

A group of people, including men and women, are standing in a field, looking towards the horizon under a cloudy sky. The people are dressed in traditional and casual clothing. The scene is outdoors, with tall grass in the foreground and a bright, overcast sky in the background.

Finding Community Relevance in Transitional Justice:

**Drawing Attention to
the Need for Decent
Reburials –**

**A Case of Lukodi in
Gulu District**

Justice and Reconciliation
Project
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About the Justice and Reconciliation Project

The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) was established in 2010 as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Gulu, Uganda to understand and explain the interests, needs, concerns and views of communities affected by conflict and to promote sustainable peace through the active involvement of war-affected communities in research and advocacy.

Find out more about JRP at <http://www.justiceandreconciliation.com> or email info@justiceandreconciliation.com

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Cover photo: Community members observe a reburial process in Lukodi village on 20 August 2013.

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Introduction

To “ensure the centrality of victims in the design and implementation of transitional justice (TJ) processes and mechanisms”¹ is one of the UN’s guiding principles that lie at the foundation of Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) programs. Meaningfully engaging survivors and victims’ groups in community-led justice and reconciliation initiatives is the core objective of JRP’s community mobilisation department. The term ‘community-led’ implies that communities should not only participate, but also play a central role in defining and addressing their own transition needs. This is not to say that they do not need support, quite the contrary.

JRP, in collaboration with Child Voice International (CVI) and the conflict-affected community of Lukodi, developed a Community Reconciliation (CORE) team with the hopes of creating a replicable community-driven model of reconciliation after years of violent conflict. JRP provides support by building the capacity of the team to be increasingly self-sustainable. This has taken the form of various trainings, such as advocacy and conflict analysis. JRP also plays an advisory role to the activities of the CORE Team when requested.

The Lukodi CORE team provides a shining example of a victims’ group that has risen to the challenge of identifying, planning, and implementing community-relevant projects. Thus far the 25-member team has engaged in documentation of Lukodi conflict stories, developed a memorial site, organized remembrance events, and held ongoing meetings to identify potential or existing conflicts and respective strategies to address them. It is in these meetings that indecent burials were named as an issue preventing peaceful coexistence in the community. The need for reburials highlights a pervasive post-conflict challenge that formal transitional justice mechanisms have yet to address in Uganda.

Lukodi Case Study

Background

In order to understand the need for reburials, one must have some awareness of the cultural traditions of Acholi people. According to Acholi tradition, if someone dies outside their ancestral land, the body must be brought back home for proper burial following traditional rituals². If not brought home and properly buried, it is believed that the spirit of the deceased will feel deserted and will come back to haunt and bring harm to family members and even the wider community. This spiritual vengeance is referred to as *cen*. Laying a loved one’s soul to rest is of utmost importance in Acholi tradition, however in the midst of violent conflict, and the chaos that comes with it, this becomes a formidable, if not impossible, task.

The conflict history of Lukodi paints an alarming picture of this reality. Inadequately protected by government soldiers, LRA rebels were able to carry out a gruesome rampage in the village of Lukodi on the 19th of May 2004. Apart from common atroc-

¹ A complete outline of the guiding principles and framework for the United Nations approach to transitional justice processes and mechanisms can be found at http://www.unrol.org/files/TJ_Guidance_Note_March_2010FINAL.pdf

² In Acholi tradition, after the body is buried near the ancestral home the family performs funeral rites. The rituals depend on many factors such as the gender, age, and cause of death of the deceased.

ities, such as destruction of property, looting, sexual assault, deformations, and abductions, this rampage involved the massacre of over sixty people. Those that made it through the day alive and were left behind by the rebels quickly joined the staggering numbers of Northern Ugandans in forced displacement. The community members scattered in all directions, however the majority relocated to the nearby Coope IDP camp.³

Due to the chaotic environment, most of the affected families of those killed in the massacre did not have the time, means, or state of mind to carry out decent burials for their loved ones. The scene of Lukodi camp at the time was described by one of the community members during documentation:

The whole camp was littered with corpses. The strong-hearted people immediately started burying their dead. We buried all of them here without attempting to distinguish between who was from Lukodi and who was not. Even strangers who were passing on the road came and helped us. The burials were carried out very quickly. There was no time to bury the dead properly... There was no time to carry out traditional rituals in line with Acholi culture.⁴

Unfortunately, the bodies hastily buried in Lukodi were not the only indecent burials needing remedy. Those who relocated continued to live in times of great insecurity and suffer from the harsh living conditions of the overcrowded camps. Therefore, family members of those who died, whether it was from further killings, disease, or other causes, were forced to give similarly hasty burials away from the land of their homes.

In 2006, the community of Lukodi gradually started the resettlement process, which would last for years. The challenge of facing realities of the past and rebuilding lives obliterated by the conflict days continues to plague Lukodi, and countless other communities in northern Uganda, today.

In the years after settlement, ongoing complaints of *cen* permeated the community. Affected family members experienced nightmares, abnormal thoughts, mental disturbances, miscarriages, sickness, and feelings of being 'stuck' that prevented happiness and productivity. Schoolchildren in the nearby boarding school were also experiencing the haunting of spirits, along with other community members who talked of seeing and hearing unusual things when travelling at night.

On top of the experiences of *cen*, tensions between affected families and landowners arose. The landowners wanted the remains reburied near ancestral homes, so that they could use the land for their own purposes. Cultural tradition forbids these landowners from making use of any land containing dead bodies. As much as affected family members wanted reburials, the majority did not have the means to do so. The conflict years left many impoverished to the point of struggling to meet basic needs, let alone carry out necessary spiritual rituals. This tension between landowners and affected families continued to escalate, with no clear resolution in sight. Many community members viewed these tensions as a 'ticking time bomb', the potential for an eruption of violence instilling general insecurity in Lukodi.

³ For detailed information on documentation of Lukodi massacre see JRP's Field Notes XIII publication. This can be accessed online at <http://justiceandreconciliation.com/2011/04/the-lukodi-massacre-19th-may-2004-fnxiii/>

⁴ Interview with a 44 year old male, Lukodi, 25th August 2010 (taken from Field Notes cited above)

When you are not happy with yourself or your neighbour, there can be no peace. Community members were annoyed of the ongoing tensions. Lukodi is not a big community and members share the same market. It became a burden for the entire community.⁵

In the absence of desired accountability on the part of the government and LRA, the CORE team decided to push forward with a community-driven reburial process meant to bring healing to the community and peace in calming the rising tensions between community members.

Community-Led Planning & Preparation

After recognising the need for reburials, the CORE team sought out participation from the cultural institution, Ker Kwaro Acholi, as this type of activity lies within its mandate. The sub-county officials were equally involved in the reburial, with their approval sought before the planned activities. The team proceeded with planning meetings, in consultation with JRP and cultural leaders, to complete tasks such as the creation of a budget. They also worked tirelessly to identify affected families who desired and needed support in a reburial. Once identified, the team assisted in organizing family meetings necessary for logistical and emotional preparation. All the while, the CORE team mobilised and solicited contributions from relevant stakeholders. JRP was able to provide financial contributions, while various community members were able to provide support mostly in the form of materials.

The affected families were encouraged by the CORE team to coordinate with the landowners to develop plans prior to the actual reburial. Landowners played their part by granting permission to families for exhumations and directing them to gravesites. Some of these landowners even cleared the graves in preparation for the exhumations and provided social support by accompanying the families to the new burial site.

Reburial Event

The perseverance and hard work of the CORE team paid off on the 20th of August 2013, the opening day of the reburial ceremony. Lukodi community members, cultural leaders, local leaders, the media, and various CSO representatives were in attendance as the event was kicked off with a ceremonial welcome of the acting Acholi paramount chief Rwot Peter Oola Ojigi. The collaborative effort of attendees in the day's events stood as a testament to its community-driven nature.

Elders served as 'cultural teachers', the CORE team closely monitored the activities, invited guests dispersed burial materials to families, affected families dug up graves and wrapped remains for reburials, the sub-county provided security, land-



The CORE team chairperson (far right) stands with the cultural leaders as they bless the gravesites.

⁵ Phone interview with secretary of CORE team, Vincent Oyet, Lukodi, 18th September 2013



Invited guest hands out the materials to be used during the reburials to affected family members.



The first bones are retrieved.

lords provided tools, tents, and chairs, community women cooked and distributed food, and the youth offered their strength in various laborious activities. The main celebrant Rwot Ojigi and other cultural leaders officiated the ceremony as they inspected and blessed the graves, demonstrated proper reburial procedures, and consoled those in need of support.

Acholi tradition was closely followed with the sacrifice of a goat for each body to be exhumed, the wrapping of the remains in a blanket or bed sheet, the throwing of *wee*⁶ in the old grave, the cleansing of the transport vehicle with a chicken, and the reburial ceremony by the home. All the necessary burial materials were also in conformity with Acholi tradition. (For example, the blankets/bed sheets did not include unwanted colours such as red and the sex of the sacrificed goats corresponded to the sex of the deceased). These rituals were performed to bring peace both to the families and the spirits of their loved ones.

All in all, 53 bodies were successfully exhumed and reburied as a part of this weeklong event. The bodies were recovered from 11 locations, with large numbers coming from Lukodi and Coope as to be expected. Besides Lukodi, there were 8 other locations in which recovered bodies were reburied.

Impact

JRP conducted an evaluation with various stakeholders involved in the reburial event to elicit feedback on project impact. The process and event

contributed to not only healing and reconciliation, but also worked to strengthen community relations and their capacity to respond to needs in the future.

The major achievements, as cited by the project beneficiaries, include reburying the 53 bodies as planned and, consequently, laying the spirits of loved ones to rest. The process itself, from planning meetings to the reburial, brought unity within families and reconciliation between landowners and affected families. Family members spoke of the happiness that the reburials brought to them after years of waiting. They report that the experience of *cen* and related fear no longer plagues the community and the “pain in their hearts” has been removed. This was true in the following comments by a widow who was able to transfer the remains of her late husband:

My heart is at peace now, I am indeed very relieved that finally my husbands’ remains are going back home where he belongs. This is such an

⁶ The Acholi term for food in the process of digestion taken from a goat’s intestines after slaughter.

emotional but happy moment for me and my family.

The working partnership formed with the cultural institution enabled the proper execution of cultural practices. Beneficiaries saw the teaching of cultural values and traditions to the entire community as another significant achievement. The passing of knowledge to younger generations encouraged many community members because they believe it will ensure the continuity of traditional practices.

The collaboration between participating stakeholders for the reburial event strengthened community relations overall. Trust was built between the CORE team and community, and there were noticeable improvements of teamwork within the CORE team. Community members appreciated the support of attending CSO and media representatives at the event, and stated that the “people are free to move around the community with new feelings of unity, hope, and positive attitudes” as a result of the reburial activities.

Moving Forward

As the families completed the reburial process with funeral rites, the Lukodi CORE team plans to take advantage of the trust and working partnerships developed as it moves forward. In line with the promotion of self-sustainability, the team conducted its own evaluations to reflect on its performance and better its next steps. The CORE team plans to officially register as a CBO while it continues to expand its efforts as a community-driven model of reconciliation.

Conclusion

Recommendations

Erin Jessee, an oral historian and cultural anthropologist, formulated lessons learned for Uganda in an issue of JRP’s *Voices* magazine based on her knowledge and experience with post-genocide reburials in Rwanda.⁷

The Lukodi case study provides a closer look into the current realities of reburials in Uganda and how the situation differs from that of Rwanda. The biggest of these differences lies in the fact that the national government has not yet recognised or invested in the much-needed reburials of Uganda. Despite this, the Lukodi reburial event provides a successful community-led example of an acceptable form and function of reburials. This case study paves the way for imagining how such initiatives could be replicated elsewhere in Uganda and how reburials could be effectively incorporated into nationalized commemoration efforts in the future.



An elder follows tradition by throwing wee into the old gravesite after exhumation.

⁷ Jessee, Erin. “Lessons from Post-Genocide Rwanda: The Location, Identification and Respectful Burial of the Anonymous Victims of Mass Atrocities.” *Voices*, September 2012: 38-39 available at <http://justiceandreconciliation.com/2013/01/voices-issue-3/>.

Secondly, in the case of Lukodi, the affected community members already knew the location and identity of the deceased victims. Their experience with forensic investigators was limited to quick exhumations following the massacre in the name of collecting evidence against the LRA.⁸ Even if such exhumations take place for documentation reasons only, the actors involved could more closely coordinate their activities with affected family members to assist in necessary healing.

Still, there are other communities who suffered from massacres where the families have not been so fortunate in being able to identify the remains of their loved ones.⁹ Additionally, the large numbers of missing persons in northern Uganda, and the support of forensic investigations to properly identify bodies found is an often-discussed need in today's post-conflict environment.¹⁰ If national support for such efforts is eventually secured, adopting lessons learned from Rwanda, in relation to meaningful collaboration with those communities affected, will become relevant.

No matter, the call for international and national political support is crucial in the case of Uganda. National processes related to transitional justice must pay attention to and accommodate community relevant needs, such as reburials. Erin Jesse spoke about the necessity of reburials in Rwanda "to promote social reconstruction and relieve the lingering spiritual violence experienced as a result of having been unable to bury and mourn missing loved ones according to tradition."¹¹ This spiritual violence is rampant in northern Ugandan communities, with countless loved ones lost during the ravaging conditions of conflict years that obstruct decent burials. The social and cultural disruption that persists in the absence of reburials is brought to light in the case of Lukodi.

Although the Lukodi reburials can be seen as a success, it is important to note the major obstacle that prevented these families from carrying out decent burials; lack of means. After years of brutal violence and forced displacement most families continue to live in abject poverty with little opportunity to climb out. The Lukodi CORE team received financial support through JRP for this event, but this cannot realistically be replicated among the many communities of northern Uganda in need of similar reburial processes. This makes it all the more imperative that the national government invests in necessary social reconstruction efforts.

In strengthening its commitment to the ongoing development and implementation of a transitional justice agenda, the Government of Uganda must listen to the voices of affected peoples to identify community-relevant needs and must promote, support, and collaborate with community-based initiatives such as the model seen in Lukodi.

Apart from national support, the case of Lukodi stands as a reminder of the immense benefit that comes from strengthening relationships and building capacity between local actors, such as government officials, cultural leaders, and organized community members, in their pursuit of community-based initiatives of reconciliation and healing.

8 However, there has been no communication of the findings to community since, as explained in the Lukodi Field Notes

9 For detailed information on an example of this see *Occupation and Carnage: Recounting Atrocities Committed by the NRA's 35th Battalion in Namokora Sub-County in August 1986*, JRP Field Note XVIII. Available at <http://www.justiceandreconciliation.com>.

10 Jesse, Erin. As above.

11 Jesse, Erin. As above.



Every Voice Matters
Listen And Act.



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