

Full Length Research Paper

The cultural factor in conflict management/resolution: A case study of the Acholi of Northern Uganda

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Received 17 December, 2018; Accepted 8 February, 2019

The research was purposed to explore the role of positive practices in culture(s) that support the resolution and management of conflicts. The government's militaristic options achieved no meaningful results. Lack of peace eluded the 2006 Juba Peace negotiations. This necessitated exploration of alternative approaches to conflict resolution and peace building. The main thrust of this study was the exploration of culture-based approach to conflict resolution in war ravaged northern Uganda. The qualitative research methodology was employed in combination with desktop method. Related literature was reviewed including books, journal articles to explore, discover, identify and understand selected culture-based methods for resolving disputes in communities. Data was collected in conflict affected areas of Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader in northern Uganda. Major finding of the study reveals that the Acholi culture is rich in traditional knowledge, positive cultural practices and skills of conflict resolution and promotes peaceful coexistence among local communities. The research concludes that opportunities exist in culture as demonstrated by the case study of the Acholi people. The study makes three recommendations.

Key words: Culture, tradition, conflict resolution, purification, cleansing, reintegration Northern Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

The study seeks to explore the positive traditional practices that support resolution and management of conflict in a community. The major objective of this research was to examine culture in order to find if within culture opportunities exist for conflict resolution in view of enhancing peace building efforts. The study also seeks to find alternative methods of conflict resolution and peace building in the war ravaged northern Uganda. The study recognizes that for a long time the African continent was viewed by the world as the cradle and base of deep-seated protracted and devastating conflicts, wars,

insurgencies and civil unrests. Uganda, which is located in the East African region, has had its share of conflicts, political instability and unrest since its independence in 1962. For example in 1966 the government of President Milton Obote invaded the *Lubiri*, which is the seat of cultural Buganda Kingdom and forced the then king of Buganda, Sir Edward Mutesa II, to exile in Britain. In 1971, Milton Obote was ousted by General Idi Amin Dada who, in 1979, was toppled by a combined army of Uganda and Tanzania in a war that was commonly known as the Saba Saba, the name of the artillery used

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by the military and rebels in the shelling as they advanced towards regime overthrow. Milton Obote was reinstated for a second time in 1980 through flawed elections, but was deposed again five years later in 1985 by Tito Okello Lutwa, supported by General Bazilio Okello. From 1986, a rebellion began with Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit movement which mutated into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The war ravaged northern Uganda for over 20 years (Jendia and Mbabazi, 2014). Over the years, a concerted efforts and emphasis were put on articulation and utilization of conventional methods of peace building and conflict resolution such as mediation and third party negotiation, Peace Talks, and arbitration, to mention but a few.

The main thrust of this study is culture and tradition based practices with specific reference to the way of life of the Acholi people of northern Uganda. The focus is on their approach to conflict resolution and management as a means to building and attaining sustainable peace. In this study, conflict is not only limited to interpersonal disputes manifested in disharmonious social relationships among people. From the African perspective conflict rages between evil represented by bad spirits and good represented by good spirits, peace and harmony. There is always continuous conflict prevailing between good and evil even in the spirit world (Mbiti, 1992).

"Conseptualisation" would sound better. However, it is important to first understand the word culture as a terminology. According to the Merriam-Webster (Online Dictionary) culture is: (1) the act of developing intellectual and moral faculties of a person especially through education; (2) expert care and training; (3) enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training; acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills; and (4) the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group. Culture also refers to the characteristic features of everyday existence as diversions or a way of life shared by people in a given place or time. Merriam-Webster (Online Dictionary) maintains that the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a social group, an institution or organization; the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic all constitutes culture.

According to the Cambridge English Dictionary culture means the way of life of a particular people, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time_as shown in their ordinary behavior and habits, their attitudes toward each other, and their moral and religious beliefs. While the Oxford dictionary defines culture as "the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement

regarded collectively by each society and country, and culture having numerous nuances that may be difficult for the others to understand."

From the varied definitions ranging from Merriam-Webster to Cambridge to Oxford dictionaries, the research recognizes that culture has varied interpretations and meanings to different people. This suggests that it is not easy to define culture. Barber and Badre (1998) observed that culture is difficult to define because it is an abstract, complex and problematic concept to comprehend. However, Northouse (2010) asserted that culture should be understood as learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols, and traditions that are common to a group of people. The learned and shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding can all achieved through socialization processes. The qualities that are shared by the group make them unique. Therefore, in this study culture should be understood as a way of life of a particular people at particular and time scope and geographical location and in this case, the Acholi of Northern Uganda. Mbiti (1992) agreed that the function of culture serves as a lens through which a given social group views and grasps the world. The discussion on understanding culture leads to locating the Acholi and Luo in this study.

Origins of the Luo and their spread in East Africa

The study asks the questions, who are the Acholi people and what are their roots? In this section, the answer to this question is provided in the historical background to the study. There is a common view, among scholars of migration and settlement, that the Luo are part of the larger extended Luo ethnic group. Bahr-el-Ghazel province along the river Nile, in modern day South Sudan, is believed to be the original home of the ancestors of the Luo according to scholars like Curtin et al., (1995); Sid (2013). About 1000 AD the presence of Luo was evident in the eastern part of the Equatoria region. Some sections of the Luo traveled upwards along the Nile to a settlement in Uganda as some proceeded to settle in western Kenya. Their tendency for settlement along the rivers or lakes is the rationale for their reference as '*Jonam*', meaning people of the Lake/River. They maintain that the close link of the Luo to the *Shilluk*, *Dinka*, and *Nuer* suggests that the roots of the Luo are in modern South Sudan. Originally their way of life and culture revolved around fishing, hunting and pastoralist as inhabitants of the Nile valley. Curtin et al., (1995) categorized the Shiluk, Jur, Dinka, Nuer and Anuak as northern Luo tribes. The settlement of Luo in East Africa introduced them to farming and agriculture. However, their southward movement to East Africa during the 15th and 16th centuries entailed absorbing and incorporated some other groups of people into their cultural lifestyle.

The Luo ancestors left their cradle land, in the Bahr El Ghazel sub region in what is today South Sudan between 1300 and 1400 AD. A small group migrated northwards while the majority went southwards towards a temporal settlement at Pubungu (Curtin et al., 1995), a likely dispersal area in Uganda. Smaller groups under distinct leaders settled in the area which later prompted another wave of migratory in different directions. Historical records reveal that at Pubungu, a quarrel broke out between two brothers, Gipiir and Labongo (Ogot, 1997). The brothers were sons of Olum who descended from Dimo, Nyikango and Geilo who remained back in the Luo ancestral cradle. The two brothers conflicted over a spear and a royal bead.

Gipiir (Nyipiir) who used Labongo's spear to stop an elephant from destroying his crops lost the weapon to the wild animal. Labongo (Nyabongo) would settle for nothing less than his original spear. Gipiir was forced to go and bring back the original lost spear. He returned from elephant land not only with the recovered spear but also with royal beads. After a while Labongo's child swallowed one of the royal beads. Gipiir cut open the belly of the child to recover his royal bead just to get even with Labongo. The tragic loss of life led to separation of the two brothers. To ensure that the separation is permanent the brothers even buried an axe in the Nile waters as a symbol of their separation and severance of kinship. This separation culminated in a major dispersal. Gipiir led his family and supporters west of the Nile. His group encountered and colonized the Madi, Okebu, and Lendu. Inter-marriages with the occupied groups gave rise to the Alur tribe (Curtin et al., 1995, p. 118).

The quote clarifies that a Luo family comprising three brothers Labongo, Gipiir and Tiful were sons of chief Olum who migrated from the Bahr El Ghazel sub region in what is now South Sudan. At Pubungu on the shores of river Nile, Labongo developed hunting skills and had weapons such as spears. Meanwhile Gipiir developed farming skills in the growing of crops as source of livelihood. When threatened by a marauding elephant, Gipiir took his brother's spear to salvage the situation hoping his brother would understand. The wounded elephant fled with the spear. Labongo wanted nothing but his original spear. The growing tension forced Gipiir to tract the elephant. This was a risk endeavor. Gipiir returned home not only with Labongo's weapon but also with royal beads. After a while Labongo's child played and swallowed one of the royal beads. The embittered Gipiir seized the moment to avenge himself. He slit open the belly of the child to recover his bead. The bloody loss of human life increased the tension and hostilities between the two brothers. They severed kinship relations and separated permanently after burying an axe in Nile waters to symbolize their separation. Gipiir's family and his supporters left Pubungu and moved west of the Nile absorbing groups like Lendu, Okebu, and Madi into their fold. Inter-marriages with these new groups resulted in the

formation of the Alur tribal group who trace their ancestry to Gipiir. The site of Pubungu is quite close to the Murchison National Game Park. The challenge of wild animals faced by Gipiir is still faced by communities living adjacent to wild life parks. The Acholi who are the subject of this study trace their ancestry to Labongo. Both the Alur and Acholi are part of the Luo ethnic group.

According to Dunbar (1965), Labongo's Luo cluster invaded the former empire of Bunyoro-Kitara at Pawir. The Luo cluster advancement into Bunyoro-Kitara brought about the final collapse of that kingdom. They successfully replaced the leadership of the Bachwezi with the Bito dynasty. A further wave of migration saw the Luo through northern Buganda crossing via Busoga to settle in Samia land. Some of the migrants into Bunyoro made a later come back to Pubungu. Together with the remaining sect at Pubungu they moved North east wards into Lango and Acholi. Inter-marriage between these groups gave rise to the Kumam tribe.

The Joka-Jok sections of the Luo went directly from Acholi land via Lango and Teso into western Kenya. Here inter-marriages gave rise to tribes like Jopadhola with Owiny as their leader. In Kenya, the *Jaluo* as the *Luo* are known settled in the current Nyanza province. Today, the *Jopadhola* can be found in modern day Tororo District in Uganda. Another section of the *Luo* group under leadership of Jok Omolo travelled and settled along the shores of Lake Victoria in the Musoma and Mara sub region in modern day northern Tanzania (Dunbar, 1965).

Understanding the Acholi

Discussion of the origins of the Luo clearly locates the Acholi as a cluster within the Luo ethnic group who are River/Lake Nilotes or *Jonam* meaning people of the rivers/lakes. The course of their migration created a pattern of movement along the rivers and lakes as their settlement preferences in the Great lake region of East Africa. The Acholi are found both in northern Uganda and eastern Equatoria in South Sudan. They trace their roots to chief Olum, a Luo leader, as their great ancestral figure. Olum was a patriarch in the Luo migration around South Sudan's lake region of *Rumbek*. After the three brothers; Nyikango, Dimo, and Gielo, had separated in southern Sudan, *Olum* emerged as one of the leaders. Chief *Olum* moved southwards along river Nile to Pubungu, near modern day Pakwach. The reference to chief Olum links the three children namely; Labongo (*Kyebambi*), Gipiir (*Nyipiir*) and Tiful to the Luo ethnic group (Ogot, 1997).

The dispersal of the three brothers Labongo, Gipiir and Tiful around 1500 AD led to the formation of the two Luo tribes. The Acholi trace their immediate ancestry to Labongo, while the Alur trace their ancestry to Gipiir. The study argues that historically the Acholi people are descendants of Labongo. In South Sudan, the locality of

the Acholi group was around the Acholi Hills in Opari in the eastern Equatoria region. The census carried out in the year 2000 by Uganda Government depicts their population estimates as being around 45,000. However, the 1991 census in Uganda placed the figure to be around 746, 796 suggesting that Acholi are numerically greater in Uganda than they are in South Sudan. Hence, the Acholi can be classified under the following categories: Lango-Acholi, Alur-Acholi, Luo-Acholi, Southern Luo, Eastern, Sudanic, and Nilo-Saharan. Synonyms to their names are Lwo, Gang, Shuli, and Acoli. For centuries, the economic activities of the Acholi included: cattle keeping, fishing, hunting, and millet based agriculture as well as iron mining and iron working (Curtin et al., 1995, p. 119). Today the Acholi are professionals in public and animal health, education, law, engineering, and agriculture to mention but a few.

Another migratory feature draws attention to persistence and survival of the Luo languages particularly its adaptation and acceptance by different ethnic groups. Their livelihood depended on greener pastures and adequacy in rainfall amounts as a result of their pastoralist ancestors. Labongo also known as Kyebambi in Bantu circles led a group of Luo into Bunyoro Kitara. As mentioned before, this group ousted the Chwezi ruling class, thereby replacing the Chwezi dynasty with the Bito Dynasty (Kiwauka, 1968). In the 20th century, the Luo (Langi and Acholi) formed the core of political and military leadership in Uganda. However, the 21st century ushered a dark period characterized by a protracted conflict in the Acholi sub-region in northern Uganda as a whole. Since 1986 violent conflict raged between the government of Uganda and the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda which lasted over 20 years causing untold suffering. The conflict was characterized by displacement, killings, and exile among other misfortunes. Patrick (2016) and Jendia and Mbabazi (2014) argued that:

The abuses by the Lord's Resistant Army (LRA) include cutting off hands, breasts, lips, legs or ears of individuals perceived to be sympathetic to the government of Uganda, abduction of civilians, including children, and forcing children to be soldiers or become sexual slaves to rebel commanders. The United Nations estimated that over 1.6 million Ugandans were forced to flee to camps where they lived under squalid and overcrowded conditions and about 30,000 children have been abducted (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

From the quote above, it is clear that the prolonged war called for multiple interventions to end hostilities and bring about sustainable peace to northern Uganda. Since neither militaristic solutions of the Government of Uganda nor the 2006 Juba peace talks yielded any meaningful results, the need to explore alternative approaches to conflict resolution in northern Uganda gained greater than ever before. Therefore, this study explored culture based

approaches to discover opportunities for realizing lasting peace in northern Uganda.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed in this study is qualitative, that is a descriptive case study aided by desktop research methodology (Creswell, 2013), which largely involved extensive review of related literature to explore, discover, identify and understand deeply the cultural based methods and mechanisms for resolving and managing conflicts and disputes in the selected communities. Several scholarly works, books and journal articles were reviewed and analyzed to collect data on conflict affected areas of northern Uganda, namely, Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader. The field work to gather primary data lasted two weeks during which oral interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. The field data was recorded, transcribed, coded, and edited interpreted and compiled. The case study is useful because of its uniqueness and in-depth information. The choice of case study is based on the positive outcomes, that is, new in-depth insights and knowledge about the phenomenon of conflict with specific reference to a particular social group. The positive practices identified and discussed could lend support to conflict resolution processes in Uganda and the east African region. The study recognizes that findings from a case study cannot be generalized or applied to all other conflict scenarios.

Validity and reliability of findings

The concept of Validity and reliability calls for the need to maximize objectivity and reduce on personal opinion and bias. The gathering of primary data necessitates careful identification of people among Acholi communities who deemed custodians of cultural knowledge. The people involved are senior citizens referred to as elders whom the community regards as custodians of traditional knowledge and skills were sought out. Resulting from their numerous life long life experiences such elders are regarded as loaded with wisdom and they are viewed as pillars of the society. They have integrity, knowledge, wisdom and provide relevant and reliable information. As mentioned earlier, the realization that neither the militaristic options nor conventional methods of attaining lasting peace in northern Uganda were yielding any meaningful results led many to ask questions like can cultural practices provide alternative options for conflict mitigation and resolution in northern Uganda? In this section some selected traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution and management were identified and discussed although there are many more traditional mechanisms of managing conflict among the Acholi of northern Uganda.

FINDINGS

Having located the Acholi and their roots, this section discusses the tradition based mechanisms in view of understanding their practicality, moral values and philosophy of conflict resolution and harmonious community living. Traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution focus on ritual purification, cleansing and reintegration of individuals into community and maintenance of peace and harmony in society. The choice of traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution and peace building is based on the assumption that in

majority of Ugandan Societies including Acholi are rich in knowledge and skills which is inherent in deep-seated practices. The study revealed that the Acholi people are one example of African society rich in indigenous knowledge and skills for peaceful coexistence even with the natural environment. Ojara Latigo, (2018) agreed that African societies are rich in knowledge that provides principles and beliefs for peaceful and harmonious living. Latigo maintained that the Acholi people of northern Uganda sustain, advocate, and preserve cultural beliefs about the spirit world and social order, which in effect informs their perceptions of truth, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation (Afako, 2002) all of which are critical values in conflict resolution. The application of traditional principles for peace building is realistic and is appropriate alternative approach to conflict resolution and management.

Traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution

There are a number of traditional mechanisms that respond to conflict-related social problems among the Acholi that can broadly be categorized as cleansing ceremonies. The practices discussed in this study are applicable to problems caused by social conflicts and conflict between individuals/community and spirits. Therefore the cleansing and purification ceremonies are performed to liberate a person(s) from harmful effects of conflict and from angry spirits that may inflict harm including disease, death and natural disaster to persons and the community. The study recognizes variations in details of the cleansing ceremonies in the Acholi sub-region.

The Lord's Resistance Army

In the northern Uganda armed conflict, the rebel Lord's Resistance Army played active roles, hence it necessary to put their role in context. This subsection provides the social context to the application of *Mato Oput* as culture based approach resolving conflict. As mentioned before, in most Ugandan cultures, people are conscious that there exist interpersonal conflict between individuals and communities as well as conflict between good and evil. The good spirits are agents of good social wellbeing while bad spirits are agents of evil. Therefore it is necessary to cleanse people and their earthly abode, by making peaceful and harmonious existence with the natural order. This endeavor is a big collective social responsibility. The study recognizes that the rituals of cleansing largely target afflictions of community members by bad angry spirits. However, no reintegration is possible without reconciliation, forgiveness, and cleansing. The emergence of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the 1980s saw rampant abductions of children (boys and girls) becoming child soldiers in the rebel

forces. However it should be pointed out that the National Resistance Army which was the initial army of the Government of Uganda used child soldiers commonly known as *kadogo*, (Kiswahili) meaning small. At the height of the conflict in northern Uganda, government child soldiers were been phased out.

Many ex-combatants gradually returned to their communities as either a result of rescue by government forces known as the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF) or successful escape ventures from the rebel forces. There was great concern by communities of northern Uganda as to what should be done about the returnees, that is, war abductees and ex combatants. As the findings show, the Acholi of northern Uganda have rich indigenous knowledge and skills of coping in the aftermath of the war. The most commonly used cleansing ceremonies especially for returnees from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) include: *Mato Oput*, *Nyono Tong Gweno*, *Lwoko Pi Wang*, *Moyo Kum*, *Moyo Piny*, *Lakere Kat*, and *Gomo tong*.

Mato Oput

Mato Oput literally means "drinking bitter root." According to Harlacher et al. (2006) in their book, *Traditional Ways of Coping in Acholi, Cultural Provisions for Reconciliation and Healing from War*, the ceremony of *Mato Oput* is a key element of Acholi culture which has become widely known in and outside Uganda. Although it is not frequently performed in contemporary Acholi, *Mato Oput* played a major role especially in the reintegration of former LRA combatants. The LRA ex-combatants were invariably involved in killings and murders. Jendia (2015) observed that the rite of *Mato Oput* is based on a feudalist approach to resolving a long standing conflict involving loss of life. This suggests that the dispute is intense. The individual families and clans involved are in bad terms and no longer share anything in common including food. There is breach of social relationships. Although the notion of *Mato Oput* is sometimes used metaphorically to refer to nearly every reconciliation process taking place in Acholi today, *Mato Oput* concludes the process of reconciliation that involves a murder.

Mato Oput is part of a rite frequently used in conflict resolution processes between the victim's clan and the perpetrator's clan. This begins with mediation and negotiation between the two conflicting parties. The mediation and negotiation culminates in agreeing upon a level of compensation by perpetrator to the victim. Compensation, known as *culu kwor*, is a central feature of the process. *culu kwor* symbolizes recognition of the victim's suffering caused by the perpetrator and serves as a deterrent from committing the act again. In addition to the importance of this symbolic exchange, *culu kwor* must be used to care for the needs of the deceased, such

as arranging funeral and funeral rites and caring of widows and orphans (Lonergan, 2012).

As quote above shows, in modern Acholi society indemnity has become monetized. That means that money is attached to most social activities such as *Mato Oput*. In modern Acholi culture, nearly all compensations carry price tags. However, traditionally indemnity could be paid in kind and could also be used to marry a wife into the clan of the deceased and this represented befitting exchange for the departed family member. For example, a young girl who is sister to the crime perpetrator could be used as indemnity. The young woman was given as a wife to a brother of the deceased to produce children so that the deceased lives on and on. The resulting child from such a marriage is given the name of the deceased person to ensure family continuity. It would be wrong if a family and a clan permitted a member of the community to just fade out. The rationale is that males are the primary avenues for sustainability of family lineages. After the compensation is paid, the process culminates in a *Mato Oput* ceremony, whose principal purpose is reconciliation of individuals and communities. When the family and the clan that committed the murder are ready to pay reparations, the process of reconciliation begins with preparation of the reconciliation concoction or drink. Therefore, this study argues that *Mato Oput* offers holistic restoration psychologically, mentally, morally as well as an opportunity for social re-integration.

Preparation of the *Mato Oput* reconciliation drink and materials

The materials required in preparation of *Opwut* comprise: roots, Juice, new calabash, and water. Preparing the reconciliation mix to drink is done by an elderly person (the most senior of all in age). The elder prepares from the roots, *opwut*. The roots are dug up, washed and pounded on a stone to form some sort of powder. The powder is mixed up with fruit juice in a new calabash and is carefully placed on the ground.

Drinking the Reconciliation Concoction (*Mato Opwut*)

This is a gradual process involving numerous steps. For example, in a situation involving two families and clans, if the assailant is called *Ojok* (a pseudo name) and the slain victim is called *Otto* (a pseudo name). Ritual cleansing becomes necessary. A short rite of purification is done prior to *Ojok's* family moving to village venue designated for the reconciliation. A brief rite of purification is performed. This involves spitting into the mouth of the reconciliation sheep which must be black in color. *Ojok* opens the mouth of the sheep he is leading to the arena, spits saliva into it (Lonergan, 2012).

1) Step i: Leveling the ground

It should be noted that before the *Mato Oput* takes place, much effort is put into mediation between the families of the conflicting parties. This is called leveling the ground. The mediation efforts preceding *Mato Oput* makes the environment conducive for reconciliation and the conflicting parties become predisposed to pursuing peace. The injured party would now be disposed to accepting apology and offering forgiveness. On the other hand, the party deemed to be the perpetrator of crime would also be more disposed to confess wrong doing, ask for forgiveness, and pay damages to ensure that justice is served.

2) Step ii: Spitting into the mouth of the sacrificial sheep

Prior to the families going to village venue for the reconciliation, a brief rite of purification is performed. This involves spitting into the mouth of the reconciliation black sheep. The perpetrator of crime opens the mouth of the sheep he is leading to the arena, spits saliva into it (Lonergan, 2012).

3) Step iii: Preparation of the Oput

When all is set, the preparation of *Oput*, the reconciliation drink begins. An elder, who doubles as the master of ceremony, takes the blood of the two slaughtered sheep and pours it into the *Oput* which is bitter root and a solution of *acuga* leaves. He mixes all the ingredients to form a single mixture-the drink of reconciliation (*Oput*) and carefully puts it on the ground.

4) Step iv: Confession of wrongs committed

In step four, confession of the crime committed is necessary. The wrong doer assumes responsibility by actually confessing the crime(s) and then asking for forgiveness from the injured individual, families and clan (Lonergan, 2012).

5) Step v: Participants converge to the Oput

Next the close relatives of the slain person and those of the assailant come close together and converge around the calabash containing the concoction from opposite directions--a gesture signifying an end to hostilities and beginning of era of peace. They closed in on the calabash containing the cocktail of the reconciliation drink known as *Oput*.

6) Step vi: *Mato Oput*/Drinking the Oput

The defendant and the victim's representative kneel down, hands folded behind their backs, then bending forward, drink from the calabash without holding it with their hands. The accuser and the accused lead the drinking process. They each sip three times from the calabash and then give way to their close relatives present who also double as witnesses to the process of rite of reconciliation. For example, *Ojok* and a close relative of the one deceased (*Otto*) begin to drink the *Oput*. *Ojok* begins to drink followed by a relative the victim, perhaps the father.

7) Step vii: Moment of crisis

As the reconciliation process commences a moment of crisis might ensue threatening the reconciliation ceremony. For example, if the mother of (late *Otto*) stands nearby and continues to weep aloud displaying excessive pain and hurt over her loss, the peace process could collapse because this action could incite anger and violence prompting the close relatives of the slain to engage in acts of vengeance. If this happens, the conflict resolution process falls apart. To avert the crisis, some elders are tasked to keep *Otto's* mothers company not only to express their sympathy and kindness but most importantly to restrain her from excessive behavior. She is also called upon to share in the *Oput* reconciliation drink.

8) Step viii: Killing of sacrificial sheep

The drinking of reconciliation drinking (*Opwut*) is not done in isolation. The conflicting parties had not eaten together for a long while. Hence eating a shared meal is necessary. The materials required are 2 sheep, 2 cows, a butcher knife, leaves, pans, wood and lighter and millet flour. When the *Mato Oput* is complete, *Ojok* leads a black sheep to a selected sport near the homestead of *Otto's* mother. At the designated sport, the sheep is laid on its back with its head facing northwards. It is then be stabbed with the sharp knife by one of the elders who doubles as the master of the ceremony (MC). In succession, another elder would lay an additional red/brown spotted white sheep on its back with its head pointing in the opposite, that is, southwards. This sheep is presented to elders by the family of *Otto*, *the slain victim*. The MC elder then stabs the sheep with a sharp knife. The close relatives of *Ojok*, *the accused*, gather in the northward direction of their slain sheep as the close relatives of *Otto* gather on the side of their own sheep in southward direction. Opposite directions of north and south are important because they represent the magnitude of hostilities which must be overturned in

order that individuals, families and communities might be reconciled without entertaining any further conflict. Only then can peace begins to rein.

9) Step ix: Eating liver of sacrificial sheep

While the meat of the sacrificial sheep is being cooked, the liver(s) of the two sheep are roasted, cut into pieces and put on the hides of the slaughtered sheep. The roast liver is distributed and then eaten by all present. *Ojok* takes a piece of liver and feeds it to a close relative of the slain (*Otto*) who consumes it. Likewise a close relative of *Otto* takes a piece of a liver and feeds it to *Ojok* who also consumes it. This action of mutual feeding rekindles the severed relationships and marks permanent cessation of hostilities.

10) Step x: Examination, acceptance and blessing of the indemnity

While awaiting the meat to cook, selected elders examine the indemnity provided by the family of *Ojok* as indemnity to the family of *Otto*. The indemnity comprises of 2 big fat goats and 2 fat healthy cows, which in modern times substitute the traditional payment of indemnity with a human being, namely, a girl. When satisfactorily verified, the elders bless the indemnity by smearing each person present on the chest with the content of the entrails of the sheep saying, "Let these cows and goats produce many more and only female off-springs. As humans we all make mistakes. May peace and calm now return among us!"

11) Step xi: Eating the sacrificial meat

When the meat is cooked, it is consumed by individuals, families and clans involved in the conflict. All participants in the *Mato Oput* ceremony are ready to celebrate the successful conclusion of the reconciliation process suggesting that resolution of conflict is complete, thereby ushering in a new era of peaceful co-existence. In this way conflict resolution is achieved using culture-based mechanism such as *Mato Oput*.

12) Step xii: Celebrating peace

After partaking in the *Mato Oput* and eating meat together, it is time to celebrate the return of peace in the land. An Elder begins to drum a *Bwola* royal drum. At the Sound of the *Bwola* drum, women shout ululations and clan mottos as the elder drum on. On hearing the sound of drums people from all over the neighborhood come and join in the happy dance and merry making. The

feasting continues even for two days as more bulls would be slaughtered to feed the revelers who have come to witness the reconciliation of former conflicting individuals and communities (Lonergan, 2012).

Nyono Tong Gweno

Mato Oput aside, one of the most commonly practiced traditional justice mechanism is *Nyono Tong Gweno* used in ritual cleansing in Acholi culture. “*Nyono*” means to step on” and “*Tong Gweno*” means a chicken egg (Jendia, 2015). Thus, *nyono tong Gweno*, denotes the “stepping onto an egg” ceremony (Lonergan, 2012; Jendia, 2015). It is used to welcome and cleanse one who has been gone away from home for an extended period of time, regardless of the reason for their absence. Essentially, *Nyono Tong Gweno* is one of the rites of reconciliation and conflict resolution line with *Mato Oput*. The returnee must step on and break an egg before re-entering the homestead and village. This ceremony serves dual purpose of cleansing and giving a cultural welcome and integration of people especially those abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) who were linked to criminal activities such killings.

Performing Nyono Tong Gweno Rite

For example, if the local FM radio station announces that *Omony* (a pseudo name), an abductee of Joseph Kony’s (LRA) for five years has been rescued by the UPDF forces and is kept at Bar Ndege military Barracks in Gulu and that *Omony* who wishes to return home would soon be handed over to this parents and relations. Upon hearing this great news, *Omony’s*, parents conclude that their numerous prayers for his safety finally have been heard by God. *Alum* (a pseudo Name) *Omony’s* mother thinks very fast of the rite of purification and so immediately reports the safe return of her son to an elder of their village to make arrangements to receive and reunite *Omony* with the family and community.

Every one of *Alum’s* neighbors who hears about *Omony’s* safe return receives the good news with great joy. The compound is packed to capacity with well wishers from all the neighborhoods waiting patiently to see and hug *Omony* who is returning home after five years. One thing is sure, *Omony* has stayed half a decade away from home and he has grown up with all sorts of human experiences some of which could have made him unclean. He needs to be cleansed before re-entering the homestead as is the practice in Acholi culture. The materials required include an egg, a stick, and a master of ceremony. The ritual of breaking the egg is done at a sacred shrine. In this ceremony, the returnee steps on an egg that has been placed under a stick broken from a *pobo* plant and a *layebi*, meaning a forked

stick usually used to open a granary. This process symbolizes the cleansing from wrong doings done or experienced during the long absence from home and indicates a re-union with the family and community (Lonergan, 2012; Jendia and Mbabazi 2015).

Nyono Tong Gweno occurs before the returnee re-enters the homestead. The rationale is that any bad acts the person might have engaged in during their long absence from the community are automatically rescinded and forgiven. Although the philosophy of *Nyono Tong Gweno* is a relevant form of welcoming and cleansing a returnee, it can also be used in situations when an individual has been away from home even for non-conflict reasons. The commonality of this ceremony with *Mato Oput* lies in the fact both aim at cleansing and purifying the person socially, psychologically, and spiritually. However, *Nyono Tong Gweno* is most widely practiced than *Mato Oput* because the requirements for the ceremony are not only available, but also the required materials are inexpensive needing minimal advance planning. Therefore many families can afford the costs involved and quickly perform the rite. Thus, it is one of the most widely practiced traditional mechanisms of justice and conflict resolution in Acholi culture. Although *Nyono Tong Gweno* is often performed as the first step to larger and more involving cleansing processes, the ceremony can also be performed independently.

Significance of Nyono Tong Gweno

The rite of breaking the egg (*Nyono Tong Gweno*) is significant because it not only attempts to restore a human person psychologically but also brings about social and moral restoration to a person and communities. It gives confidence both to the individual person and the community of a sense of trust. In an Interview conducted October 2006 with a Focus Group, an elder in the group has this to say: ‘the Acholi as a people believe strongly in communality of life. “I am because we are, and we are because I am,” as African philosophy (Mbiti, 1992)

Practices such as the ones discussed in this study often propels Acholi society forward. Whenever someone leaves the community life and lives outside of it willingly or unwillingly the person is expected to be influenced by foreign ideas and practices that may make him or her unclean, hence the need for ritual cleansing and purification before reintegration into family and community. In this way community life and the common good is safeguarded at all cost.

Lwoko Pi Wang

Lwoko Pi Wang means the washing away of tears. This ritual is closely related to *Nyono Tong Gweno*. In fact, both can be performed together and thus are frequently

referred to as part and parcel of the same process. However, *Nyono Tong Gweno* and *Lwoko Pi Wang* have distinctly different purposes and meanings.

Lwoko Pi Wang is performed in situations where mourning and funeral rites are being performed for a person who has been assumed dead. The family members wash their faces with water symbolizing the washing away of the tears shed as the returnee was presumed dead. Then the returnee is blessed with that same water. An elder pours the water onto the roof of a hut and the returnee passes through it. In some cases, an animal is slaughtered first as a further form of cleansing, and the water from hand washing after consuming the meat is used in the *Lwoko Pi Wang* ceremony (Lonergan, 2012).

This ceremony clearly marks the physical and spiritual return of the person and most especially indicates that he or she is welcome in totality (Lonergan, 2012). As with *Nyono Tong Gweno*, the *Lwoko Pi Wang* ceremony is also used for welcoming and re-integrating persons even for non-conflict derived absentism.

Moyo Kum

According to Jendia (2015) *Moyo Kum* is used to refer to a cleansing ceremony. *Moyo* means to spread something out to dry and *Kum* means the body. The ceremony cleanses the home of the returnee and the family as a whole. It also blesses the home as the family prepares for a new beginning. *Moyo Kum* ceremony is performed to cleanse a person who is possessed with evil spirits. In this ceremony, an animal is slaughtered to cleanse an individual's pain and appease the spirits. An elder offers blessings and lamentations. The animal is slaughtered, roasted, and eaten by both by all participants and the spirit (s) afflicting the subject of the ceremony. *Moyo kum* is unique in that it can be performed in a residential area, rather than in a remote location or in the specific area where a killing occurred.

Moyo kum can also be used specifically to address violations of the body in addition to a broad range of bad spirits. This ceremony is performed to cleanse an individuals or a group of people who are suffering from similar spiritual afflictions. This group approach has frequently been adopted for cleansing former abductees as well. The philosophy is that "I am because you and because you are I am" (Mbiti, 1992). Whether the ceremony is performed for an individual or a group, it is a public ceremony open to the whole community and often may involve counseling and advice from the elders performing the ceremony.

Moyo Piny

While *Moyo Kum* cleanses the human body, *Moyo piny* cleanses the whole area. It is a ritual designed to

eliminate *cen* from a particular physical location. In this ceremony, an animal is slaughtered to appease the angry bad spirits. The content of the animal's rumen is used to cleanse the area (Lonergan, 2012; Jendia, 2015).

This ceremony is intended to impact an entire community, rather than an individual. *Moyo piny* was a widely common practiced as residents moved from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps back to their home areas to cleanse the bad spirits before re-establishing communities and homesteads (Lonergan, 2012). However, at the time of return from the IDP camps many communities and individuals were unable to afford the animals and other supplies necessary to perform the ceremonies. Consequently, many areas initially remain unused as they awaited a *moyo piny* ritual (Lonergan, 2012).

Lakere Kat

As mentioned earlier, there are conflict between people and forces of nature. *Lakere Kat* refers to chasing of an evil spirit (Jendia, 2015). Like *Moyo Kum*, *Lakere Kat* is performed to rid an individual of a bad angry spirit(s). The ceremony is performed outside a residential area, so that the bad spirit(s) stay away from the afflicted individual(s). An animal is slaughtered, roasted, and offered to the *cen*. The participants in the ceremony also eat a portion of the meat. The attendants then return home without looking back to the ceremony site. When the cleansed person returns from this ceremony, the spirit that disturbed him or her is left behind. Similar to *Moyo Kum*, *Lakere Kat* can be performed for an individual or for a group and often involves large public gatherings involving the whole clan and community (Lonergan, 2012).

Gomo Tong

Gomo Tong means bending of spears. In Acholi culture, *Gomo Tong* (the bending of spears) is performed to show that violence between two groups or individuals has ended. If one party initiates violence again, the spear will turn against him or her (Jendia, 2015). This is related to *Mato Oput*. Thus the two parties involved in a conflict where death has been registered agree to come together and undergo the rituals of reconciliation. It is broader than the *Mato Oput* because it takes into account even situations where the murderer is not known but the clan is known instead.

DISCUSSION

Even though the study reveals that *Mato Oput* is an appropriate mechanism for conflict resolution and peace building there are challenges that hinder wider application of the method.

Lonergan (2012) also viewed challenges to tradition-

based mechanism of conflict resolution and peace building. Accordingly three main challenges seem to hinder wider application of the *Mato Oput*.

- 1) In the context of the LRA conflict, identification of clear victims and perpetrators as required by cultural procedures for the ceremony is rather difficult. The combatants cannot easily identify the people who harmed them or whom they have harmed.
- 2) Even as many people support the idea of *Mato Oput* as a fundamental form of justice, few can afford the costly process. The process is laborious and expensive for most village communities.
- 3) The nature and gravity of crimes committed throughout the conflict, many of which constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity are also unprecedented for the use of *Mato Oput*, and the cultural institution must balance how to apply this ritual to address these crimes without being seen as condoning impunity.
- 4) The act of spitting into the mouth of the sacrificial animal denotes a symbolism. The crime perpetrator who is repentant and remorseful despises his actions before the community in a bid to redeem his tainted self image and reputation.

The purpose of the study was to explore alternatives methods to conventional mechanisms of conflict resolution and peace building. From the study the culture based mechanisms identified in Acholi traditional practices are positive and provide alternative methods of conflict resolution suggesting that there are opportunities within culture which enhances the building of sustainable peace. Most importantly the traditional mechanisms could inspire the formation of Agencies like the Truth and Reconciliation to ensure promotion of sustainable peace and administration of social justice and integration.

However, the culture based opportunities provide useful alternatives to conflict resolution not only in northern Uganda but the whole country at large. Their country wide application would most likely create a sense of cultural dominance by one social group which in effect could compromise the building of sustainable peace in Uganda.

Further, although scholars like Barber and Badre (1998) saw culture as an abstract and complicated concept to grasp because of the varied perceptions and symbolisms different social groups hold, positivity and practicality in culture especially when it can aids the resolution of human social problems such as disputes/ conflict provides learning experiences to other cultural groups. The study reveals that within culture there are opportunities for positive change. The research now advocates for paradigm shift from culture as tool of oppression and dehumanization of marginalized groups especially women to culture as agent of positive social transformation.

Conclusion

The study concludes that opportunities exist in culture

for conflict resolution like purification, cleansing, reintegration, reconciliation, retribution administration of social justice which is fundamentals of conflict resolution and peace building particularly for northern Uganda. The Rituals discussed in this study underscore conflict resolution through forgiveness, healing and restoration of strained social relationships physically, psychologically and spiritually through sharing of common meal and celebration of the return of peace. The research further highlights positive cultural practices for dispensing social justice and promoting the value of harmonious human relations among individuals and communities. From the study it is clear that the traditional rites celebrate the sacredness and sanctity of life and dignity of the human person as being central to conflict resolution and peace building. Most importantly, the rites of *Mato Oput*, *Nyono Tong Gweno*, *Lwoko pi wang*, *Lakere Kat*, *Moyo Piny* and *Moyo Kum* as well as *Gomo Tong* etc all emphasize holistic restoration through cleansing or purification so that strained and broken inter and intra personal relationships are restored through purification, confession of wrong doings, payment of reparations and joyful celebration which involves former conflicting parties drinking from the same calabash and eating together the same food from the same dish are fixed.

The reintegrated person experiences a sense of identity, community and belonging. The deep-rooted cultural approaches discussed in this study take into account the fact that beyond conflict the individuals remain members of the same communities who have to continue to coexist side by side as neighbors unlike other conventional methods of conflict resolution such as court arbitration that strains human relationships deeper and permanently. There is no doubt that the application of culture based mechanisms of conflict resolution such *Mato Oput* provide great opportunity for enhancing peace building by both government and citizens in their quest for sustainable peace in northern Uganda and rest of the country. Therefore, the cultural factor in conflict resolution and mitigation provided alternative approaches to conflict resolution and management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study makes the following recommendations:

- 1) Preservation and wider application of traditional mechanisms like *Mato Oput*, *Nyono Tong Gweno*, *Lwoko pi Wang*, *Lakere Kat*, *Moyo Piny* and *Moyo Kum* and *Gomo Tong* as well as other mechanisms from other Ugandan cultures not specified in this study should be seriously considered by policy makers, government and cultural institution and researchers.
- 2) The culture-based mechanism of peace building are strongly recommended because collectively they provide alternative methods of conflict resolution that can greatly reinforce and increase chances for conflict resolution

and peace building processes in Uganda and the rest of Africa. Therefore, it is necessary to preserve positive cultural practices which augment conventional mechanism of resolving conflicts and disputes and administration of social justice at all levels.

3) Further research is recommended to gain greater insights into opportunities within culture that can support resolution of social problems among individual and communities in order to make world a better place to live in even for future generations.

4) The establishment of truth, reconciliation and Justice Commission which incorporates rich indigenous knowledge and skills in resolution, mitigation and conflict management to ensure that the country shall not plunge into costly, devastating conflict again.

The recommendations made in this research if implemented provide practical solutions to conflict related challenges in Uganda. It should be recalled that the conflict in northern Uganda did not have an official closure through formal peace agreements and disarmament processes. Although hostilities have ceased since 2006 and nearly all the conflict affected population have evacuated from Internal Displaced Persons' Camps, there is still great desire for accountability and social justices which are fundamental for building sustainable peace especially in northern Uganda. The achievement of sustainable peace would in effect drive economic recovery and development.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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