

## THE JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION PROJECT: FIELD NOTES

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### Alice's Story: Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions of Reconciliation in Northern Uganda

#### Introduction

The indictment of top rebel leaders by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in October 2005 has captured global and national attention on the delicate balance of simultaneously pursuing justice and a peaceful resolution to the conflict.<sup>1</sup> The Government of Uganda and the Chief Mediator, former Minister Betty Bigombe, have begun to consider strategies for bringing out non-indicted high and mid-level commanders, largely falling back on the promise of demobilization and reintegration packages. National debate has also focused on the need for a Truth Commission, recognizing the limitations of ICC indictments to promote a national healing process.

Less attention has been afforded to the plight of the possibly tens of thousands of children, youth and adults that were foot soldiers of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and who have already returned to internally displaced persons camps. There, many face the difficulty of integrating into the same communities against which they were forced to commit horrendous acts of mutilation, arson, looting, rape, abduction and murder.

This inaugural issue of *Field Notes* focuses on the process of reconciliation at the grass-roots level in northern Uganda through the story of Alice, a 24 year-old Acholi woman living in Anaka camp.<sup>2</sup> Abducted by a group of the LRA rebels in 1996 when she was fourteen, Alice was forced to kill her sister in order to save her own life. She has been haunted by the experience ever since, and believes that her sister will not let her or her family rest until she reconciles with her past.

Alice's story provides insight into the spiritual dimensions of Acholi culture, unearthing the possibilities of reconciliation through traditional approaches at the grass-roots level. Many of the Acholi people pursue justice and reconciliation based on an intimate relationship to the spirit worlds.<sup>3</sup> Children and youth returning from the 'bush'<sup>4</sup> are often stigmatized and considered to be 'unclean' until they reconcile with what they have done or experienced. The

<sup>2</sup> There are around 15,000 people in Anaka camp, and around 350-400 'returnees' from the 'bush'. The camp was established in 1996-97. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the subjects. Interviews were conducted over a period of six months, including cross checking of information (September 2005 - February 2006). Observation of rituals was conducted by the JRP in September 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Although there appears to be a rural-urban divide, where urban dwellers tend to be less inclined to believe in traditional spirits.

<sup>4</sup> A local euphemism referring to the theatre of war.

<sup>1</sup> See Liu Institute for Global Issues. *Pursuing Peace and Justice in northern Uganda*, May 2005.

institution of cultural leaders representing the majority ethnic group in the north (the Acholi), Ker Kwaro Acholi, have begun to lay the foundation for reviving and adapting traditional approaches, holding symbolic cultural ceremonies to foster social trust and build legitimacy in the process.

Yet as Alice's story illustrates, the impact of the conflict on social relations – including the legitimacy of the traditional leaders – and the requirements of traditional bylaws and customs are difficult to realize in the current setting of extreme poverty and insecurity in displacement camps. This Issue of *Field Notes*, then, provides an important preliminary insight into the possibilities of Acholi cultural approaches at the grass-roots level, but also highlights the many challenges and paradoxes to this approach, concluding with a set of recommendations to different stakeholders wishing to support the process.

### *Alice's Story*

In May 1995, when she was 14 years old Alice was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) together with her sister Joy. Longer-term captives warned the sisters that in order to survive, they must strictly follow the rules: don't try to escape; obey all orders; and, never cry. Within 48 hours, Alice came to learn the deadly ramifications of breaking these rules.

Early the next morning while it was still dark, Alice's sister was caught trying to escape. The commander in charge immediately condemned her to death. Knowing Alice and Joy were sisters, the commander told Alice that she too would face the "full wrath" of death by the machete.

Joy was tied up *kondoya* – with hands behind her back – and forced to follow the group as they moved to a new location. Alice remained tightlipped as she carried her

heavy load together with the other captives, remembering she was not to weep.

On arriving to the new location, the commander telephoned LRA leader Joseph Kony to report the success of his abduction mission, and of a young girl's attempted escape. He reported that Joy had a sister and implied that Alice had conspired. Kony replied that while Joy must be put to death, the sister should not 'pay' for another's mistakes. Alice's life was to be spared, but what followed would haunt her for the next 10 years:

They then went ahead and asked me whether I would mind if my sister was killed. I answered them that I wouldn't mind the death of my sister. [Such was] the answer I had to give if I wanted to save my life.<sup>5</sup>

Alice's sister was brought forward with her hands tied and asked to make her last confession. She was then gagged and pushed flat on the ground. Alice was forced by the commanders to watch as three of the new captives came forward and stabbed her sister. She was then given the knife and told to stab her sister until she was dead. Alice recalls the blood and tears of her sister vividly. 'We stabbed my sister until her body was totally shattered. This was the ugliest experience of my life...I had a hand in killing my own sister.'<sup>6</sup>

Bloodied, the commander refused to allow Alice and the others to wash their hands. They were then forced to eat with the blood of Joy still on their hands.

Together with other captives, Alice was taken to Sudan to be trained as a soldier. Over the course of her 16 months in captivity, Alice was forced to kill a number of civilians. She participated in a number of battles with the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) in Uganda, but their 'home'

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Alice, Anaka Camp, Gulu District, 8 December 2005.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

as Alice called it, was in Southern Sudan. Whenever her group came across dead bodies, they were told to step on them as they passed – breaking an Acholi taboo to respect the dead.

Alice turned 15 years old in captivity. She was given to an older man to act as a ‘wife.’ She continued to fight alongside her husband until he was killed during a battle with the UPDF at Lamogi. The fighting was intense with the UPDF, who used helicopter gunships to conduct deadly air strikes. As bombs fell, she and the others scattered. She found herself alone and was able to escape in August 1996.

For three and a half months after her escape, Alice stayed at the World Vision rehabilitation centre in Kiroko-Masindi district. Although she sent a number of letters home to her parents, she received no word or visitors. Fearing the worst,<sup>7</sup> she left the centre to travel back to her village. There, she discovered her homestead abandoned. Both her parents had died of AIDS while she had been in captivity. Two of her younger siblings were now living with her great aunt, an elderly woman, in Pece near Gulu town.

Everyone had left the villages and gone to live in the camp. I had no alternative but to live with this old woman .... She later died and we went to settle with my uncle in Anaka camp [in December 1998]....[H]is wife was never kind. She used to quarrel at me and call me names. She warned my uncle never to collect all sorts of rubbish in her house, implying I was rubbish. This made me think of getting a hut and live by my self.<sup>8</sup>

In Anaka camp, Alice’s uncle was unable to support the siblings monetarily, and so they were forced to discontinue school. Alice cannot read or write. She and her sisters

took up domestic work and digging in gardens to sell produce to meet their needs.

Alice married Jimmy around the age of 18 and settled into a hut in Anaka camp. She and her husband had three children – a girl and two boys - the first in 2000, the second in 2002 and the third in 2005. The elder daughter, Hope, appears to be healthy and happy, but the second born boy, Samuel, suffers from epilepsy, often having seizures on a daily basis. Her youngest son died at four-months in April 2005 within 24 hours of receiving an immunization shot by a local doctor. There was no medical autopsy into the exact cause of death.

Samuel’s illness is a cause not only of great worry to Alice, but also tension within her marriage and the community. It is largely believed that Samuel’s illness is related to *cen*, the Acholi belief that when one dies in a ‘bad way’, their spirit will seek vengeance on the wrong-doer and their family members until compensation is paid. In addition, Alice’s husband believes that the death of their youngest son was directly related to *cen*. In frustration, Jimmy has often quarreled with Alice and forced her from the family home. However, with the counsel of his elder sister, he has endeavoured to be understanding of the situation and assist in finding a means to resolve it.<sup>9</sup>

Neighbours and local leaders have not been as patient. Alice and Jimmy reported they are often stigmatized by the community because of the belief that they are plagued by *cen*.<sup>10</sup> In Acholi, it is believed that those with *cen* can pass it on by association, and so they tend to be socially avoided. Because of this, neighbours have been reluctant to assist Samuel when he falls into seizure, and

<sup>9</sup> Both of Jimmy’s parents are also dead.

<sup>10</sup> It has also been observed by others that returnees also experience discrimination by neighbours who have also had a child abducted, but they have yet to return from the ‘bush.’ (Jeannie Annan, co-director of SWAY, email communication February 8, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> LRA often report they will kill one’s parents if they escape.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Alice, Anaka Camp, Gulu District, 8 December 2005.

Alice reports that she has often found him lying in the hot sun alone after an episode as neighbours looked on. On a few occasions, the community has destroyed the family's property, name called and marginalized them in activities.<sup>11</sup> Local leaders, including local government officials, camp leaders, and the local Council of Elders in the camp, provide little leadership to the community, in part because of their own biases and fear of *cen*, and also because of their own preoccupation with meeting the needs of their immediate families.

Alice displays signs of psychological trauma, often seized with fear brought on by certain triggers, such as attempting to dig in nearby gardens – a place where civilians are commonly abducted. She has sometimes found herself in states where she would suddenly begin to run, unaware of what she was doing. Alice reports this usually occurs after she has imagined hearing rebels charging in an attack. Other symptoms include visceral nightmares, with the sensation of being 'choked' by spirits. She claims that her sister's image keeps coming to her, especially when she is lonely and inside her hut. "My sister always keeps appearing, asking me 'can I enter.'" She often screams out during the night.

Alice has more recently fallen into suicidal depressions. She once attempted to join the UPDF but was stopped by her younger sister. Alice also confessed that she once went to the shop to buy some rat poison (*sivacle*) to kill her children to "forget about the sufferings [they] were undergoing." The shop was reluctant to sell any poison to her and reported it to a counselor who intervened.

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, children thought to have *cen* are often marginalized in play, as it is believed that should a child injure another that has *cen*, he or she will also become infected. Epilepsy is often identified as a form of *cen*.

### *Cultural Approaches*

In a population-based survey with over 2,585 respondents from north and eastern Uganda, one study found people would like to see the Amnesty Act of the Government of Uganda amended to require confession, the request for forgiveness, reparations, traditional rituals and punishment.<sup>12</sup> Although amnesty might be popularly supported, this is so to the extent that people are desperate for the war to end. The Amnesty Act is a tool to end the war, but not necessarily for justice.<sup>13</sup> Given the high level of violence experienced as a result of the war, and given traditional Acholi cultural and spiritual beliefs, it is perhaps not surprising that the war-affected population would wish to seek more than what the current amnesty offers.

The practice of Acholi justice is restorative, seeking to rebuild social relationships through a process of truth telling, compensation and ritual. As in other African contexts, perpetrators voluntarily come forward in order to avoid and to end the ghostly vengeance of persons killed.<sup>14</sup> Spirits of the dead attack not only the individual concerned, but also the extended family, providing added impetus for their involvement. In the context of on-going conflict, internal displacement and extreme poverty and in the absence of a functioning legal, social and medical welfare system, Alice has turned to traditional cultural

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<sup>12</sup> ICTJ and Human Rights Centre, 2005. *Forgotten Voices: A population-based survey of attitudes about peace and justice in northern Uganda*.

<sup>13</sup> See Joanna Quinn and Lucy Hovil. 2005. 'Peace First, Justice Later: Traditional Justice in northern Uganda. Working Paper No. 17, *Refugee Law Project*, Kampala.

<sup>14</sup> See for example: Honwana, Alcinda, 1998. 'Trauma Healing in Rural Mozambique', *Conciliation Resources: ACCORD, The Mozambican Peace Process in Perspective*. Tim Kelsall, 2005. 'Truth Lies Ritual: Preliminary Reflections on the TRC in Sierra Leone', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 27.

practices to try to find resolution to her traumatic experiences which she believes extend to her son and are at the root of her family's problems.

The value of Acholi approaches to address the current circumstances has more recently been recognized by local peace stakeholders, including the Amnesty Commissioner Justice Onega, regional peace initiatives such District Peace and Reconciliation Teams, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARPLI), the traditional leaders and, civil society. To supplement the Amnesty Act, many have begun to turn to cultural practices. Cases such as Alice's are often well known by the leadership, but to date their plight is largely one left to the individuals and families involved. Overwhelmed by the number of cases, cultural leaders and the Amnesty lack the resources, capacity and to some extent, the legitimacy to assist people like Alice and her family, as illustrated below.

### *Alice's Search for Reconciliation*

Alice and her husband have tirelessly searched for a cure for their son. They consulted medical doctors, who diagnosed Samuel with epilepsy and prescribed medication that has had little effect. At one point, doctors suggested they take their son to local herbalists to seek alternative medical solutions. At first, they were reluctant, but as Samuel's condition worsened, Alice began to try different herbalists throughout the camp, so many she cannot recall the exact number. On advice of one herbalist, she decided to seek the services of an *ajwaka*, a spirit medium and healer. In 2004 and 2005, Alice and her husband took their son to five different *ajwaka* across Gulu and neighbouring Masindi districts. Both became convinced that Samuel's illness and Alice's continued traumatic experiences were because of her experiences while in

captivity.<sup>15</sup> They began to believe the vengeance of the spirits of the dead is not only directed to Alice, but also the child. The detail of their experience provides insight into this belief and corresponding traditional healing processes.

The first consultation with an *ajwaka* was in Anaka camp. For 8.00 USD the *ajwaka* narrated the story of Alice while in the bush, focusing on the participation of Alice in the murder of her sister. It was during this narration that Jimmy first learned what his wife had been forced to do; up until that point, Alice had kept the horrendous act a secret. The *ajwaka* advised that in order to survive *cen*, traditional rituals were necessary. However, the family was unable to afford the ritual.<sup>16</sup>

The second *ajwaka* was consulted in Agwee near Gulu town. The *ajwaka* demanded 5.50 USD. She consulted with the spirits to narrate the crimes Alice was forced to commit while in captivity, and concluded that *cen* was the cause of Samuel's illness. She then performed a ritual in order to relieve the boy which involved swaying a hairy lizard-like creature around Samuel three times. But as soon as the *ajwaka* had finished, he had a seizure. He was rushed to the nearby hospital where doctors claimed to

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<sup>15</sup> To the best knowledge of the researchers, none of the *ajwaka* consulted were aware of Alice's story prior to her solicitation of their services. However, as the researchers did not witness the practice, it remains to be independently verified. It is possible the *ajwaka* were able to get this information from Alice during the consultation.

<sup>16</sup> In a recent statement by Civil Society for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU), it was reported that 70 percent of the population in northern Uganda have no access to monetary income, and 95 percent live in absolute poverty ('Northern Conflict Taking a Heavy Toll, Say NGOs', UN IRIN, February 16, 2006). Alice and Jimmy were able to afford the fees and related transport costs for seeing *ajwaka* through money raised by selling produce from their garden in a local market, as well as charcoal production and sales.

find nothing wrong with the boy and he was eventually discharged. Reportedly, his condition later worsened.

Jimmy's elder sister offered to take the child to an *ajwaka* in Bweyale, Masindi district who was considered to be very powerful. Charging 55.00 USD, she consulted the spirits and narrated Alice's experience in captivity like *ajwaka* before her. However, in this case, the spirits demanded the sacrifice of a black sheep. The aunt bought the sheep and the ritual was performed away from the compound in the bush. The ritual was intended "to drag away the sickness for a while". The *ajwaka* then advised that in order to appease the spirit of her sister permanently would require payment of compensation to Joy.<sup>17</sup> The ritual helped Samuel for a period of about two months, during which time he experienced no seizures. This prompted the parents to consult another *ajwaka*.

After paying 8.00 UGS, the third *ajwaka* performed a ritual with 3 black hens and involved singing to plead with the spirits. However, the ritual did not have the desired effect, and Samuel continued to suffer from seizures. The parents decided to return to the doctors who re-confirmed he suffered from epilepsy.

Undeterred, a fourth *ajwaka* was consulted in Anaka at a place known as *wii oleng*. The *ajwaka* accepted a down payment of 20,000 UGS, with the rest to be paid after the child was healed – the amount to be determined by the spirits. Once again, the *ajwaka* narrated the atrocities committed by Alice and attributed this as the sole cause of the boy's illness.

The *ajwaka* also performed the ritual known as *lwongo tipu* which harkened the spirit of her dead sister. According to Alice, the

<sup>17</sup> As with the first *ajwaka*, Alice and Jimmy were unable to raise the monies required for compensation at that time.

voice of her dead sister emerged from the *ajwaka*'s mouth:

Is it you Alice my sister who is now calling me? What do you want? Now you have come because of sickness? Had it not been sickness, you wouldn't have looked for me. You wouldn't have come asking for me.... I cannot talk to anyone of you because I died painfully. My bones rotted in the bush and were burnt down by wild fire. I did not receive any decent burial. How can my own sister kill me? You shouldn't have participated in killing me. Instead you should have accepted to die together with me. Now you are married. Had you not killed me I would also be living happily in marriage like you. I would have had children and remained a happy mother like you. For that matter I will cause the death of all your children and later kill you.<sup>18</sup>

At this point, the *ajwaka* pleaded on Alice's behalf, saying that what she had done was not what she wanted to do. She had been forced. The *ajwaka* asked her to hold her temper and give Alice a blessing (*goyo laa*) to cleanse her of *cen*. Alice said her sister's voice replied, "In order for me to acknowledge you as a caring sister, you should do the following: get a goat for the performance of my funeral rites (for a decent burial), one goat for myself since you killed me when I was hungry and one for removing the cast away from you." When asked how she should raise the compensation, her sister's spirit said that it would be improper if Alice's husband and in-laws provided the amount, since at the time of the incident Alice was not yet married.<sup>19</sup> The spirit of Joy therefore

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Alice, Anaka Camp, Gulu District, 8 December 2005.

<sup>19</sup> *Culu kwor*, or compensation, is traditionally paid by the extended family or clan of the perpetrator. In Acholi, a girl belongs to her family's clan only until she is married, at which time she then joins the clan of her husband. Which clan should be responsible for paying compensation after a woman has been married is a point of contestation amongst Elders in different clans, from which they currently seek

ordered Alice to raise the compensation from her own relatives, despite that Alice is an orphan and only Alice's uncle remains.

As a temporary measure, the *ajwaka* swayed a hen around Samuel three times to cleanse him, and gave him local herbs. While there was some improvement for two weeks, he again fell sick. They set off to visit another *ajwaka* in Pece.

In Pece, the *ajwaka* also identified the same causes of the son's illness. The spirits were consulted and demanded that a sheep be brought for a ritual. Jimmy informed the *ajwaka* that in Bweyale this same ritual involving a sheep was performed and that they had run out of money. The *ajwaka* then informed them that the ritual done at Bweyale wasn't properly performed as required by the spirits. They paid her 8.00 USD for invoking the spirit and returned home.

Jimmy feels the solution to his family's troubles is to engage in *mato oput* – a term that refers to the process of reconciliation commonly known as 'drinking the bitter root'.<sup>20</sup> However, the cost of the compensation and reconciliation ceremony required in *mato oput* is prohibitive. Both Alice and Jimmy's parents and grandparents are dead, and their remaining relatives are living in camps. Cognizant of the need to collect compensation from her clan, Alice has repeatedly gone to her uncle for assistance.

However, the uncle has refused to contribute, arguing that he lacks the capacity

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clarification from Ker Kwaro (cultural institution of chiefs and leaders). In the dire poverty of the camps, this issue takes on a new urgency for the clans involved.

<sup>20</sup> See *Roco Wat I Acholi: Traditional Approaches to Justice and Reconciliation*. Liu Institute, GDNF, KKA, September 2005; Sverker Finnström, *Living with Bad Surroundings: War & Existential Uncertainty in Acholiland*. Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology, 35, 2003.

and that she alone is responsible for bringing this misfortune into her home. This has led to some tension between Jimmy and the uncle, to whom Jimmy paid bride price for Alice. Jimmy feels abandoned. Approaching other distant relatives, Alice was told that her husband's family is responsible to pay despite what the spirit of Joy indicated. This has led to quarrelling between Alice and her remaining relatives.

Determined, Alice raised enough money to buy one of the required goats by cultivating a garden in the neighbouring Latoro camp. She presented the goat to her relatives as her contribution to the compensation. Her relatives convinced Alice and Jimmy that the one goat would be enough to temporarily appease the spirit of her sister while they raised the money for the remaining compensation. They took it to the *ajwaka* in Anaka and again raised the spirit of Joy. However, the spirit rejected the offer and warned Alice that the next time she was 'called' without all three of the required goats there would be serious repercussions. That night, Alice's goat died.

Jimmy sums up their experiences this way:

All the family is left with is to struggle hard and see [Samuel] survive this horrible punishment. We have gone as far as visiting *ajwaka* from all corners of Gulu District. We have also gone as far as Bweyale and seeing medical doctors but there seems no way out. The only chance left is to struggle hard and raise some money such that compensation is paid to appease the spirits.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Reflections on the process***

That Alice and her husband have sacrificed time and resources to this endeavor illustrate its relative importance to them. It also illustrates how cultural practices are limited by the context of the conflict, where

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Jimmy, Anaka Camp, Gulu District, 17 January 2005.

resources are scarce and social and familial structures have been shattered.

The requests of Joy's spirit provide insight into Acholi spiritual beliefs. The sacrifice of a goat for funeral rites is a symbolic act that could help Alice move towards closure. In Acholi tradition, one is typically given elaborate funeral rites and buried in the ancestral home to give one's spirit peace, but also so that it remains close to family members.

The role of *ajwaka* in traditional justice processes is often under-reported by Ker Kwaro Acholi. This may be due to the fact that historically chiefs had little to no involvement in the conduct of rituals, and even less contact with spirit mediums.<sup>22</sup> Elders continue to be the primary organizers of ritual events, often consulting *ajwaka* for advice on different parts of the process. In the case of evoking the spirits however, few Elders will attend, fearing that an evil spirit might 'jump' into them and cause havoc in their own families.<sup>23</sup> This may be one reason some Elders are reluctant to become involved in counseling formerly abducted persons in camps, as is the case in Anaka.

The fact that five different *ajwaka* were consulted is not unusual. In cases where the exact causes of a disturbance cannot be determined, Elders often travel to different regions to consult 'objective' *ajwaka* about the causes and appropriate course of action to take. However, there are cases of fraud amongst spirit mediums, some of who become involved in the practice as a means

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<sup>22</sup> To maintain their physical and spiritual health, Chiefs are supposed to stay away from spaces inhibited by spirits. They are also not supposed to come into any kind of contact with blood, and thus should not be present during ritual sacrifices. While this might have been historically so, some chiefs now take an active part in rituals.

<sup>23</sup> Researchers observed that some *ajwaka* have the reputation of driving evil spirits into witnesses as a way of getting more clients in the future.

of earning a lucrative income. In some camps, the local population line up beside Army soldiers to consult *ajwaka* on a range of issues: fertility, health, love and death. Included among the clients are formerly abducted persons, often seeking guidance on the root causes of misfortune or strange behaviour.

The conflict in northern Uganda has no doubt combined both traditional and religious dimensions.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, religious leaders, such as ARLPI have been openly supportive of traditional justice practices to promote forgiveness and reconciliation. However, evangelical and born again Christians are opposed to the practice, believing the rituals, not to mention the role of *ajwaka*, to be satanic. It is unclear whether the active role of spirit mediums is supported by the leadership of ARLPI, and how religion and culture reconcile in cases such as that of Alice.

#### *Amnesty Commission and NGO assistance*

Upon learning of the new Amnesty Law and 'resettlement' packages in 2000, Alice went to the office in Gulu town to try to obtain a certificate. Alice wanted to use the package to buy the necessary requirements for a traditional ceremony. However, Amnesty certificates and packages are only given to those who returned post-2000.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits*. Oxford: James Currey, 1999; Tim Allen, 'Understanding Alice: Uganda's Holy Spirit Movement in Context', *Africa*, 61 (3); Sverker Finnstrom, 2003. *Living with Bad Surroundings*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press. Kevin Ward.2001. 'The Armies of the Lord: Christianity, Rebels and the State in Northern Uganda, 1986-1999', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXXI, 2.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on the Amnesty Act, its implementation, and its cultural implications, see Lucy Hovil and Zachary Lomo, 2005, *Whose Justice? Uganda's Amnesty Act 2000: The potential for peace and long-term reconciliation*,



After returning from the Amnesty Office empty handed, she was advised by a camp official to seek the advice of a local man who had been trained by the Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief (CPAR) as a counselor and was now working in the camp with other formerly abducted persons.

Through him, Alice became a member of an income-generating project in June 2005 organized by the Northern Ugandan Peace Initiative (NUPI). The project involves both returnees and war-affected persons in brick making and is designed to facilitate reconciliation by holding group counseling.<sup>26</sup>

The same group also participates in traditional dramas, songs and dances. Alice stated she feels happy when dancing together with other members of the community and enjoys being a member.<sup>27</sup> The Gulu based group Empowering Hands (EH) has also recently opened a new 'chapter' in Anaka, with cross over membership from the NUPI and CPAR counselor's groups. Founded by a handful of young women in Gulu town who had been abducted by the LRA, EH strives to raise community awareness about the difficulties facing those who have returned from the LRA through radio programmes. They extended this work to Anaka and other camps in 2005 to promote empowerment and mutual support networks. Although not an explicit part of their mandate, EH are supportive of traditional practices, raising special cases in need of intervention to Ker Kwaro Acholi. In fact, Alice's involvement in these groups appears to have opened up

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Working Paper No. 15, Refugee Law Project, Kampala.

<sup>26</sup> No profits had been raised by the time of writing these notes. The group agreed to decide on how to utilize the money as a group when the bricks have been made and sold. Alice hopes that from the proceeds she can engage in petty business in the camp.

<sup>27</sup> Some of the members of the group had previously attended a short tailoring course, although Alice had joined after the courses were completed.

new possibilities to receive support from Ker Kwaro.

The Amnesty Commission and NGOs have been supportive of cultural approaches at least in public discourse and, in some cases, in terms of facilitating or attending communal ceremonies. However, as Alice's experience below illustrates, much needs to be done to build social trust and the confidence of individuals in a communal approach before these rituals can be influential or effective.

### *Assistance of Ker Kwaro Acholi*

Relaying her traumatic experiences to the CPAR counselor, Alice was advised to attend some communal rituals that were being organized for formerly abducted youth by Ker Kwaro Acholi (KKA). After discussing it with her husband, Alice decided to participate in the communal ceremonies in September 2005. The couple hoped that the rituals would provide the cleansing Alice required.<sup>28</sup>

The communal 'stepping on an egg' ceremony (*nyono tong gweno*) is believed to cleanse whatever ills have attached to a person who has been away from the community for an extended period of time. In 2002, Ker Kwaro revised the ritual to a communal level to 'welcome home' former members of the LRA.

The ceremony began with the ritual of stepping on an egg, followed by speeches and song, dance and food to celebrate their 'return'.<sup>29</sup> Addressing the assembled

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Alice and Jimmy, Anaka camp, Gulu District. February 12, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> The materials used in communal ceremonies are generally provided by KKA through projects with international NGOs or UN bodies. The communities contribute music and dancing and their own labour to ready the food. This was the second 'stepping on an egg' ceremony in Anaka, organized because the first (in February 2005)

community, Paramount Chief David Onen Acana II urged the 50 participants to join a second communal ceremony, the ‘cleansing of the body’ (*moyo kum*), planned for the following day: “We urge you to come up and cleanse yourself before it reaches a situation where you may run mad or things go out of hand....Do not hide out, we know your needs. Come out and we will help you before things get worse.”<sup>30</sup> However, a number of the formerly abducted failed to attend. According to the CPAR counselor: “Those who did a lot of atrocities fear to join returnee groups or even do communal cleansing ceremonies [like] stepping on an egg because they fear that the relatives of those whom they killed might discover them.”<sup>31</sup>

The ‘cleansing of the body’ ceremony (*moyo kum*) was one of the first to take place at a communal, public level in northern Uganda. The ceremony was conducted at the *Rwot*’s palace, a compound consisting of three huts located in the heart of the camp. While usually a private ceremony, in this case, the community was invited to witness the ritual.

*Rwot*<sup>32</sup>Ojigi, the chief of the region, announced that the ritual was to ‘bring calm’ to formerly abducted persons. He explained that the ritual shouldn’t be seen as an ultimate end to their suffering but the beginning of what will, in the long run, translate into reconciliation marked by compensation and consequently *mato oput*. “It’s the first step aimed at relieving pain, agony and traumatic experiences our sons underwent...while in captivity.”<sup>33</sup> He consoled the former captives, stating that the community was ready to accept them despite

the past. “Even if you killed my father, brother or sister, I need you back. We need you alive and we want you to live in harmony.” He appealed to the community that “the Acholi culture of forgiveness and reconciliation will always extend till the end of time.” “It was begun by our ancestors. We grew by it and will live to see that our children remain in it.”<sup>34</sup>

Holding his royal spear, the *Rwot* instructed the Elders to prepare for the ritual. To his right were four goats, waiting to be sacrificed. Everyone seated at the East end of his compound was instructed to clear the area: east is the direction where the sun sets (*opoto ceng*) and where the *cen* is traditionally driven out. The *Rwot* began the ceremony by making *agat*, evoking the spirits of the ancestors:

Okello Okere, Awich, Ojigi and Lanene. You are the ones who brought us into this world. You gave us life and above all the rituals to cleanse our people. Today we come before you to do the same things you used to do when you were in this world. We cleanse your children in your presence as a deed destined to harmonize them with their brothers and sisters in the community. They were captured and forced to kill their own people. They have greatly displeased the spirit world against their own wish and therefore call for cleansing so that they return to normal. So bless and accept our ritual.<sup>35</sup>

The *Rwot* then called on the chairman of the Council of Elders to drag the two goats around the formerly abducted participants.<sup>36</sup>

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had not been able to include all returnees, as many were out of the camp at the time.

<sup>30</sup> Observational Notes, Anaka Camp, Gulu District, recorded 18 September 2005 by JRP.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with CPAR Counsellor, Anaka Camp, Gulu District, 18 September 2005.

<sup>32</sup> *Rwot* means chief in Acholi.

<sup>33</sup> Observational Notes, Anaka Camp, Gulu District, recorded 19 September 2005 by JRP.

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<sup>34</sup> Observational Notes, Anaka Camp, Gulu District, recorded 19 September 2005 by JRP.

<sup>35</sup> Observational Notes, Anaka Camp, Gulu District, recorded 19 September 2005 by JRP.

<sup>36</sup> After dragging the goat three times around the formerly abducted youth, the goat defecated. According to the impression of the Elders gathered, it was such a good omen that the goat defecated. One of them explained that if the goat urinates before defecating, it’s a sign that the ancestors have not been pleased or accepted by

Removing his sandals,<sup>37</sup> the Elder dragged the goats one after the other around the formerly abducted participants while making *agat*, pleading with the ancestors to intercede.

One of the goats was then slaughtered by a group of five Elders. The chairman said aloud: "Today you (goat) will die as a testimony before everyone gathered here that our ancestors have been consulted and have received assurance of the ritual we are to perform."<sup>38</sup> The slaughtered goat was then dragged and placed in the Eastern side of the compound.

Afterwards, the Elders then performed *lwoko cidu* ('washing of the hands') - using the water left over from the skinning and preparation of the sacrificial goat to wash away 'dirt' of the formerly abducted. The water was then sprinkled over the *Rwot's* house as a blessing. The community joined in on eating the goats prepared by the Elders.

Alice said she felt relieved by the rituals, and Jimmy reported he hoped that they would be the solution to his family's problems. However both continued to worry about raising money required for compensation. After the ritual, Alice met with *Rwot* Ojigi to explain her problems. *Rwot* Ojigi advised them they required further rituals. *Rwot* Ojigi told them that he would take the matter forward to Ker Kwaro Acholi and consult if they could be able to give assistance to help with the compensation.

Historically, in the case of an orphan in need of assistance, traditional leaders would provide for the health and well being of the

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the sacrifice. In such a case the goat is substituted with another.

<sup>37</sup> According to one Elder it is culturally expected of the one who will drag any sacrificial animal to do so bare footed.

<sup>38</sup> Observational Notes, recorded in Anaka Camp, Gulu District, 19 September 2005.

child or youth. KKA had discussed this issue in relation to *mato oput* in an earlier workshop with the researchers. There, they agreed that in the cases of orphans who were formerly abducted, they should also be responsible for providing for compensation and the ceremony.

At the time of writing, Alice and Jimmy have not yet met with the Elders in the camp or KKA to discuss a way forward. This may in part be explained by logistical difficulties but also the under-capacity of KKA. If the case moves forward, it would be one of the first of its kind that KKA has supported.

### ***Reconciliation?***

In a follow-up visit with Alice a month later, she reported that there had been little improvement in her or her son's condition since the *moyo kum*. In interviews with other participants, half stated that they were also disappointed with the results of the ceremony. Many went to their Elders afterwards to ask why no change was noticeable. Clan Elders argued that a communal ceremony for *moyo kum* was not the 'proper', 'traditional' way. The ritual should have taken place in the private domain, with goats sacrificed for each individual and not as a group. This was important because different people had committed different types of crimes while in captivity, each requiring unique rituals.

This reaction is indicative of the challenge before Ker Kwaro Acholi. The fact that the majority of the Acholi population now lives in camps makes conducting these kinds of reconciliation rituals extremely difficult; some people feel unable to conduct these ceremonies in an 'artificial environment.'<sup>39</sup>

Young people are less and less likely to have been schooled in the importance of traditional cultural practices. And, as in Alice's story, money is scarce. Where resources are not available for private

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<sup>39</sup> Hovil and Quinn 20-25.

ceremonies, KKA is attempting to adapt and provide communal ceremonies. Yet the belief system remains strong amongst clan Elders who provide cultural guidance to the youth.

Finally, the psychological impact of living in camps adds to the trauma experienced by formerly abducted youth in the bush. People are unable to return to their homes and to the social roles and physical activity that can be so important to the process of healing. The displaced camps compound the trauma experienced. Until this is resolved, that is, until people can return home safely and with dignity as citizens of Uganda who enjoy the rights of a democratic and functioning state in the north, the general situation of those living in the north will continue to be precarious. In the meantime, it is critical that even before the conflict ends, the groundwork is laid for developing culturally sensitive framework for social and community healing.

## Recommendations

The large-scale violence experienced by northern Ugandans requires intervention that takes into consideration and supports culturally appropriate approaches to healing and reconciliation as illustrated through Alice's story. A number of stakeholders working in the north have already recognized this, and have been working to promote a form of reconciliation that incorporates aspects of Acholi culture. However, as Alice's story also reveals, these require additional reflection, consensus building and significant strengthening. To this end, a number of recommendations are presented here:

**To the Government of Uganda:** Develop a strategy for dismantling the camps that incorporates social justice and healing.

Current debates regarding demobilization and reintegration under the Amnesty Act

tend to focus on luring mid and high level commanders out of the bush with economic incentives and confidence building measures.

Consider how reintegration packages might be revised to benefit not only recipients of the Amnesty but also communities, as well as used to support community level reconciliation efforts. While incentives to mid- and high- level commanders may be a priority in the short term towards the end of the conflict, social and community level reconciliation may assist in the longer-term.

Revise strategies to address the disparity between providing material incentives to commanders, while no material support to victims.

**To the Peace Mediator:** As Madame Betty Bigombe and other peace stakeholders continue to look for new strategies to revive peace talks, one of the critical challenges will be how to work around the ICC indictments and to build confidence of those remaining in the 'bush' that they will be accepted by the community, without prosecution. The Chief Mediator should continue to liaise with traditional leaders to develop a common platform and messaging on cultural approaches.

Confidence building at the grass-roots level will lend to increased confidence of commanders and foot soldiers considering returning home, but who are still fearful of the communities.

**To Ker Kwaro Acholi:** The reporting by KKA regarding the steps required to facilitate reconciliation has greatly improved in the last six months. However, measures are still required to build the population's confidence in adopting communal approaches and to explain its benefits over private ritual ceremonies.

Local camp based leaders require clarification of by-laws, such as the issue of which family should pay compensation in

the case of a woman who has married into a new clan requires clarification.

Camp based Elders need to feel more connected to the vision of KKA, and share in that vision. On-going and constant communication is therefore required.

**To Religious Leaders:** Clarification of the relationship between religion and culture in the area of reconciliation is urgently required. Engage in a dialogue with KKA on this issue and develop and disseminate a statement to communities.

Continue to hold religious ceremonies and mixed religious and cultural ceremonies to complement traditional approaches.

**To NGOs:** The formerly abducted youth in Anaka appear to have benefited greatly from the presence of a local counselor sensitive to cultural healing processes. Not all camps have such counselors. It would be beneficial to assess which NGOs carry out counseling in which camps, to evaluate the strengths and weakness of different approaches and to develop a coordinated strategy for outreach and service referrals in other camps.

Coordination and on-going mutual assessment of support to traditional processes would greatly enrich the NGO communities support to individual and community based reconciliation efforts. For instance, different NGOs hold a variety of local level dialogues with camp based people. Results could be exchanged in a regular basis to improve the learning process and programme interventions.

Medical NGOs should increase services to camps to provide treatment to children and youth and help in clarification of medical and spiritual ailments.

**To camp-based leaders:** Consult with and provide leadership to reduce the levels of stigmatization and marginalization, and to provide support and guidance to the formerly abducted and victims. Represent

the interests of vulnerable formerly abducted persons to NGO and UN bodies.

**To Donors:** Reconciliation among the war affected must be understood in the cultural context within which it takes place and strategies must be developed to ensure complimentary approaches to national and international justice. Donors should facilitate a series of workshops and national learning processes involving the ICC, the Government of Uganda, local leaders and the war-affected population on transitional justice, towards the development of a comprehensive and coordinated approach.

**To ICC:** Consider how the work of the Court and Victim's Trust Fund will complement and could support community level reconciliation through consultation outside of Kampala and Gulu town, and directly with the war affected population in camps.

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*Field Notes* is a new series of reports by the Liu Institute for Global Issues and Gulu District NGO Forum as a part of their collaboration on the *Justice and Reconciliation Project*. Each issue of *Field Notes* will feature a new theme related to community level justice based on research carried out with war-affected persons in camps. Drawing directly on their experiences and initiatives, results are intended to inform and improve regional, national and international policies and programmes on justice and reconciliation. This issue was greatly helped by feedback from Jeanie Annan, Jessica Huber, Carla Suarez and Joanna Quinn.

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