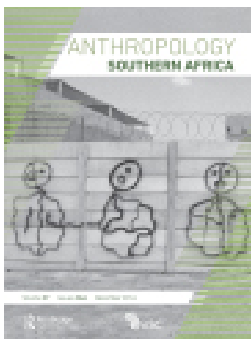

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Traditional Acholi mechanisms for reintegrating Ugandan child abductees

Eric Awich Ochen

Department of Social Work and Social Administration, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda
Email: eaochen@chuss.mak.ac.ug

Using a mainly qualitative approach, this paper analyses the presence, significance and efficacy of traditional mechanisms for the protection of children from conflicts and other adverse situations. Contemporary child protection debates seem to put emphasis on the western construction of childhood and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as instruments of child protection. Taking a traditional-modernistic approach this paper argues that in many cases African communities practised and developed very strong and elaborate mechanisms for the observance and preservation of the welfare of children. It examines some of the enduring socio-cultural practices among the Acholi tribe in northern Uganda and their implications for the rehabilitation, resettlement and reintegration of children affected by armed conflict in the region. Findings suggest that there is strong potential for utilising traditional systems and practices to address rehabilitation and reintegration dynamics among children and young people, but complementary initiatives also need to be implemented to enhance the efficacy and, in some cases, adaptability of these institutions.

Keywords: child protection; children rights; child soldiers; Northern Uganda; traditional mechanisms

In 2001, it was estimated that about 300 000 boys and girls were serving as child soldiers in different parts of the world, with up to two million killed between 1990–2005 (Bardin 2005).[1] Countries within Africa with a high record of involvement of children in armed conflict have been Uganda, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Angola and Mozambique. Despite the reported resilience of children in armed conflict situations, the impact of war causes significant physical, social and psychological damage to them. In Uganda, children have been used in armed conflict with alacrity. While the most prominent usage has been by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), even the National Resistance Army (NRA), in its quest to wrestle power from Obote's government in the early 1980s, used children as soldiers. Bainomugisha (2011) suggests that the conscription of child soldiers is not a new phenomenon in Uganda's history, with the involvement of children in armed conflict being traced as far back as 1972, and also to the 1978–1979 wars of liberations against Idi Amin. The present paper is concerned with the reintegration of those abducted in service to the protracted northern conflict (1986–2006) and discusses how Acholi beliefs on childhood and children's rights could enhance the reintegration of former child soldiers and young woman hostages, now mothers themselves.

The Acholi live in northern Uganda and have borne the greatest brunt of the northern Uganda conflict which raged on for over 20 years. In considering the healing and regulative mechanisms in Acholi cultural institutions, what is at stake is the return and reintegration of young women who had been abducted as girls by the rebels, taken to the bush and forced to become wives and child mothers, as well as the experiences of young men who had been coerced as boys into becoming soldiers. While I acknowledge the limitations and weaknesses of socio-cultural institutions with regards to the rights of children, I suggest that effective and durable social reintegration needs to be contextualised within acceptable socio-cultural domains.

This qualitative study was conducted between November 2011 and December 2013 in the two neighbouring Gulu and Amuru districts in the North Central part of Uganda. Data was collected

mainly from community focus groups with elders, opinion leaders and other members of the community. The study also benefited from a total of twelve key informant interviews carried out at community and district level to generate the views and perspective of local leaders, technical government personnel and other agencies.

Current contention within the child rights field is that the protection of children in conflict situations is premised on international humanitarian laws and conventions as well as national legislation and statutes. It should be noted, however, that childhood and how it is defined is itself a contested concept. Nonetheless, some scholars suggest more or less uniform childhood experiences predicated on biological and age based dichotomy (see Francis 2007; Machel 2001; Boyden 1994). These views seem to have heavily influenced the definition of childhood as presented in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC has so far been the most comprehensive instrument for the protection of children generally, and in conflict situations specifically. It is based on four general principles: non-discrimination (Article 2); the best interests of the child (Article 3); the right to life survival and development (Article 6); and the right for children to have their views heard and given due weight in all decisions affecting them (Article 12). Subsections 1–4 of Article 38 specifically address the issues of protection of children in armed conflict: the Convention prohibits the recruitment of children below 15 years into armed forces, and encourages state parties to recruit older persons and to ensure that adequate care and support is provided to children affected by armed conflict (Harvey 2003). All countries except the United States of America (USA) and Somalia have ratified the UNCRC.

The UNCRC has, however, been criticised for being insensitive to cultural differences across countries, and its tendency to be premised on the western conceptualisation of childhood, even though childhood is considered a social construct (Gadda 2008). Dissenting scholars recognise childhood as an important stage in the development of an individual but reject the age-based dichotomy, and point to a complex experience and conceptualisation of childhood (see Francis 2007; Shepler 2005). They suggest that childhood is inherently socially constructed and varies from one community to the next, with children in different societies leaving childhood at different stages and not necessarily based on age-based characteristics.

It should be noted, however, that different communities, tribes and ethnicities have their own social institutions, norms and regulations which form fundamental aspects of the socialisation and protection of children (Murithi 2008; Francis 2007; Bainomugisha 2011). Cultural context plays a key role in children's socialisation, in how childhood is defined and in the determination of children's privileges and responsibilities (see Francis 2007; Shepler 2005). The need to factor in cultural dimensions and perspectives in child protection programmes has contributed to a view among some scholars that actors need to find common ground between the international interpretation of children rights and how they are perceived locally (see Honwana 2006; Shepler 2005; Francis 2007; Bisell et al. 2008). Among those concerned with how abducted children are reintegrated with their families and societies, there is a view that effective protection of children from direct involvement in conflict requires the harmonisation of local and global understanding of children's rights and that this should be locally sanctioned (Honwana 2006).

The debate within the contemporary child rights discourse pits the universalist view of children's rights against the localisation view. The former premises its assumptions and interventions on the argument that childhood and childhood experiences are more or less similar across culture, region and continents. This view does not effectively take into consideration the uniqueness of certain contexts and how this impacts on childhood definitions and experiences. Boyden (1994) opines that care should be taken to avoid universal interpretations of children's experiences of conflict, and suggests that children's resilience be considered. Moreover, interventions that are culturally sensitive are not necessarily universally applicable in different cultural contexts. Besides, developing culturally sensitive interventions might enhance the acceptability of the message of children rights. Recent studies in northern Uganda indicate that emphasizing rights

as a concept foreign to the local culture rather than integral to it could cause communities to misinterpret the philosophy and purpose of child rights observance (Abola et al. 2009; Ochen 2009). When children's rights are presented as something new that requires a realignment of socio-cultural organisations, it alienates children from their socio-cultural reality and affects family and community cohesion (Ochen 2009).

The localisation view emphasises the uniqueness of culture, time and space to applicability of rights and what constitutes childhood or its roles and privileges (see Francis 2007; Shepler 2005, Bisell et al. 2012). This position recognises the variance of cultural practices, definition of children rights and conceptualisation of childhood based on varied social situations, norms and practices. Such a definition and construction of childhood also leads to role prescription that is performed by children. Within Acholi communities, for instance, it is considered appropriate by many to give children quite significant responsibilities in the homestead, with girls and boys below 18 given roles which are considered gender-segregated. These were also looked at as ways of socialising the child and preparing them for adult roles later in life. So, unlike the UNCRC document, the child taking on some adult responsibilities is believed to provide a child with the right structure and environment to develop as an individual. While cultural changes have occurred over the years and while technological and other aspects of globalisation have impinged significantly on the indigenous cultural practices of many communities and ethnic groups, it is a contention among scholars espousing this view that local cultural and institutional practices remain a key determinant of childhood and children rights.

Studies carried out in northern Uganda suggest that the Acholi cultural and social set-up had clear norms, regulations and practices which protected children (see Ochen 2011; Bainomugisha 2011; Acirokop 2010) and that gender-based violence, child sacrifices, sexual abuse, maltreatment and abuse were unequivocally rejected and heavily sanctioned. However, some practices such as the corporal punishment of children was regularly practiced across Acholi communities, and in many cases children were inflicted with physical injuries which left long-term emotional and physical scars. Such outcomes do not conform to the UNCRC and its clauses for the protection of children against harmful practices.

There has also been the contention among other child protection and development scholars subscribing to the Euro-American view of childhood as majorly aged-defined that suggests a universality of applications of rights as defined by western construction (see Francis 2007; Honwana 2006; Bisell et al 2012). This view suggests an intervention framework that emphasises the universality of rights and its application within varied context. While this position does not totally dispute the influence of culture on child rights' outcomes, it considers that children rights as conceived by the UNCRC can be applied in any context (see also Gadda 2008; Lachman et al. 2002; Wald 2004; Houston 1992; Glass 1992). The proponents, however, do not measure or pay close attention to the cultural influence and the construction of childhood on the implementation of rights programmes. It is important to note that most UNICEF and international child protection agencies, such as Save the Children, War Child and Plan International, developed interventions and programmes that are heavily influenced by this view. Some of the interventions thus ended up alienating rather than promoting harmony between children and their parents or communities (see Abola et al. 2009). In contrast the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which was adopted by the Organisation of African Unity in 1990, recognises the differences in definition of childhood although it maintains the UNCRC definition and conceptualisation of childhood.

Nature of the reintegration interventions

The key interventions which international organisations implement for the return and reintegration of children affected by conflict are: reception centre-based support to provide remedial short-term care for child-mothers and other formerly abducted young people to prepare them for post-resettlement life within the community; reception centre preparation of home communities

and the families of the returning young people through sensitisation and family counselling respectively. Intervention activities within the Reception and Rehabilitation Centres (RRCs) involved a series of initiatives to ensure that child-mothers return to a normal state of psychosocial wellbeing, addressing their fears and doubts, as well as preparing them to re-settle within the community. Efforts at reintegration of child-mothers have also involved provision of socio-economic support, with the young women who passed through reception centres receiving more support compared to those who went directly to the community. The main actors supporting reintegration of child-mothers are UNICEF, Save the Children International, War Child, Care International, CARITAS, Invisible Children Organisation, as well as the government of Uganda and several indigenous development organisations. Some child-mothers utilised the support by the Reception Centres effectively while others did not.[2] Vocational training constituted one of the key skills in the rebuilding approach for child-mothers and other young people (male or female). However, the quality of the training and the young mothers' marketability and self-determination in choosing skills were points of contention. Other challenges, such as training a number of child-mothers with similar skills, thus leading to competition between them, the short duration of the training and the failure of child-mothers to develop competence in the skills chosen, have been cited as some of the key obstacles (Abola et al 2009). Individuals and structures at community level were also identified and trained to support the child-mothers at home after reunion with their families.

While many development organisations provided support to the returning young people, most of these supported new structures and, at times, local government structures at the expense of traditional and more naturally occurring structures within the community. The assumption was that the former would be more responsive to the situation of the children and young people, yet concomitant efforts to resource these structures were not made nor given critical considerations. Both key informant interviews and focus groups suggested that the welfare of children who have gone through the horrific experiences of abduction has been enhanced by the support of the traditional leaders and structures. Initially, the emphasis of most development agencies operating in the region was on supporting modern structures in the community, such as the local council officials and other community structures. However, the difficulties and challenges with the sustainability of working with modern structures made the agencies rethink their approach and begin considering supporting traditional structures. This is due to the unique tendency of traditional structures for self-renewal. Moreover, traditional structures are normally voluntary in orientation, serve to meet social demands and expectations and do not exist for any commercial purposes. Contextual changes in the course of the conflict, such as the movement of people away from the Internally Deplaced People (IDP) camps, also made the agencies realise the greater importance of bringing traditional structures on board to enhance stakeholder ownership of interventions and sustainability of the outcomes.

One of the key limitations of the interventions by government and other actors is that, while they have been crucial in supporting the reintegration process of conflict-affected communities, their relative success is contested. Concerns have been raised about inadequate conceptualization and planning for the emergent recovery context where the challenges and issues appeared to be different from issues within the active emergency period. The inability of the interventions to effectively empower the young people is also attributed to failure to conceive and develop interventions which respond to the changing security, development and conflict realities within northern Uganda, including appreciation of which structures to support in the post-conflict situation.

Acholi context and background

The Acholi are one of the most prominent communities in northern Uganda and in Uganda's socio-political and historical landscape. They belong to the Luo Nilotic ethnic group which includes the Luo of Kenya, the Shilluk of Sudan and the Anuak of Ethiopia. They are believed to have

emigrated from the present-day Bahr el Ghazal, Southern Sudan, in around AD 1 500 to travel south to Uganda and elsewhere within the east and horn of Africa. One of the central historians who studied the Acholi, Ronald Atkinson, suggests that they are inherently organised in terms of small chiefdoms with the clan led by a chief, the main traditional leader uniting the community. The chief (*Rwot*) is often assisted by other, junior traditional leaders up to the village level. While historically the Acholi did not have one king or paramount chief, from around 2006 a Paramount Chief was elected by the council of chiefs of all Acholi clans and the *Rwot* of Payiira, one of the largest clans, was appointed to lead, supported by the council of chiefs and elders. The decision to conglomerate was reportedly taken to respond to the challenges brought about by the conflict and to enhance the capacity of traditional leaders to work together to address socio-cultural regeneration and promote development. Recent population estimates suggests that the Acholi number just over one million people.

The Acholi believe in a deity and every clan was associated with a Jok who was taken as the main deity of that group (p'Bitek 1971). The Acholi also possess very distinct cultural practices and disciplined social organisation (Atkinson 1994; Allen 1996). While Acholi pre-colonial culture was distinct, colonial and other immigrants have had significant influence on Acholi, their language and culture, although marked cultural practices have survived even the conflict in the last two decades. The kinship system is very strong among the Acholi and also the tendency to do things within a clan setting with clear respect for hierarchy and authorities. Music forms a crucial part of Acholi life and illustrates, facilitates and supports many cultural events. Being in possession of 45 different types of dances the Acholi use music and dance to celebrate happy events, including harvests or socio-political and economic achievements. The Acholi also use music to mourn and cope with difficult and sad events. Indeed Acholi heritage saw the development of significant amount of music commemorating and illustrating the experiences with the conflicts. These were sung by both traditional poets and younger generation trying to adapt western hip hop culture to local music and the sad experience of conflict.

The Acholi have played a key part in Uganda's colonial and post-colonial history and been at the centre of most upheavals and political changes that have occurred in Uganda since independence (Allen 1996). Between 1986 and 2006 the Acholi homeland was reduced to a theatre of conflict and confrontation between rebels and the government army, a conflict which affected the entire northern and eastern Uganda for a considerable amount of time. Since the peace talk ceasefire has been instituted in 2006, the Acholi sub-region has been in a process of rebuilding with many formerly abducted people returning to their home (Abola et al. 2009).

Acholi community-building practices

Focus group discussions with elders and other community members indicated that child protection was a major role of families and communities in Acholi society. Children were jealously guarded and protected in Acholi traditional society, although the war and its aftermath significantly limited the capacity of families and communities to ensure this. Interviews with the Paramount Chief of the Acholi (head of the traditional cultural institution) also indicated that Acholi cultural practices and norms actively promoted the best interest of children. The protection of children was vested in the leadership of the clan, although most of these responsibilities were delegated to families and members in the community to execute. Findings further suggest that abuse of children was heavily disparaged and derided. Indeed, among the Acholi sanctions existed which were levelled against parents or community members who were perceived to have mistreated a child. Parents and children were often reminded of these sanctions through riddles, proverbs and folk stories, considering the oral history of the Acholi.

Parents and elders would utilise the space and forum provided by the *wang oo* (evening fire place discussion) and other social events to elaborate to children social expectations, cultural demands, acceptable behavioural practices and other issues which were deemed important for the

preservation of the society foremost and the protection of children generally. The evening fire place (*wang oo*) is an institution in itself. It is the forum within which the cultural values, conventions and norms were passed from the elders to the future generation. The discussion was normally led by the overall elder (head of the homestead). This was also where folk tales would be told. The folk tales instilled cultural values and imbibed in children the benefits of obedience and adherence to social expectations; they also demonstrated the consequences for those that do not conform to social expectations. It was also along the fire place that food would be served and everyone within the home would eat from there. This practice was handed down from generation to generation and can be traced back to the days of migration when Luo settled in present-day Acholiland. It formed part of the central cultural tenets and was a key medium of transmitting cultural heritage. The practice is inherently an Acholi custom and is therefore not widely practiced within Uganda. Both colonial and post-colonial governments did not issue any laws or decree to constrain the practice of the *wang oo.* Indeed local government in Acholi is encouraging such practices as a way of mobilising families and communities around development issues in the aftermath of the conflict.

The *wang oo* is emblematic of a philosophy of communal responsibility for children's socialisation:

> The Acholi traditional society thrived on communalism, collective action and respect and observance for long established traditions and institutions. Such included the norms for child upbringing and general relations among children and parents and other people within the society. Many social events were organised to encourage social integration and the appreciation of the society cultures among its own children. (Elder, Ker Kwaro local committee, Paicho subcounty, Gulu district)
>
> In Acholiland we have always said that orphans would be fed via the *wang oo.* This was based on the fact that in any Acholi homestead food would be served outside at the *wang oo* and all people would eat together. Selfishness was discouraged and all women were compelled to cook and bring food for everyone within that homestead. These practices significantly got eroded during the war but they have been strong cultural safety nets for [the] upbringing of children without mothers or fathers. The Acholi cultural values did not promote any form of discrimination against orphans, and other children were not required to remind the orphaned children of their situation. (Council of Elders, Ker Kwaro Acholi)

Within this socio-cultural framework, it was acceptable for any member of the community to discipline a child who was caught flouting acceptable behavioural expectations of children. These adult privileges were embellished within the social cultural set-ups, settlement patterns, social events and the general arrangements within the Acholi traditional society, its leadership and economy. According to the elders in the council of chiefs in my focus groups, this collective approach to disciplining an errant child was society's own method of ensuring that its children abide by its expectations at all times and not only in the presence of their parents. The elders noted that this mechanism also had a negative side to it as it could easily be abused and rights of children violated in the name of collective correction and disciplining of the child. In other words, someone with the intention of inflicting physical pain on children could do it under the pretext of chastising a child. This is because determining the necessity and nature of the punishment was the prerogative of adults, and an adult's word was more likely to be believed than that of a child. While the UNCRC advocates the guidance of children by adults, it does not explicitly refer to punishment. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the other hand, puts more emphasis on both rights and responsibilities of children. There is an implication within the African Charter that a child can do light work which is not above the physical, mental and emotional strengths of the child.

Among Acholi, the belief that children were less equipped than adults to understand limits was perhaps countermanded by the belief that children also had responsibilities in the community. These responsibilities were part of their socialisation. Children's roles and responsibilities were gender-segregated with boys performing different roles from girls. The children were expected to

help adults in domestic activities and display respect to older members of the community and to each other. This is how one of the council elders at the Palace of the Paramount Chief put it:

> Before the war, and in spite of the advent of modernisation and western ways of life, Acholi's culture was very strong. The socio-cultural institutions regulated everyday life, with men, women and children aware of what was required of them. Children were taught at the *wang oo* and knew their roles as looking after the compound, supporting their fathers in home management, farming and for the girls helping their mothers in the kitchen and weeding. What Acholi culture instilled in children is respect, discipline and obedience. (Focus group with council of elders at the Palace of the Paramount Chief)

The social organisation thus required children to respond to requests and directions of adults, and where children did not do that, they were appropriately disciplined. However, the punishments were regulated and parents and community members were not allowed to exert excessive punishments on children. Consultation with the council of chiefs and focus groups with both male and female elders highlighted that socio-cultural norms, values and practices in a very strong way protected children from exploitation by families and members of the community. It was a generally held view among elders and traditional opinion leaders that the rights and welfare of children were taken care of in these frameworks. Although they were not called rights, Acholi society was clear on its expectation and obligations towards its children. In all focus groups held with both male and female elders it was revealed that the socio-cultural practices were not harmful to children. The elders did not, however, rule out isolated cases of child abuse. They indicated that one of the key social sanctions protecting children from sexual abuse and early marriages was the practice of confirming a girl's maturity by looking at certain physical development attributes that would signify the age of 21–24 for girls, which is clearly above the age of childhood even by the standards of the United Nations. Some of the features examined included the back part of the leg, which would be different for children and adults. These were attributes indicated by elders in three locations, namely the Council of Chiefs and Advisors, and local traditional cultural committees in Paicho sub-county of Gulu District.

Traditional Acholi mechanisms for protecting and reintegration

A key mechanism for reintegration and peace building in northern Uganda is *moyo kum* [cleansing the body] which literally translates into cleansing the body of impurities, to remove the bad spirits the children and young people (in this case) could have got through their sojourn in the bush, and to keep away ill-health. Interviews and focus groups with elders suggested that *moyo kum* has been done to cleanse the body from impurities (normally conceived as evil spirits and apparitions) which the *blood* of an aggrieved person could visit on the child or young person. Here, ceremonial slaughter of a goat and applications of some of its parts to the body of the person being cleansed is done so that "the bad spirits are chased away."

Over the last few years the Acholi have also carried out the practice of *moyo cere/piny* which implies cleansing the areas (hills), in the potential resettlement places for the formerly abducted young people. Such practices were supposed to cleanse the areas of any evil spirits as many atrocities were committed by the rebels in people's villages. The objective is to make the area safe for the return of the formerly displaced persons. *Nyono tongweno* [stepping on an egg] is a ritual which is performed on a member of the family who has been absent for many months, and in cases where one was presumed dead. Another ceremony called *lwoko pig* wang [washing away the tears] is done to restore the relationship supposed to have ended by the presumed death of the family member, after the person has resurfaced.

Of all these practices the most conspicuous is the *mato oput*, which literally means drinking the roots of the *oput* tree. It symbolises the reconciliation of persons (at family or clan level) who had wronged each other, normally involving crimes of murder whether committed deliberately or inadvertently. Tradition has it that such practices restore social harmony and promote wellbeing of the people concerned within the general society, as the children and young people have been

forced to commit atrocities against their own people and others during the period of their captivity. The generally held view among community members was that Acholi traditional cultural values and practices effectively provided for the protection, welfare and development of orphans[3] and other vulnerable children. To ensure the full realisation of their rights and growth potential, Acholi tradition encouraged the community to care for orphans and other vulnerable children. There were socio-cultural norms and regulations regarding support of orphans depending on their age and other socio-cultural and economic factors within the community.[4]

When a mother died while she was still breastfeeding, an alternative feeding mechanism would be found for the child. Normally the child would be adopted and breastfed by the mother of the father (paternal grandmother), a sister of the deceased or any other close relative who was available. Other options for raising the child would be supplementary feeding involving usage of goat or cow milk to ensure that the child received the best nourishment for its growth and development. Older orphaned children would be taken as other children within the homestead and the head of the home or any other assigned male relative would assume the fatherly responsibility for them. They would thus have the same rights and access to family resources like all other children within the homestead.

While these were the traditional prescriptions as enshrined within the Acholi value systems, discussion with traditional cultural leaders in Patiko and Paicho sub-counties in Gulu district suggested that it is difficult today for people to volunteer to meet the needs and welfare of orphans and other vulnerable children. As a result, a new phenomenon of child-headed families arose, a situation which was not known before the war and the massive displacements to camps. This was created, partly, by cultural degeneration and the inability of traditional social support systems to absorb the emerging challenges of war orphans.

Several traditional practices that can ensure a smooth return (and reintegration) of formerly abducted young persons and other people exist in Acholi society and are under the custodianship of the traditional [*Ker Kwaro*] cultural institution. These have included the traditional practices of *mato oput* [drinking the roots of oput tree], *gomo tong* [bending the spear], *nyono tong gweno* [stepping on an egg], *moyo cere* [cleansing the hills] and *moyo kum* [cleansing the body]. It was a view among the elders that such practices were critical for a peaceful resettlement and return of individuals and their coexistence with other individuals in the communities. The practices are carried out by the elders to promote social harmony, and within them a rehabilitation, resettlement and reintegration discourse occurs to ensure a peaceful transition of the formerly abducted children and young people from rebel captivity to community.

It is, however, important to point out that Acholi society has undergone a cultural revolution and that not all people within the community fully subscribe to these cultural rituals and practices, with some sections of the population preferring stronger Christian and Western psychiatric/psychological practices to address personal psycho-emotional and reintegration issues.

Abuse breaches Acholi cultural mores

As noted earlier, the *Ker Kwaro Acholi* traditional institution is a new form of Acholi traditional governance system which was developed to bring together all clans under one unified leadership. The other clan leaders automatically became members of the *Ker Kwaro Acholi* Council of Chiefs and Elders. It acts as the custodian of all cultural values, norms regulations and practices. When examining Acholi cultural institutions, it is clear that not only have children's rights been violated during the war, but that these violations themselves represent a breach of cultural mores. During the conflict, girls were raped, physically abused and made to become mothers and child-wives on an unprecedented scale (Angucia 2010; Allen 2005, 2006). The behaviour of the rebels contests the legal and socio-cultural construction and interpretations of rights and the very essence of social justice. It can, therefore, be argued that rebel action is an aberration of Acholi culture and does not represent normal everyday practices in Acholi communities. Indeed, this is what Acholi

elders attest to. Focus group discussions with members of the *Ker Kwaro* and local communities also indicated that the breakdown in the implementation, subscription and adherence to traditional Acholi socio-cultural institutions affected the incisiveness of the latter in the enforcement of social values, ideals and expectations. One focus group meeting with elders is instructive:

> Acholi society had inalienable customs and practices which were meant to enhance social harmony in society as well as [ensure] the protection of vulnerable people and individuals. Over time human interactions between the Acholi and other communities through such practices as intermarriage, trade and other social interactions has made some behaviours such as gender based violence, child sexual abuse, incest, physical injuries to children to emerge. Some of these foreign practices were later labelled as inherent to Acholi traditional systems whereas [it was] not. (Council of Elders, KKA)

While the rebel abduction of children can be regarded as an extension of patriarchal power, this behaviour was clearly against established broader socio-cultural positions on children, women and war. Social impoverishment in the wider society and displacement of people has exacerbated the problems of child abuse (Republic of Uganda 2007). The key lesson here seems to be that social and cultural cohesiveness and the resistance of communities to shocks are to some extent dependent on socio-economic stability, with instability breeding negative cultural environments or an adulteration of cultural values which may then leave children at risk of harm.

The current study suggests that cultural beliefs and practices are critical in the reintegration process of both the child-mothers and their children born in captivity, as well as that of other young people affected by conflict. Findings indicated that the community acceptance of children born in captivity to abducted girls depended on whether the child was a boy or a girl. Children of child-mothers were treated as though they were members of another clan. The question arose as to where the young women could take their children and what future such children would have if society did not fully accept them as worthy of all rights and having access to resources within the family. According to some studies, the perception and behaviour of child-mothers' maternal relations derive from the male superior position in the cultural disposition of the Acholi (Maina 2010; Ochen 2011; El-Bushra and Sahl 2005). In this case, it was used to deny children an opportunity to actualise their rights. When the issue of gender and male powers was raised with the cultural institution of the council of elders, it was indicated that the prominent position of men in the home was to provide leadership and not dominance. It was also indicated that a man cannot take a unilateral decision within the home concerning family resources without involving the wife and his children.

While the pre-conflict society was more inclusive of children regardless of their parentage, in post-conflict Acholi society a different situation arose. Other studies have indicated that children conceived out of rape/sexual violence can be discriminated against, rejected, and not provided with the support they require. This suggests that children's rights may be mediated through other, possibly more powerful, cultural norms which, if breached, threaten the very rights that are espoused within the community (see Josse 2010). Yet studies have also indicated that children born in rebel captivity are disadvantaged by such heritage (Allen and Schomerus 2006). The reported lack of acceptance of boy children by a significant section of the communities indicates the patriarchal nature and entrenchment of male-oriented lineage systems, though it differs significantly from good practices in the traditional Acholi society. Families therefore sought to protect the interests of boys within those families and communities that child-mothers were returning to with their sons. Girls, on the other hand, were looked upon as a source of income, since it was believed that they would at some point attract a bride price and move away from that home. The objectification of girls and women as a source of wealth has been heavily critiqued by feminist and development commentators (see Zeitzen 2008). Where boy children are rejected, this is likely to be because the families they were reunited with did not want them to compete with their own children for the limited family resources, especially land. This marks a departure from established socio-cultural practice in which orphaned children, children captured or rescued in war and all other "clan-less"

children would have previously been integrated within the family and community. In this way, the protection that children and young people could be accorded as prescribed by the traditional protection system has been seriously obliterated by the circumstantial changes the Acholi society has undergone over the past three decades.

In the face of so much variance and departure from the traditional systems for child protection, the question arises of whether we should just abandon such traditional ideals and embrace the new realities buoyed by globalisation and more individualistic values? What opportunities exist for the integration of traditional and emergent child protection dynamics?

The cultural *Ker Kwaro Acholi* institution has taken the position that all children born in captivity (boys and girls) belong to the family of their mothers. While this is a strong position taken by the custodians of Acholi cultural practices and traditional values, it is not clear whether this is being unanimously accepted within a community already divided as a result of the conflict. It is possible, therefore, that isolated hostile actions by people and families towards child-mothers and their children, especially their sons, will continue to be experienced. For those child-mothers experiencing family rejection, however subtle, their long-term reintegration path seemed to be more problematic because of worries about the future and welfare of their children. Yet both data and literature has pointed out the existence of good practices and institutions inherent within the Acholi traditional cultural set-up for the promotion and preservation of the welfare of children. It is possible that such opportunities and institutions exist in every African society, which would have great potential of enhancing the protection, rehabilitation and reintegration of children affected by armed conflict.

Shifting research and policy focus to traditional healing mechanisms

The current study suggests that traditional and indigenous resources and mechanisms exist to complement efforts at rehabilitation, resettlement and reintegration of children affected by armed conflict. Such structures and mechanisms are inbuilt within local social institutions and situated culture. There is agreement among scholars that these mechanisms play a critical role in the lives of children and young people returning from captivity (Bainomugisha 2011; Murithi 2008; Liu Institute for Global Issues 2005). Yet their crucial roles have been, to a large extent, neglected, both within academic and policy debate. In northern Uganda, the *Ker Kwaro* traditional institution is the vehicle within which traditional approaches as a means of reintegration and peace building have been promoted, with many children having gone through some form of traditional cleansing ceremony (see Bainomugisha 2011). Murithi (2008) recognises the importance of local indigenous institutions in promoting social stability, rebuilding trust, reconciliation and reconstituting order. He identifies several practices across different communities in Africa, discussing those actions performed both during and after conflict. Studies (e.g. Murithi 2008; Bainomugisha 2011) have indicated that these local mechanisms have wide appeal in the areas of application, even though they are yet to get national and international recognition.

According to Bainomugisha (2011) there is research evidence that traditional approaches to reintegration and reconciliation have improved family relationships and reminded communities of their collective and cultural responsibilities to resolve and accept their children returning from the bush, no matter the perceived extent of their crimes. It is noteworthy that these mechanisms have the potential for promoting post-conflict reconciliations among communities in northern Uganda as it is widely understood and accepted by the majority (Bainomugisha 2011). The roles and utility of traditional and indigenous resources cannot thus be called to question. Moreover, one of the core advantages of the traditional approach is its emphasis on restorative as opposed to retributive justice, focussing on generating and not destroying social harmony (see Bainomugisha 2011). The close cultural cohesion among the Acholi in the north also provides significant opportunities for accepting the traditional approaches to reconciliation and reintegration, although traditional leadership and authority to enforce social norms and institutions have been severely weekend

by the conflict (see Carlson and Mazurana 2010; Ochen, Bukuluki and Mugumya. 2010). Other scholars have wondered whether such indigenous mechanisms would be very effective where the very institutions implementing them, such as the elders, have been victims of the conflict, with their authority significantly weakened (Murithi 2008). Moreover government in most case does not quite recognise or promote such indigenous approaches, as it is viewed as partly letting perpetrators of violent crimes go scot-free. As a result, little interface exists between such local approaches and national and international efforts, with a lack of global and national recognition for such a rich body of indigenous knowledge. It should, however, be noted that the existence of these resources and institutional practices presents viable options for addressing some of the repercussions of the conflict within socially accepted domains, although the structures might not be foolproof.

This paper recognises both the presence of the *healing* and *regulative* child protection systems within the Acholi society. The healing and corrective child protection institutions focus on treating the offending child listening to her story, his or her psychological wellbeing in order to ensure that such a person lives a normal life within the community. While studies have documented and assessed the efficacy of local and indigenous structures or institutions for child protection, there is as yet no agreement on their efficacy in promoting actual reintegration. One school of thought has it that such traditional approaches are only helpful in as much as they make child-mothers and other children affected by armed conflict to *feel good* and assume social acceptance. But the actual efficacy of such rituals, especially the cleansing ones (*moyo kum, moyo cere*), is contested. It is my view that perception of healing and recovery by child-mothers is important in achieving an inner peace which will directly enhance interaction and participation in community activities (actual indicators of good reintegration or effective resettlement). It should be noted that most current literature on children tends to overemphasise rehabilitative support without the consideration of the costs (resource envelopes). Yet analysis of the literature also suggests that not much attention has been given to this aspect of support: embossed within the *regulative* traditional child protection practices. So while this paper does not extol one method over the other, the degree of challenges faced by communities in northern Uganda requires lateral thinking. It is, therefore, imperative that traditional healing methods be considered with the other traditional child protective institutional mechanisms.

Notes

1. It should be noted, however, that the situation varies in terms of the magnitude of the conflict as to its effects on children. While in some countries, children have been forcefully conscripted into the armed forces and rebel ranks, in others they have been affected in ways other than direct conscription.
2. The main reception centres were operated by World Vision International Uganda, Save the Children International, Gulu Support the Children Organisation and Caritas Gulu Archdiocese.
3. An orphan is defined here as a child which has lost one or both parents.
4. Focus group discussion with Council of Elders, Gulu district.

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