitarian aid agencies.

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<sup>11</sup> Sverker Finnstrom, “Living with Bad Surroundings: War and Existential Uncertainty in Acholiland, Northern Uganda” (Uppsala: Dept. of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University, 2003) 197.

<sup>12</sup> "12 Die in UPDF Protected Villages" (Daily Monitor, October 30, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Morten Boas and Anne Hatloy, *Northern Uganda Internally Displaced Persons Profiling Study* (Office of the Prime Minister, Department of Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Adam Branch, "Humanitarianism, Violence, and the Camp in Northern Uganda" (Civil Wars, 2009) 477-501.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Branch, "Against Humanitarian Impunity: Rethinking Responsibility for Displacement and Disaster in Northern Uganda" (Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 2008) 151-73.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

An increase in humanitarian accountability would require agencies to provide those whom are receiving the aid their plans and projects.<sup>17</sup> Reports show that no IDPs were aware of the WFP's plans. Rather, plans were implemented by individuals from the outside who were not the recipients of aid.<sup>18</sup> The process by which aid was received was very violent. IDPs had to stand silently in lines for hours to receive their ration of food and risked being struck by armed guards for stepping out of line.<sup>19</sup> Again, this begs the question, for whom is this encampment benefitting?

A change in how humanitarians view the individuals that are receiving aid would benefit humanitarian intervention. Rather than seeing the Acholi as 'victims' they should be viewed as "already existing socially, politically and culturally embedded individuals."<sup>20</sup>

The lack of evidence to support the Ugandan government's claim that the Acholi had to be moved to camps for their protection from rebel groups is rampant. Rebel attacks had been in decline since 1996 and people felt their town was a safe haven.<sup>21</sup> Branch also cites security issues as the primary reason the government gave for moving people.

## Theory

Amartya Sen's capability approach is currently the dominant development paradigm of the major institutions, such as the United Nations. In *Development as Freedom* Sen defines

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "Fostering the Transition in Acholiland: From War to Peace, from Camps to Home" (Human Rights Focus, September 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Adam Branch, "Against Humanitarian Impunity."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

development as, “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.”<sup>22</sup> The approach involves two main arguments: (1) the freedom to achieve well-being is morally important and (2) this freedom is understood through people’s ability to produce an output based on their values. These freedoms vary for each population and depend on a variety of indicators such as social and economic programs, political and civil rights, industrialization, technological progress, and social modernization.<sup>23</sup> Sen claims these freedoms are expanded through development, which requires the absence or eradication of poverty, tyranny, poor economic opportunity, social deprivation, negligence of public facilities, intolerance, and overactivity of repressive states.<sup>24</sup>

But what if a population does not consider itself to be impoverished? What if that population lives a fulfilling life as an agricultural farmer or cattle rancher surrounded by loved ones that share the same values and connection to culture that they do? Perhaps the population does not feel the need to utilize monetary currency to obtain necessities, but instead barter with neighbors. This is where many of the issues with using Sen’s capabilities approach arise. These capabilities and ‘freedoms’ are Western assumptions that determine a good life, yet these are not always necessary factors for all societies to feel content.

Now that the dominant development paradigm has been addressed, critical development theory will be analyzed. Anti-development thinker James Ferguson’s book *The Anti-Politics Machine* presents a Foucauldian critique of the institution of development through the failed intervention in the south African country Lesotho. Ferguson argues that the issue at hand is that development has created a fantasy of the “less-developed country,” that the fantasy does not

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<sup>22</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999) 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 3.

match the reality which sets development projects up for failure, and that the enterprise is a mechanism to spread and reinforce bureaucratic state power.<sup>25</sup> This shows the often unintended political consequences of development intervention.

An excellent quote to sum up Ferguson's anti-development thinking is, "Capitalist interests...can only operate through a set of social and cultural structures so complex that the outcome may be only a baroque and unrecognizable transformation of the original intention."<sup>26</sup> Due to the layers of complexity that are tied to regions lacking development, the enterprise of development essentially sets itself up for failure by intervening in a region through a capitalist, Western lens, void of the dominant local ideology.

Another applicable concept for this case is post-development theory. Although Arturo Escobar uses the example of Columbia to explain the theory it is relatable to Uganda as it is telling of the development enterprise as a whole. Escobar argues that before Columbia was intruded by foreign aid workers and development, poverty did not exist in these communities. Poverty is a foreign concept assigned to the Columbians to 'fix' their lack of electricity, running water, and lack of formal education, yet those are not things the communities felt they needed changed. Development organizations saw Columbia as somewhere that was lacking development because their way of life did not look like the Western model, and thus required intervention.<sup>27</sup>

The Acholi way of life prior to the forced displacement was very similar to Escobar's example of Columbia; the Acholi culture was deeply connected to their land, which was used to grow food for their own use and for animal grazing, practice traditions of conflict resolution, and perform a variety of specialized dances and art are all defining characteristics of the Acholi

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<sup>25</sup> James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine* (5th ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Katie Willis, *Theories and Practices of Development* (2nd ed. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011).

population, yet virtually none of these were permitted in the camps.

Prominent development thinker, Jeffrey Sachs, boldly boasted in 2005 that with proper planning and funding the earth would be free of poverty by the year 2025. Sachs' plans to eradicate poverty started with an experiment among a few African villages called The Millennium Villages Project. The idea was to heavily invest for five years in food production, health care, education, and infrastructure. After the five years somehow the Villages were expected to continue these projects and lead to the eradication of poverty and a flourishing economic system.

These projects were intended to preserve the indigenous cultures of the Villages, yet culture was harmed and the failures started. Nomadic peoples began permanently settling due to the abundance of food aid. Garbage flooded shantytowns. Livestock markets failed. Villagers began to fight over distributed goods. Theft, droughts, floods, and epidemics stemmed from the implementation of the Millennium Villages Project.<sup>28</sup>

Now we are ten years away from the year we are supposed to be free of poverty and what do we have to show for the billions of tax-payer dollars that have been spent on the implementation of development projects that many of the assisted populations never requested? We have more thinkers like Jeffrey Sachs claiming the answer to the world's issues is more and more money, despite the evidence showing that on average poverty has not diminished.<sup>29</sup>

## **Camp Conditions**

Despite the fact that the introductory story of a fourteen-year-old girl's life at an Acholi

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<sup>28</sup> Howard W. French, "The Not-So-Great Professor: Jeffrey Sachs' Incredible Failure to Eradicate Poverty in Africa" (Pacific Standard Magazine. September 27, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*.

camp is hypothetical, the camp conditions, issues, and horrendous treatment of IDPs is very much based in truth. Not only did the government treat their civilians like criminals by forcing them out of their homes and into the camps, the conditions in the camps are some of the worst humanitarianism has know. At one point during the internment of the 1.5 million Acholi, mortality rates reached a deplorable rate of 1,000 people per week.<sup>30</sup> People were placed in camps separated from relatives making the transition to camp-life even more difficult.<sup>31</sup>

Initially the camps were void of any humanitarian aid, but after a month of failed attempts to lure the Acholi into the camps despite inflicted violence, the government was granted food aid from the World Food Program to feed up to 200,000 people in camps in four counties.<sup>32</sup> By December 1996 the UN

reported that Gulu town camps would receive food aid from World Vision, Oxfam/Accord, the Church of Uganda, and the Catholic diocese, while medical authorities from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International

 **Number of IDPs benefiting from Relief Food in the conflict affected districts**  
AS OF SEPTEMBER 2004

**Total number reported by WFP : 1,380,211**



The above map shows the concentration of Acholi within the camps in the different Acholiland counties that received food aid still in 2004.

Map courtesy of OCHA Uganda

30 September 2004



<sup>30</sup> Adam Branch, "Against Humanitarian Impunity..."

<sup>31</sup> "A Time Between: Moving on from Internal Displacement in Northern Uganda." (UNHCR Report) <http://www.unhcr.org/4baa0fd86.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Adam Branch, "Humanitarianism, Violence, and the Camp in Northern Uganda"

Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) provided vaccinations and medical attention.<sup>33</sup> All the policies of the camp were based on models set by the agencies. This top-down approach completely ignored the population's needs and instead affectively broke the spirit of the Acholi.

Safety is another major issue within the IDP camps. Although the camps were created with the intention of curtailing LRA attacks, attacks still happened and the densely populated camps also made the Acholi a much easier target. There was a severe lack of security surrounding and within the camps, despite the prevalence of robbery, rape, and other violence between IDPs.

The quality of food aid provided was not ideal. In 1998 there were allegations that the WFP food aid was mixed with ground glass. This resulted in the subsequent death of nine people, yet an investigation never happened.<sup>34</sup> WFP aid was also controlled exclusively by officials and rationed to the population. This was another affective way of stripping the IDPs of their power and sovereignty.<sup>35</sup>

### **Humanitarian Complicity**

Due to the nature of humanitarianism and the logistics behind delivering aid to a population, aid organizations usually align with governments and use their military for protection. The Ugandan crisis was no stranger to this relationship as UNICEF and the World Food Program (WFP) heavily relied on the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) to safely deliver aid to the Acholi camps. This pulls at the fundamental issues with the development enterprise. First,

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<sup>33</sup> B. Ali-Dinar, Ali, ed. "Uganda: UNDHA IRIN Humanitarian Situation Report." 1996.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Dolan, "Documents on War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity Committed..."

<sup>35</sup> Adam Branch, "Against Humanitarian Impunity..."

humanitarianism by most development agencies must be neutral. Neutrality is and has never been legitimate in humanitarian intervention because of the necessity of military protection for aid workers. Secondly, in the Uganda situation in particular, the government, which aid organizations formed an alliance with, is frequently the reason aid is needed. The Acholi did not choose to leave their farms, livelihood, homes, and everything they know to live in what is essentially a poorly run prison. Rather, they were forced to by the government.

The humanitarian agencies formed a collaborative relationship with the Ugandan government, which enabled this massive displacement to continue for over a decade.<sup>36</sup> This joint venture of successfully containing such a massive population was made possible by the involvement of the humanitarian agencies.

It could be argued that if these humanitarian agencies never became partners in crime with the government, it is probable that the government would have released the Acholi much earlier. This argument, however, is speculative, yet considering the staggering number of lives lost while trapped in the camps with the availability of some humanitarian resources, the total number of lives lost could have been far less if the camps never received aid, thus forcing the government to release the Acholi.

Because the humanitarian agencies that supplied aid to the Acholi camps formed an alliance with the government, they are effectively declaring to the world that they are supporting the government's counterinsurgency against the Acholi.

### **Humanitarianism Failed Uganda**

According to Adam Branch, among other scholars within the field of humanitarianism,

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<sup>36</sup> Adam Branch, "Humanitarianism, Violence, and the Camp in Northern Uganda."

humanitarianism is intended to be an “antidote to violence – even if only a temporary one,”<sup>37</sup> yet in this case and many others humanitarianism is the very poison sickening the population it is attempting to heal, and in some cases creating new forms of violence<sup>38</sup>.

Another interesting argument Branch explores is that the partnership between the state violence and humanitarianism is derivative of the common need to contain people and remove them of their political relations and organization, which results out of the necessity to efficiently deliver aid and political repression.<sup>39</sup> In this sense humanitarianism and the state complemented each other’s efforts to contain and repress the population to helpless, broken individuals who were essentially in a prison poorly masquerading as an oasis of protection. It can be argued that the state’s agenda could not have existed with out the collaboration of humanitarianism and vice versa.

It is necessary to clarify the distinction between refugees and the forced displacement of the Acholi. A refugee typically flees their hometown or country for their own safety, yet in Uganda they wanted to stay in their relatively safe homes, but were forcibly moved to the camps.<sup>40</sup>

The government’s decision to forcibly displace the Acholi was a strategic attempt to rally support for their campaign against the LRA. The Ugandan government was definitely not in the economic position to fund the camps alone, so they turned to aid agencies for the support they knew they would get, and, of course, the agencies ran into the government’s arms and sprang at the opportunity to slap a band-aid on yet another African humanitarian crisis.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

In 2006 the Ugandan government declared the majority of the Acholi population free to leave the camps. This return has been incredibly problematic as the interned population had become socially, emotionally, and physically broken and attempted to return to their home towns. Many of their homes were completely destroyed due to the UPDF's scorched earth policies and the LRA and other rebel group's looting and destructive tactics. Also, it is relevant to add that during this ten-year encampment countless people died and many Acholi were born into this disjointed camp void of traditional Acholi culture and normal society. Many of these children born in the camps and those who were forced into the camps at a young age left the camps alone without any familial support because they had survived their parents.<sup>41</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Is it better to live your life in agony watching your loved ones be ruthlessly maimed by individuals who claim to be holding you captive for your own safety while you wait for your own end to come, or to continue living in a society which is instable, yet free? Amartya Sen claims development is freedom, but I do not see any freedom in living life as a captive under the guise of development.

In a growing \$22 billion a year industry that attracts countless idealistic Western thinkers to intervene in what they call crisis, but may not be a crisis to the affected population, all humans have a responsibility to critically look at the facts. How many more billions of dollars will be spent on slowly killing incarcerated population like the Acholi? It is absolutely heartbreaking to know that such a huge population in Uganda was treated so poorly by their government and the international community.

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<sup>41</sup> For more information on IDP transition home please see "A Time Between: Moving on from Internal Displacement in Northern Uganda." ( UNHCR Report) <http://www.unhcr.org/4baa0fd86.pdf>.

I do not know what the answer to the world's problems are and honestly it is not my place to say what another human needs to live a fulfilling life, but I am certain that the answer will not come from a room full of detached bureaucrats halfway across the globe speculating about a rural African village's future. I do think, however, that a key missing component is legitimately and successfully assessing a population's needs based on measures they see fit, not what Westerners think they should have. My hope is that the international development enterprise will be completely reworked into something that legitimately lives its mission before countless more populations like the Acholi are murdered, imprisoned, stripped of their culture, and broken to a point of numbness rather than this prevailing inhumanitarianism.

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