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Post-Conflict Cultural Revival and Social Restructuring in Northern Uganda

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In northern Uganda, cultural revival has become a major topic of concern after the decades-long civil conflict that displaced 1.9 million people. During that time, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) abducted an estimated 20,000 children and adults as mercenaries, porters, and sex slaves, and killed and mutilated thousands of others. The LRA wreaked general havoc on the entire northern population, contributing to the ensuing psychological and physical traumas that accompany such an experience. In the chaos and devastation of the protracted conflict, many cultural practices have fallen to the wayside, including dances, songs, folktales, marriage rites, social norms and rules, and the practice of wang'oo - nightly fireside meetings with extended family members. Wang'oo is seen by many to be the social, cultural, political, and ideological backbone of Luo society. Its discontinuation has led to the prolonged absence of other practices and has contributed to the general sense of social breakdown. In this thesis, I propose that the post-conflict reconstruction era in northern Uganda has opened up a space for social restructuring, including adding and discontinuing practices by certain groups (i.e., the youth or the cultural institution) and I will discuss how this restructuring has been problematized, namely by elders. Though some cultural revival projects are carried out by foreigners, here I focus on the Acholi opinion of cultural revival. I will explore how some cultural practices have changed over the course of the war and how reviving wang'oo is understood to help those affected by the conflict to find some sense of healing and closure. Such help, in the view of wang'oo proponents, includes resolving some of the tension between those who experienced the conflict differently and empowering communities to form their own economic endeavors and demand better services from their government. My analysis is based on original fieldwork carried out over the course of seven months in 2010. I conducted focus group discussions, individual interviews with women's groups, politicians, religious leaders, traditional dance groups,

and many others. I also observed multiple cultural events, including wang'oo and traditional dance as well as carried out two projects that involved the youth experience of culture in the post-conflict setting. All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants, except where permission was explicitly given.

Introduction

In my first few days in Uganda during my semester-long research project in 2010, I attended a barbeque party in Kampala that my host, Ms. Winnie Lawoko, was throwing for a national holiday. Winnie is a Luo woman from the Acholi region who has been successful in Kampala. Many of her Acholi friends and family left the northern region to live in either Kampala or Sweden during the Lord's Resistance Movement (LRM) conflict in northern Uganda, both popular locations for Ugandan emigrants or refugees. At this party, I was able to speak with several of her friends. One woman, Rose, spoke of her longing for her home. In addition to Rose's story below, I recorded my thoughts in my fieldnotes:

> *While [home] may not have been particularly wonderful at the time, to her, it's the perfect setting to live and raise a family and be happy. Now that the ceasefire has been signed, people are returning from abroad and going to back to their family's plot of land, hoping to find a house in one piece, if it's still there at all. Many people return to find an empty expanse of savannah – no trees, no house, no well. Making a life there would be starting from scratch. Some return to find remains of their house, but it's so overgrown with weeds and infested with bugs and animals, it will take at least a year to clean it up – not to mention the money it will take to repair. Rose told me her initial reaction was to be extremely saddened and depressed, hopeless even. And what else would you expect? Many of us experience that same kind of yearning for our childhood or family home. When you drive by and see how it's changed, you can only think about how those happy memories you have of that place are just that – memories. They have no physical proof anymore. But while the initial reaction is sadness, people find themselves willing and ready to rebuild their lives. They want to return to their family structure, their mango trees, and their family units – this also includes their dances, songs, fireside storytelling, and poetry. So why are people wanting to "reinvigorate" the culture? Because the rituals of twenty years ago [before the war] are what they relate with peace. Peace and "the way things were" go hand in hand. Both are very much idealized, but they are not separate entities for many Acholi. In order to have peace and stability, many people feel they must return to their traditions as a means of returning to their true selves.*

This woman's story is a portrait of the emotions of many others who have had similar experiences. The emotional distress of losing one's home and heritage has been one of the most devastating effects of the 20-year conflict. In this study, I propose that this is why so many people feel so strongly about returning to their former ways of life. I will explore the means of cultural revival that are taking place in northern Uganda with a strong emphasis on the social space that has opened up for restructuring cultural activities. I will not only discuss the importance of *wang'oo,* or nightly fireside community meetings, as a vital cultural practice which people believe once fostered unity and social cohesion, but I will

also examine the way in which its discontinuation is seen to affect other aspects of Acholi cultural life. I will conclude with a discussion of how Acholi people, with whom I worked, believe that *wang'oo* sessions can be utilized as a safe dialogue space to foster community building and cultural revival in response to the influences of globalization and conflict.

I designed my research project to discover what people really felt about cultural interventions for peace and how they can be made most effective. My primary goal was to understand how opinions on cultural revival varied amongst age groups and how they related to their experiences of the war. Having already seen how people had benefitted from experiences with traditional and cultural arts education, my goal was to discover ways to tailor cultural revival projects to different experiences of the war. What I found was that the practice of *wang'oo* appealed to nearly all age groups and could work as a tool for unification and empowerment. This thesis is based on the knowledge I acquired from these experiences, combined with my extensive literary research from peer-reviewed articles, journalistic histories, and analyses about the situation in northern Uganda.

History and the Effects of War

From 1986 to late 2006, a rebel movement known as the Lord's Resistance Movement (LRM) terrorized villages and abducted children across the entire northern region of Uganda using guerilla tactics, often reaching into neighboring Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic (CAR), in an apparent attempt at a government coup (Eichstaedt 2009; Dolan 2009). The movement in northern Uganda was led by Joseph Kony, famed for his multiple spirit possessions (*jok*) and elusiveness, who has continued to lead the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) through similar attacks in neighboring countries.

Whereas Kony's agenda had previously been to turn the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government into a theocracy, he changed his goal to that of creating a new population of Acholi people (Finnstrom 2008). As payment for their lack of support, Kony abducted Acholi children to be sex slaves and soldiers, often forcing the children to kill their own parents or siblings (Dolan 2009). The girls would be given to high-ranking generals and forced to bear children without any medical attention, usually where they were camped in the wilderness, referred to as the "bush." The boys were trained to use weapons and fight (Dolan 2009; Eichstaedt 2009; M. Green 2008). The LRA attacked villages indiscriminately and fiercely, leaving destruction and despair in its wake.

The threat of an LRA attack created great unrest and disturbance in the social structure of the Acholi, leading to the perceived social breakdown that persists today (Dolan 2009). The paranoia that friends and family could be LRA informants has made an atmosphere of mistrust. The fear formed by the rebels' presence and guerilla tactics also left a space for criminals, who came to be known as the *boo kec* bandits, to pillage homesteads for food. The population feared the bandits, who could often be even more relentless than the trained guerilla fighters of the LRA (Finnstrom 2008). Because of this constant state of fear, many people ceased to participate in communal gatherings or to make their positions known by lighting a fire as they normally would every night (Finnstrom 2008). There was not enough time to devote to recreational activities in the struggle to recover from attacks or survive in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps (discussed further below) (young woman, March 27, 2010).

As the conflict intensified in the 1990s, people's ancestral homes became unsafe. As Bishop Ochola explained in a conversation, the Luo people do not put strong doors on their homes as a sign of trust for their neighbors, which ultimately caused these homes to be vulnerable to rebel attacks. The children began leaving their homes at night because

one of the LRA's preferred tactics was to attack children when they were sleeping at home with nothing but a mud hut to protect them. They also targeted children gathered in large groups, like in schools or orphanages (de Temmerman 2001). Because of the insecurity at home and school, children became night commuters, trekking as far as 10 kilometers to city centers so they could crowd onto a concrete floor with hundreds of other children who were also seeking safety. The children were often minimally protected with only a man or two with automatic weapons, and they were hardly safer in the commuting centers. This necessity surely saved many from rebel captivity, but it also took the children away from the guidance of their parents and communities for long periods of the day.

Further complicating issues, the government forced the entire northern population (approximately 1.9 million people) except for those already living in town centers into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camps in 1996. They were given 48-hours to pack everything important to them and build a home in a very limited space, often surrounded by strangers (HRW Report 2005). The government formed the camps to protect them from large-scale military offensives. President Museveni was moving his army into the north to try to defeat the rebels with excessive force, and he wanted the villagers out of the way (HRW 2005). In the camps, the Acholi found themselves in a situation similar to refugees. Sometimes, when individuals refused to move to the camps, the government soldiers would accuse them of being rebels or rebel-supporters, killing them on site. When people were moving to the camps, the rebels would also consider them government-supporters and kill them (Green 2008). Throughout the conflict, the Acholi often found themselves caught in the middle of a war they did not want to fight and taking the blame for the situation from the rest of the country, which has been divided along ethnic lines exacerbated by colonial policies.

The forced displacement into the camps was unsuccessful, making a bad situation worse as the war continued for another 14 years. The camps were meant to be a form of "protected villages," with government soldiers guarding them on all sides (Dolan 2009). However, at the height of the war in the early 2000s, around 1,000 people died each week in the camps (HRW 2005). The rebels found it easier to abduct people from the camps because they could find them concentrated in one place. Whether intentional or accidental, camp fires were common, and they could wipe out dozens or hundreds of homes because they were located in such close proximity to each other. The health conditions in the camps were abhorrent. Without clean water and no access to sanitary latrines, cholera and other diseases were rampant (Dolan 2009).

The UPDF soldiers who were intended to guard the camps often became dangerous themselves. Many were accused of stealing food, neglecting to carry out their duties, and raping women, contributing to the high HIV/AIDS rate in the camps (Dolan 2009; Finnstrom 2008). Additionally, the people were allowed to farm only occasionally. Sometimes, IDP residents were shot if they were found going outside of the camp to farm, under the assumption they could be joining the rebels or acting as informants. This made the IDP camp residents entirely reliant on food aid, creating a culture of dependency (Pincer 2010). However, the food aid was hardly ever enough, and many elderly and children starved to death or died of malnourishment combined with other illnesses. In addition to the obvious tragedy of such mass amounts of deaths, the loss of so many elders was and is very deeply felt because of their important roles in society as cultural leaders. Attempts at cultural revival have been stalled in some communities because their elderly relatives died during the war (Acholi dancer, March 27, 2010). The middle-aged parents feel there is no one to provide guidance to the predominantly young population, and they feel ill-equipped

to carry out this task themselves, as this should be delegated to the elders. According to a Human Rights Watch Report,

> Northern Uganda is one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world because of the extensive and prolonged displacement of a very high proportion of its inhabitants and large camps where the conditions are poor to appalling and there is little prospect of work, health care, education, or return home. (HRW 2005:16)

Though most of the camps are now closed and most inhabitants have returned to their villages, the effects of the prolonged displacement are still profoundly felt, and a new set of problems awaits most returned villages.

The camps further disrupted the traditional family setting and made it impossible to carry on cultural practices like dance and music, because every day was consumed with the struggle for survival. When asked why traditions have been put on hold, many people point to life in the camps as the primary cause (Interview, March 27, 2010; July 2010). The struggle to survive became the only constant in chaotic lives. It seems that this existence has been widely blamed for the perceived social breakdown and moral degeneration (Dolan 2009). In my own interviews, as well as focus group discussions carried out by the Pincer Group Intl., Ltd., participants echoed similar tendencies as to what Chris Dolan terms as a "need to place the blame on internal sources." This allows some semblance of control over the situation, rather than on external forces like rebel soldiers or government policy. This sense has led some people to believe that the problems can be solved by searching within the group, blaming women and children for issues like promiscuity, prostitution, and immorality, rather than blaming the conflict for creating the situation. With this mindset, it is easy to see how many Acholi believe that cultural revival, or a return to traditional rules and norms, is a solution (Dolan 2009).

Abducted children suffer innumerable abuses. They are often given drugs and guns and indoctrinated into the rebel army by being forced to viciously murder a family member (Dolan 2009; Finnstrom 2008; M. Green 2008). Their young minds are filled with guerilla war tactics and death. Their parents are dead or are never seen again. Their only "family" is the rest of the LRA fighters - hardly an adequate guidance system. With many of these children escaping rebel captivity, rehabilitation centers have been trying to teach them vocational skills and give them some sort of livable life. Still, people are concerned because these children lost the socialization into Acholi norms they should have received to guide them through their lives and help them make good decisions. The same can be said for those children who were born in the bush or in the camps. An entire generation has grown up knowing only war and violence, and they are just now getting to know their heritage as teenagers.

After a ceasefire was signed and officially observed in 2006, a relative peace returned to Uganda, and today people are still working to rebuild their lives (Green 2008; Dolan 2009). Kony agreed to the cease-fire and moved his army into Garamba National Forest in DRC. Still, a final peace agreement has not been signed, and the government has more or less abandoned diplomatic solutions (Operation Lightning Thunder, IRIN Africa 2009). After the Ugandan government attempted to bomb the LRA camp, Kony responded by carrying out the same atrocities in DRC, Sudan, and CAR, abducting, mutilating, and killing thousands while displacing tens of thousands more. Some say he is reforming his army in order to return to northern Uganda, but this fear no longer pervades daily life. Instead, people are choosing to accept the stability they have at the present, taking

advantage of the opportunity to return home and rebuild. These efforts are both inspiring and disheartening for many people. Though they are elated to have peace and the ability to return home, they have new hardships to face upon their return, including providing their own food, rebuilding their homes, and sending their children to school.

Cultural Revival

> The restoration and renewal of cultural values and traditions can be enormously helpful in assisting people to deal with the past, forge a new post conflict identity and rebuild social cohesion. However there are also risks. Culture, if it is to be seen as meaningful and accepted by future generations cannot be static and has to evolve and constantly incorporate new ideas and expressions. Current tension exposed in the research indicates that this evolution is precarious in northern Uganda and more work led by cultural leaders is needed to strike a balance between the generations. This will enable the community to move forward collectively. Dynamic cultural support will also help communities recognize the importance, value and rights of other groups in Uganda, which is critical to national reconciliation (Pincer report 2010: 33).

Despite the treacherous peace deal and numerous challenges, the Acholi people are attempting to move on with their lives in peace. Since 2006, intensive rebuilding efforts by the government and other organizations have made great strides. Those displaced into camps are moving back to their homes, but there is still much to be done. As could be expected, the conflict created deep wounds in the social, cultural, and political lives of the Acholi people. This has led to the widely recognized need for a revitalization of the cultural mechanisms that were largely abandoned in the past two decades (Dolan 2009). Cultural practices like dancing or *wang'oo* have come to be associated with peaceful times, and many people look back nostalgically on what they once knew of their home.[1] In the aftermath of mass displacement, child abduction, mutilation, and murder, cultural revival is a vital aspect of post-conflict reconstruction. Many Acholi believe it will foster peace between elders and youth and restore social structures that can be highly empowering, enabling the Acholi to reestablish a kind of unity and togetherness that will help them to achieve some political clout.

There are multiple organizations participating in cultural revival or incorporating some aspect of it in their work. Such organizations include War Child Holland, War Affected Children's Association (WACA), Ker Kwaro Acholi (KKA), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Gulu Theatre Artists (GUTA), War Affected Youth Association (WAYA), Watoto Church, the US Embassy in Uganda, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and multiple religious and government programs, though they all exercise different approaches. For example, War Child Holland claims to have been the first to initiate cultural revival programs in their partner communities, though they have recently backed away from this initiative because the communities began taking ownership of the programs.[2] Then there are smaller organizations, like WACA, who form partnerships with war-affected communities. They had a program running in a village in Awach sub-county in Gulu District where the community met every Saturday to practice traditional dances, and WACA provided them with costumes and teachers.[3] The US Embassy even signed a two-year contract with KKA for about $56,000 to "revive and preserve the Acholi culture" (*New Vision*, December 15, 2009). The project had lofty goals of restoring practices,

norms, and values, as well as releasing multimedia materials and sensitizing school children to their culture. Though most of these programs were started by large INGOs, they were formed in partnership with Acholi communities and emphasized the need to pass on ownership of the programs to the communities themselves. Now, it seems that communities are taking the initiative without major organizational support.

With so much time and effort being put into these programs, it seems necessary to step back and really examine what they are attempting to achieve and how their projects will or will not be welcomed. During my time in northern Uganda, it became apparent that not only is cultural revival deemed necessary to ensure that Luo traditions continue through the generations, it also helps many people to forget about the trauma they suffered during the war (Finnstrom 2008).[4] Still, this movement has been met with many obstacles. As mentioned before, many communities are very young, and they feel they cannot revive their traditions without the elders. There is some credence to this statement, as many of them were born in the camps or were very young when the war began. They do not know what peace looks like or even what the traditions are. Most communities also lack the money to buy the appropriate costumes and instruments to go along with certain dances. This gives a sense of illegitimacy for many groups and maintains a disinterest amongst the youth.[5]

Creating a more significant obstacle for many Acholi is the Westernization and globalization that took place before and during the course of the war, resulting in "diluted culture" (Dolan 2009). Though these changes might have occurred in times of peace, the war brought in a deluge of international organizations, Western media, missionaries, volunteers, and researchers that have brought their cultural influences with them. People who moved into the towns from the villages were also introduced to Western media that they likely would not have seen otherwise, including rap music videos and break dancing, which have become hugely popular among the youth. When people began moving out of the IDP camps, they often left their children behind where they could access health facilities and schools because there were none in their villages. This further separated children from the cultural support they would receive with their families (IRIN African 2007). Many traditionalists fear that the children will abandon Luo traditions for Western imports, and this has created a great deal of tension and a major point of contention between elders and youth. Traditional Luo culture is based on sustenance through a pastoral and agricultural economy, which does not resonate with everyone's current lifestyle (Imara 2010). For example, a young person who has built a life in town as a business owner might be reluctant to give up his shop to return to a home that he does not associate himself with, including the agriculturalist lifestyle. In these cases, for who are cultural revival and healing meant?

Though it is a challenging and ephemeral pursuit, it is important for this paper to note the meaning of the term "traditional culture" in the Luo context. As an anthropology student, I recognize that culture is fluid and constantly responding to external influence and internal pressures. The accepted definition in anthropology is that culture is a dynamic but internally patterned system, encompassing everything from beliefs to social norms and values (Goodale 2009). However, this definition does not always translate to the areas in which we conduct our work. In northern Uganda, the nuanced term "tradition" is thrown around quite freely, creating the perception that Luo culture is or should be fixed and pure. This ideal presents a challenge to the culture-as-a-system theory because the changes that have transgressed in Acholi society occurred simultaneously with the experience of a violent conflict and displacement. This has contributed to the sense that these changes are Western intrusions rather than uncontrollable circumstances on a world stage. Some people

believe that the Western influence must be stopped, and that this would prevent the young people from participating in "improper" behaviors.

Various actors are drawing up their own definitions of what Luo culture should look like in Acholiland, from governmental and cultural institutions to localized villages, which brings up the question: "Who speaks for culture?" (Goodale 2008: 73). Cultural revivalists have found it to be beneficial to draw on a solid conception of the past in order to recreate it in the future, which presents a theoretical and ideological issue. While it is important to learn from the past, it is impossible, and potentially unhealthy, to attempt to recreate it in its entirety.

Shannon Speed encountered the same issue of essentializing culture with her work in Nicolas Ruiz, Mexico. She explained, "…we may have to confront the fact that indigenous groups often find such cultural fluidity contrary not only to their goals but also to their very understanding of themselves and their cultures" (2008:73). She found that in presenting their case to the government, it was best to package the residents' culture in a way that would claim their identity as indigenous peoples of Mexico. I encountered a similar situation. Essentializing Luo culture–establishing a clear set of activities and values that should be revived–has allowed the development of a foundation from which to base revival programs. I worked within this framework because this is what my informants seemed to mean and to value, and this is the context through which cultural revival occurs.

In my interviews, I found the above factors contributed to a concept of three distinctive time markers of Luo culture: pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict. Though the identification of a "traditional culture" varied among different people, I found that it was clear that this phrase usually referred to the pre-conflict state of life, or what existed before this relatively peaceful society was disrupted and uprooted by violence. Due to the fixed ideal of Luo culture and the association of a return to cultural values as a return to what existed before the conflict, cultural revival has been tied to peace-building in a very unique way. This definition has been problematic in many ways, particularly in fostering a purist ideal of Luo culture that seems to have been established by other Ugandans, Westerners, and even Luo people themselves. However, it has allowed cultural practices to foster a sense of healing and moving on in the communities where traditions are being revived (Dolan 2009).

Other researchers and journalists in northern Uganda have noted similar responses to the conflict, as well as compared the Acholi response to other post-conflict societies around the world. Chris Dolan devotes a chapter to this in his report on northern Uganda, saying that the perceived social breakdown has caused a great deal of tension between the elders and youth (2009). Matthew Green also notes this idea in his journalist-style report of the conflict. He writes that it is natural to romanticize the past, and he even found himself doing so (2008). Atkinson shows in his historical ethnography of the Acholi people that war and conflict have been fairly frequent throughout the history of the Luo. The men have been recruited for wars, even as a special battalion in World Wars I and II, and successive Ugandan Presidents have recruited them as the predominant fighting force in their armies. Indeed, Luo people find themselves classified as "knowing only three things: fighting, hunting, and dancing" (Green 2008:52), as explained by a former UPDP soldier. Unfortunately, warfare has been all too common throughout the history of the Central Luo of northern Uganda, but never before has it been conducted on such a devastating scale.

Romanticizing the past can be both helpful and problematic in the context of Luo culture. David Kertzer explains in *Rituals, Politics, and Power* (1989) that the rituals of a group of people can empower them as a community even in the absence of consensus, thus

improving their political and social power in the broader context (1988). Cultural revival is but one of many initiatives working to empower the Luo people in order to facilitate their growth as a community and help them to rebuild their own schools and hospitals, moving into the future on their own. On the other hand, this golden past can be debilitating, creating a constant struggle toward a perfect peace that is unattainable by any group of people. Though the Luo would say that relative peace has returned to the north, they do not believe that peace has fully returned because there are still domestic struggles, poverty, disease, etc. They are correct on one level because these issues are largely a remnant of the conflict, but domestic struggles, poverty, and disease exist in even the most peaceful of societies in the form of structural violence and hegemonic relationships of power and inequality. At what point can such problems be classified as everyday struggles and cease to be reminders of a war wrought with brutal victimization and marginalization?

Despite contact with Arab slave traders and British colonialism, people believe Luo culture has come through fairly intact, though always responding to the outside influences in such areas as religion and clothing. However, I often found that what people described as a "tradition" or "norm" was something established after British colonial rule, such as clothing styles or religion. Still, it was the massive upheaval caused by the LRA conflict that disrupted cultural practices on a grand scale. Now that people are returning home, they are attempting to revive their culture while also struggling to incorporate the influences of globalization. Some Acholi people who have had the opportunity to participate in traditional culture believe that the revival of *wang'oo*, nightly community meetings, can act as a forum for discussion of all of these influences and changes. *Wang'oo* can also serve its former purpose of promoting other traditions like dance and music or traditional marriage rituals, thus helping to relieve inter- and intra-group tensions that have arisen in the post-conflict era.

Wang'oo

The discontinuation of cultural practices, especially of *wang'oo,* caused and still perpetuates the perception of a social break down in Acholiland. *Wang'oo* is simultaneously one of the most cherished practices and most mourned losses. It is also perhaps one of the most exemplary characterizations of the importance of the knowledge and wisdom of elders as well as the respect given to them. Many people I spoke with about *wang'oo* believe it to be the foundation of Luo culture and family values. In my field notes from 2010, I wrote, "*Wang'oo* is the traditional Acholi practice of sitting by the fireside at night, telling stories, folk tales, riddles, and discussing one another's lives." This definition is accurate, but it does not fully convey the importance of *wang'oo* that I would later come to understand.

I had the opportunity to attend a *wang'oo* during the first week of my field work in a village called Bungatira outside of Gulu town. It was the first time I had heard of the practice, despite my previous visits to Gulu. This likely has something to do with its discontinuation, and the nature of *wang'oo* as a meeting among close family members. My friends and I received the invitation that morning, not really sure what we had in store for us. Nonetheless, we eagerly loaded up in the SUV with some friends from the Pincer Group and drove about 30 miles to the village. This trip was part of Pincer's comprehensive survey about public opinion on the Peace, Recovery, and Development Plan (PRDP) in northern Uganda. At the village, we found about 30 people – men, women, elders, and youth – gathered around a large fire, already talking. We joined the circle, and the *wang'oo* began. The entire session lasted for a few hours and was conducted almost entirely in Acholi, the Luo dialect predominantly spoken in northern Uganda. A friend from Pincer

translated everything as it progressed, but it was not difficult to glean details from the tones of those who spoke.

There was a lot of frustration expressed in this *wang'oo*. Elders were frustrated with the youth. The youth were frustrated with the elders. Everyone was frustrated with the government. Cultural leaders were upset by their lack of power. Young women complained of their lack of access to education. Elders expressed their concern over the intrusion of Western culture. Although no solutions were offered in this *wang'oo*, it served as a remarkable starting point for open dialogue. Outside of this realm, there is very little space or time for this kind of conversation.

The Bungatira *wang'oo* was not necessarily conducted in an ideal format. First was the fact that it was initiated and attended by non-community members – Pincer Group. Though they were still Acholi, they were not a part of this particular community. Other than that, it was more of a *wang'oo* to discuss how to revive and continue the tradition. It was attended by cultural leaders of the area, many of whom were elders. There was also a significant youth presence that brought an interesting perspective. It is difficult to capture the "ideal" of *wang'oo* in a brief discussion because of its all-encompassing nature. In the past, nearly every community action was decided in these sessions, and everything the child learns came from the parents, aunts, uncles, and elders around the campfire. Still, the leaders of this particular session asked the participants to define what *wang'oo* is to them. Below are some responses as they were relayed to me:

> *Elders said that if you got a message from outside the family group, then you should discuss it here before you disseminate it. It's a place where the women prepare food, and it's passed around the circle. They said if you want knowledge, you must talk to the elders at wang'oo. Here, they taught girls how to behave, conduct themselves, dress, do housework, etc. The boys would be taught how to hunt.*

> *When people are done with a long day's work, they come here to rest while children play outside the circle. It's a place where counseling is done, and it brings about harmony in the community. It is a place where clans meet each other. Boys gather together here before they go hunting. The elders first come together and speak a blessing on the boys.*

> *For the ladies, they think Wang'oo helps with courtship. During this time, mothers could be sure the girl doesn't escort the boy until the age of 15 or 16. The girl will give the boy a bead if she has accepted the proposal. When a boy is going to choose a girl, he observes how she lives to see how tidy she keeps her living space. The elders would follow her to his family to negotiate. Now, they say that girls and boys have relationships without the elders' knowledge, and this is why so many girls have early pregnancies. Since the war has introduced many children to town life, girls and boys are not interested in having their parents and grandparents involved in their relationships. How could the community return to this kind of courtship when the kids are so reluctant to do so?*

It is obvious from just these few explanations that *wang'oo* has different implications for everyone. Before the conflict, *wang'oo* was a time for the family to come together, building a sense of community, friendship, and trust. A sizeable fire would be built every night, usually in a central location, which Bishop Ochola describes as "an important part of the village life where the groups came together every evening to share their meals" (www.

bishopochola.typepad.com). No more than 20 people would attend – mostly family members from nearby family clusters in the village. Some report that men, women, and children would gather around the fire together. Other sources said the women and girls would stay in the kitchen for their own conversations while the boys and men gathered around the fire. This discrepancy can be attributed either to variation among clans or as an attempt to equalize men and women, which is an aspect of Western influence that has been introduced during the course of the war. Nonetheless, it was clear that there were specialized topics of conversation for young girls and boys.

This central meeting time taught children everything they needed to know about how to be proper Acholi citizens, including respect, marriage rituals, courtship, dances, songs, folktales, sewing, hunting, cooking, building, farming, and a number of other activities vital to their livelihood and the livelihood of the Luo culture. Elders taught lessons in the form of folktales and riddles, allowing children to learn while the adults enjoyed the entertainment of a good story. From this central meeting place, the community fostered unity, friendship, and peace, empowering themselves through the practice of their rituals (Kertzer 1988).

Discontinuation

The discontinuation of *wang'oo* in the camps and other communities compounded the affects of the war on other cultural practices that are taught in *wang'oo* sessions. Dolan explains, "When the cultural context within which such issues would otherwise be dealt with was debilitated, they became still less amenable to solutions" (2009:187). Though *wang'oo* was discontinued more or less around the same time as other practices, its absence is partially responsible for the continued social unrest among the Acholi and the prolongation of the absence of these other practices, like dancing, singing, and storytelling. Without *wang'oo*, there was no space for dialogue to discuss the changes caused by the conflict and discuss plans of action for responding to factors like globalization and displacement into the camps. The loss of *wang'oo* was a loss of a source of social cohesion for many communities

Not all communities completely discontinued the practice or abandoned the concept of *wang'oo*. Betty Bigombe, the renowned peace negotiator credited for much of the progress made during the peace talks, described *wang'oo* as one of her techniques for engaging with the Acholi people and ascertaining the local opinion on the peace process. She began by visiting villages and camps, dancing and dining with the residents. Then she participated in the sessions which sometimes lasted into the next day. She emphasized that the session was for open discussions and dialogue, where residents could voice their opinions safely, reinforcing the idea of *wang'oo* as a safe space for communication. Bigombe stressed that most importantly *wang'oo* is a place for justice and reconciliation, where the elders mediate and judge conflicts, which squares with the pre-conflict Acholi ideal of *wang'oo*. Her meetings allowed open dialogue on topics that were previously only discretely discussed. This proved to be therapeutic for those voicing their opinions and helping her to mediate a peace process in the interest of those most affected (Ochieng 2007). It is unclear whether these sessions continued after Bigombe's presence or not, but she utilized this practice for its communal purposes long before the war ended and post-conflict reconstruction began. This highlights both how *wang'oo* can be effective in peacebuilding, but we also have to investigate how it gets constructed differently depending on who organizes it and what purpose they want it to serve. In the post-conflict setting, *wang'oo* is seen as a part of cultural revival, but it is also being remade for current purposes.

Dolan explains that the discontinuation of cultural practices is the worst side effect of social breakdown as it creates further distress among an already troubled population (2009). Simply put, it removes the sense of identity and control from victims of the conflict. Kertzer explains that rituals exist within a symbolic complex that allows people to feel as if they maintain some control over their lives (1988). They also provide a framework to respond to political and social crises as they arise. In the past, *wang'oo* has filled this niche, providing a place to discuss conflicts and create plans of action. With the discontinuation of *wang'oo* and other practices, Acholi feel they have lost their sense of control. Additionally, some elders feel that the high level of theft and what some perceive as general immorality is linked to the absence of *wang'oo* and other Acholi norms. In an article by IPS, *Rwot*,[6] David Onen Acana II said, "We have a generation of children who never saw the *wang'oo*. That is why we have thefts and all forms of bad manners" (IPS, October 23, 2009). In this statement, the *Lawirwodi* echoes the voices of people who believe that the revival of *wang'oo* will restore society to its pre-conflict state.

No specific time marker can be placed to determine when exactly *wang'oo* was discontinued because the intensity of the war varied across regions, and many families resisted the move into IDP camps. Thus, its discontinuation varied from family to family, depending on when the violence escalated. However, it became evident through interviews with villagers and cultural leaders that they believe there was definitely a discontinuation of the practice directly due to the conditions of the conflict. Though it would not solve all of the problems, reviving this practice is clearly linked to restoration of the sociocultural symbolic identity amongst the Acholi people. *Wang'oo* as a communal practice is linked to the dynamics of conflict, displacement, mutual trust, and justice.

Most people reasoned that *wang'oo* was discontinued for both logistical and economic reasons. During the conflict and before people moved into the camps, a fire would alert the LRA to their location, which was a risk people tried to avoid. Additionally, travelling far from home to collect firewood was dangerous due to the possibility of encountering rebels or stepping on a government-planted landmine. When people moved to the camps, it was difficult to acquire firewood. Even if firewood was accessible, building a fire in a densely populated camp ran the risk of setting fire to hundreds of huts within the camp.

There was also a level of trust that went along with *wang'oo*. In the camps, people often had new neighbors of whom they were wary and with whom they would not want to share their personal information and struggles. *Wang'oo* places a strong emphasis on the extended family unit and the importance of unity amongst a village or clan. It is not considered a true *wang'oo* if it is missing any one of the elements associated with it. For this reason, *wang'oo* sessions initiated by external groups or visitors are not completely accepted as the real thing. Being incapable of building a fire may seem like no reason to stop a community from discussing their lives, and surely this did not stop completely, but in the process of cultural revival and "purification", the session should be carried out properly. Without all of the elements, it still feels like settling for less rather than working to achieve the highest level of peace. Obviously, people were still having conversations and some form of social living throughout the conflict, but the ritual, communal, and historical importance of *wang'oo* was deeply missed.

Since *wang'oo* serve as a meeting point, justice center, school, and center for cultural heritage, people argue that its discontinuation contributed to the youths' lacking understanding of cultural values, norms, and practices that has caused them to be largely ignorant of their own rich cultural heritage. Most people will mention dance, gender roles, marriage, respect for elders, telling of folktales, and the social significance of *wang'oo* when asked about cultural revival. As the central meeting point for the community, it is difficult to reinstate other practices without first exploring the reinstatement of *wang'oo*.

Social Restructuring

The return to relative normalcy has opened up a space to redefine what it means to be Luo. There is a great deal of uncertainty and lack of guidance for the youth, whose lives seem to be defined by the conflict. This means that they are ignorant of many of their parents' traditions and have indulged in Western art forms, like rap or hip-hop, which they have discovered in the towns. Though adopting Western art forms is by no means negative in itself, some elders feel that these practices threaten the survival of traditional Acholi art forms. Additionally, globalization has introduced new concepts of human rights and a sense of being part of a global community, inspiring the intentional discontinuation of some practices.

There are some changes that have occurred by means of removing or discontinuing a particular practice, whether intentionally or coincidentally. In some instances, this means purposefully discontinuing practices that might be viewed as repressive, especially in the realms of women's and children's rights. On the other hand, there are changes that involve adding an element that did not previously exist. In these instances, cultural revival has opened up a space for overarching institutions and interventions to insert an ideal and call it "traditional" without too many people being aware of the "intrusion." Additionally, there are those that have become a combination of Western and Luo cultures, in what anthropologist Sally Merry calls hybridization--taking a foreign concept or practice and "vernacularizing" it to fit the context (2006). Most would claim that this restructuring is beneficial as the region moves into a peaceful future. Others fear that the recognition of women's and children's freedoms has contributed to the current social breakdown due to these groups becoming "disobedient" (Pincer focus group, January 2010). Opinions on the subject differ, and most organizations and institutions – Acholi and foreign – support the option to practice any form of culture which an individual might wish to adhere to as long as it does not violate any human rights. It is difficult to distinguish between cultural changes that have occurred over time as opposed to changes that have occurred directly due to the conflict as everything seems to have changed simultaneously, and some changes may have occurred had the conflict never happened. Below I will discuss several areas of Luo cultural life and how they have changed in response to the conflict and globalization, including additions, removals, and hybridizations.

Ker Kwaro Acholi

The most official cultural authority, with strong connections to the central government of Uganda, is Ker Kwaro Acholi.[7] However, this institution has a controversial history. According to personal communication with Bishop Ochola, the institution was established by the British colonialists and had garnered little respect in its brief time presiding over the Luo people. I have heard this opinion echoed by many, and most Acholi do not have any personal connection to the institution. However, KKA doles out materials and reports claiming to have existed since the migration of the Luo to northern Uganda around 1400 AD (SPRING Grant Summary). Why do there exist two opposing sides to the history of such a prominent institution? How might these definitions be politically motivated? What implications does this have for the future relationship between the cultural institution and the people?

KKA is led by the *Lawirwodi*, who is given the authority to make decisions over all of the central Luo people of northern Uganda. However, before the colonial area, there were only *Rwodi* who presided over their individual clans in an informal support network (Atkinson 1994). Bishop Ochola explains, "… it must be noted that the Luo culture does not allow another *Rwot* to be on top of the other *Rwot*. All the Cultural

Rwodi are equal in status and dignity" (Personal communication, February 20, 2011). According to this view, they were surrounded by Counselors, and the large clans historically never overpowered the smaller clans. All *Rwodi* were equal in power, no matter the size of the clan, and all were equal to the rest of the Luo people except for the role they played in society.

The British colonialists appointed the first Lawirwodi in 1950. Uganda's People Congress (UPC) appointed yet another *Lawirwodi* after coming to power in 1962, continuing the institution. Both the British and the central Ugandan government wanted the Luo people to have a single authority through which to govern, similar to the other powerful kingdoms of Uganda. Idi Amin, the famed militaristic dictator that ruled Uganda during the 1970s, then removed the position of *Lawirwodi*, along with all other cultural leaders as he felt they threatened his power. The current *Rwot* David Onen Acana II was appointed after his father's death in 1996. His father had been appointed by the current government in 1990 with the reinstatement of cultural leaders throughout Uganda. Though the *Lawirwodi* have no role in the affairs of the central government and limited power amongst their people, they are in charge of all cultural matters. In the Luo region, this includes the traditional justice mechanism *mato oput*,[8] land dispute settlements, domestic abuse cases, and cultural revival.

While KKA does have community outreach programs in cultural revival, it does not reach as far into the community as their reports might claim. I even documented what may be evidence of corruption and misappropriation of funds. None of the participants in my interviews had had any interaction with the cultural institution, despite the need for mediation of land disputes. This is likely because much of the money that the institution receives in grants is not used properly. In an informal interview with a friend and former employee at the cultural institution, I learned that the funding that was meant to go to her projects was instead given to housing for the *Rwodi*. She was unable to carry out any of the goals for her position, for which she had received funding from a major source. When it came time to write a report detailing her project, she was told to fabricate the results so the corruption would not be apparent to the funding agency.[9]

In a formal interview with an administrator of KKA, I was told that much of their spending for cultural revival was put towards building houses for the *Rwodi*. Keep in mind there are 54 *Rwodi* amongst the Luo, and this could be a major undertaking depending on the type of houses being built. When inquiring further, the administrator said it was to ensure the *Rwodi* can stay with their people and really listen to and observe their problems. However, there is no justifiable reason that KKA had to furnish housing for the *Rwodi*, and it seems that such treatment would serve to further distance the *Rwodi* from their people. Additionally, the money granted to KKA for cultural revival could be better spent on costumes, instruments, or community support programs. KKA's report from SPRING denotes that they are trying to foster a healthier relationship between traditional leaders and the people through *wang'oo* sessions, while also disseminating information "regarding Acholi traditional culture, practices and norms." However, it is unclear how successful or comprehensive these efforts have been. The KKA administrator indicated that the funding had only covered *Rwodi* housing up to the time of the interview.

More evidence comes from the fact that the cultural institution is surrounded by what is termed a "cultural village." It should be noted that these grounds are the former home of the British administrative offices, and they were given to the cultural institution for their administrative purposes, the point being that no one formerly lived on this land. One can see the "cultural village" behind the offices, and it looks like any other residence

with grass-thatched roofs on mud-brick huts, except it has a large plaque in front which reads, "Acholi Cultural Village." When I asked the same KKA administrator about the village he said,

> The question of the cultural village came when this institution was brought up. We cannot do without a cultural village. Because the cultural heads from the 54 clans, when they convene a meeting, they convene a meeting at home. That is what came to the minds of the chiefs that we should have a cultural village, centrally at the palace. So that whatever we want to do we can do it at the palace.

It is true that the *Rwodi* cannot act without the consent of their people, but it seems that the founders of the cultural institution fabricated a traditional residence and a small portion of the population to act, or appear to act, as a consenting population. With the cultural institution's administrative offices nestled into the cultural village, it gives the impression of authenticity. This might be acceptable if the *Lawirwodi* was only over one clan, but he is in charge of all 54 clans. It gives the impression that KKA is simply trying to give the appearance of hosting a counsel for important decisions rather than actually engaging with the Acholi/Luo community.

As previously mentioned, the *Lawirwodi* did not traditionally exist in Luo culture. Because of this, *Rwot* Acana II has had extreme difficulties garnering respect from his people. One news article from *The Acholi Times* would seem to reflect a different perspective, however, claiming that *Rwot* Acana II is the 25th Paramount Chief in his lineage (Amoru and Makumbi 2010). These authors may be misinterpreting the information, for it is possible that he is the 25th *Rwot* for the Payira clan to which he belongs, but the position of *Lawirwodi* is a fairly recent creation, and there have not been 25 *Lawirwodi*. In this matter, KKA seems to be using the post-conflict confusion to their advantage. In an interview with an administrator from KKA, he said this about the *Lawirwodi*:

> I must adore the King like the Paramount Chief. I have to adore by giving utmost respect because we see Paramount Chief as the son of God, the only one whom is very close to God. And our cultural values demand that we really give the highest respect and be very faithful to him (Personal interview, April 19th 2010).

Bishop Ochola proclaimed that a statement such as this is "false and blasphemous" (personal communication, February 20, 2011). This particular administrator may be referring to the *Lawirwodi* in this way because he is trying to assert his authority over the other clans, utilizing the social breakdown to the advantage of the cultural institution. If KKA is successful in creating a new image for the position of *Lawirwodi*, asserting his status as a powerful ruler, centralized leadership can become the norm and decisions can be made without consulting the people, as would ideally occur. This was certainly what the British had in mind when they established the position and, since the current President Museveni receives little political support from northern Uganda it could be a useful tactic for his regime, as well. Since the *Lawirwodi* is a direct line to the government, it benefits the centralized government in that they can more easily rule over the Acholi through a centralized leader. This is possible because so much of the young population is unaware of the history of this institution, allowing administrators to pass off KKA as "traditional" or powerful. Where cultural leaders could be promoting traditional education, *wang'oo* sessions, empowering communities, or providing supplies, they seem to have instead focused their efforts on reinforcing their power and political clout.

Dance, Music, and Art

For many people, the first thought that occurs to them when they think of "culture" is of the art forms. We know that culture encompasses every aspect of life, but it is often the modes of creative expression that create a lasting impression and elicit feelings of pride and enjoyment. The Luo are indeed very proud of their art–numerous dances and songs, and even the famous poet Okot p'Bitek, are credited to their rich cultural history.

Dance is one aspect of Luo culture that has managed to persevere through the war, though its use and practice have been somewhat altered. This can be attributed to the extreme poverty brought on by the war and Westernization inspiring more conservative dress, though it is difficult to determine if these changes are directly due to the LRA conflict. For example, among the dozens of Acholi dances, each one requires specific costumes, instruments, and props. Many organizations will provide at least a few sets of the bells, called "jingles," that are tied around the ankles and produce a rhythmic sound while dancing, and most schools have a small set of drums. Sometimes, they will even be lucky and have a few other props as well. All of these supplies can be used for other dances, but most of the time, the dances cannot be done without at least a few sets of supplies. This is because half of the music comes from what the dancers are wearing on their bodies. Obviously, this is difficult on already stressed budgets. If the children do not go to school and the families do not receive assistance, they would find it difficult to find extra funds to pay for items that are not a matter of survival. These families likely feel discouraged to even try the dances because they cannot acquire all the materials needed. In the past, these items would have been very easy to come by, but now the supplies are not readily available. Additionally, the items have changed. Whereas the dancers would have previously used a real axe, they now use wooden replicas, whether for safety or frugality. The girls have even changed the costume to make it slightly more modest.

Another example of this dilemma, and the changing context of dance, is in the iconic *Bwola* dance. Not only are the costume pieces expensive, its performance has been made much more public and less exclusive than in the past. Dances were not meant for entertainment for a crowd of strangers. Most of them serve a functional purpose. For example, the *Ajere* is for courtship, and in this case, the *Bwola* was only performed for royal events, not for outsiders. Now, the *Bwola* may be performed in national dance competitions, celebrations, or when heads of state visit from other countries.

These minor changes that occurred within the realm of traditional dance exemplify culture change in response to various internal and external influences. The dances still exist and are practiced quite frequently, but their meaning and significance has been slightly altered. While it may seem inconsequential to an outsider, some regard these changes as diluting the meaning of traditional dances and violating the sanctity of Luo culture. They feel that, especially in the case of performing the *Bwola*, allowing outsiders to experience and alter the dance removes a kind of sacred exclusiveness that was previously reserved only for the dancers.

A woman from a village called Gwendigya in Awach sub-county Gulu District explained that her community is having trouble acquiring costumes and instruments. She believes the children would be more interested in their culture if they could use the right supplies to make the dances attractive to them, since quite a few of them are used to the flashing lights and loud bass of the night club.[10] She thought that the only thing that could hold back cultural revival in her community was that her village could not afford the proper costumes and instruments. They have too many other things to worry about to spend the time finding money for dance costumes. In this village, they were struggling with the large

number of orphans they were taking care of, who either lost their parents during the war or had attached themselves to the women in the camps. These are children who have already missed out on learning some of their cultural heritage, but extreme poverty and the struggle to rebuild after the conflict are proving to further inhibit their cultural education.

In this same village, however, dance organizing has been beneficial for microeconomic ventures and paying for children's school fees, providing some hope that the situation will improve. The community did not have nightly *wang'oo* at the time I conducted my research, but they do have weekly dance practices. In Gwendigya and for the dance group at KKA, the weekly practices and group support have helped the members move on from their trauma, similar to the effects of *wang'oo* for communities. The dance group, called *Can Rwede Peke*, has strict rules for participation. Members must show up on time to every practice and give advance notice if they will be absent. They must also support the various micro-finance programs, like beekeeping and goat-raising that support the community as a whole. People feel that having weekly meetings has been hugely unifying for this community, and it has enabled them to support each other through the resettlement period.

At the cultural institution, a large dance group meets weekly and is often hired out for performances around the country. While KKA's other programs are controversial, the KKA Cultural Dancers are run by a group of young people who are passionate about restoring dance in their culture. The dancers are mostly in their 20s and younger, some as young as age five. They have a dozen dances in their repertoire, and they perform the dances for specific occasions. Many parents have brought their children to this group so their children can learn the traditional dances. Quite a few of the dancers had been abducted in the past or had lost family members to the war. One boy around the age of seven was particularly talented, and he led a group of his peers on his own. The social benefits of this group are obvious, but they have also been able to send many of their members to school through the proceeds from their performances. This group also helps to foster national reconciliation by inviting dance groups from other areas of Uganda to exchange cultural dance lessons.[11] It is apparent that group gatherings such as these have had beneficial social consequences in both the local and national context.

In *Can Rwede Peke*, the dance group from Gwendigya, members also described the dance as therapeutic, since focusing on the dance gave them something to do rather than mull over the past and their present troubles. In the documentary *War Dance*, about a group of children from Patongo IDP Camp who travel to Kampala for the national dance competition, several of the young students explain that they feel happy when they are performing the dances. They said they felt a sense of pride that they were representing their people in a positive light. It follows that members of a community working together on a project that fosters group identity will allow community members to gain a sense of pride in restoring their culture, similar to that of *wang'oo*.

While working on CreatEd during the summer of 2010, which involved combining Luo and Western art forms in the lives of Acholi youth, the CreatEd team had a very unique perspective from working in two schools – one urban and one rural. We observed that the students in the rural school were significantly well-versed in the *Ajere* dance, more so than their urban counterparts. We attributed this to the fact that the rural children still went home in the evenings, while the urban children stayed in the hostels at the boarding school, a phenomenon introduced with British colonialism. Dance programs there are voluntary, and only a small fraction of the students participate. We did find in both schools, however, that all of the students had a great sense of pride in performing their traditional dances, which was revealed in their post-course evaluations and in personal communications with various

students. Additionally, there was an element of discipline that accompanied dance and music training, which is something many elders believe to have been lost.

The various dance groups described here (*Can Rwede Peke*, KKA Cultural Dancers, and CreatEd students) are fortunate to have the support, supplies, and interest, even if it is limited at best. They are not participating in *wang'oo* sessions, but they are experiencing similar benefits as those they might gain from the social gathering in *wang'oo*. CreatEd students received the element of discipline that goes along with group learning that they would normally receive at home, through *wang'oo* and with their own community. Each of these groups is building a community, and that opens up the possibility of empowerment through group participation in ritual activity (Kertzer 1988). They even find ways to help each other through the group, like sending orphans to school. Unfortunately, there are thousands of others in the north who do not benefit from a social group like this. In these situations, restoration of *wang'oo* could foster more dialogue, helping the community to generate ideas that will benefit everyone. *Wang'oo* has the added benefit of being inexpensive. The only hindrance is in communities where elders are not present or they are incapable of leading such sessions.

Additionally, break dance and hip-hop can be used as tools for national reconciliation, relieving tensions that have existed amongst Uganda's various ethnic populations since the nation was established. An organization called Breakdance Project Uganda (BPU) was founded in 2006 by Abraham "Abramz" Tekya, a young man with a simple mission: to teach Uganda's youth how to breakdance. He began in Kasubi slum in Kampala and then expanded his lessons to the north at a time when few people dared travel there. What he found was that breakdance proved to be a neutral art form, which children from the north and south could enjoy together. BPU has since brought together youth of different political, economic, social, and cultural backgrounds (www.myspace.com/breakdanceprojectuganda). They have found that the children participating in the classes get into less trouble in school and spend less time on the streets. It has had psychosocial benefits similar to that of traditional dance programs. The northern b-boys and girls now practice at Gulu Youth Center once a week under their own direction and Abramz occasionally travels to teach new skills and check on the students. When I was visiting, Abramz was even teaching the students about how to form life goals and deal with challenges. They are not just benefiting from the social interaction with their peers; they are also receiving valuable life lessons from someone they respect.

There are other aspects of cultural expression that have been altered in response to the globalization of world cultures and the effects of the war, including music and art. Luo songs are always narratives that tell a story. The current popular artists are still doing that, but they have combined reggae and hip-hop with traditional styles. In addition, they have incorporated socially-conscious lyrics, often on topics about the conflict (i.e., calling for the child soldiers to return home). The style in which these are enjoyed is also an addition to Acholi cultural life. Dance halls and bars have become the popular meeting places for many youth, especially those that grew up in or near town during the war. Elders that I interviewed were upset by this, saying it was inappropriate and not according to the ways of the Luo. One participant said, "How can you tell if a woman is beautiful in the dark?" indicating that he believes a Luo courtship dance, like the *Ajere* performed in the daytime, to be much preferable to meeting in a club. Though the youth have incorporated traditional culture into their globalized lives, there is miscommunication between the youth and elders concerning what is appropriate for a Luo person.

Painting was not typical in Luo culture, but it has been introduced through years of Western influence and especially since rehabilitation programs have worked with thousands of children, using art as a form of healing. One organization, the TAKS Art Gallery, has noticed the large north-south divide in art forms, and they have taken the initiative to share new art techniques with children from Laroo Boarding School in Gulu, a school designed specially to support formerly abducted children. Fred Mutebi, the leader of this art movement, has incorporated skills- and values-training into the art lessons, allowing students to learn life skills and receive guidance while also expressing their thoughts via traditional Acholi, Baganda,[12] and Western art forms (*The Independent*, November 18, 2009).

Marriage and Gender Roles

As seen in the definitions of *wang'oo* from residents of Bungatira, marriage and gender roles are a cherished aspect of Acholi tradition that are taught in *wang'oo* sessions. The famous Acholi poet and cultural anthropologist Okot p'Bitek approaches the issue of gender roles in his famous poem *Song of Lawino,* published in 1967. The poem is told from Lawino's perspective, and she explains that there are specific guidelines to follow in choosing a spouse while she laments over her husband's poor choice for a new wife. We can see from her story that there are certain roles that men and women play in Luo society. This was yet another aspect of life that changed due to displacement and outside influence, and most elders point to the improper relations between young men and women, as well as the way they dress, as a sign of the times.

As a foundational understanding, gender roles in Acholi society are what one would expect to find in most sub-Saharan African societies. Ideally, women take care of the children, household, and farming, while men mostly have responsibilities in the realms of hunting and construction. The men traditionally have held the role providing the primary source of income. Though it seems largely segregated with the weight of the work on the women, work was traditionally divided equally. For example, one man described that the man would construct the home, while the woman would cut the grass for the hut.[13]

When the majority of people moved into camps, basically all economic activity ceased to exist. They were not allowed outside the camp to farm, which was a primary means of sustenance for most families. In addition, herds of cattle, a sign of wealth, had almost totally been looted by the government and neighboring Karamajong. The men were essentially disabled as "breadwinners," and the women no longer needed to rely on them.

Procedures for food aid from international NGOs or cattle distribution from the government were delivered to the women of the household and not to the men, because women were presumably more trustworthy (Dolan 2009). This essentially put women in charge of the economic activities of the household. Additionally, what little work could be done for small amounts of money in the camps was all designated as women's work. They could wash, iron, and cook for small sums of money, contributing to whatever little the family had. The most prosperous economic activity in the camps was the brewing of local beer, which was also a woman's activity. Unfortunately, a good deal of this money would be spent by the husbands on local beer itself, contributing to the rampant alcoholism in the camps (Finnstrom 2008). With seemingly little to do or contribute to the family, husbands began to feel useless, leading many men to become idle and depressed. In this atmosphere and state of mind, it is no wonder that many men (and women, too) turned to heavy drinking to pass the time. This habit has had serious social ramifications, contributing to an

increased rate of divorce and domestic violence, making elders incapable of taking up leadership positions in the community, as they have lost respect from the other members.

This change in gender roles is often locally referred to as "role reversal" and is a serious issue for many families, though some women would say they have experienced increased independence and economic freedom now that they have become the breadwinners. With people returning to their villages, there have been reports of domestic violence related to this issue. In some homes, men no longer want their wives taking a financial lead, and women are reluctant to give it up.

Additionally, microeconomic programs have focused on empowering women, but some women cannot tell their husbands that they are participating in them. For example, the Gulu Regional Director of CARE told me that in one meeting a woman's husband barged in shouting at the woman, and then he physically forced her to come home. He was intimidated by her interest in economics, fearing that her independence would allow her freedom to leave him, which has been exactly the case for some women, as they described in focus group sessions during Pincer's research. The reassertion of patriarchy as "culture" and tradition is also a part of cultural revival and displays how cultural revival has different implications for every person.

In other families, the men have failed to return to helping the women with duties like digging, construction, raising children, etc. as part of what seems to be a continuation of their idleness in the camps, and they have continued to do nothing but sit and drink, to the chagrin of the women. When interviewing a group of women, we were joined by one of their husbands. He explained that now women go to the garden with the husband, come back and cook, look for firewood, fetch water, go back to the garden to weed, and the only task the husband will join is the gardening. When he returns to the home, he rests while she cooks and cleans. This particular husband admitted that he does the same, and I noted that he was a frequenter of the local bars, and was often drunk on subsequent visits to this homestead.

Further complicating matters, women were often exploited as sex slaves throughout the war by rebels and government soldiers (Dolan 2009). Whether they were raped in the unsafe IDP camps or kidnapped as young girls and given to rebel officers as wives, many of them had devastating experiences during the war. These experiences have not only affected their bodies, but they have also damaged their social lives, especially for those who have returned with children or were infected with HIV/AIDS. Interactions with government soldiers, including rape and prostitution, were often connected to the high level of HIV/AIDS infections in the camps (Dolan 2009).

Children who were fathered by the rebels are frequently unwelcome in their mother's villages. Husbands and families of these women who have become victims to circumstance and poverty have been known to reject them, leaving them with few options to provide for themselves or their young children. One young woman explained in an interview in Gwendigya that she had returned home with a child from the bush and then drifted through several villages, living with different men in relationships that never worked out. She gave birth to several more children in the process. She was fortunate in that she still had her village to come home to, but she still had little means to provide for herself. As Sister Dianna Ortiz explains, "Afraid and filled with shame, women are released, their cultural identity no longer intact, carrying the offspring of their rapists, and 'giving birth to a new generation that no one wants,' as one woman put it – least of all the women who were forced to conceive" (2001:25). These women have lost their roles as mothers and wives and are forced to make money however they can, sometimes even turning to prostitution.

Some community members have blamed this prostitution on the moral degeneration of the youth rather than on their victimization at the hands of rebels (Dolan 2009).

In this atmosphere of "role reversal" and/or societal rejection, gender-based violence has become a major issue in the Acholi region. The government and KKA have launched sensitization campaigns to encourage women while also discouraging men from beating their wives. An administrator at the cultural institution described one such intervention. A man had been beating his wife, and the neighbors tried to defend her. Eventually, she went to the parents and then to the *Rwot*. Her case continued to remain unresolved until it finally reached the *Lawirwodi*.[14] When the team from Ker Kwaro Acholi reached the home, the man claimed that it was his right to be in charge of his wife and that the beating was for discipline and obedience. The team convinced the man that there is nothing in Acholi culture that permits domestic violence.[15]

Though domestic violence has increased, some Acholi women have also felt that they have seen an increase in the recognition of their rights, rather than an increase of abuse. In Bungatira, one young woman claimed that she and other women had seen benefits from the war. While this may seem to be a radical statement, it cannot be denied that during this time, more girls were being sent to school than ever before. While the statistic is true – there are many more girls attending school – it is difficult to say if it can be directly attributed to the war or simply to further influences of Westernization that emphasize women's and children's rights, including the importance of girls' education.

Outside of school, women have seen an increased level of independence. This has empowered them as leaders in their community, enabling them to accomplish things that girls in their family had never accomplished before, such as attending university. CARE International has a major influence in the region as one of the organization's main objectives is to eliminate poverty by empowering women.

When discussing cultural revival and examining whether or not some aspects of the culture will return, there were typically two responses. One was that economic issues will prevent the dances from returning at their full potential because there are not enough funds to provide the appropriate materials. The second response was that there are certain practices that will not return because they are not beneficial or widely accepted, including wife inheritance or consulting the *abila* (ancestral shrines), usually referred to as "bad cultural practices."

When discussing "bad" practices, wife inheritance was most commonly referenced as something to be done away with. Wife inheritance occurs when a woman's husband passes away and she goes to stay with a brother-in-law by default, either becoming one of his wives or simply being under his care. The problem with this practice is that the woman has no choice in the matter, and it promotes the view that she is property, especially when considering that the bride price paid for her is part of the motivation for keeping her in the late husband's family.

Wife inheritance was usually discussed along with girls' education. There is typically no financial return for the family if the girl is sent to school. It does not make her more valuable to her future husband's family and will only cost them money when they will be sending her off to live with another family in the not-so-distant future. Because of this, many girls missed the opportunity to go to school, and it is frequently still the case that if a family has to choose between sending their boys or girls to school, they will almost always choose the boys.

However, families are beginning to realize the importance of educating their girls along with their boys, seeing that other young women have made it to university and landed

highly-esteemed jobs. Wife inheritance is also now more about choice. A woman in a rural area might feel pressured to stay with her brother-in-law should her husband die, but she also has more economic opportunities on her own than she did before. As discussed previously, the economic situation in the camps allowed many women to realize their abilities as entrepreneurs and businesswomen. This can also partially be attributed to the effects of globalization and the large amount of human rights organizations operating in northern Uganda, sensitizing people to their own universal rights as humans.

There has, of course, been some backlash to this movement. In Pincer's focus group discussions, two men in two different groups adamantly proclaimed that some of the women's and children's rights should be repealed because it has caused them to be generally disobedient. These men hold their beliefs as deeply rooted in traditional gender roles and feel threatened by this increase in freedoms. Role reversal is one of the more turbulent side effects of the forced displacement during the conflict. While women and children are entitled to their rights, it is just as important to include the men. In their report, Pincer explained,

> Some respondents felt that the introduction of women's and child rights by both government and external agencies had exacerbated these tensions and had been done in a way that ignored the local cultural context and values. There was a feeling that these types of interventions excluded men, already emasculated by conflict, and further eroded the cultural significance of men to the family (Pincer Report 2010: 26).

Women's and children's empowerment is vital to the future of Acholi, but the men should not be ostracized from these movements, or we run the risk of creating the same problem, just reversed. It could become increasingly difficult for men to attain employment or respect among the community, further shaming them and adding to their growing sense of uselessness as a group. This is one vital aspect of the future of Acholi that could be discussed openly in the safe *wang'oo* setting. Currently, women may hesitate to speak to their husbands on the issue for fear of repercussions or abandonment, but acknowledging gender roles and their future implications as a personal and community issue could make the topic less heated.

Folktales and Respect for Elders

The elders, primarily elderly women, tell their lessons in the form of folktales and riddles. Folktales are meant to symbolize the different kinds of people one may meet in the course of life. By telling children these tales, they can draw on this knowledge and know how to act in situations that are similar to the stories. There are, of course, variations to the stories, as they have been passed down through generations and altered along the way. The message, however, remains the same.

Unfortunately, one of the major consequences of the war has been the loss of the large, valued population of elders who would tell stories like the ones mentioned above. Life in the camps was simply too tough, emotionally and physically, on already feeble bodies, and in the later years of the war, lineage heads were targeted as part of Kony's campaign to form a new Acholi people. Atkinson explains that lineage heads in Acholi were established as the heads of certain villages, with the name of the village coming from a long line of patriarchal ancestors. These lineage elders were in charge of production, marriage rules, and "most of the social control exercised in Acholi" (Atkinson 1994:76). The lineage system is not rigid. While similar to the role of the *Rwot*, male lineage heads also led *wang'oo* sessions. When they are not performing their roles in *wang'oo,* the situation could

lead to a feeling of disconnect with the past, which many contemporary youth experience. Additionally, there are few lineage elders currently alive who possess the folktale knowledge or the will to reestablish *wang'oo*. As a result, many youth know very few folktales, if any at all. There is some concern that the folktales will die out with the current generation of elders because the most recent generation of parents also do not know the tales to pass them on to their own children. In an era of social restructuring, such valuable cultural resources would cease to exist. Though concepts like norms, rules, and values can be taught through other means, the use of folktales has been the primary means for communication of important values. They help to foster a relationship between elders and children, and it is hard to tell how this bond might be established in the absence of the tales.

Because elders were either failing to take up their role as leaders or had been tragically lost during the violence and poor health conditions of the war, many youth felt like they had no guidance once they moved back to their homes. I asked one woman if her village had participated in *wang'oo*. She said that they had not because there were no elders in her village who were capable of or willing to continue the tradition. I then asked if it was something that the youth could take up on their own, and she replied that the youth did not have the required wisdom to take on such a task.[16] Leading and initiating *wang'oo* necessitates having a strong leader who has experienced all the different challenges one experiences throughout the course of a lifetime. The war seems to have debilitated one significant factor in Acholi life: the guidance of experienced, respected elders.

There are programs, like the Luo Folktale Cartoon Project, attempting to share the stories with more children before the folktales are lost. Even though the tales are now being introduced in a non-traditional setting (i.e., at school, cartoon form), the hope is that these children will remember them and be able to teach their children the tales from home. Through the CreatEd Pilot Project, it was clear that the students had little knowledge base where the folktales were concerned. Outside of the most popular two or three tales, the children had no knowledge of other tales. In the plot, these stories were the primary means for elders to pass down valuable life lessons and knowledge, and many of the youth have been deprived of what is referred to as "traditional education." Elders are concerned that this generation of youth, which is largely unfamiliar with traditional norms and values, has a skewed sense of judgment and morality.

Okot p'Bitek also discusses the importance of elders in Luo society. According to p'Bitek, they are considered by many to be the foundation of moral upbringing and respect, as well as a source of cultural knowledge. The elders are also capable of exerting a great deal of power over the rest of the population when the social hierarchy is respected. As demonstrated in the *wang'oo* setting, the elders lead the discussions, make the major decisions, and impart their cultural knowledge onto the youth.

In *wang'oo*, elders make every important decision: who is allowed to marry whom, when to hunt, and when to go to war. They are even the judges for reconciliatory traditional justice systems. Traditional justice, called *mato oput,* has been highly contested throughout the reconstruction phase. Some groups, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative in particular, advocate for its use in reconciliatory matters, stating that they want to forgive and move on. Logistically, however, *mato oput* has proven to be challenging. One news article in the *Daily Monitor* reported that recently a former rebel who had stood trial before a panel of Acholi elders for his crimes during the war was denied forgiveness because he could not name every person he had killed and every crime he had committed. Though the details may seem trivial when considering the fact that the ex-soldier is willing to be tried at all, the elders felt that in this time of reconstruction, the rules must be precisely followed

in order to preserve the respect and dignity of the culture. Incidents like this one are not isolated; it has been a regional post-conflict issue. Perhaps in this time where other traditions are being hybridized, like *wang'oo, mato oput* could also be accepted in a different format. There seem to be aspects that are no longer practical, especially when dealing with ex-LRA combatants who have committed mass atrocities. When this system was created, it was meant to deal with isolated incidents rather than incidents of mass murder. It entails group responsibility for an incident, meaning an entire village must make reparations for one of their member's actions. This often involves a payment in a set number of cattle or other livestock or trading younger members to help the other village do all of their work. *Mato oput* also fails to account for cases where the perpetrator may have been coerced into the act, like a conscripted child soldier. If Joseph Kony were to be tried using *mato oput,* traditional rules would require his entire village to make repatriations to every victim of the LRA which is just logistically impossible. Additionally, whereas group responsibility was emphasized in the past, his village is likely unwilling to accept responsibility for the atrocities of the war, preferring to view Kony as a renegade son rather than one of their own. While the elders have good intentions, it may be more helpful to allow *mato oput* to occur in a less rigid format, especially now that the LRA have become more of an international than a localized problem.

Some Acholi feel that one of the major issues with the social breakdown is that people are united by the multiple horrific shared experiences of the war, rather than the shared experience of cultural traditions and community. The conflict in northern Uganda seems to have created fissures amongst a once unified people or to have exposed fissures that already existed. Property lines are frequently contested in newly returned communities, elders and youth have serious ideological divides, and inter-group conflict with other regions has added to the tensions. This is most likely because the perpetrator, Joseph Kony, came from within Acholi to attack his own people, rather than an attack from the outside, which people could then rally against. It is possible that the elders have some fear of what may become of the youth and Acholi society in the future, but the youth are feeling a great deal of unwarranted blame for what happened to them.

At the *wang'oo* I attended in Bungatira, the youth were upset with the elders because they felt that they were not good role models and that they spent more time drinking than they did leading the society as they should. The elders then complained that the youth were uninterested in the "old" ways and that it was impossible to get them to learn or respect other social norms like proper marriage rituals, appropriate dress, and the right way to dance and meet members of the opposite sex. It is true that many youth were introduced to town life (i.e. different jobs, dance halls, a faster-pace of life, more accessible schools and services) during the course of the war, but this is not necessarily negative. Many are opposed to returning to their villages, preferring to maintain the life they have led in town. Seeing as there are more opportunities for work and school in town, the young people's reluctance is understandable. Unfortunately, this tension can be witnessed almost across the board in elder/youth relations. Elders carry a huge burden as the source of cultural heritage and as decision-makers, but when they are not functioning in their societal role, how does this affect the rest of society?

Some elders undermine their own power and respectability by abusing alcohol. Just like other men and women in the camps, the elders frequently idled their time away by drinking. There were few other activities to partake in, and unfortunately heavy alcohol consumption is often associated with times of intense political and social turmoil. It is not uncommon to see old men clustered around television sets in small bars in the middle of

the day, watching a football match and clutching a sachet of Waragi, or locally brewed gin. In fact, this image is often all that people associate with Acholi elders. With this mindset, it is easy to see how youth would have a hard time taking them very seriously, but most of the elders in this state also have no interest in guiding the youth because they believe it is hopeless. One youth in Gwendigya placed all the blame on male elders saying,

> ' … the elders are not being a good example. The male elders are not being help-ful, but the women elders are being very supportive. They're giving them ideas and teaching them certain dances, like funeral dances that they know best. So the support they're getting from there is really big, and the men are letting the culture die.[17]

It is apparent in this situation the elders' guidance is very highly regarded, but tensions and social stress are made much worse when the elders fail to carry out their societal role. It is likely that elderly women will occupy more cultural leadership roles moving in the future as a result of the "role reversal."

Still, blame should not be placed entirely on the elders' shoulders. Their attitudes and actions are an unfortunate result of the abuses suffered in the camps and at the hands of the LRA. Just like everyone else during the war, the elders were unable to perform their societal roles. This could lead to a sense of failure or uselessness as these men and women, who have lived and guided their children in Acholiland for decades, watch their homes burned and children and grandchildren abducted, mutilated, and killed. This trauma has resulted in a significant amount of cases of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression, both of which can be highly debilitating. Walter H. Sangree explains the importance attributed to age in his article *Age Grade and Power* about Tiriki-Terik men of Kenya. He says, "… a personal sense of failure is particularly acute for those older men, who, for whatever reason, fail to fulfill the explicitly ascribed social roles of elderhood" (27). This is likely a very similar experience for Acholi men who feel that they have failed to fulfill their roles. However, in the case of Acholi, they were powerless against the chang-ing circumstances, being able to only watch as their home was thrown into chaos for over two decades. Pincer notes in their report,

> Many older people complained that many of the young had shunned traditional life and increasingly preferred town life and 'modernity.' This, they felt, had affected the authority of elders and was leading to growing inter-generational tensions between the old and the young (Pincer Report 2010: 26).

There are a significant number of elders who have taken on their part as role models and leaders, but have proven to be more concerned with the rules and norms of society, while the youth are more concerned with the rituals and practices. For instance, elders in Pincer focus groups complained that youth were immoral and promiscuous. They complained that the girls are not dressing modestly as they should, they are getting pregnant without know-ing who the father is, and they no longer help their families at home. For the boys, they go to dance halls at night, and they have picked up the bad habit of drinking. One administra-tor at KKA was particularly concerned with marrying outside of Acholi, and he promised that the cultural institution would work to ensure that outside cultural influences do not affect the Acholi. He said, "We shall keep on saying I think this one is not a good thing and keep on opposing. So if the majority opposes, it dies a natural death."[18] Acholi elders seem to be approaching the issue from a very purist viewpoint, which seems natural when faced

with restoring what they feel is a broken culture. They have a saying: "The traditions of the Acholi will raise you in this life, and the traditions of the Acholi will bury you in the soil." Basically, one should live according to her own culture because that is what will support her in life and death. This phrase also seems to adopt a defensive tone, as it is meant to warn others against the perils of indulging in other peoples' traditions. This idea has value in that it encourages the youth to respect their heritage and their elders by reminding them of where they come from. However, it comes across as very close-minded, leaving the recipient of this knowledge feeling as if participating in foreign cultural practices is something about which to feel guilty.

The youth, on the other hand, identify their cultural pride more with the rituals and practices for which the Luo people are known. A young man at the *wang'oo* in Bungatira admitted that he did in fact feel that he had grown up without knowing his culture – the war had taken it from him, and he wanted the elders to teach him. Dances, songs, folktales, and music are the most identifiable and concrete aspects of Luo culture for the youth to understand and identify themselves according to their heritage. Respect, morality, and rules are all abstract concepts that do not necessarily have to be learned from someone with experience, but the dance, songs, folktales, and music are concrete practices that can be taught, learned, and cherished. Since these forms of culture are iconic, their full return would offer a sense of comfort and connection to the past that the youth have never really known. As Kertzer explains, "One of the reasons why ritual is such a potent means of legitimation is that it offers a way to unite a particular image of the universal with a strong emotional attachment to that image" (1988:40). Elders reconnecting with their roots as lineage heads and leaders and taking on the role of teachers might help youth and adults alike to reconnect to their rich past.

The current values- and norms-focused approach to cultural revival has not won the support of the youth who have found it possible to cherish their own cultural history while participating in cultural influences from outside Acholiland by participating in hip-hop classes during the day and going home to the village at night. Still elders are concerned that the children will find these other art forms to be more rewarding than Luo cultural art and will then abandon their past. Often, young people are discouraged from participating in any kind of break dance practice or other foreign influences because it might keep them from learning their own art. However, this does not have to be the case. With the CreatEd Pilot Project, we used the "cool" factor of hip-hop to interest the students in learning Acholi dances. They were able to see that their dances could even be combined with elements of hip-hop and still remain very much Acholi dances, displaying their ability to incorporate both art forms into their lives. The lack of a support system at home most likely only adds to their aversion to learn their own dances, creating a sense of discouragement. A strong sense of a caring community and guidance from the elders would undoubtedly help motivate the youth to learn. A few students in the CreatEd program had the opportunity to learn the *Ajere* dance for the first time while the others were able to practice what they already knew. They were also able to make peace with the two aspects of their lives that, according to the elders, did not seem to be compatible. Using Acholi culture as a foundation, they explored other forms of expression. They were capable of approaching the culture issue with an open mind, in order to embrace their emerging role on the global scene. The anthropologist Emilio F. Moran explains a similar situation in his work with the Inuit peoples of Alaska. As a result of missing traditional and modern activities, he believes the "new generation [can] combine traditional knowledge with the need to be a part of the global economy (Myers 2000; cited in Moran 2008).

This differing viewpoint can be attributed to the various generational experiences of the war. Children and young adults had a much different experience than did adults and elders. While the children feared being abducted, the adults feared being mutilated or having their children taken, or worse, their children being forced to kill or mutilate their own parents. Abducted children were often raised in the bush, with no rules or guidance, and now many of these children have escaped captivity to join others their age, with some of these former children now being as much as 30 years old. Even those who were not abducted by the LRA were subjected to life in the IDP camps. This entire generation of young people grew up essentially without any rules. The elders fear for the order of society and, in a way, they fear the youth themselves. In a news article for WOW Gambia, one woman said,

> These are the children we have…I have no trust in the children we have brought up. Though they represent the future of our community, I fear that it will be a future of people whose character has largely been influenced by the situation we have lived under for these years (2007).

Their attempts to revive the culture are their concerns over a sense of a loss of control. Dolan explains that internalizing the problem can be easier for people to handle than blaming the issues on external factors. For example, blaming social breakdown on the deviance of the youth becomes an Acholi problem which can be handled within, rather than a problem created by the uncontrollable forces of globalization, poverty, and war (Dolan 2009).

Sally Merry's (2006) theory of vernacularization is applicable to Acholi society in many ways, from the realm of human rights to clothing to music. Universal human rights concepts have come to be known as foreign concepts that do not always apply to Luo culture. For example, some men in Pincer's study believed that the women and children's knowledge of their rights have made them disobedient and that conversations about rights should be reduced. Additionally, clothing styles have become Westernized. Obviously, those who rely on clothing donations from the West will wear outdated styles that are not necessarily culturally appropriate. But for affluent northern Ugandans, they often choose a highly Western style with some kind of Africanized variance. For example, a woman might carry a purse with an African design or a man could wear a shirt made out of African fabrics. Music, especially, has adopted styles from reggae and hip-hop and combined it with traditional music to create a unique sound. Even nightclubs have integrated a Western social culture with traditional Ugandan music and dance. There is likely no aspect of Luo culture that has not been touched by the affects of globalization, which began a long time ago when Arab slave traders first came to the region or every time Luo people had contact with other people. Luo culture has always responded to outside influence; it just seems that the current state of things and the elders' rejection of any foreign influence are due, in large part, to the extreme situations created by the conflict and mass displacement.

But how do these issues translate into the lives of the youth? For many of them, town life, not village life, is how they grew up. Would returning to the village not also strip them of opportunities like university education and jobs that they would not have access to in their villages? This raises the question of how much should be expected of the youth and what raising children might look like in the future. How many will stay in the villages as opposed to going to university and acquiring jobs in cities? Surely, some will stay, and many people I spoke with preferred living in the village. Only time will tell how this will affect the future, and it certainly raises questions about how to move forward using the past as a model. The past can help to warn against making the same mistakes, but an attempt to totally recreate the past in its entirety is unrealistic.

Through exploring this idea in open, mediated conversations, communities may be able to find some peace with each other, as in the example of productive dialogue from the *wang'oo* in Bungatira. Additionally, reviving cultural practices has proven in other places to be highly beneficial in alleviating cases of alcoholism, as well as other ailments. For example, the Plains Indians of North America have a long history using peyote, a halluci- nogenic drug used for ceremonies. The United States government outlawed this drug, but its use was still discreetly continued. Native American reservations have a history of high drug use and alcoholism, but in some reservations the use of peyote, a form of traditional culture that involved communal meetings, was proven to curb instances of alcoholism among men (Lefler 2005). It was not necessarily the peyote that cured the alcoholism, but also the added social aspect of the practice, similar to that of *wang'oo*. Perhaps participa- tion in *wang'oo* and other cultural practices could have a similar affect in reducing alcohol- ism among the war-affected Acholi.

Reviving *Wang'oo*

Wang'oo is already being used by various Ugandan and non-Ugandan organizations in the community setting, and they are also adopting the concept for use in rehabilitation and community centers. Pincer conducted an extensive survey of the entire northern region, and one of their key findings included that recapturing cultural identity can reduce victim- hood related to the conflict, boost prosperity, and promote national reconciliation. They recommend that leaders (*Rwodi*, elders, etc.) aid the recovery by leading cultural revival in a way that "incorporates the best of the old while creating a space for the new" (Pincer Report 2010:7). In light of this statement, it seems clear that leaders can utilize *wang'oo* as the appropriate space to carry out this transformation. Indeed, there are elders, like Mzee Otto Yuvani, who are working to revive the tradition but who are also backed by interna- tional funding sources, in this case the Norwegian Refugee Council (Kyalimpa 2009).

With the myriad of social restructuring, hybridizations, and tension amongst social groups, fully reviving *wang'oo* can be a very powerful tool, as it opens up a safe space for dialogue in which communities can discuss their traditions, their issues, and their reactions to globalization's affects on their communities. True, it is not realistic to expect *wang'oo* sessions to solve all the problems of the Acholi, but a unified and empowered Acholi can work to solve their own problems in healthcare, education, and unemployment (Kertzer 1988). An administrator from KKA commented, "In traditional Acholi, you build home- steads together. One homestead is the homestead of relatives. They are not foreigners. They are just relatives" (Personal interview, April 23, 2010). Much emphasis is placed here on the importance of family relations and the trust factor associated with living in close quar- ters with people you know. Camp life and widespread paranoia contributed to a decline in trust, not to mention the upsurge of theft. *Wang'oo* can provide a space for community members to get to know each other again, to build trust, and to discuss new beginnings for the community.

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im's work can apply in helping communities to accept hu- man rights ideals as their own. He suggests that some sort of consensus should be reached through internal discourse (2009). He says, "Change is induced by internal adjustments as well as external influences. Both types of change, however, must be justified through culturally approved mechanisms and adapted to preexisting norms and institutions" (An- Na'im 2009:74). Up to now, change has occurred outside the realm of culturally approved mechanisms. If these changes were discussed in *wang'oo*, it may make people feel like

they have more control and ownership of the circumstances rather than being pushed along by external forces without their consent. Additionally, some people, like the *Rwot*, believe that *wang'oo* has a beneficial effect on children, making them more disciplined and intelligent (IPS, October 23, 2009).

Challenges

Reinstating *wang'oo* is much easier said than done. Though most of the population has returned to their ancestral homes, a different set of economic and logistical restrictions have presented themselves. There is a large percentage of the Acholi population who suffer from PTSD, which can cause serious issues amongst family members. Additionally, land struggles caused by the undocumented property holdings of many clans have placed family members in the same area as strangers. These groups may fight over land on a regular basis, and in some cases, the struggles can be quite violent. It seems unlikely that a family would open themselves up to that kind of vulnerability when they are trying to protect their land, which they claim is the only wealth they have left.[19] While it could be helpful for community unification, it might serve to unify communities against one another in struggles over property lines.

Additionally, villages like Gwendigya are stalled because they feel they are lacking elders and that youth cannot lead a *wang'oo* session on their own. One young woman told me that they previously had *wang'oo*, but it was a long distance from her homestead, which is a daunting prospect after a long day's work. Eventually the program ended, and they have not begun *wang'oo* closer to her homestead because there are no elders. She said they would have to go searching around for elders to guide them.[20] There are many communities like this where people may be aware of their traditions, but they are not equipped to initiate a revival because it has simply been too long without practice or their initiation would not be appropriate.

Regardless of the restrictions, many villages have begun to reinstate the practice and organizations like The Pincer Group International, Ltd. have initiated programs to revive *wang'oo* in various parts of the Acholi sub-region. In fact, the first *wang'oo* I attended was a part of Pincer's program. Problematically, a *wang'oo* should not be initiated by strangers, rather from within the community, and it is not sustainable to have Pincer's representatives return to the village every night to mediate. What was clear, though, was that the *wang'oo* session in Bungatira succeeded in putting several controversial opinions and discussion topics on the table. That night opened up some dialogue and understanding between the youth and elders in that community.

Programs and Implications

However beneficial *wang'oo* may be, it is by no means a solution to all of the post-conflict issues in Uganda, and it will not even be practiced by everyone, whether due to circumstance or choice. The scope of social problems is too broad to be solved by the reinstatement of one practice, notwithstanding the massive inadequacies in access to health care and education, as well as high levels of PTSD. However, as stated above, this kind of cultural and historical connection can be psychologically beneficial, especially if Western forms of psychotherapy prove to be unsuccessful or are not culturally resonant. Though reviving *wang'oo* is by no means a panacea, it has the potential to foster social cohesion as those who were affected by the war move into the future as well as to provide a safe space for people to voice their opinions. Kyalimpa says it well in his 2009 article for IPS news, "…rebuilding communities shattered by war is not just a question of putting up new houses and planting crops; it is also about repairing the battered fabric of shared stories that make

a collection of people a community." Rebuilding the social and physical spheres of life in Acholiland go hand in hand: one cannot move forward without the other.

It should be considered that there are many people who will have no desire to return to the villages or even participate in such a practice. Some of the elder/youth tensions are too strong, some of the youth want to stay in the town, and one woman in Bungatira did not even want to continue *wang'oo* because she feared it would adversely affect women's rights progress. Her thoughts echo a serious concern – that *wang'oo* sessions can be hijacked by power players to promote their own agendas. In this case, she feared the men could use this space to promote patriarchal values that detrimentally affect women. There are also those that may simply go through the motions, not fully understanding the significance. This resistance is not to be faulted, it simply indicates a different choice, a phenomenon that is likely to increase in frequency as globalization and urbanization expand their influence across the country and provide varied opportunities that do not fit into the traditional agriculturalist lifestyle typical of the Acholi. There are various different changes that will have to take place in order to recover from such a traumatic event as the conflict, but empowerment through cultural revival can allow the Acholi people to create better situations with little outside assistance.

Like other practices, *wang'oo* has also been hybridized to serve the current social atmosphere. For example, an organization may host a *wang'oo* in a trading center in order to inform the community about a new project, and some organizations have even created community centers and called them *wang'oo*. Betty Bigombe's work exemplified the important issues that community *wang'oo* sessions can address, and current programs work through similar frameworks. Below is a summary and description of the various organizations that have incorporated the concept of *wang'oo* into their community work:

- Acholi Development Association. Claims to be popularly referred to as "*wang'oo*" because of its work to unify and support the development of persons, groups, and the Acholi sub-region. They recognize the need for a forum in which people can come together to discuss and exchange views freely, as well as discuss the best methods for promoting the formation of programs to improve public health (ADA Report).

- Gulu University. Carries out multiple community outreach programs, including a storytelling archive that documents the stories collected from elders as they would have been shared in a *wang'oo* (Gulu University Report).

- Ker Kwaro Acholi, supported by USAID. "Culture as a Tool for Development." Works to increase communication between traditional leaders and the community. They hold *wang'oo* sessions at each sub-county to reflect on leadership practices and to also disseminate cultural information.

- Koro Cultural Trust, supported by the Norwegian Refugee Council. Leading one effort to return to *wang'oo*, recognizing that the Acholi youth who grew up in the camps need a place to learn their culture (IPS News 2009).

- NUREP, supported by the Norwegian Refugee Council. House community centers called *wang'oo* that provide information on the peace process to the community, recognizing that access to valid information is vital for peace. They also provide information on historical and cultural heritage (NUREP Actions in Acholi).

- Norwegian Refugee Council. Carry out information counseling and legal assistance through 16 camp-based *wang'oo* centers (NRC Fact Sheet 2010).

- The Pincer Group International, Ltd., supported by USAID. Initiated *wang'oo* sessions in order to ascertain the local opinion on the PRDP (Conflict and Recovery Briefing Report No. 7 2010).

- USAID Office of Transition Initiatives. "*Wang'oo* for Peace and Reconciliation," Support "Wang'oo celebrations" in 15 villages with high rates of returnees, endeavoring to educate the youth on their own culture through exploration and dancing (USAID/OTI Uganda Quarterly Report 2009).

One beneficial program from Ker Kwaro Acholi has been the nightly radio programs, a sort of technological replacement in the absence of real *wang'oo*. Though I cannot understand the programs, as they are spoken in Luo, I understand that they often involve folktales, riddles, and discussions of the day's events as if they were all being discussed with a family. Though it is not the traditional form of *wang'oo*, almost every rural village has a radio to listen to, and it can serve as a place marker until more established programs come along. It is also possible that the radio program can be incorporated into other villages' *wang'oo* sessions as a sort of regional unification or a way to involve the disenfranchised youth.

Additionally, candidates for the 2011 presidential election took to campaigning at night in *wang'oo* sessions (IRIN Africa, February 9, 2011). This is an extremely wise tactical move for the candidates since it helps the residents to feel as if the candidates respect their cultural traditions and rights, and they recognize the importance of elders in Acholi society. In this scenario, Western-influenced administrators are campaigning through cultural systems, allowing the culture to be used as a vessel for communication.

Many improvements must be made in the domestic violence issues associated with gender role reversal if *wang'oo* is to be restored in more communities. As Sister Ortiz made note, rejected women (those that have experienced rejection from their families, especially those that have been abducted, raped, or forced to fight) feel as if they have lost their cultural identity (2001). Would being welcomed into a community and participating in revival programs not help them feel empowered as part of a group? The woman in Gwendigya even said she had benefited from the small dance troupe because it comforted her to know that the culture was building up strength (Personal interview, March 27, 2010). Whereas gender roles were formally taught in this setting, typically segregated into different communal areas, this space could now be used to discuss gender roles and mediate conflicts between husbands and wives. The Acholi community is meant to be a non-threatening atmosphere where issues can be openly discussed. It would not be unusual to have seemingly personal conflicts discussed in a group, as this is already common practice. *Wang'oo* as a center of discussion can be a useful mediation system for domestic conflicts.

Conclusion

Through the long history of the Luo in northern Uganda, the challenges presented by the LRA conflict are unmatched in their scope and scale, and it will take some time to fully heal the wounds that these past two and a half decades have created. Though it presents a significant challenge, the widespread reinstatement of *wang'oo* in Acholiland can have great influence on the future of this area. With all of the changes that have occurred in the past two decades as a result of outside influences, it is understandable that many Acholi feel

they have lost control over their own fate, having been tossed around from homes to camps to commuting centers as the political atmosphere shifted. The massive number of children and adults abducted and killed has left a huge mark on almost every family in Acholiland, and these wounds will likely take some time to heal.

The future of Acholiland depends greatly on the initiatives of the residents, regardless of how much foreign assistance they receive. Communities may initially need some outside support or stimulation for *wang'oo* sessions, but these outside influences should leave them with the tools and confidence to continue on their own. The reinstatement of *wang'oo* will in no way solve all the problems created by the LRA insurgency, but it can be the first of many steps in the reconstruction process. It will open up a safe space for dialogue, invoke a sense of connection with the past, and allow people to feel some sense of control over their future, with their voices being heard in a community forum. It can also contribute to a sense of social cohesion that can be useful as political clout to fight the constant marginalization by the central government. Conversely, it could be used by people with their own agendas or ideas of cultural revival. Steps would need to be taken to insure that *wang'oo* sessions will incorporate the ideals of every community member rather than the agenda of certain powerful members of the community.

The current reconstruction era and how people respond to it will ultimately determine the future of Acholiland. It is evident that some people are using this opportunity to craft a new way forward, while others might be using it as an advantageous power grab. My hope is that this thesis will serve to enlighten some of the issues that need to be addressed in these changes and that it can similarly be used by those initiating cultural revival programs to understand how their beneficiaries are affected by their actions. Having felt the incredible energy that resonates from the now-booming town center of Gulu, I am eagerly anticipating the growth, healing, and flourishing of the Luo people of Acholi sub-region in the coming decades.

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Endnotes

1   Fieldnotes, January 30, 2010.

2   Interview, February 22, 2010.

3   Interview, February 2010.

4   Also, Acholi dancer, March 27, 2010.

5   Elderly woman, March 27, 2010.

6   The word for "Chief" does not exist in Luo, but it is the closest interpretation for the word *"Rwot"* (sing). *Rwodi* is the plural for *Rwot*, and *Lawirwodi* indicates the "Chief over all others" who is sometimes referred to as the "Paramount Chief." When stating his name in conjunction with his title, one should use *Rwot*. When referring to him without his name, he is the *Lawirwodi*.

7   Culture of Acholi. Though this should be "Ker Kal Kwaro Luo" it is officially known as "Ker Kwaro Acholi" and I will refer to it as such.

8   The drinking of the bitter root. Participants will drink a substance made from the bitter root of the oput tree in a symbolic show of trust and truthfulness.

9   Personal interview, March 25, 2010.

10   Interview, March 27, 2010.

11   Ethnic tensions have persisted in Uganda since colonial times and been promoted by the change of power from one group to another. People are beginning to place a strong emphasis on national reconciliation.

12   Largest and most prosperous ethnic group in Uganda, mostly concentrated in the Kampala and Entebbe areas.

13   Interview, July 2010.

14   Complaints like these are filed through what is essentially a chain of command from the parents all the way up to the *Lawirwodi*.

15   KKA administrator, April 2010.

16   Interview, March 27, 2010.

17   Interview, March 27, 2010.

18   Interview, April 2010.

19   Personal interview, March 27, 2010.

20   Interview, March 27, 2010.

About the Author

Erin Cagney graduated summa cum laude from the University of Tennessee in 2011 with a degree in Anthropology. Erin was a member of the Chancellor's Honors Program and upon graduation received the Chancellor's Award for Academic Excellence. As an undergraduate student, Erin was a core leader of the Jazz for Justice Project, a student-led organization that raises funds and awareness for the use of music and the arts in post-conflict peace in northern Uganda. Erin first traveled to Uganda in 2008 under the auspices of the Jazz for Justice Project on a site visit with eleven other UT students. After that she traveled to Uganda two more times over the summer of 2009 and spring semester of 2010, where she conducted research on cultural revival programs and co-founded two projects that focused on the youth perception of culture.

About the Advisor

Dr. Tricia Redeker Hepner received her B.A. in Anthropology from Barnard College in 1996 and her M.A. and Ph.D. in Anthropology from Michigan State University in 2000 and 2004, respectively. She is an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee, where she has taught since 2006. Her research interests include political and legal anthropology, African diasporas, forced migration, human rights, and transnationalism. In 2009, she also received a Certificate in Forced Migration and Refugee Issues from the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University in Toronto, Canada.