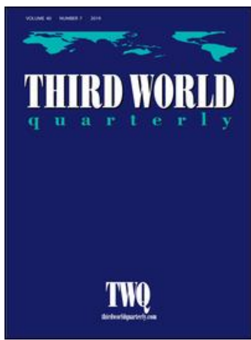

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International peacebuilding and local contestations of notions of human rights in Acholi in Northern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contestation over human rights norms between Acholi traditional authorities and everyday realities on the one hand, and international peacebuilding actors on the other. Within this contestation, the focus is on women's and children's rights. When implementing human rights programmes, some international peacebuilding actors presented culture and rights as conflictual and attributed human rights violations to culture. This created tension between Acholi traditional authorities and everyday realities on the one hand, and international peacebuilding actors on the other. The paper argues that Acholi traditional authorities responded to the 'assault' on Acholi cultural values by presenting alternative narratives of human rights violations, to show that culture and rights overlap and are not conflictual.

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Introduction

One of the legacies of colonialism in Africa has been the creation of artificial and dysfunctional states riddled with instabilities and conflict. The conflict that plagued northern Uganda for over two decades and which remains an open sore has roots in colonialism. Uganda was an 'artificial creation'[1] of British colonialism, which brought together several distinct nationalities with diverse, complex and cross-cutting divides. Uganda suffers from a lack of structural integration between the constituent units – regional, ethnic and religious.[2] This has been due to the system of indirect rule through native or traditional authorities and the policy of unequal development. Colonial policies favoured and concentrated economic and social infrastructure in southern and south-eastern Uganda, while the north was neglected and lagged behind in development. The lack of national integration led to an indifferent attitude, in other parts of Uganda, to the conflict and human rights abuses in northern Uganda.

For decades, there was little concern in other parts of Uganda about violence and human rights abuses in northern Uganda. International donors, too, did not pay much attention to the conflict. Western donor states and organisations were influenced by their benign view of Yoweri Museveni as a leader who had restored peace and stability in Uganda. The National Resistance Army (NRA) government led by Yoweri Museveni restored a modicum of stability,

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adopted International Monetary Fund (IMF)- and World Bank-sponsored Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in May 1987, and began carrying out political and economic reforms. Uganda was, thus, hailed by Western donors as a model of successful post-conflict recovery in Africa.[3]

However, outraged by violence against the population and human rights abuses, multilateral and bilateral organisations, international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups started to focus on the conflict in northern Uganda. In 1996, the parliament of Uganda launched an investigation focussing on the conflict.[4] During the same year, a civic forum, *Kacoke Madit*, was organised in London, aiming at a peaceful end of the conflict.[5] In 1997, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the US embassy in Kampala commissioned Robert Gersony, an independent consultant, to conduct an assessment of the conflict.[6] By the early 2000s, the Acholi sub-region in northern Uganda had become an intense theatre of international peacebuilding intervention. International donors and NGOs began to carry out a broad range of humanitarian operations under programmes such as 'peacebuilding and reconciliation', 'women's role in peacebuilding', 'women's empowerment', 'gender mainstreaming', 'children's rights' and 'conflict resolution'.[7] These programmes signalled a shift from traditional relief operations to human rights protection. They were, therefore, important for drawing attention to humanitarian problems and human rights abuses in northern Uganda.

There are, however, tensions between universal human rights and cultural relativism. Universal human rights hold that all human beings are entitled to human rights by virtue of being human.[8] Cultural relativists argue that universal human rights do not take into account cultural diversity. Universalists depict culture in a negative light and reject 'cross-notions contamination'.[9] Writing on African values and human rights, Josiah A. M. Cobbah observed that Western perspectives on human rights, which are based on the liberal idea of an individual autonomous from society and endowed with natural rights, deny culture, yet rights should be talked about in a cultural context.[10] Claude Ake[11] observed that the universal notion of human rights is alien to African traditional societies. Raimundo Pannikar argued that human rights in their present form 'do not represent a universal form', since 'meanings are not transferable' across cultures.[12] Debates on human rights in Africa have been shaped by the historical engagement between Africa and the West, and the idea of how Africa should be transformed, which is rooted in modernisation theory.[13] Thus, 'the individualist postulate of natural rights' raises 'suspicions about the Western view of human dignity and liberty'.[14]

This paper examines the contestation between Acholi traditional authorities and everyday realities on the one hand, and international peacebuilding actors following human rights norms on the other. Within this contestation, the paper focusses on women's and children's rights. When implementing human rights programmes, some international peacebuilding actors presented culture and rights as conflictual and attributed human rights violation to culture. This value judgement ignored common ground. All cultures have aspects that protect rights and those that disempower.[15] The negative attitude towards Acholi culture and the interventions to reconstruct the society were interpreted by traditional authorities as a crusade to achieve cultural domination. The perceived attempt to turn people into Westerners created opposition, and measures to assert African identity. Acholi traditional authorities responded to the 'assault' on Acholi cultural values by presenting alternative narratives of

the problem of human rights violation, that were common in Acholi, and the local understanding of human rights, to show that culture and rights overlap and are not conflictual.

Methodologically, this paper draws on contextual research conducted in the Acholi sub-region, and ethnographic data and experience in Acholi over a number of years. I draw on interviews with traditional authorities, religious leaders, local government officials, and officials of NGOs and grassroots communities. In addition, I have reviewed documents, reports and newsletters from NGOs, grassroots organisations and local governments.

International peacebuilding and human rights protection

Since the 1990s, peacebuilding interventions have become an important policy approach to societies affected by conflict.[16] In *An Agenda for Peace* (1992, 11), United Nations (UN) Secretary General Boutros-Ghali defined peacebuilding as 'action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict'.[17] Since then, peacebuilding has become a broad and holistic concept. Peacebuilding strategies tend to address security, political institutions that are broadly accepted, a revitalised economy, and mechanisms for dealing with past injustices and human rights abuses. The concept is appealing to a broad range of actors – global, regional, state and civil society – and provides an 'obvious answer' to crises, wars, poverty and terrorism in the Global South.[18] Promoting peace and development provides justification for external intervention.

While there are various understandings and approaches to peacebuilding, over time, liberal peacebuilding has become the dominant approach. Liberal peacebuilding entails restructuring societies emerging from conflict, through the establishment of liberal democratic systems of governance, promotion of respect for human rights and rule of law, and the creation of a market-oriented economy and society.[19] Liberal peacebuilding is programmatic and technocratic. It follows a model and is guided by 'a one-size-fits all approach'.[20] Critics argue that liberal peacebuilding has become an instrument of liberal governance: an ideological and hegemonic project of entrenching neo-liberal values in societies emerging from conflict;[21] an instrument of neo-colonial intervention. Commenting on continuities between colonialism and peacebuilding, Meera Sabaratnam observed that peacebuilding interventions are shaped by 'structural relations of colonial difference'.[22] They amount to attempts to rebuild conflict-riddled states and societies in the image of the West.[23] Constanze Schellhaas and Annette Seegers[24] referred to peacebuilding as a 'revised form of modernisation', a tool for interference in and control of the Global South by powerful countries and coalitions. Roland Paris likened contemporary peacebuilding to the European colonial practice of conveying norms of 'civilised' behaviour to colonial populations and territories. Paris argued that today's peacebuilding may be viewed as 'a modern rendering of the *mission civilisatrice* – the colonial-era belief that the European imperial powers had a duty to 'civilise' their overseas possessions'.[25] Under liberal peacebuilding regimes, local customary values and practices that do not conform to liberal values – such as neo-patrimonialism, patriarchy, payment of bride wealth and widow inheritance, among others – are demonised, labelled 'primitive' and targeted for eradication. This is reminiscent of the colonial view that considered local customary norms inferior and subordinated them to the 'superior' European values. Colonialism subjected customary norms to a 'repugnancy' test, where those practices deemed repugnant to morality and justice were statutorily criminalised.[26] Thus, interventions to impose liberal values in the Global South have created tension and have led to resistance

from local or grassroots actors.[27] Such resistance is an indication of local agency and an effort to assert local identity.

To overcome challenges of liberal peacebuilding in the Global South, 'building local capacity', 'empowerment' and peacebuilding from below started to gain attention.[28] Like their colonial counterparts, international peacebuilding actors sponsored the reinvention of traditional authorities and customary methods of peacebuilding. However, what are now considered traditional cultures and institutions in Africa were in fact shaped by powerful forces, missionaries and colonial authorities.[29] As under colonial rule where commissions of inquiry were instituted to investigate and document things 'traditional',[30] international NGOs have documented customary practices on which to train traditional authorities. This has created the impression that NGOs 'foster a new kind of cultural and economic colonialism'.[31]

Over time, attempts have been made to promote engagement between peacebuilding and human rights. However, engagement remains riddled with tension, particularly with regards to justice.[32] International human rights are premised on the framework of natural rights as a universal norm. Non-Western societies are perceived to be lacking such norms, a perception that has created a negative attitude towards non-Western societies. This has provided a rationale for the diffusion of neo-liberal norms and institutional models to societies perceived to be lacking such norms. The same framework, argued Gloria Esteban de la Rosa and Cherif Ba Sow, was used to legitimate colonialism as a 'civilising mission' directed at non-Western people whose customs do not meet the standards of universal natural law.[33] There has been a transition to a more open-ended and less normative approach towards peacebuilding.[34] Peacebuilding has taken an approach that does not follow a set model, because of the realisation that models are not necessarily transferable and that contexts matter. Emphasis is laid on supporting local processes, with the strengthening of local political and social institutions' capacities that can sustain peace.[35] Such a change has also taken place in development interventions.

The legacies of colonialism and conflict in Acholi in Northern Uganda

The conflict in northern Uganda began in August 1986, a few months after the NRA captured state power, after five years of waging a guerrilla war against the government. The guerrilla war pitted a predominantly southern guerrilla army against a northern-dominated government army and polarised the country. The conflict in northern Uganda was orchestrated by rebel groups comprising former soldiers and members of security forces who served in the government that the NRA fought against and deposed. The most brutal and resilient of the rebel groups was the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony. Active hostilities in northern Uganda lasted until 2006 when the government of Uganda and the LRA signed the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CHA). After the agreement, the LRA relocated to the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, where they remain.

As a result of the lack of national integration and regional and ethnic animosities, when conflict broke out in northern Uganda in August 1986, it was trivialised as a manifestation of 'primitivism', 'backwardness' and an inability to cope with 'modern times'.[36] This discourse has informed peacebuilding interventions. Accordingly, opening up the north to outside investment to create modern 'development' and reformatting society have been presented as the obvious answer to war, violence, poverty and underdevelopment in the region.

Two decades of violent conflict and brutal counter-insurgency operations left northern Uganda socially, economically and politically broken, and increased the historical marginalisation of the region. During the conflict, the population was subjected to violent attacks, mutilation, torture, killings, sexual and gender-based violence, abductions and forcible recruitment, which have left deep psychological scars.[37] The government's internment of the civilian population in internally displaced persons camps increased insecurity and contributed to the humanitarian tragedy. Social and economic infrastructure collapsed, and poverty became widespread. Malnutrition, undernourishment, threat of infectious diseases, high mortality rates and misery became endemic.[38] With socio-economic collapse, alcoholism, domestic and gender-based violence and human rights abuses became rampant. Poverty and destitution, forced marriages (including underage marriages), prostitution, rape, incest, sexual assault and other forms of violence against women escalated. These abuses were being perpetrated by government soldiers and militias allied to the government, insurgents and members of the community.[39]

The political impact of the conflict was equally catastrophic. State institutions and authority weakened. Alternative governance and authority structures, such as local militias and security groups, religious institutions, NGOs, and traditional and cultural institutions, emerged to fill the gap and to provide a range of activities, including local security, law and order, humanitarian protection and peacebuilding.[40] The population became suspicious of the State of Uganda and its intentions, and disengaged from it.[41]

Despite the catastrophic impacts of the conflict, the Ugandan government put a high premium on a military solution to the conflict, and categorically stated that it was not prepared to talk peace with Joseph Kony's LRA. International donors, whose policies were influenced by their benign view of Ugandan leader Yoweri Museveni, ignored the conflict. The government of Uganda had signed an agreement with the IMF and World Bank in May 1987 and embarked on the process of political and economic reform, and over the years closely aligned itself with Western discourses and the Western agenda. To international donors, Uganda was a 'beacon of hope' in Africa.

Given the government's hostile attitude to international intervention in the conflict, and inadequate international concern, attention for a peaceful resolution to conflict turned to traditional and cultural institutions. In 1998, Dennis Pain, an international consultant commissioned by the international NGO International Alert, and *Kacoke Madit*, a civic forum of the Acholi community in the diaspora, produced a report entitled *The Bending of Spears: Producing Consensus for Peace and Development in northern Uganda*, which recommended peaceful resolution of the conflict with Acholi traditional cultural authorities playing a central role. Besides Pain's 'lifetime involvement in Uganda, with detailed knowledge of Acholi',[42] the choice of a consultant was influenced by the consideration that a narrative from a Western consultant would likely be given more attention.

The report was important in raising international awareness about the conflict and its impact on civilians, and in changing perceptions about the possibility for peaceful resolution of the conflict. It aroused interest in Acholi peacebuilding processes and the traditional institutions of chieftainship. In 1999, the Belgian government provided funds to Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD), an international NGO that was active in Acholi, to identify Acholi chiefs (*rwodi*) or their rightful heirs; and for restoration of chiefs.[43] After the revival of traditional institutions in Acholi, international NGOs commissioned studies to document local processes 'to serve both as a general knowledge resource and a

practitioners guide' for application of local mechanisms in peacebuilding.[44] However, there was no consensus on the restoration of chiefs. Questions were raised about the lack of consultation with 'ordinary people'. Tension also manifested 'between some elders, as there were expectations about financial benefits'.[45] Revival of chiefs elicited cynicism within a section of the community who labelled the newly appointed chiefs '*Rwodi* NGO' or 'NGO chiefs'.[46]

The legitimacy and claims of some of the new chiefs to royal ancestries were contested. By the beginning of the twentieth century, colonialism had radically altered and transformed the administrative set-up of Acholi and replaced hereditary chiefs with administrative chiefs, appointed with scant regard to hereditary claims to chieftaincy.[47] An elder asserted that the 'revived chiefs are not genuine chiefs. The era of genuine chiefs in Acholi ended at the beginning of the twentieth century when the British deposed chiefs like Awich of Payira and replaced them with colonial appointees'.[48] The creation of Ker Kwaro Acholi and the installation of a 'paramount chief' in January 2005 was more divisive. Allen described it as 'a violation of traditional customs'.[49] Historically, Acholi was a segmentary society with many chiefdoms and chiefs, who worked in collaboration with heads of clans or lineages and elders under their chiefdoms.[50] The concept of a paramount chief was a creation of colonialism, in the 1950s.[51] Furthermore, few of the newly appointed cultural leaders had solid knowledge of tradition. Consequently, there were complaints that 'some rituals were not carried out properly'.[52]

Local peacebuilding rituals, such as the reconciliation cleansing practices of *mato oput*, and *moyo piny*, were carried out with support from international peacebuilding actors, following the visit to Northern Uganda by United Nations Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Jan Egeland in 2003. During the two-day visit, Egeland described the conflict in northern Uganda as 'the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world', and expressed shock at the 'moral outrage' of the situation in northern Uganda.[53] In 2005, the UN began to use northern Uganda as a pilot for the cluster approach to humanitarian intervention.[54] It was meant to increase coordination among peacebuilding actors. But divergence of focus, definition of issues and approach remained.

International peacebuilding and local contestations of norms

With increased international peacebuilding intervention in Acholi, the local space became a site of contestation and of tensions between competing international and local norms. The contestation arose because of the presentation of culture and rights as contradictory by some international peacebuilding actors, who ignored local context and overlooked normative overlaps. This perspective is premised on a binary contrast where culture is viewed negatively, and as an obstacle to the enjoyment of rights. Sylvia Tamale attributed this approach to the legacy of colonialism and practice of subjecting application of culture to the 'repugnancy' test, where only indigenous practices and values that were not repugnant to colonial values passed the test.[55] The approach overlooked the fact that international human rights norms as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) reflect Western belief systems and cultural norms, at that particular historical moment. With this approach, humanitarian and human rights problems in northern Uganda were attributed to 'deficiencies in Acholi social order', and they were to be remedied through external intervention.[56] International peacebuilding actors attributed rights violation and everything problematic in Acholi to culture and ignorance. In a project proposal to donors, one international NGO wrote: 'Ignorance and lack of understanding of rights, roles and duties of

women, children and men in Acholi sub-region, plus ignorance of concepts like gender equality, result in violence'.[57] This perspective ignored the role of conflict and displacement in violence and human rights abuses in Acholi.

Among others, some international peacebuilding actors criticised Acholi socio-cultural practices, labelling the practices patriarchal and blaming them for abuses of rights of women. They cited cultural norms such as '*Kwero dako ki cware*', which means a woman should not decline to have sexual intercourse with her husband, as contributing to 'marital rape'. The reaction to advocacy against 'marital rape' was influenced by the patriarchal nature of Acholi society, everyday cultural practices and the belief that there is no such thing as marital rape. The view that there cannot be rape between a married couple, because consent was given upon marriage, exists in many patriarchal African societies.[58]

Invoking traditional values that disapprove of sexual violence within marriage would lessen tension and promote change. International NGOs condemned payment of bride wealth, and argued that it turns women into commodities and property for men, thus contributing to gender-based violence. They attributed child marriages to the cultural practice whereby virgins attract better bride wealth. NGOs condemned the practice of '*tweyo ceno*', the placing of bracelets on the hands of young girls to signify engagement, or 'booking' for marriage. International NGOs did not appreciate the meaning and significance of cultural rights. The term 'bride wealth' is an inappropriate translation of cultural rites and ceremonies around the exchange of gifts to signify a unity through marriage. Furthermore, cultural norms provided protection by mitigating practices of premenstrual sex and marriage, and by guaranteeing the right of a girl to consent before marriage and a sexual relationship.

Through advocacy and sensitisation, international peacebuilding actors set out to remake Acholi society and eradicate 'primitive' cultural beliefs and practices that contribute to human rights abuses. International NGOs organised training workshops, radio talk shows and sensitisation meetings, to change community attitudes and create awareness of policies, laws and procedures. Chiefs were targeted and invited to participate in sensitisation workshops. These workshops were patronising. Workshop participants were provided allowances in the form of a per diem, and reimbursed for transportation costs and a 'sitting allowance'. T-shirts displaying the logo of the responsible NGO and the theme of the workshop were often distributed among the participants, ostensibly for identification purposes, but possibly to account for funds from donors. An official of Gulu district local government observed that the payment of allowances to workshop participants made the society corrupt, and introduced a 'negative culture' of expectation of monetary rewards for participation in community programmes.[59] The official noted that the workshops were so numerous that 'if local government officials invited to officiate at opening and closing ceremonies honoured all invitations, they would hardly have time to perform regular duties'.[60] The workshops involved elites educating elders, traditional authorities and community leaders and subjecting them to disparaging messages about their culture. Like peacebuilding experiences elsewhere, the workshops were facilitated by urban and educated NGO elites who are external to the local setting.[61] The workshops and sensitisation meetings were a tool of cultural domination or colonialism akin to projects advocated by modernisation theorists in the 1950s.[62] Frequent attendance at workshops undermined respect for chiefs among sections of the community and earned them the label 'workshop chiefs'.

To address the problems of sexual and gender-based violence, programmes were put in place to increase access to legal justice systems, by encouraging reporting of gender-based

violence including violence between intimate partners. International peacebuilding actors recruited and trained paralegals to assist victims of human rights abuses, and established shelters for women survivors, who were encouraged to make use of such shelters. Inherent in this approach was the stereotypical construction of men as villains and women as victims of the culture of patriarchy and male domination. Such an approach to promotion of gender equality failed to recognise the reality that the male 'villains' were marginalised and impoverished, and were victims of conditions in which they found themselves. In the private space, patriarchal cultural values privilege even the most impoverished men.[63] The approach also presented culture as opposed to human rights, and contradicted the use of local processes of peacebuilding advocated by neo-liberal peacebuilders.

Acholi traditional authorities' idea of human rights

Acholi traditional authorities – heads of chiefdoms (*rwodi*), heads of clans or lineages (*ludito kaka*) and elders (*ludito*) – provided ideas of human rights based on local realities. They argued that Acholi culture recognises and promotes the involvement of women in decision-making. They interpreted the inadequate involvement of women in decision-making as a problem of elite women marginalising other women.[64] However, Acholi traditional cultural authorities disapproved of the advocacy for a blanket involvement of women in decision-making. They argued for the involvement of elderly women, as in Acholi tradition. 'Young women should wait for their time', argued members of Ker Kwaro Acholi, the coordination body of Acholi chiefdoms. Members of Ker Kwaro Acholi urged international peacebuilding actors to acknowledge the inclusion of 'women cultural leaders', such as '*rwodi okoro*', women leaders in charge of mobilising women for agricultural activities, in decision-making in traditional institutions.[65] Traditional authorities cited the involvement of the following categories of elderly women in decision-making in traditional cultural institutions: '*daayo*', '*meego*', '*maaro*' and '*waayo*' – grandmothers, mothers, mothers-in-law and aunties.[66] Traditionally, *daayo*, *waayo*, *meego* and *maaro* are revered, and play important mentorship and decision-making roles. The Acholi perspective on human rights ascribes rights to positions, not individuals. This practice resonates with Tola Olu Pearce's argument that individuals can only claim rights by virtue of their membership and position in a social group.[67]

Acholi traditional authorities criticised the idea of 'women's and children's rights' as it was presented by international peacebuilders. They provided an alternative translation of the concept of 'rights'. International NGOs had translated rights as *twero* in Luo, the language spoken by the Acholi. In Luo, *twero* also means 'authority'. Such a translation of 'rights' would encourage women and children to disrespect older men and undermine authority. As Raimundo Pannikar observed, translations are delicate, and 'meanings are not transferable'.[68]

In line with these principles, Acholi traditional authorities reinterpreted the idea of 'rights' to mean 'rules'. 'Children's rights' was read as 'rules regarding proper treatment of children', or '*gwok ma opore pi lutino*'; and 'women's rights' was redefined as 'rules on proper treatment of women', or '*gwok ma opore ki mon*'.[69] Another elder defined human rights in Acholi as '*kwo ma opore calo dano adana*', or 'appropriate and dignified life befitting human beings'.[70]

Presenting culture as opposed to rights and ignoring local contexts created tensions and resistance. The case of a woman victim of gender-based violence who was assisted by an

NGO to lodge a case against her husband is illustrative. The police arrested and detained the husband, while the woman took shelter in a facility for survivors of domestic violence that was operated by the same NGO. Meanwhile, the children of the couple were left on their own, without anybody to care for them. The incident infuriated local authorities and community members.

The elected district leader sent a stern warning to the NGOs operating in the district. In an address broadcast over the local FM radio station, the district leader warned the NGOs against disrupting marriages and turning women and mothers into 'prostitutes'. He blamed the NGOs for causing the imprisonment of men and booking their wives into lodges, while depriving children of parental care. This shows how masculine norms aimed at keeping women 'decent wives' and 'good mothers' can be used to promote the control and subordination of women. Faced with a dilemma, the woman referred to above asked the police to set her husband free and give her the option to settle the dispute using customary processes.[71] This is a legacy of colonialism, which introduced legal pluralism where the lives of 'natives' were regulated by African customary law, while those of 'civilised' Europeans were regulated by common or civil law, depending on the colonial history.[72] After independence, customary law has continued to operate at the local level, especially in rural areas, as 'the law of the poor'.[73] It is more accessible to the common person and the procedures are easier to understand than those of modern courts.

The lives of a great majority of people, especially at the local level, in regards to activities surrounding family, marriage, property and inheritance, are conducted in accordance with customary norms. Imposing discourses of women's rights and gender equality challenges local ideas of male authority and may not always lead to harmony. It also shows how there are many intersectional challenges in women's lives, and how both local and international NGOs overlook strategies that are gender sensitive, children sensitive and conflict sensitive. As Claude Ake put it, people are not interested in 'esoteric ideas which do not change their lives'.[74] The woman victim of gender-based violence who asked the police to set her husband free was poor, and her livelihood was tied to that of her husband, on whom she was dependent. Her major concern was the safety and welfare of her children, and the perceptions of the community regarding the arrest and detention of her husband. In everyday life, women's rights are subordinated to family and community interests. Thus, external interventions can be problematic.

Interventions to address socio-economic problems and poverty constituted important tools to promote the empowerment of women. With the support of international donors, the NGOs implemented livelihood support programmes such as income-generation activities, village micro-credit saving schemes and entrepreneurship activities. These interventions were often micro in nature, promoting private voluntary self-help activities. They aimed at imparting market values and integrating marginalised women into the neo-liberal global economy, albeit at the margins. These programmes focussed on symptoms as opposed to structural roots of socio-economic problems of poverty in communities, such as displacement, lack of access to agricultural land and loss of assets such as livestock during the conflict. The programmes privilege certain perceptions of women's security and rights, ignore the complementary aspects of production relations in rural communities and undermine family unity and children's rights. International NGOs had little understanding of local gender relations and masculine norms. They promoted a value system assuming that women in traditional societies are automatically denied rights. Exclusion of men from NGO interventions

created resentment, and in some cases was blamed for fuelling domestic violence and the break-up of marriages. In internally displaced persons camps, it was common for men who had lost assets and means of livelihood during the war to resort to heavy consumption of alcohol as a coping mechanism, thus fuelling domestic violence.

A number of aspects of the international peacebuilding interventions discussed above were out of sync with the local contexts and therefore created tension. Acholi traditional authorities and communities found international human rights and women's empowerment norms confusing and in conflict with their world views, and voiced strong disagreement. Traditional authorities protested against the denigration and misrepresentation of Acholi culture and interventions to Westernise Acholi society. They dismissed arguments that domestic violence and rights abuses, which were endemic in post-conflict Acholi, were due to ignorance and the absence of the notion of human rights in Acholi culture. They accused international NGOs and their local employees of arrogance and ignorance. International NGOs did not appreciate the erosion of traditional norms by conflict and displacement. 'These children who work for NGOs do not know what they are talking about', observed an elder during an interview.[75] The argument of the elder is reminiscent to what Chinua Achebe wrote in *Things Fall Apart*:[76]

> Does the white man understand our customs about land? How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; even our brothers who have taken up his religion also say our custom are bad.

Achebe was commenting on interference by the colonial administration when it made a ruling on a land dispute between two families, without taking into consideration the local customs. The attitude of local employees of international NGOs towards African cultures, traditions and societies is a manifestation of the psychological injury caused by colonialism to the Africans. It is an indication of the irreparable damage done by decades of exposure to the view that one's culture is inferior to another.

Traditional authorities expressed outrage at the argument peddled by international NGOs that human rights abuses, sexual and gender-based violence, child neglect and alcoholism that were common in internally displaced persons camps were rooted in culture. In Acholi culture these things are considered socially a taboo and attract sanctions. As one elder put it, acts like rape, incest and domestic violence are considered *Kiir* or abomination in Acholi culture, and are sanctioned. If they occur, both the perpetrator and victims have to be cleansed.[77]

The prevalence of such abominable acts, argued Acholi traditional authorities, was due to the erosion of traditional cultural norms. Acholi traditional authorities blamed colonialism and the spread of Western culture, 20 years of conflict and the incarceration of the population into internally displaced persons camps for weakening respect for cultural norms. This, traditional authorities argued, had contributed to moral degeneration and disruption of social order. Instead of blaming and undermining Acholi cultures, traditional authorities advised international peacebuilding actors to support programmes of cultural revival that they had initiated.

Acholi elders attributed moral decadence in society to the influence of Western culture which young people have adopted. They singled out modern entertainment, such as dances, for promoting promiscuous behaviour. This is reminiscent of Lawino's criticism of Western

dances in *Song of Lawino*, in which Okot P'Bitek depicted the destructive effects of colonialism on Acholi culture:[78]

> They come to the dance dead
> Drunk….
> Each man has a woman
> Although she is not his wife,
> They dance inside a house
> And there is no light.
> Shamelessly, they hold each
> Other
> Tightly, tightly,
> They cannot breathe.

Acholi traditional authorities criticised the adoption of the Western culture of individualism and blamed it for eroding respect for kinship ties and social support systems. 'People have become selfish, and only mind about themselves and their children', lamented an elder. According to elders, the concept of an 'orphan' is alien to Acholi society, where the idea of family is broad and extended. With Western influence, a person can now refuse to support his nephews, whereas culturally, a maternal uncle had an obligation to look after the children of his sister. This is reflected in the saying '*Okeyo pe kiryemo*', meaning 'nephews are not chased away'.[79]

Weakening of protection afforded to girls and women was attributed to conflict, internal displacement, exposure to non-indigenous values, disintegration of cultural norms and spread of permissive sexual attitudes and behaviours. This exposed girls to greater risks of sexual and gender-based violence.[80] Traditionally, there were strong taboos regarding sexual intercourse. Elderly women – *waayo*, (paternal aunties) and *daayo* (grandmothers) – provided mentorship to girls. Family and community structures accorded respect and protection to the girl children and women.

Traditional authorities criticised the idea of children's rights that seek to grant individual liberties to minors and promote 'improper' conduct such as premarital sex, promiscuity, inappropriate dress codes and disobedience to parental authority. Traditional authorities invoked standards that emphasised parental control, obedience, modest dressing and hard work as indicators of upstanding behaviour. They argued that children must be taught to listen, obey and submit to elders. Parents, for their part, are meant to instruct their children in Acholi cultural norms and discipline and provide for the needs of children. In the world view of elders, if you 'spare the rod, you spoil the child', meaning that the best way to correct a wayward child is to spank with a cane. They blamed NGOs for spreading messages that make children disobedient and undermine parental authority. This view is disturbing because it legitimises control, violence and abuse.

To reduce tension and ensure acceptance of their interventions, some international NGOs initiated dialogue with the Acholi traditional authorities, elders, community leaders, community-based organisations and religious leaders. This produced a realisation that invoking the revival of culture might be more likely to lead to change than blanket condemnation of culture. The appeal to culture led to an emphasis on partnership and shared ownership between men and women at the household level, and family cohesion in the implementation

of activities, to promote rights and reduce domestic violence. Traditional leaders became involved in peacebuilding as implementation partners.

Conclusion

International peacebuilding interventions are vital for stabilising societies and building peace, but they can also have negative consequences. Most often, problems in conflict-riddled societies and their solutions are determined by international peacebuilding actors, who perceive themselves and their values as superior. International peacebuilders tend to have little or no understanding of local contexts and realities. Interventions therefore tend to be marred by ethnocentric views, paternalism and the arrogance of the 'outsider' saving strangers. This has made international peacebuilding akin to the colonial project of bringing civilisation to savages. This approach leads to tensions with local actors, who are neither passive nor uninformed.

This article has shown how international peacebuilding interventions to promote protection of human rights and empowerment of women interpret local situations, and seek to provide solutions, as per their Western understanding. However, these solutions may not always lead to harmony. International peacebuilding actors promoted ideas of human rights based on universal norms; they depicted Acholi culture as lacking notions of human rights and therefore sought to instil these norms. This narrative was rejected by Acholi traditional authorities who presented alternative ideas based on local cultural values. Some international peacebuilding actors were cooperative and listened to local voices, which reduced tension and promoted cooperation.

This suggests that peacebuilding interventions should be based on local realities and cultural sensitivity. International peacebuilding actors need to invoke cultural values to promote social change. Local people have time-tested institutions that command loyalty and legitimacy. Outsiders need to be respectful and humble and avoid paternalistic attitudes. External actors had little understanding or appreciation of the traditional cultural norms of the Acholi. The interventions ignored roles of conflict and displacement in violence and human rights abuses.

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Notes

1. Low, "Dislocated Polity."
2. Omara-Otunnu, "The Dynamics of Conflict in Uganda," 224.
3. Collier and Reinikka, "Reconstruction and Liberalization: An Overview," 15.
4. Republic of Uganda, *Report of the Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs*.

5. Pain, *Bending of Spears*.
6. Robert Gersony, *Anguish of Northern Uganda*.
7. Dolan and Hovil, *Humanitarian Protection in Uganda*.
8. Donnely, "Relative Universality of Human Rights," 282; Pearce, "Human Rights and Sociology," 48; Ake, "African Context of Human Rights," 5.
9. Mutua, "Savages, Victims, and Saviours," 205.
10. Cobbah, "African Values and Human Rights Debate."
11. Ake, "African Context of Human Rights," 5.
12. Panikkar, "Is the Concept of Human Rights a Western Concept?"
13. Pearce, "Human Rights and Sociology," 49.
14. Cobbah, "African Values and Human Rights Debate," 314.
15. Mutua, "Savages, Victims, and Saviours."
16. Paris, *At War's End*; Adebajo, *UN Peacekeeping in Africa*; Curtis, "Introduction. The Contested Politics of Peacebuilding."
17. Boutros, *An Agenda for Peace,* 11.
18. Sabaratnam, *Decolonizing Intervention. International Peacebuilding in Mozambique*.
19. Paris, "Saving Liberal Peacebuilding"; Forman and Patrick, "Introduction"; Kumar, "Nature and Focus of International Assistance."
20. Lund, "From Lessons to Action," 165.
21. Paris, "Saving Liberal Peacebuilding"; Paris, *At War's End*; Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars.*
22. Sabaratnam, *Decolonizing Intervention. International Peacebuilding in Mozambique*, 4.
23. Geldenhuys, *Foreign Political Engagement*.
24. Schellhaas and Seegers, "Peacebuilding: Imperialism's New Disguise?," 3.
25. Paris, "International Peacebuilding and 'Mission Civilisatrice'," 368.
26. Comaroff, "Symposium Introduction: Colonialism, Culture and Law," 306; Ndulo, "African Customary Law," 95; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 51.
27. Donais, "Empowerment or Imposition?"; Richmond, "Becoming Liberal, Unbecoming Liberalism."
28. Richmond, "Becoming Liberal, Unbecoming Liberalism"; Richmond, "De-Romanticising the Local, Demystifying the International"; Roberts, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding, Liberal Irrelevance"; Pugh, "Local Agency and Political Economies of Peacebuilding"; Mac Ginty and Richmond, "Local Turn in Peace Building."
29. Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention"; Chanok, *Law, Custom, and Social Order*.
30. Comaroff, "Symposium Introduction: Colonialism, Culture and Law," 306.
31. Petras, "NGOs: In the Service of Imperialism," 434.
32. Parlevliet, "Human Rights and Peacebuilding"; Mani, *Beyond Retribution*.
33. Rosa and Sow, "Role of Colonialism in the Construction of Human Rights."
34. De Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding."
35. Call and Wyeth, *Building States to Build Peace*.
36. Gingyera-Pinycwa, "Conflicting Fingers within the Iron Fist," 104.
37. Human Rights Watch, *Abducted and Abused*; Human Rights Watch, *Uprooted and Forgotten*.
38. World Health Organization, *Health and Mortality Survey*.
39. Human Rights Watch, *Uprooted and Forgotten*; Porter, "Justice and Rape on the Periphery."
40. Tapscott, "Local Security and the (Un)Making of Public Authority"; Macdonald and Allen, "Social Accountability in War Zones"; Porter, "Justice and Rape on the Periphery."
41. Hansen, *Conflict and the Emerging Roles of NGOs*; Republic of Uganda, *Peace, Recovery and Development Plan*. 2007; Omach, "Peace, Security and Elections in Northern Uganda," 355.
42. Pain, *Bending of Spears*, 2.
43. Bradbury, *Reflections on Peace Practice Project*, 18; confidential interview with chiefs, Gulu, 2015.
44. Huyse and Salter, *Traditional Justice and Reconciliation after Violent Conflict*, iii; Branch, *Displacing Human Rights*.

45. Allen, *Trial Justice*, 148.
46. Interview, Gulu, 2015.
47. Bere, "Land and Chieftaincy among the Acholi."
48. Confidential interviews, Gulu, 2015.
49. Allen, *Trial Justice*, 149.
50. Atkinson, *Roots of Ethnicity*.
41. Gertzel, *Party and Locality in Northern Uganda*.
52. Allen, *Trial Justice*, 149; confidential interview, Gulu, 2015.
53. Al Jazeera, "Uganda War 'Worst Forgotten Humanitarian Crisis'"; Human Rights Watch, *Uprooted and Forgotten*.
54. Dolan and Hovil, *Humanitarian Protection in Uganda*.
55. Tamale, "Right to Culture and the Culture of Rights."
56. Branch, *Displacing Human Rights*, 130.
57. Confidential document, 2008.
58. Rose et al., "Operationalising Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights."
59. Interview, Gulu, 2014; see also Branch, *Displacing Human Rights*, 627.
60. Interview, Gulu, 2014.
61. Fuest, "Contested Inclusions."
62. Schellhaas and Seegers, "Peacebuilding: Imperialism's New Disguise?," 3.
63. Wyrod, "Between Women's Rights and Men's Authority."
64. Ker Kwaro Acholi, *Increasing the Role of Women*.
65. Ibid.
66. Grassroots Women for Development, *Empowerment of Women for Durable Peace and Reconciliation*.
67. Pearce, "Human Rights and Sociology."
68. Panikkar, "Is the Concept of Human Rights a Western Concept?"
69. Ker Kwaro Acholi, *Increasing the Role of Women*.
70. Interview, Gulu, February 22, 2018.
71. Confidential interview with community services official, 2015.
72. Ndulo, "African Customary Law."
73. Ibid., 97.
74. Ake, "African Context of Human Rights."
75. Confidential interview, Gulu.
76. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 124.
77. Confidential interview, Gulu, February 22, 2018.
78. p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino*, 44.
79. Confidential interview, Gulu.
80. Patel et al., "In the Face of Vulnerabilities"; Porter, "Justice and Rape on the Periphery."

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