

'I cannot accept what I have not done': Storytelling, Gender and Transitional Justice

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Abstract

Storytelling can be a process of seeking social equilibrium after violence. We examine this proposition through the stories of Ajok, an Acholi woman who was abducted by the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda and who was forced into marriage and motherhood. We consider how her stories contest discrimination by her neighbours and family since her return, creatively reinterpreting the past to defend her innocence and moral character throughout the war and to defend her rightful place in present society as an Acholi woman and mother. The article concludes by reflecting on the value of locally based and culturally relevant storytelling for survivors in the field and practice of transitional justice.

Keywords: Acholi; armed conflict; forced marriage; northern Uganda; sexual and gender based violence; transitional justice

Introduction

Following the conclusion of a more than 20-year-old war in northern Uganda, an uneasy tension exists amongst survivors.¹ The war was characterized by the mass abduction and forced recruitment of an estimated 54,000 to 75,000 people (Pham et al., 2008). The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) are infamous for their brutal training of young boys and girls, for forcing them to kill or harm others and for subjecting 'new recruits' to exhausting labour and unforgiving beatings in an effort to create loyal and obedient followers (Blattman and Annan, 2010). An unknown but significant number

1 Following the end of Operation Iron Fist II and during the start of the Juba peace talks (2006–8) the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) retreated into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where they remain operational to date. The term survivors refers to those who suffered at the hands of the government army and the rebels, but also collaborators and local security officials. Given that so many youth were abducted and forced to fight and commit atrocities, the definition of survivor is still ambiguous in northern Uganda.

of young girls were forced to become the ‘wives’ to LRA commanders,² some bearing children while held against their will in Sudanese bases (Annan et al., forthcoming). During the Ugandan military campaign against the LRA between 2001 and 2005, the bases were overrun and thousands of abducted persons – now fighters, commanders, wives and mothers – returned home to communities that had suffered greatly at the hands of both the Ugandan military and the LRA. Civilians were forced into internally displaced persons’ camps and lived in a state of hunger, disease, humiliation and great loss, some for more than a decade and a half (Dolan, 2009). When their daughters returned home after many years in captivity, many carrying with them children of the same commanders responsible for the suffering of civilians, families faced a terrible dilemma. How to accept into their homes the children born of rape, the children of their tormentors? The mothers who returned home describe the pain of being blamed, of having their children rejected by their own families. ‘You find them saying: “Aaa, you make us tired of your children, the madness you came back with from the bush”’ (‘Kite’, Storytelling Session, Gulu, 3 July 2010).³

For the women who had endured the degradation and deprivation of forced marriage and pregnancy in captivity, the social stigma and exclusion encountered upon return home compounds an already long series of injustices. Without public acceptance, women who survived abduction and forced marriage are unable to move beyond memories of an unbearable past: ‘You can stay among people but they will still discriminate you. You can move among people but they will still discriminate and point fingers at your back, that is what I find is so painful in my heart’ (‘Flamingo’, Storytelling Session, Gulu, 3 July 2010). These experiences extend to the schools their children attend, the medical centres they seek treatment from, the state institutions designed to protect them, and the marriages they attempt to enter. As a result, they find themselves struggling alone to care for their children and they lack the socioeconomic support necessary to do so.

Within this difficult social context, survivors tell stories. As Paul Gready (2010) observed, stories of survival are now championed more than ever before in the human rights movement and, we might add, in human rights scholarship. In the practice of transitional justice – the range of mechanisms such as trials or truth commissions designed to help people move beyond violent events of the past and move individually and collectively towards the future – victims’ stories are given particular importance. Witness testimony

2 The authors wish to recognize that the words wife, co-wife, husband and marriage are unsatisfactory in the context of captivity and the circumstances in which Ajok and others like her were forced into unwanted relationships. We use quotations to remind the reader of this context here, but drop the quotations subsequently given the repeated use of these terms in the article.

3 All names of informants have been changed to code names used at time of recording. Ajok chose her own pseudonym.

offers an opportunity not only to set the historical record straight, but also to heal (Godwin Phelps, 2004). What is less understood, but no less urgent to consider, is how stories told amongst survivors, in informal settings, like the women above sitting under the mango tree, provide a space in which survivors might renegotiate their social marginalization and insist on their innocence and social worth. In this article, we consider how storytelling is a process of seeking social equilibrium and thus a locally based practice of justice making (p'Bitek, 1963).

To illustrate the restorative nature of storytelling, this article examines stories told by Ajok, a woman who participated in more than 12 storytelling sessions organized by Baines. Ajok was abducted by a small LRA contingent while on her way home in the mid-1990s. She was brought directly to South Sudan where she was made a *ting ting* (domestic servant) to a mid-level commander and forced to be a domestic worker to a senior wife until she herself was forced to marry the commander. She bore him two children before he was killed in battle and she was able to escape and return home. Strikingly, the majority of Ajok's stories discuss cultural protocols that were transgressed in the bush, and in particular, the implications not only of being forced to marry, but of being married before she was socially or culturally ready. In doing so, she emphasizes her innocence and reaffirms her self-worth. She speaks of her father and the paternal kin of her children at length, and of their failure to act in culturally appropriate ways to acknowledge her rightful place as a mother. Her future is in peril, she insists, because her children do not have the paternal protection that would be afforded them if they were formally recognized by, and bonded to, their father's family. As such, Ajok reminds us that, for her, a great injustice on top of that which violated her person is that which violates her sense of self and place in the world: her status in relationship to her own identity and in connection to others. Ajok's stories reject the shame thrust upon her by a suspicious family and community: 'I cannot accept what I have not done', she tells her listeners.

The article unfolds in three parts. First, we discuss the methods used to promote storytelling in a culturally appropriate and safe environment. Second, we map the narrative accounts of Ajok's life in which she both recalls and resists violent acts against her as a woman, and how she moves towards a future by renegotiating the past. Finally, we conclude by stating what we believe to be the relevance of storytelling to the field and practice of transitional justice.

Storytelling as Method

In 2009, Baines, with the assistance of a local non-governmental organization, the Justice and Reconciliation Project,⁴ organized a series of

4 See www.justiceandreconciliation.com. Baines has partnered with the Justice and Reconciliation Project, based in Gulu, since its founding in 2005.

storytelling sessions with a group of 27 formerly abducted women who returned as mothers. On average, they had spent more than eight years in the bush, and returned with between one and five children. Meeting every month or two over a period of 18 months, the mothers discussed a range of topics under the shade of a mango tree close to their homes in an urban suburb. Baines provided a research topic per session, such as ‘justice’, ‘children’, ‘marriage’, but the sessions were structured so that the women chose what specific stories they wanted to tell under this general topic. The dialogues were recorded and transcribed by a Luo English-speaking research assistant and translated into English.⁵ The facilitators, also formerly abducted women from their peer groups, would not interrupt the women as they began to talk, nor would they intervene to ask questions, but, following Acholi cultural norms, allowed the speaker to continue until finished, and the next speaker to supplement and continue until all who wanted to participate were done, at which time the storytelling sessions were closed (Oloya, 2010).

The purpose of these sessions was to document their life stories in order to understand the roles they played within the LRA and their experiences of returning home, as part of a larger research project on women and justice. There are several reasons a storytelling method was employed. In northern Uganda, storytelling is a philosophical act. The Acholi communal practice of *wang-o* (telling stories around the fire pit) is an everyday practice of inviting discussion of social life and actively shaping morality and social relationships. For Okot p’Bitek (1986), the oral tradition is an expression of critical thought, cosmology and morality that hold together communities. Morals are taught through the *ododo* (folk tales) and lessons are impressed upon younger and older listeners alike (p’Bitek, 1962). Acholi scholar Opio Oloya argues all *ododo* have ‘moral ending[s] that instructed us how to relate to the people around us as *dano adana*, human persons, a core identity endowed on each individual, and which determined how the individual viewed self, and how the individual was treated by others within the community’ (Oloya, 2010: 17). Of course *ododo* may have moral lessons intended to relegate women or girls to subordinate positions, but they also offer opportunities for women and girls to contest in a safe space things that are unjust. As an example, during a storytelling session, one woman expresses her anger at the inability of women to remarry due to stigma of being a ‘bush wife’:

Us who have returned should be equally the same as those whom we found here at home without any discrimination amongst ourselves . . . If you put it like a race, if someone started running before and you started afterwards, how can they judge it? If the person who started running first reaches the rope first can it be said that he or she is faster than the

5 We carried out all sessions in accordance with the approval of the Canadian International Ethics Review Board. All these sessions were recorded in Luo then transcribed by Baines’s collaborators, and are stored in a secure file in Canada.

other? It cannot be judged because the one who started running afterwards cannot catch up with the one before, is that justice? ('Crane', Storytelling Session, Gulu, 3 July 2010)

In the above statement, the woman defends herself: she was denied the life opportunities that would enable her to live as a respected woman and, as such, the injustice against her is double-edged. Her victimization becomes the source of her continued exclusion. Just as in a race, she tells her listeners, this is unfair and unjust.

One reason to adopt a storytelling method was to create a culturally familiar and comfortable space in which the women could speak. Fear and distrust towards researchers amongst formerly abducted young persons is not uncommon, and many may understandably evade questions they perceive to compromise their security, such as discussing their role in an armed group. Silence is often a strategy of survival. In the LRA, enforcing silence, literally the violent denial of speech, was one method of control. Since their return, few break the code of silence thrust upon them. They fear they could be overheard by the wrong person, with fatal consequences. But silence should not be mistaken as having nothing to say, and the provision of the right cultural space which builds social trust can provide opportunities to speak. For instance, storytelling within a group setting over repeated intervals with limited interruptions to the storytelling process by the researcher enabled the participants to have control over what they wanted to share and what not. The group setting also facilitated a critical distance to be established in which different participants actively contributed to the creation of a larger story, such as on the experience of return and reintegration. While facts, in and of themselves, may be difficult to verify, what is important here is not an objective truth, but rather how the participants perceive their lives and the environment in which they struggle to survive (Felman and Laub, 1992). For this reason, storytelling also provides important insight into human agency and the struggle to remake one's life after so much pain (Maynes et al., 2008: 16).

Ajok's stories were told to her peers in the storytelling sessions. The authors were not present in most of the sessions in order to promote the comfort of the women, although Baines met them separately over the course of the project to remind them of the objectives, listen to concerns and answer questions. All of the sessions were optional to the group; a woman could attend and not speak if she chose. There was no incentive offered outside of modest transport provision and refreshments; however, we did provide each of the women who participated in the project with her own personal history book afterwards. In 2011, Ajok's stories were pieced together into one document, forming a narrative arc of abduction, life in the LRA, and then return home. These were then reviewed with Ajok in order to check the stories were accurate and her consent was sought for a final time to use the stories to

inform this publication. The article was reviewed with the interpreters and facilitators to ensure accuracy of translation.

Ajok and Storytelling

The northern conflict began in 1986 when current President Yoweri Museveni's rebel army violently unseated an Acholi president, whose brief term in office followed a long succession of northern-based presidents, harking back to the beginning of Ugandan independence. Pursuing a retreating Acholi army into the north, Museveni's army took revenge against civilians, giving rise to a popular and spiritual based movement, the Holy Spirit Movement. Suffering large defeats, the movement disbanded and soldiers either returned home or regrouped in the north under a young spirit leader, Joseph Kony. The LRA reorganized a disoriented rebellion along the principles of the Holy Spirit Movement and fought for the next two decades against the Ugandan military with the support of the government of Sudan, an enemy to Museveni. The guns are now silent in Uganda as the LRA retreated to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2006, but the war had, and continues to have, a devastating toll on the Acholi people. More than 90 per cent of the population was displaced into inadequately serviced and poorly protected internally displaced persons' camps. The LRA, losing popular support in the early 1990s, began to commit atrocities against the Acholi people and abducted more than 60,000 children into their army (see Finnström, 2008; Dolan, 2009; Allen and Vlassenroot (eds), 2010).

It was in this context that Ajok grew up, and due to the insecurity of the region she and her brothers were sent to live in Gulu town. When conditions at her caregiver's home became intolerable due to neglect, Ajok decided to return home to her father. It was during this journey that she was abducted by rebels and forced to walk to Sudan where she was trained in the use of arms and later became a domestic servant to a senior wife of a mid-level commander. In the following reflection, Ajok begins to suggest that she had nothing to do with her own abduction. Rather, she argues that her father is to blame for failing to care for her as an equal to her brothers, and laments the lack of protection he should have afforded her as a responsible man:

I am my father's fourth child. I am the only girl. My father never wanted to pay for me in school. We were then sent to town when the war started. The condition in town was hard for me to handle. I was still young. I decided to go back to the village. The war was terrible, then on my way to Ajulu, I found two dead bodies that had just been killed. The rebels had just passed by. The reason why I am so angry is because my father did not take good care of me. The reason why I was abducted was his fault. He brought me to town in order to cook for my elder brothers. He said girls could not study. I would use wet firewood

to prepare the food. The person who was to take [care] of us would sell the food our mother brought for us.

Ajok accuses her father of not taking care of her, in violation of cultural expectations (Ominde, 1952). He did not pay for her to go to school and was not protecting her when she was abducted. By illuminating his wrongdoing and the impossible circumstances of the war, she affirms that she had not transgressed culturally acceptable behaviour for girls. In fact, she stresses that she continued to serve him as a daughter despite his failures as a father, and the limitations her parents faced due to the insecurity.

Ajok spends a great deal of time in her stories focused on her life as a *ting ting* to a senior wife. She discusses how, despite the context of the bush, she defended her moral integrity by protesting the lack of transgenerational teachings that she would have received from her grandmother to prepare her for womanhood. In recalling an incident early on in the bush in which she is nearly punished for breaking a law of the LRA related to cooking, Ajok highlights how the commander's eldest wife failed to provide her appropriate resources to fulfil the duties expected of her. She confirms her innocence by adding that her elder was beaten for the wrongful act, in place of her.

Being *kurut* [newly abducted], I had no clue that people were beaten for letting out smoke while cooking.⁶ So I started cooking with smoke all over, I kept on adding firewood and minded less of the smoke that had filled the place. [An elder wife] ran to where I was, slapped my ears hard while saying that 'you don't want to go and blow the fire?' I replied that 'why should I blow the fire and yet I see the firewood burning well?' She said 'you will get beaten!' True to what she had said, the security came and asked that 'who is lighting fire here?' She immediately answered back that 'it is that girl who has lit the fire'. They said 'this girl is the one who lit the fire like this yet you an elder woman [and hence knowledgeable] is with her? Why didn't you tell her to stay close to the fire?' Instead of those people caning me, they caned her.

Ajok tells stories of how jealousies manifested amongst the co-wives against her as a *ting ting*, knowing that she would soon join them as a co-wife and thus compete for their husband's favour and in turn, life-giving resources. The elder wives torture Ajok, seeking to humiliate and shame her. They taunt both Ajok and their 'bush husband', saying that her status as a single *ting ting* on the verge of womanhood (and thus vulnerable to other men's advances) brings shame to the house. They accuse Ajok of having an affair, and provoke their husband to discipline her. To dissuade their husband from raping her (an act that symbolically, terribly, turns her into his wife), Ajok reminds him of her immaturity:

6 To avoid detection by Ugandan government troops, women had to cook in such a way that the smoke would disperse.

So one evening *ladit* [a term of respect for a man of authority, here referring to the commander] called for me after dinner. [The first wife] was still eating. Before I went, she pinched me and it hurt me so I cried. *Ladit* asked why I was crying. The first wife said that I was crying because of my stupidity and jealousy. *Ladit* asked how I could be jealous because I was not his wife and still young . . . She said I was jealous and now that I was capable of jealousy, I was ready to live with a man.

She told *ladit* that I [loved another boy]. This made him conclude that I was ready for a man. I was only 14 years old. After two days he started calling me to his room [for sex] . . . [I told him] ‘Between her and I, who do you think is jealous? I don’t love anyone. I am still young, too young to be with a man.’ I refused to sleep with him. He caned me and demanded that I go next time because I was clearly ready to live with a man. The first wife also beat me that day.

It was that wife who recommended that they cane me because she said that by refusing *ladit* I embarrassed and shamed him to the people. Indeed she made me lie down and sent one boy to cane me. He caned me three strokes and I got up immediately and began to fight with the boy. In the process of fighting, the boy beat my eye and it swelled.

After that we returned home to cook. We had 12 boys (soldiers) in the home. So she said I should begin to cook because even though my youth spared me from going to *ladit*, I was old enough to be in my own house. I started cooking, but being young, I could not knead *dura* [bread] properly.

In this story, Ajok emphasizes her innocence. She was unprepared to be a wife and resisted as long as possible. She recalls enduring three beatings (by her commander, by the first wife and finally, by a boy soldier in the commander’s home), indicating the length to which she sought to protect herself. Once in a position to physically resist against a boy that was her equal, she seizes the cane and attempts to fight back. She eventually is left alone until she can mature. In restating this story, she illustrates that she sought to preserve her girlhood at great cost, and defends her moral fortitude as a person. She was not even old enough to knead *dura*, she underscores.

Eventually, within a year of this incident, Ajok is forced into marriage. Her stories about her marriage resituate her from a young victim to a married woman and, despite the tragic circumstances surrounding this relationship, she insists she is a good and honest wife and co-wife. In this example, Ajok demonstrates her consideration for her fellow and more senior co-wives by insisting that she not eat until they were present to share:

He did not eat all the bread. The leftover was brought to my room. The woman who prepared the bread called me to eat some of the leftover. I refused to eat without the rest of the group. I said if we were to eat bit by bit there would be little bread left for the rest.

More pressingly, Ajok strives to retain her moral high ground when a scandal breaks out in her home after two of her co-wives are caught having an affair with other men. Accused of being complicit for not having reported the affairs, Ajok defends her honour. The co-wives are sent to the ‘military’ for questioning, during which time she challenges her ‘bush husband’ to state what she has done wrong: ‘*Ladit*, if am to be killed because of people’s crimes then it will happen. But I have not done any wrong against anyone. I cannot accept what I have not done.’ She is eventually pardoned from the trials. Her co-wives are found guilty and beaten, taking months to recover.

At the age of 17, Ajok became pregnant for the first time. She describes in great detail a story of how she was given millet by an old woman in the community they were staying with, but her co-wives accused her of stealing it. After unsuccessfully convincing her husband of her innocence, she tells him of the pregnancy, to which he responds ‘that he had enough children and no one should bother him of any pregnancy’. Given his condemnation of the pregnancy and the accusations against her, Ajok decides to abort. She takes various kinds of medicine and begins to starve herself:

I refused to eat when food was brought because he had said the child I was to give birth to was useless. I decided to die of hunger . . . Due to anger I decided to take a lot medicine . . . I continued to take more medicine. I would take quinine tablets. I continued to take more medicine but nothing happened. I took all the medicine.

Ajok then states that her overt distress made her husband realize that he had been told lies by her co-wives and he once again believed her to be an honest wife, allowing her to regain her rightful place inside the home.

Motherhood presents a series of further challenges to Ajok. The status of mother greatly increased her access to privileges within the homestead and the LRA, aggravating the jealousy of her co-wives. As she nears childbirth, her co-wives place on her the curse of *wino*,⁷ wishing her death in childbirth. As Ajok tells the story, she encourages her listeners to associate her refusal to accept the women’s curse as an indication of her strength as a mother.

The women said that I was not supposed to keep money because I was pregnant. They said that I would suffer from *wino*. One of the women . . . came and told me what the ladies said. I told her I would never suffer from *wino* because my mother gave birth to all her children without suffering from it. I told her I would only suffer from it if it is

7 Placenta retention after birth, often leading to death.

on the man's side . . . I told [my co-wives] 'let us settle our misunderstanding today. There is nothing we are competing for. If it is cooking for the man, he eats the same food we all eat together with the boys and the children.' We exchanged very bitter words. I told them: 'you do not have the guts to tell me that I will suffer from *wino*, I will never suffer from it because my mother never did. She was a traditional birth attendant. She learnt it from her mother.' [One co-wife] told me 'I will not help you when you are giving birth, you will suffer like a dog.' I told her that 'I will not suffer, you will be the first one to help me when am in labour.' She said 'you wait and see if I will help you. I will not use the hands my mother gave me. I would rather die.' I told her that 'you will be called to help me and you will do so.' . . . I bathed and decided to eat some food. That is when the 'waters' broke and I called for her. When the pain took long she began to panic. She sent for herbs to be brought. She sent for medicine for *wino*. I refused to take any herbs for *wino*. Luckily enough I gave birth. She cut the umbilical cord properly.

This story highlights Ajok's controlled and disciplined handling of an otherwise potentially dangerous situation by evoking the good standing of her own family, in particular her mother who has 'never suffered from *wino*'. She ends the passage with the victorious detail that her co-wife cut the umbilical cord properly – a sign that Ajok had acquired authority, positioning herself as morally superior to the woman around her. Her refusal of herbs to avoid *wino* translates into a conviction that she is wise and intuitive and thus a strong and fit mother.

Ajok later gives birth to a second child. Shortly thereafter a military offensive, Operation Iron Fist, forces her and her family to return to Uganda, where for nearly a year they live in mobile units seeking to avoid Ugandan government troops. Eventually, her husband is killed and Ajok is injured and captured. She and her children were held in a military detachment where she is exposed to the scorn of civilians who question her moral character. In the barracks, she recounts her first encounter with a civilian woman and describes how her capacity as a mother was challenged.

A certain lady came over to me while at the defence [barracks] and asked me what I was doing in the bush for all this period that I gave birth to a big child like that? She told me I was stupid or else I wouldn't have stayed in the bush for that long. I told her that I could not just escape because it was difficult. Then she said that 'supposing you were not just captured, would you come home? A child who has grown up and ready to go to school was just being kept in the bush, you were just there running about with him instead of bringing him home to study?'

After release from the military, Ajok attends a rehabilitation centre where she is reunited with her father. She expects her father to support her and her children as is culturally expected when a woman leaves her husband. When he does not and she has nowhere to live with her children, she temporarily contemplates returning to the bush or committing suicide. Her story details how she chose instead to assert her identity as an Acholi daughter – she decided to remain his daughter and insist that she occupy her rightful place as a woman within her family: ‘However much he insulted and chased me from his home, I would still survive and remain his daughter’.

Ajok’s story about her struggles upon return to civil life serves as a site for renegotiating her subject positions as a mother, wife, and ultimately a woman in Acholi society in the face of the stigma that implied otherwise. This renegotiation involves stories that place her squarely within a liminal social position, and detail her attempts to reinhabit her rightful role as mother, wife, and woman through stories. For instance, as a mother, Ajok tells of her determination to learn how to use a sewing machine despite her illiteracy, in order to secure some income for herself and her children. This story is a critique of the general discrimination Ajok faced from her community that refused to support her as a respected member of the community. She details how her father accused her of having no value because she never went to school and he tried to keep her from tailoring once she learned how to sew:

I could struggle on my own to get something to feed all of us and pay rent at the same time. I did tailoring and started doing my own business. My Dad would insult me and even say that he didn’t see any value in me because first of all I did not even go to school and now I have returned with children from the bush to give him extra burden! I remember in a family meeting when I told my Dad that as much as he blamed me for not studying, he should not forget that he never took me to school even before I was abducted. He never liked girl children and would say that I am useless.

In this story about her father’s refusal to support her and her insistence to start her own business as a tailor, Ajok repositions herself from an outcast to a productive and independent member of society and a mother capable of supporting her children.

Ajok discusses several interactions with the family of her late ‘bush-husband’. Culturally, children acquire their paternal identities, although this is slowly changing over time. Ajok details her decision to reinhabit her position in her children’s paternal kin by agreeing to consider marrying her husband’s brother, as is customary, in order to secure her children’s social and economic future. While choosing to reoccupy the identity of wife – a space of terror and violence – Ajok carefully reconfigures this violence of her ‘bush

wife' identity to insist that this decision was wise and right. To achieve this, Ajok provides lengthy details about how her brother-in-law came looking for her and the children. Ajok details her brother-in-law's continued support and his family's willingness to accept her in ways that emulate courtship.

Ajok's mother refused to build a relationship with the family of the man who had abducted her. But in a story, Ajok explains how her mother came to accept Ajok's in-laws through a traditional ceremony for her infant son. Ajok explains that a cock bit her infant son's head and a cleansing ceremony required the involvement of his paternal clan. The story highlights the community's acknowledgement of the paternal kin's legitimate role in Ajok's life. It also makes her decision to reoccupy her identity of wife intelligible as an act that satisfies the Acholi life cycle of a woman.

[My grandmother] came out of the house and asked me what had happened. I told her that a rooster had bitten the child's head. She could not believe it. I carried the kid and took him to her and she saw the head had blood at the spot that was bitten . . . My grandmother said that it was bad and a ritual had to be carried out. My grandmother said that the ceremony had to be done from the child's paternal home. A letter had to be written to the child's (paternal) grandfather . . . The grandfather came immediately when he got the information . . . The local leader said that the ceremony should be carried out even if the child did not belong to our clan (because a child belongs to his paternal clan). The man whose rooster had caused trouble said that the ceremony had to take place and he gave us a goat. My father-in-law was called and the ceremony took place. My mother who used to say that I was abducted when I was young and I was made to stay with an old man began to notice the advantages of a child knowing his paternal home. I decided to go and see my husband's home in the village as people were staying in the smaller camps. I had already visited their home in town where my brother-in-law stayed. I organized myself and went in 2006 for New Year.

Ajok's subsequent decision to go to live with the family of her husband is legitimized through the retelling of a conversation she had with her mother upon returning from a visit with the family:

I told her that it was not bad . . . I told her that the family showed me love and they never said that my children had *cen* [spiritual possession from the ghosts of people who die badly]. Even his sister was good. The other relatives were also good. I told my mother that I wanted to go and dig from my husband's home.

The story of life with her in-laws in the capacity of wife emphasizes that she occupied this space on terms that were culturally acceptable for the wife of a

brother. Once Ajok introduces a jealous sister-in-law who moved in one year later, her story turns into a justification for her decision to later leave. Yet she maintains her status by continuously visiting and receiving visitors from her children's paternal kin:

They always come where I work. I tell them that am now working and my job does not favour going to the garden. I have to pay electricity, buy materials and pay rent. It is not that I do not want to dig or take the children but it is the misunderstanding I had with my sister-in-law. I would rather go once in a while. Not as I used to go and spend a lot of time digging. I just go to visit. This however does not stop me from taking the children.

This act makes her identity as a good mother contested, because her decision to leave also removes her children from their place within the family and potentially restricts their land claims. Ajok thus describes her careful scrutiny of her options and ultimately posits her refusal to *koko* (allow them to inherit) her children as an act of affirming her identity as a good mother:

The only problem I have is when it comes to *koko* the children. There is one thing that is going to stop the *koko*; I ask myself who will take care of the children in case the family decides to *koko* them? One of my sisters-in-law is good. She can take care of my children. She can welcome me when I arrive and laugh with me. The thing is we still don't know her true character. The question is will she take care of my sons until they grow, if the family *koko* them? And how will the other woman I am not in good terms with look at my children?

Following this statement, Ajok provides further justification through the analogy of her deceased brother-in-law's son who grew up with his mother, far from his paternal relatives. She then adds another story about the son of a paternal cousin who chose to stay with his mother upon divorce and he subsequently became the parish chief. In both cases the boys grew up to be successful and respected. Ajok positions these stories as support for her decision to raise her children alone and as defence of her identity as a good, respectable mother.

Storytelling as Social Repair

Das and Kleinman (2000: 8) contend that in order to reinhabit spaces of terror, survivors of violence must forge memory and forgetfulness in new ways. To legitimately occupy her identity as wife and good mother, Ajok negotiates the meanings of her experiences through storytelling. Ajok's process of constructing herself as a good Acholi woman in relation to her family and community through storytelling thus represents a powerful and

effective form of contesting her social exclusion on return and asserting her own social worth.

As Cornassel, Chaw-win-is and T'lakwadzi (2009) argue, storytelling reconstitutes families, communities and relations – a critical act in the process of reconciliation. The stories Ajok tells during the *wang-o* sessions represent an effort to regain her worth as a respectable Acholi woman and, consequently, as *dano adana*. She generates a new subject through a process of reconfiguring the violence of her past and mediating stories of social repair in her return to civil society. In the context of ongoing structural, symbolic and overt violence, storytelling restores humanity through the reconstruction of one's life story: 'Finding one's voice in the making of one's history, the remaking of a world . . . is also a matter of being able to re-contextualize the narratives of devastation and generate new contexts through which everyday life may become possible' (Das and Kleinman, 2001: 6). Storytelling thus becomes a form of justice making that restores the imbalances of individual value necessary for returned women to successfully reintegrate into their communities. As South African observers of truth telling state: 'we tell stories so that we do not die from truth. But we also tell them to know who we are and to make sense of the world' (Krog et al., 2009: 19).

Examining the impact of violence on one's sense of self in relation to others, Susan Brison writes that the experience of trauma severs past from present in such a way that 'undoes' one's sense of self (cited in Godwin Phelps, 2004: 57). Similarly, Michael Jackson argues that violence is experienced most profoundly through the devastation of the relationships that constitute a person's lifeworld. When an individual loses their connections to others, their words and actions are considered to have no place in society (Jackson, 2006: 39, 45). With a critical understanding of her political and social position, an individual can reinhabit the fragments of herself and renegotiate the experiences so that the pieces can be brought together to form a coherent subject. In her essay about the relationship between the violence of the partition of India and subjectivity, Veena Das concludes that while past violence exists in the present, a story that reaches back into the experiences of violence 'shows how one may occupy the very signs of injury' and construct their meaning (Das, 2000: 221). In Ajok's case, the signs of injury translate to the stigma she endures. But as we listen, she renegotiates the meanings of her experiences of past violence in order to construct herself as a new subject.

Storytelling is the method through which this construction of a new self is achieved. Scholars of storytelling argue that it is a fundamental aspect of humanity. Teresa Godwin Phelps writes that 'narrative is "international, transhistorical, transcultural . . . simply there like life itself"' (2004: 59). Yet stories do not exist outside of history, but rather must be situated within the historical structures in which they are told, and in that sense they are meaningful within the localized justice making processes in which they are

embedded. Considering Ajok's stories within this sociocultural practice, her narrative easily becomes recognizable as a critical understanding of the broader political structures that have identified her as not *dano adana*, in her status as a non-person within her community and state. A storyteller positions herself and her story in relation to the opinions and mores around her – just as Ajok situates herself within the social expectations of Acholi womanhood embedded in her culture and country. It is precisely in this relational act that her story becomes political as facts and information are secondary to the critical understanding expressed as a 'provocative and principled story' (Disch, 1993: 689). Storytellers thus encourage their readers to see *as* they do, rather than simply *what* they see (ibid: 687). In Ajok's case, she tells a story that instructs her listeners how to relate to her as *dano adana*. This act exemplifies Jackson's affirmation that storytelling offers people a way to 'redress imbalances and correct perceived injustices in the distribution of Being' (Jackson, 2006: 36).

Ajok presents her stories as a contested journey of social navigation through war as an Acholi woman. Strategically, she positions herself against challenges to her humanity. By claiming that she legitimately occupied the critical positions fulfilling the traditional Acholi woman's life cycle, Ajok's story acts as a site for the renegotiation of accepted cultural narratives that define Acholi womanhood. The telling of her story represents a strategic manoeuvre to reposition her experiences as evidence that she both remained *dano adana* from beginning to end and consequently that she qualifies as a legitimate Acholi woman. That is, as an act of storytelling, Ajok's life story represents an effort to produce and reproduce herself within her local socio-cultural world.

The story represents a response to the social stigma Ajok encountered when society identified her as a former 'bush wife'. Jackson theorizes this discrimination as a loss of balance between one's own world and the world deemed to be 'not-self'. When such imbalance occurs, he argues, the person loses her ontological security, her sense of belonging to and effective engagement in a world of others – of 'having some say, some voice, some sense of making a difference' (Jackson quoted in Coulter, 2009: 88). There is always a reaction to restore balance and thus to avoid nullification of one's own world (Jackson, 2006: 18). This article has argued that Ajok's story is an attempt to address this imbalance. Taking such control over her life is then recognizable as making justice in the sense that Jackson explains the ethics and theory of justice in such acts of rebalancing. Jackson argues that people seek justice in the sense 'of experiencing a just apportionment of forces and of things between the particular world I consider mine and the wider world I associate with others' (ibid: 20). In Ajok's case, she seeks justice in the sense of being treated as a human being in recognition of the social roles she claims that she legitimately inhabited.

Considerations for Practitioners

While the transitional justice field has to date focused on the stories survivors tell in public forums like truth commissions, we suggest that there is much to learn from less formal storytelling sessions. These stories are sometimes told to other survivors, whispered to loved ones at night when others have fallen asleep, or in this case, in storytelling sessions. They are sometimes told for the teller, other times for their children or family, and sometimes for those they feel they have harmed. They are told to make sense of what has happened, and to work through why it happened to them (Felman and Laub, 1992). Ajok's stories of life in the LRA and her return in informal, culturally appropriate storytelling settings are illustrative of the role of stories in meaning making. She is not concerned with recalling facts, events or dates, but evokes stories which help make sense of the experiences she went through, to cope with these but also to reposition herself, to reclaim her status and self-worth. In these informal settings, researchers and practitioners in transitional justice are reminded that they not only have a 'responsibility to the story' (Gready, 2010), but sometimes the story itself is the act through which people work through social tensions, misperceptions, discrimination and injustice. As practitioners, providing survivors of violence a space to tell each other stories may be just as important as pursuing formal justice goals. This is not to suggest trials or truth commissions are unimportant, but that their limitations in terms of transformative effects on individuals and communities have been recognized, particularly in the case of sexual and gender based violence where women prefer to remain silent about these abuses in public (Ross, 2003; Theidon, 2007; Henry, 2010). It suggests that stories are not solely told for the practitioner or researcher to listen to, but for those who tell them, for survivors to testify to other survivors.

Evidence that storytelling in community settings is a desirable and effective way of working through histories of violence and of restoring social relations should be given more attention, and merits further policy and programme considerations. In Uganda, for instance, the desire to talk in a community setting about what happened during the 20-year war is a preferred justice strategy, recognizing the complications of victims and perpetrators living side by side and, more so, that some people embody both statuses at once (Anyeko et al., forthcoming). Community truths can be an important supplement to official, national truth that sometimes 'erases, downplays, marginalizes or formalizes and institutionalizes the stories of some or all victims' (Hackett and Rolston, 2009: 362). However, popular participation in recounting the past is not just important to ensure formal mechanisms are democratized or reflective of those 'in the grassroots'; this article suggests that localized storytelling is in and of itself a process of justice making (Lundy and McGovern, 2008). Communities search not only for truth (the facts of what happened) but also for 'truthfulness' (what these events mean) (Riaño Alcalá

and Baines, forthcoming); at times only stories can provide that meaning. As such, the human rights and transitional justice practitioner might recognize such sessions as conciliatory processes in and of themselves, rather than steps that feed into wider more formal processes of justice seeking.

Further, there is a great deal to learn about the telling of stories from the location of a culturally safe and relevant space. Without directing the storyteller (questions, time limits, interruptions for clarifications) as we often do in formal mechanisms searching for truth (trials, research processes or historical commissions), people tell the stories relevant to them; they may choose stories that help work through parts of their experiences that have meaning to them. They do so in ways that are rooted in cultural contexts that give their experiences meaning (Krog et al., 2009: 46). Ajok recalls the injustice of being a girl whose father denies her education, and of being forced to become a wife and mother before she is provided the proper cultural education. On her return to Uganda, she makes sense of her rejection by family and community members through the lens of what it means to be a proper woman, and defends her innocence and her moral high ground and, in turn, seeks re-entry into a society that excludes her for unjust reasons. Ajok demands dignity and recognition, and this, after all, is as important to the story of loss and violence as the loss and violence is to the story (Harrell-Bond, 2002). Ajok insists she is human, *dano adana*, and chooses stories to illustrate she is so within her social cultural framework of being a woman, wife, and mother. In short, we are reminded of the value and importance of self-worth, of social acceptance and repair in the aftermath of war, of the meaning attached to violent events, how these can tear people apart and, through storytelling, assist the survivor to come to terms with the past.

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