



Grass-roots Perspectives on Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Report of the Dialogue in Kitgum Matidi, Displaced Persons' Camp

Justice and Reconciliation Project, 9th November 2006

Executive Summary

With the peace versus justice debate in Northern Uganda reaching a crescendo, different views have been expressed, with the majority focusing on peace through amnesty and a process of reconciliation. Local politicians, civil society organizations (CSOs), cultural and religious leaders have spoken strongly on behalf of the Northern population in support of forgiveness and reconciliation of the LRA, without necessarily consulting with grass-roots people they represent.

The dialogue below was conducted by the JRP in the internally displaced camp of Kitgum Matidi on the 9th of November 2006. It explores a variety of views of grass-roots actors on the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation.

It finds that no general consensus exists on the desire or will to extend forgiveness to the LRA at this time. For some, forgiveness is not a choice but is derived out of the reality in which they live. "As for forgiveness, it appears like we have no option but to accept it. This is because we do not have weapons like our brothers in the bush. Since we do not have the weapons, we have no option but to accept."

Grass-roots participants in the dialogue did not agree that *mato oput*, a process of restorative justice leading to a ceremony designed to promote reconciliation of two conflicting parties, could or should be performed in the context of on-going war.

The sequencing of peace and justice is viewed as extremely important by some grass-roots actors: peace is a pre-requisite of reconciliation, and peace entails the ability to return and reconstruct homesteads, livelihoods, and fulfillment of basic human rights and freedoms. As one woman stated, "take a look at the camps....am I supposed to forgive from this mass homestead? For me to forgive I feel we should first go back home, so that I can forgive the person who hurt me from my own homestead."

For some in the camp, being able to face your perpetrator appeared to be essential part of the process of reconciliation, "How can I *mato oput* with someone I cannot see?" asked one youth. Without some form of acknowledgement on behalf of the perpetrator, some argued they would be unable to forgive: "*Mato oput* can only take place when the rebels come out and admit their guilt."

Much as local leaders, politicians and CSOs may argue that peace, the amnesty and forgiveness are enough, reconciliation involving some form of accountability may be necessary. Many of the voices in this report illustrate that forgiveness without a justice and reconciliation process in Acholiland is not enough. They also remind local leaders

that reconciliation at this point should not be forced upon them, but needs to be a gradual process that includes them and involves the perpetrators directly. As one man argued, “I feel so sad when our elders are misguiding us and telling us to start reconciling now (*mato oput*). How do we start? Who are the people who have caused us this suffering?”

At the same time, the potential to promote reconciliation does appear to be culturally supported, in that the communal nature of Acholi life emphasizes the idea that relations in Acholi-land are inter-connected and inter-dependant: “They [the rebels] are part of me, you her and him. So if we do not forgive, we are persecuting our own selves.”

Over one hundred people from across the camp attended the dialogue. The LC1 chairman of the area also attended the dialogue, and represented the official authorities. In addition, two cultural groups were available to present songs, dance and drama. These groups were *Nokmyero bwola* group, and *Watamo pi Kuc* drama group.

Opening remarks were by Okoya Denish, the JRP focal person for Kitgum Matidi and Okot Ceph, the volunteer committee chairman. They told members present that the dialogue was being organized by JRP. They also told the people that the main objective of the dialogue was to capture the views of the local people at the grassroots level. The local authorities present such as the area LC1 chairman were introduced, and people were encouraged to participate actively in the dialogue. The dialogue was recorded and forwarded to the Paramount Chief for consideration in a consultation with Elders of Acholi-land on adapting traditional justice, held in Gulu on 19th of November, 2006.¹

Summary of the Dialogue²

The following question was put to the assembled group by the facilitators. “Is reconciliation (*mato oput*) and forgiveness the way forward? What needs to be done?”

Man a: We cannot take part in this dialogue because we have not been informed in time. I do not want to humiliate the organizers of this dialogue, but I strongly feel that they should have consulted us, and passed through our leaders. We the youth will always be willing to participate in a dialogue when we are called in time and we have prepared ourselves. Since this was abrupt, there is no way we can participate.³

Man b: There is nothing that comes abruptly in this world. Each one of us here knows the problems that affect him or her, how we relate with other people, and how we survive here on earth. Our problems are part of us and we move with them all the time. So since we have a lot of problems, what should be done? That is why I would like to encourage people to participate actively.

¹ Report forthcoming.

² The dialogue was held in Luo, tape recorded and transcribed into English by Owor Ogora Lino.

³ The dialogue was however almost ruined by a member who stood up and asserted very strongly that they had not been informed in time about the dialogue. The second speaker however saved the day, and several people were motivated to give their views.

The topic today is reconciliation and forgiveness. For reconciliation to be there, two people must have quarreled, or annoyed each other seriously. The elders are consulted to mediate, and then they see to it that the necessary compensation is paid. After *mato oput*, then the two conflicting parties are reconciled, and they can interact. We have with us our children who were abducted and have returned and they are living with us here in the camps. They are living with us peacefully as everybody here is aware. They are not being stigmatized or called names. That is what we want to continue, so that even the current peace talks succeed. I therefore request the people gathered here to participate actively, because reconciliation and forgiveness is a matter that affects everyone. It can never be an abrupt topic.

If you have nothing to say then remain quiet but do not prevent other people from giving their views.

Man c: I have come to speak in support of reconciliation and forgiveness. Why I say reconciliation and forgiveness is good, is because if we forgive our brothers who are in the bush, they will also respond, and we shall get back peace eventually. I ask all people gathered here that we should forgive our brothers who have been forced to commit atrocities against us. They may be our neighbors, or even coming from the same parish. We must not forget that many rebels are getting the courage to come out of the bush because they know they will be forgiven. Forgiveness is the only thing that will give us togetherness, and allow us to live in peace in future. It will also make the peace talks to succeed and we shall all go home.

I also pray that the forgiveness is not by word of mouth only. This will quell all grudges. If you do not forgive the person who is still in the bush, you are cultivating a grudge between yourself, and the relatives of that person. That means we will still have a lot of conflicts, and fighting among us.

Elder a. I am in support of reconciliation and forgiveness. Forgiveness comes about after proper negotiation. Therefore if a person is begging again and again for forgiveness from you, that means he is truly penitent. But if you decide not to forgive, then you are the wrong doer. The person has admitted his guilt, and wants to reconcile, but you are still insisting on going to the courts to have him jailed. That means that the problem now is with you.

For *mato oput* to take place, it is necessary for the people who committed killings, and the people who lost relatives to come together and solve their differences. *Culo kwo* can then take place. But as long as these two parties are not together, *mato oput* cannot take place.

Man d: I belong to a drama group called Watomo pi Kuc (lets think of peace). I feel so sad when our elders are misguiding us and telling us to start reconciling now (*mato oput*). How do we start? Who are the people who have caused us this suffering? They are our brothers in the bush. But where are they so that we can *mato oput* with them? Can we

mato oput with ourselves? That is not possible, and must come later. When I look around, I see fellow brothers and sisters who are suffering.

Besides, the war is not yet over. We cannot start the process of *mato oput*. In future when the war is over, then we can think about it. So I strongly refute the words of the elder who tells us that we should start *mato oput* now. Let us find a way of calling our brothers back home, then we can reconcile with them.

Man e: I am in support of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is good to forgive our brothers. That is what will bring us peace.

I feel however that there is one thing which is going to lead to the failure of the peace talks. That is the tendency of sending people with “pot bellies” to represent us at the talks. These people are rich and well off, and they have never seen the suffering in the camps. They are only making a lot of money out of the peace talks, and their bellies are growing larger.

What I feel should be done is to pick elders from among us here in the camps, who know the problems of the Acholi. That is when I feel the hearts of the rebels will be touched and they will come home. Another thing that needs to be done is for people to think and talk only of peace to our brothers in the bush, so that peace can return.

We have taken long in the camps and we need to return home. I have heard some people at this dialogue saying that the dialogue was abrupt. I must remind you that you came to this dialogue and did not forget your mouth at home. You came along with it. So use it.⁴

Young man a: I can forgive, and be willing to *mato oput*. But how can I *mato oput* with someone I cannot see? I wonder how the ceremony will be conducted. I feel this is nonsense, and the government is simply playing with our minds. I have nothing more to say.

Man f: I am in support of forgiveness. It is because of forgiveness that most of our brothers are coming out. If there had been no forgiveness we would not have seen even one of our brothers coming out. They would have preferred to die there. Forgiveness is proper. That is these days we are even enjoying peace in the camps. We must not forget that most of the people were forced to go into the bush and are always willing to come back. But if we do not forgive them, they will be even more willing to stay there because they know they will be forgiven.

Elder Woman a: We have pleaded with our children to return home, and they do not listen to us. Those who have returned are being taken care of properly.⁵ Why don't the others come out? Even the government has offered them amnesty, but they have ignored the offer. Why? We have pleaded in vain. How then can we accept to *mato oput* with them, when they still continue to abduct us, pierce our sides, and kill us? Why can't they

⁴ In reference to the first speaker who almost ruined the dialogue by saying it was abrupt.

⁵ The woman was referring to amnesty and packages granted to returnees.

forgive at least the elderly? They should consider us as their parents and stop abducting us. Let them tussle it out with the army, not with their parents who bore them. Why do they kill us? Why won't they listen to us?

Children come home! Children come home! There is nothing that will happen to you.

Young Man b: I am standing strongly in opposition to this idea of forgiveness. The people in the bush commit grave atrocities against us, but we forgive them. But when we ask them to forgive us they do not. Is forgiveness one sided? That is not possible.

The elders say that when you mix with the people who killed your relatives, then you have intermarried with a beast (“*nywake ki ojebu*”). We are currently living with people who killed, and we are being told to forgive them, and yet they do not forgive us. I therefore do not support this idea of forgiveness, even at the expense of continuing with the war. The reason why the rebels are advocating for forgiveness is because the going has not only gotten tough, but also hot for them. So now they want forgiveness.

Man g: We have several children here who do not know how *mato oput* takes place. When there is a killing, the two parties get together, discuss, and agree on the amount for compensation. After that *mato oput* can take place. But how can *mato oput* take place without compensation? That is not possible at the moment. Let the rebels come home, lay down their arms, and then we can think of *mato oput*.

Forgiveness is good. Forgiveness should come from the heart. The forgiver should forgive willingly, after the wrongdoer has asked for forgiveness. At the moment we have several children who have come from the bush, and they are living peacefully among us. That is a sign that we have forgiven them. However sometimes they behave in weird ways, and when we try to correct them, they wave scraps of paper⁶ at us, and tell us to leave them alone. Let us however continue to forgive them and under look such weaknesses.

The children who have come from the bush are mine and yours. My child killed your child, and yours killed mine. I should not get into a grudge with you because your child killed mine. A conflict is a conflict. So let us forgive.

Man h: I will speak on *mato oput* first. *Mato oput* cannot be possible now. Let us stop speaking like mad people. We are in camps and we do not have homes yet. So how possible is that?

I Ayella have practiced forgiveness in vain. I am a victim of the LRA atrocities. I was hacked in the head with a machete.⁷ I forgave. Now tell me; if the person who hacked me on the head comes again with the machete, should I forgive again? I feel forgiveness

⁶ Amnesty cards. Some of those who have returned from the LRA have taken advantage of their amnesty cards to become unruly, and sometimes ‘do whatever they want’ without fearing ramifications.

⁷ *Man h* is a victim of LRA atrocities. He was hacked in the head with a machete, but fortunately he survived, and lived to tell the tale. This perhaps explains why he is so bitter.

should be for those who hurt accidentally, but not those who do it deliberately. If people's conception of forgiveness is the latter, then I Ayella is not willing to forgive.

Take a look at the camps. Did the Acholi live in one single mass homestead like this in the past?⁸ Am I supposed to forgive from this mass homestead? I cannot answer that question. For me to forgive I feel we should first go back home, so that I can forgive the person who hurt me from my own homestead.

Woman a: I am from a group called *watamo pi kuc* (lets think of peace). I do not think any *mato oput* should take place at the moment. People have been in the camps now for over twenty years. Let the rebels first come home and then we can *mato oput* when they have given up on all atrocities.

Man i: Can you *mato oput* with someone who is in another country? *Mato oput* can only take place when the rebels come out and admit their guilt. Forgiveness should also take place when the rebels have come home. How can we forgive them when they are still in the bush?

Woman b: This dialogue was organized so that each one of us here can have a chance to narrate their problems. I am in the camp because of displacement. I therefore cannot accept that idea of forgiveness. Even now when we go to the bush to gather firewood, we still come across rebels who can do anything to us. They can ask you for salt and if you refuse then they can tell you to leave your clothes behind. As a result we have a shortage of firewood, and some of the women in a bid not to let their families go hungry have resorted to stealing firewood from their neighbors. Let our children in the bush lay down arms and then we shall *mato oput*.



Woman drinking the bitter root, a final stage in the *mato oput* ceremony, Pajule, 2005.

Woman c: There can be no *mato oput* now. Our elders tell us that *mato oput* can only take place when the person who has wronged you is around. When you look around you, do you see the people who have wronged us? If they are around, then let us start the *mato oput*. If you assess carefully, you will find that there is no security. We cannot travel

⁸ An Acholi homestead in the past was referred to as a *paco*. Several families could live in one homestead, which were divided into *paci*, which had a head, who was most often an elder. This structure was not possible to replicate in the camp setting.

freely at night like in other places. How can we forgive the people who are working hard day and night to ensure that insecurity persists? We cannot go home to dig. We have to come dashing from miles away the moment we hear that world food Programme has delivered food. Then we have to line up like beggars. Did the Acholi line up in the past for food like beggars? The Acholi were hard working. We did not wait for free food like birds. We used to farm our land and get plenty of food. This issue of *keno opoto* was not there.⁹ We even have to line up for the toilet.¹⁰ So I cannot talk about forgiveness.

Question:¹¹ You say there should be no forgiveness. But what about our brothers who have returned and could even be in this gathering? What to you say to that?

Response: We have no problem with the person who has returned. We can only forgive the people we see. If the people in the bush want forgiveness, then they should also return.

Young man c: We cannot say that we can *mato oput* at the moment. If anyone insists that we do so, then maybe they will simply force us to do so. As for forgiveness, it appears like we have no option but to accept it. This is because we do not have weapons like our brothers in the bush. Since we do not have the weapons, we have no option but to accept.

Man j: When we talk about *mato oput*, it means reconciliation. You can only *mato oput* with someone you are seeing face to face. I do not think you can *mato oput* with a ghost. That would require more rituals such as a black goat, and a sheep. *Mato oput* cannot take place at the moment.

As for forgiveness, I would like to ask; do you forgive someone who has wronged you and is continuing to wrong you? At the moment we sometimes rely on wet wood for cooking, simply because we fear going into the bush to gather firewood. Even in the bush we hear the rebels are killing themselves. We cannot forgive people who are in the bush. When the rebels return, we shall forgive and *mato oput*.

Woman d: We are wasting our time trying to talk about *mato oput*. That cannot take place now. Let's talk about forgiveness. We should forgive only the children who were forcefully abducted. Most of the children who are returning are those who were forcefully abducted. But those who went to the bush voluntarily have committed serious crimes. Some of the women in this camp as we talk are motherless. How can we forgive the sons of those people who will one day return to bring back joy to their homes, while in other homes the childless ones will be mourning?

If we want to forgive those people who committed serious atrocities, then we have to first consult the people who have lost loved ones, so that they can forgive with a genuine heart. If we force these people to forgive, then they will not forgive genuinely. They will only

⁹ *Keno opoto* is a term used by the people in Kitgum Matidi to refer to the absence of one's name from WFP list of beneficiaries. Translated roughly, it means the "the cooking place has failed".

¹⁰ In Kitgum Matidi the sanitation is so poor that sometimes up to twenty families have to share a toilet.

¹¹ The debate became so heated that sometimes a person with an opposite point of view to the one being expressed by the speaker would stand up to challenge the current speaker with a question.

pretend to forgive. Forgiveness is not something easy. It must come from the bottom of one's heart, and of one's own free will.

Question: When two elephants fight, what suffers?

Response: The grass.

Question: So if we do not forgive and give peace a chance, we shall continue suffering.

Woman e: I am not knowledgeable in *mato oput*, so I will not speak about it. I shall speak about forgiveness.

We are being told to forgive. The question is who should we forgive? Should we forgive the people who have driven us into the camps? When a person kills your father, your mother and your brother, why do you have to forgive? I personally cannot forgive anyone. Unless Kony himself comes out of the bush and asks the people to forgive him, I cannot consider doing so.

Young man d: I say we should forgive. If we do not forgive, the rebels will not return as we want them to. So we must forgive so that they return. We request the rebels to come home. We are ready to forgive you. Do not die for nothing out there. Your colleagues have been granted amnesty and nice packages. So come out and enjoy these benefits too.

And to you people here in the camps, if you say you cannot forgive, what do you have as an alternative to forgiveness? Do you want the rebel in the bush to hear that you cannot forgive so that they come to finish you off?

Question: Are you telling us that we have no alternative but to forgive because we have no weapons and are therefore harmless to the rebels?

Response: I am telling you to forgive because there is simply nothing you can do to the rebels. Instead you should forgive them.

Question: In that case, why don't you simply tell me to live in fear because I am harmless to the rebels? I would gain nothing by forgiving them.

Woman f: We have our children who were forcefully abducted. They have now returned. Let us forgive them because they were forced to do what they did. It was not of their own making.

Man k: Forgiveness lies in two dimensions. The children who were forcefully, abducted and those who went willingly to the bush. The former should be forgiven. But the big shots like Kony who are causing all these problems should not be forgiven.

Man l: *Mato oput* cannot take place at the moment because in the past the two conflicting parties would come face to face to carry out the ritual. We are here, but the rebels are not yet out.

Forgiveness should be there. But we cannot forgive those who are still in the bush. The rebels who have returned home are like tame goats. No hunter hunts a tame animal. But the rebels in the bush are still wild. They should be hunted down and killed.

Woman g: I say that there should be no forgiveness at the moment. At the moment we have a lot of problems in the camp. We cannot store our millet in the granaries.¹² We cannot leave our *sim sim* in the gardens to dry.¹³ And when the fire comes, it destroys all what we have worked hard for.¹⁴

Woman h: It will be difficult to forgive the rebels. We have given birth to children who have grown up in the camp and do not know what it is like to live in homesteads. Some of the women and girls who were abducted were raped in the bush and have given birth. These are things that used not to happen in Acholi. We used not to have children conceived from the bush.

Man m: The children who have been abducted are our children. Do you mean to say that when they come back they should be killed?

Man n: When we are burnt by fire do we cease using it for cooking? When one of us is killed by drowning in water, do we cease to quench our thirst using water? We do not stop because these things are useful to us. The rebels in the bush are still useful to our society if they return. Let us forgive them.

Man o: You cannot put out fire using fire. You can only use water. When you go astray you seek the right route. When you stumble you stand up again. The reason why we refer to the rebels as “they” is because they went on multiplying, until they became many. They are part of me, you her and him. So if we do not forgive, we are persecuting our own selves.

Closure

As it was getting dark, the *bwola* dancers were once again called up to entertain the people. Closing remarks were made by Owor Lino, who gave the people a deeper insight into JRP activities, and the reason why JRP conducts research.

¹² Millet cannot be stored in the granaries because there is simply no space in the camps for the construction of granaries. The camps are so congested that entire families sometimes share one hut. The government is currently implementing a decongestion program.

¹³ In Acholi when *sim sim* was ready for harvest, the stalks would be cut, tied in sheaves, and piled up to dry from the garden, where they would be threshed. The grain would then be taken home, while the stalks were left to rot in the garden. This at the moment is not possible because of the insecurity. The crop can also be stolen.

¹⁴ In the dry season, huts in the camp are usually set ablaze by unknown causes. Some myths blame the causes of the fires on evil spirits and witchcraft. Scientific sources say the fires arise because the people use fresh grass to cover their houses, which stores moisture, and in the dry season ignites by itself. The source of the fires, despite investigations by the government and other NGOs remains mysterious.

About JRP

The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) is a partnership of the Liu Institute for Global Issues and the Gulu District NGO Forum. JRP conducts action oriented research in Northern Uganda with local and cultural leaders, ex combatants, and war affected communities. Dialogues are one the many mechanisms employed by JRP to capture the views of the local population at the grassroots . Drawing directly on their experiences and initiatives, results are intended to inform and improve local, national and international policies and programmes on justice and reconciliation.

This dialogue was conducted and written by: Owor Ogora Lino with the assistance of Okoya Denis, and the JRP camp volunteer committee of Kitgum Matidi IDP. The project is supported by the John .D and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Royal Embassy of the Netherlands and the Compton Foundation. For more information contact: ojok.boniface@gmail.com or ogoralino@gmail.com.