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Indigenous Communication for Post-conflict Healing and Reconciliation: Lessons from postwar northern Uganda[1]

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Introduction

Violent conflicts in societies leave in their wake a number of unpleasant by-products: death, poverty, disease, strained social networks and the destruction of a people's culture, especially their mores. On the more positive plane, violent conflicts have also produced an influx of scholarly attention to the causes, consequences and theorization of conflicts. This scholarly attention spans several disciplines, especially sociology, anthropology and political science (Dzurgba, 2006; Otite and Albert, 1999), communication studies (Olorunnisola and Martins, 2012; Isola, 2010; Mutua-Kombo, 2009; Olukotun, 2005), education (McGlynn, Zembylas, Bekerman and Gallagher, 2009) and human geography (Chigh, 2013). In fact, the deluge of scholars on post-conflict societies is sometimes so overwhelming it creates interview and observation fatigue for community members (Mutua-Kombo, 2009).

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In communication studies, scholarly efforts in post-conflict communication have focussed largely on the role of the mass media in reconciliation and development (Jakobsen, 2000), the impact of conflict on language use and language loyalty (Drake and Mutua-Kombo, 2009), and the application of communication in post-conflict development efforts (Soola, 2004; Udoakah, 2004). In this chapter, we select an aspect of communication in post-conflict societies that has not received much attention by researchers — indigenous communication.

Communities bear the deadliest brunt of wars and similar atrocities. Wars affect people not just as individuals, but collectively by virtue of their being community members and members of ethnic groups. Communities should, therefore, be the fulcrum of healing and reconciliation. Studies, as well as interventions, only partially reflect this, treating communities as the location for experimental peace and reconciliation initiatives fuelled by theories and ideologies that are foreign to the communities in question. Attention needs to be paid to the communication efforts that are wholly indigenous to the community, and which are deployed for post-conflict healing and reconciliation.

In this chapter, we focus on the Acholi communities in post-conflict northern Uganda. In search of healing and reconciliation from the atrocities of a 20-year war, the Acholi people have been reaching inward for indigenous and cultural communication resources, rather than relying on foreign and external assistance only. What are these community-owned indigenous communication resources deployed in post-conflict healing and reconciliation in Acholiland? How effective are they in promoting healing and reconciliation? What fundamental lessons do they teach about conflict communication and reconciliation in Africa? These are the questions which we tackle in this chapter.

To do this, we first present a brief summary of the war and its aftermath, and an overview of indigenous communication. We then

discuss indigenous communication practice in post-conflict communication among the Acholi, and draw lessons for communication for post-conflict reconciliation and healing.

African indigenous communication system

It should be a straightforward task to define or describe indigenous communication, but it is not. As observed by Ojebode (2012), there exist two broad perspectives to the meaning of indigenous communication. One of these perspectives views indigenous communication as the deployment of any and all communication tools and resources by an indigenous people. This view marks the studies led by Pamela Wilson and much of the work on indigenous communication in the global west (Wilson and Stewart, 2008).

Guided by this framework, scholars have studied how indigenous peoples use radio and television (Browne, 1996), video (Salazar and Cordova, 2008), cinema (Guathier, 2008) and digital media (Christie, 2008). Through anthropological tools, scholars have shown how these media are being used to tell stories of the oppression of the indigenous peoples, document indigenous peoples' experiences, define and preserve their identity, and provide native, culture-compatible entertainment. A common verdict seems to be that indigenous communication is not a disinterested process of sharing information through modern communication media, but a process that has the colouration of politics, power and identity.

The other perspective of indigenous communication is represented by the works of Desmond Wilson, who described indigenous media as pre-colonial, pre-bureaucratic and endangered forms of communication found among the peoples of Africa. This perspective is shared by Wang, as cited by Mundy and Compton (1995), and has shaped the study of indigenous communication in sub-Saharan Africa. In summing up this perspective, Ojebode (2012: 3) stated:

African indigenous media are African in origin and have been in existence before the coming of the Europeans ... (these media) existed at a time in the past. Though still existing and being actively used in many societies, they cannot be described or discussed without active reference to their ancient origins. Also, these media are fixed within and derive meaning and relevance from a defined cultural and linguistic context.

Wilson (1987) classified eight indigenous media of communication in Africa:

1. ideophones (self-sounding instruments)
2. aerophones (instruments which produce sounds as a result of air vibration)
3. membranophones (which produce sounds at the vibration of membranes)
4. symbolography (symbolic representation or writing)
5. symbolic displays (such as smiling and other bodily expressions)
6. signals (physical embodiments of a message such as gunshots or drumbeat)
7. objectifics (media presented in concrete forms)
8. colour schemes: music and extra-mundane media (such as invocations and supplications used in communicating with the worlds of the dead or spirits)

In 2005, he re-classified these into five:

1. instrumental media (made up of ideophones, aerophones, membranophones and symbolography)
2. demonstrative media (music and signals)
3. visual media (such as colours, clothing, nonverbal cues conveyed by the human body)

4. institutional media (such as traditional institutional forums)
5. iconographics (made up of flora and objectifics), and extra-mundane communication

Researchers have studied the effectiveness of these ancient communication tools in behaviour change communication and development communication (Ojebode and Agboola, 2010; Akinwunmi, 2010; Onasanya, 2008), as preserves of marginal groups (Awonusi, 2012), and even as tools of modern public relations (Onanuga, 2008). However, studies of their use in post-conflict reconciliation are scanty.

The difference between the two perspectives on indigenous communication, as explained by Ojebode (2012), is mainly in their focus. Pamela Wilson and her group focussed on the users of the media. Once the user of a medium is a member of an indigenous group, what is going on is indigenous communication. Des Wilson's focus is on the media — their origin and age. If a medium was introduced to a people, then it is not indigenous and its use cannot be regarded as indigenous communication.

This chapter finds its home in Desmond Wilson's classification. We shall focus on indigenous communication media used by the Acholi people of northern Uganda for post-conflict reconciliation and healing. From literature and personal experience with the Acholi people, we discovered that two major indigenous media are deployed for the reconciliation and healing of the community: extra-mundane communication and indigenous singing.

The war in northern Uganda

The war that ravaged Acholiland for 20 years was a product of political and ethnic tensions that had existed in Uganda since the colonial days. Uganda, like many African nations, is an amalgam of numerous ethnic groups competing for power and the resources that come with it. At independence from Britain in 1962, the country was

led by Milton Obote, a northerner. The Acholi from the north dominated the army, while the southerners dominated the civil service. Within 24 years of independence, Uganda witnessed four coups and counter-coups, one of which was led by Idi Amin, a man known for his violent atrocities against human beings. (Temmerman, 2009).

In 1986, rebel leader, Lieutenant Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, became the military ruler of Uganda following his conquest of the government army under Commander Tito Okello. Like Amin, Yoweri Museveni was said to have unleashed terror on the northerners in the army, especially the Acholi, as vengeance for their excesses when the government army had earlier fought Yoweri's rebel group in the Lowero Triangle. In the early days of the Museveni regime, many soldiers of Acholi ethnic group were tortured, murdered or simply declared missing.

About this time, there emerged a queer Acholi woman by the name Alice Lakwena, who claimed to have been ordained to defeat the Museveni government, liberate the Acholi and rule the nation strictly by the Ten Commandments. Out of fear or in search of vengeance, many Acholi in the army and civilians rallied round Lakwena and her Holy Spirit Movement. She marched towards Kampala from the north, but was roundly defeated by the troops of the Museveni administration (IRIN, 20012; Temmerman, 2009).

Joseph Kony came into the limelight about the time of Alice Lakwena's death and claimed to have been inspired by her. Kony, arguably one of the most ruthless and uncouth rebel leaders to live, was illiterate, possessed a weird interpretation of the Bible and had access to weapons (Ojebode and Owacgiu, forthcoming). He rallied many Acholi and Langi round himself and formed a formidable movement, the Ugandan People's Democratic Christian Army, which later became the notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) (Temmerman, 2009).

In the first few months of his insurgency, Kony fought with government troops. However, towards the end of the 1980s, he turned his anger on his own people, the Acholi and Langi. Their offence was that they had voted in an election in which Museveni won. The LRA, led by Kony, began a massive destruction of the Acholi, and the abduction of male and female Acholi children — some as young as four years old. Many of the female teenagers among the children were given as wives to his commanders; other children were made into fighters and porters. Kony himself was said to have had 80 wives — mostly abducted children. In reality, however, the children were the cannon fodder behind whom the commanders hid (Temmerman, 2009).

The extreme brutality meted out to the abducted children and the Acholi is still being documented. Abducted children were made to kill and maim people, especially members of their family. Children who refused or were too weak to walk long distances or carry out military tasks were killed in the most gruesome manner, such as having their skulls smashed, or forcing other children to bite them bit-by-bit to death, or burying them alive. The abducted children were considered too cheap to be killed by a bullet; rather their skulls were smashed with hammers or clubs (OCHA and IRIN, 2004; Ojebode and Owacgiu, forthcoming).

By 2002, Kony rebels had abducted over 20,000 children. Life became so insecure even in cities such as Gulu, Kitgum and Lira that schools had to be shut. For example, in 1996, Kony's LRA attacks led to the closure or destruction of 136 out of 189 schools in Gulu. In 2003, half of the schools in Kitgum and about 90 percent of those in Pader were closed (OCHA and IRIN, 2004; Ojebode and Owacgiu, forthcoming).

In an attempt to contain the insurgency, government troops launched several operations and attacks. In reality, these operations and attacks killed probably more Acholi villagers than the rebels. There were several allegations of government soldiers, most of whom

were non-Acholi, unleashing extreme terror on Acholi villagers, including murder, castration and rape. On both sides, from LRA and from government soldiers, Acholi villagers became the targets and victims of organised armed attacks.

Apparently to make it easy for the government soldiers to protect the civilian population, government constructed internally-displaced persons (IDP) camps and herded the Acholi into them. By 2004, roughly 90 percent of the population in the northern region were living in the camps (IDMC, 2005). These displaced people amounted to about 1.7 million. But there were claims that the Acholi were forced into the camps so that the government could take over their rich land (Whitmore, 2010). Although these camps were guarded by government troops, they were not safe. The rebels regularly infiltrated the camps and wreaked terror on the people while the army fled. Not only this, government troops allegedly committed reckless acts of violence and humiliation in the camps against the displaced persons. Rape and torture of unimaginable kinds such as sodomization, castration, robbery and sheer humiliation of the Acholi were commonly reported in the IDP camps (*Acholi Times*, 2010).

The war is (not) over

In 2006, the war came to an end as Kony and his group moved to the Central African Republic. However, the wounds left by the war on the Acholi remained deep and sore. Arguably the most painful toll left on the people by the war was the bloodied social and communal relationships. Many of Joseph Kony's commanders and fighters were abducted from the Acholi communities and were made to unleash terror on their parents, relatives and neighbours. Some of these were people known by name in the community. The feeling of anger and hostility that this betrayal produced continues to smoulder in the communities.

At the individual level, the aggrieved community members considered the killers and their relatives as enemies. Where a commander had led rampaging rebels against communities, surviving members of those communities hold grudges not just against the commander, but also against the community to which such a commander belonged. In many cases, the fact that such commanders wreaked similar brutality on their own communities did not significantly assuage the anger and thirst for vengeance by the attacked communities. The Acholi people came out of the war angry with one another at both the individual and community levels.

The situation was compounded by the large presence of former child soldiers in the communities. This is the second aspect of the war toll. At the end of the war, a large number of abducted child soldiers accepted government amnesty and returned to the society. But many of them faced ridicule and even open hostility from many in the society who still considered them as murderers, rapists and mutilators. The women among them were ridiculed as sex slaves, 'Kony's wives' and vectors of sexually-transmitted diseases. Reintegrating these former child soldiers into the society remains a daunting task.

A third aspect of the toll is the land disputes that continue to fester among communities and individuals in Acholiland. Being herders and farmers, the Acholi treat land with utmost care and guard it with a complex set of time-honoured traditional laws. While in the camp, the Acholi lost a generation of elders who could handle boundary matters and apply these traditional laws guiding land use (Okot, 2013). Furthermore, after staying in the IDP camps for, in some cases, as long as 15 years, many Acholi returned to their communities with a blurred vision of land boundaries. The result is interpersonal and inter-communal land disputes that continue to plague the communities. The disputes have led to fresh hostilities among communities. For instance, in 2012, at least six people were reportedly killed in violent land disputes in Amuru district. Two

people had been killed in late 2011 in the Nwoya District (*Nile Chronicles*, 2012).

Land disputes go on at three levels: among the Acholi people; between the Acholi people and the government that, it was alleged, had sold Acholiland to politicians and military men (including President Museveni's brother), and between the Acholi people and foreign investors (Lawino, 2012; Akena and Lawino, 2012; Refugee Law Project, 2012). In addition to the foregoing outcomes of the war, and as one should expect from a war-ravaged society, the Acholi society has lost its demographic and development equilibrium.

With so many working age people killed in the war, there is a disproportionate number of dependants and disabled. The poverty level is high, mental and physical diseases and disability are also prevalent. For instance, the World Health Organization (2006) discovered that poverty was higher in the north than in any other part of Uganda. Nationally, 31 percent of Ugandans lived below the poverty line, but in the north the figure was 61 percent. In 2012, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2012:108) noted that "poverty was concentrated in the north" as over 40 percent of the population lived in the lowest wealth quintile.

Numerous local and international non government organizations have expended tremendous human and material resources in alleviating the toll of the war on northern Uganda. Among their activities are peace workshops which seek to promote reconciliation, healing and reintegration and, thus, forestall relapse to violence. Other activities include educating and equipping former child soldiers with income-generating skills so as to make them independent and less prone to crime. A major aspect of the post-conflict reconciliation and healing, however, is the return to traditional indigenous communication resources. Among these are extra-mundane communication and indigenous singing, which form the focus of this chapter.

Extra-mundane communication for post-conflict reconciliation and healing among the Acholi

Extra-mundane communication, as defined by Wilson (1987:266), is "a mode of communication, real or imaginary, believed to take place between the living and dead, or between the living and the supernatural or supreme being." Among the Acholi, there are elaborate extra-mundane communication processes deployed to promote post-conflict reconciliation and community healing in the aftermath of the bloody insurgency that ended in 2006. These have been described as rituals or ceremonies. First of these is the *mato oput*, or the drinking of the bitter roots. The second is the *nyono tong gweno* or the rite of "stepping on the egg".

Mato oput

One of the paradoxes of the war in northern Uganda was that such gruesome bloodshed occurred among a people who believed in the sanctity of human life and considered murder or manslaughter the greatest crime a person can commit. The gravity of that crime is captured in the fact that it is regarded as a crime not just against the victim, or his or her family, but an offence against the entire community and, worse still, against supernatural forces, ancestral spirits, and the Supreme Deity, *Nyarubanga*. Killing another person, freeborn or slave, rich or poor, native or stranger, knowingly or by accident, is such a grievous crime that its atonement is indeed an elaborate one.

The Acholi say *mac pe kweyo mac*, meaning "fire cannot quench fire." Murder or manslaughter cannot be atoned for by killing the murderer. In the Acholi understanding of the cosmos, killing a murderer for murder amounts to two equally grievous murders, and further pollutes the land, rather than cleansing it. It creates more bad blood and repairs nothing. The community is also considered the loser if capital punishment is enforced as this means loss of manpower for the community. The way out is not to kill the

murderer, but to appease the aggrieved parties — family of the victim, ancestral spirits and the Supreme Deity. To do this, the elaborate *mato oput* rite is organized.

When a person kills another, the act creates an immediate supernatural barrier between the families or clans of the killer and the victim. Members of the two clans immediately stop eating or drinking together from the same vessel. All forms of social engagement and interaction also cease. They are not even allowed to engage in a quarrel or fight as that is also considered as a form of social interaction. The killer is ostracized because he is now seen to be carrying *ujobu*, the shameful smear or taint or dent of killing. This remains so until the mato oput is conducted for him.

As an extra-mundane communication act, mato oput involves five groups of communicators: the council of elders, an arbiter appointed by the council from a neutral clan (different from the clan of the killer or the killed), members of the victim's clan led by the victim's next of kin, members of the killer's clan led by someone they choose and (it is believed) ancestral spirits.

There are also symbolic materials that must be presented. The killer's clan or family must present a bull and a ram. The victim's family present a goat. Food, an unused vessel, beer and ground roots of the oput tree are also needed.

The process begins with the offender confessing to the elders that he indeed killed the victim. Then the elders appoint an arbiter who must be from neither of the concerned clans. Working with the elders and the aggrieved family, the arbiter determines what the blood money should be. The money is paid. It is to be spent in marrying a new wife who will produce children to replace the slain person. In this way, the manpower lost by the family is replaced. The reconciliation rite or mato oput, follows after the payment of the blood money.

The rite typically takes place in an open field, preferably between the homesteads of the two concerned clans. On the day chosen for

the atonement, elders, the arbiter and members of the two groups assemble. Members of the village are also allowed to attend. All stand and observe a moment of solemn silence.

The arbiter then addresses the ancestors and the Supreme Being. He acknowledges that a grievous sin has been committed in the land, and the land thirsts for peace because of the action of one man. He reminds them of the ubiquity of sin and also invites their mercy and forgiveness and healing. He invokes the ancestors' commitment to reconciliation rather than retribution. He states the fact that the killer is repentant, and thus the door for reconciliation should be open. He makes reference to the blood money which has been paid, and pleads with the ancestors to bless the newly-married woman so she can bear children to replace the slain man. In concluding his solemn supplication, he makes the most crucial request: "May it now please you, our ancestors, to remove the root of bitterness by allowing these two families to engage in social interactions which they have suspended, and to now relate as brothers."

At this point, the elders and all present add their voices in a medley of confirmatory 'amens', invocations and supplication: "May the woman to be married bear many sons. . . . May there be no such evil as this again in our community. . . . May you listen, our ancestors, and grant our requests. . . . May goodness rise from the east with the sun and shine across the land."

The representative of the family of the victim then addresses the ancestors, not in arrogant pontificating, but in a sober acceptance of the offer of peace as a mark of honour for, and obedience to the ancestors. He reminds them that sin is widespread and anyone can sin. He beseeches the ancestors to kindly bless the reconciliation and healing. He asks for blessing for the blood money so that the woman whom it is spent in marrying will bear children to replace the lost brother. Again the assembly erupts in approvals, invocations and supplications. "May the guilt go down with the sun and sink forever.

. . . May we have again the kind of peace and brotherliness we once had."

After this, the arbiter and the representative of the victim's family mix the *oput* roots with the beer in the unused vessel. Then the killer with his hands tied behind his back, kneels before the vessel. The victim's next of kin also kneels beside the killer and both of them drink from the potion in the vessel at the same time. The vessel is not lifted, so they kneel and bend to reach it with their mouths.

Women do not miss this cue: they send up shrill ululations and chant the praise names of the two clans. Other members of the two families join in drinking from the same vessels for the first time since the killing. Food items are then shared and eaten together by both sides.

The arbiter slaughters the ram brought by the family of the killer and gives the head to the representative of the victim's family. He slaughters the goat brought by the victim's family and gives the head to the representative of the family of the killer. Then a bull is slaughtered, skinned and cooked. The meat is shared and eaten. This marks the end of the bitterness between the two clans and families. No one is expected to talk about the crime again.

There are variations in the way mato oput is performed in different parts of Acholiland. In many districts or clans, the ceremony is more complicated than what is described above. It involves cleaning of the meeting field with a white hen, a mock fight and the beating of sticks to symbolize anger or bitterness, eating of spoilt food to symbolize the fallow period which spoils things — the period between the crime and the atonement, the mixing of the oput roots with the blood of the goat and the sheep which is then sipped by the involved parties and spat out to symbolize the pouring of blood, eating of the liver of the animals, and ceremonial knocking of the heads of parties from the injured and the offender's families.

In some clans, the blood feud is not considered completely over until a baby is born by the newly married-woman, a baby often

named after the slain man. In some others, when the baby is born and the new family takes root, the blood money is returned to the family of the offender, thus ending the entire process of mato oput. The birth of the baby is the symbolic feedback from the ancestors – the completion of the communication cycle.

In other clans, mato oput is considered incomplete until the *gomo tong* rite is performed. *Gomo tong*, "the bending of spears," is a ritual meaning a vow between two warring communities to end all present hostilities and avoid future ones. It is a solemn oath involving the invocation of the spirits of the ancestors and of the supreme being. Some however claim that *gomo tong* is not a part of mato oput (Latigo, 2008).

Mato oput has been conducted in several cases of killing that occurred during the 20-year war that ravaged northern Uganda, and hundreds of former rebels and abductees have taken part in it. This was sometimes sponsored by the international organizations and local NGOs.

In spite of its many promises, there are obstacles to a more widespread application of mato oput in the case of the 20-year war in northern Uganda. These include the perpetrators' inability to identify their victims, the high cost of mato oput and some hesitation among religious people to participate in what appears to them to be fetish rituals. Other obstacles include inadequate knowledge of mato oput—some believe that since the practice had not been documented, some elements of it might have been lost in trans-generational transition. It is claimed, that this lack of standardization, explains variations in the practice of mato oput across communities (Nakayi, 2008).

Nyono tong gweno

Whereas mato oput is for reconciling communities, clans or families estranged by murder, *nyono tong gweno* is for reintegrating a member of a community who may have done evil, and restoring

them into the community. To the Acholi, the land is both sacred and vulnerable. Evil of any kind pollutes the land even when such evil is committed far away from the community.

Nyono tong gweno (stepping on egg) is performed mostly on community members who have been away for a long time. These are prone to being involved in evil. To prevent them from carrying the pollution into the compounds, they are stopped at the entrance and cleansed. An egg is broken on the slippery branch of the *opobo* tree. The egg symbolizes innocence and purity—an egg cannot talk (evil). The slippery and soapy *opobo* branch symbolizes cleansing, as if with soap. This simple ceremony is believed to ward off evil spirits that might want to follow the sinful returnee into his or her homestead.

Nyono tong gweno is far less elaborate than mato oput. It is also sometimes based on the assumption, rather than on the conviction, that the returnee sinned. In some cases it is precautionary. Yet, it is a widely recognized cleansing rite. As a communication act, it sends the message to community members that evil cannot be overlooked but must be atoned; that evil is like matter which cannot be destroyed or wished away; that the community is willing to accept whoever is willing to repent and be cleansed. It communicates the community's firm belief in the efficacy of traditional ways and the importance of culture. It is an expression of hope and redemption for the returning prodigals.

This rite has important social and psychological significance for former child soldiers who had been forced to perform unimaginable horrors on members of their communities and on those of other communities. Most of these have returned to the communities as rejects — labelled as murderers, ridiculed and ostracized. They remain victims of verbal and physical violence. Many of them cannot perform *mato oput* because they do not know the names and identities of the several people they had hacked to death or burnt alive under the LRA's fearful instructions. *Nyono tong gweno*

remains a major entrance to community and societal acceptance. Latigo (2008) noted that about 12,000 former LRA abductees and fighters have undergone this cleansing rite. Among them were also non-Acholi who were returning from the grip of the LRA to Acholiland or the IDP camps.

Indigenous songs and singing

Singing is a major aspect of the indigenous communication of a people. Indigenous singing has been classified as a popular rather than an elite art, because it is deployed largely by the non-elites and other underprivileged people. Olukotun (2005) draws attention to the existence, however, of pro-elite, pro-power popular singers and artists, warning against the inclusive branding of every indigenous popular artist as counter-hegemonic. Thus, there exist two groups of popular artists: the truly popular artists who use indigenous singing to question autocrats, promote peace and justice, call attention to inequality, poverty and strife, whose message is about change, liberation and revolution, and the pro-establishment artist and singer who focusses on the rich and influential. In either case, the Western notion of popular culture and popular music as trivial and as devotion to disinterested entertainment does not apply. *Popular communication in Africa is essentially instrumental, political and 'biased'*.

The Acholi of northern Uganda, in the aftermath of the war, have deployed indigenous singing to promote reconciliation, reintegration and healing in the communities. The emphasis in most songs is the need to maintain peace. Though the war had ended, many of the fighters were still in the forests, as Joseph Kony did not disband the rebels, but only moved to another country. There was the fear that the end of the war only brought fragile peace which, if not strengthened, could break if Kony returned.

However, the kind of peace sought by the artists is not the graveyard peace, but peace that rests on accountability. Like the

traditional reconciliation rites, the indigenous musicians do not suggest that the past be buried unexamined; rather they insist that the past must be addressed, the guilty should accept responsibility as a way to lasting peace.

The Alobo Boys in their song titled *Wadeg Lweny* (meaning "We don't want war"), remind their listeners of the gruesomeness of the war—a way of unearthing and examining the past:

> We want peace
> The war has taken a toll on us
> Yet we are human beings
> They set land mines
> That cut off our legs
> Like we are animals
> And yet we are human beings
> The lessons we learnt from the
> Evening time (folktales) are no more
> War has destroyed everything

Other singers talk of hunger, poverty, insecurity and other forms of hardship experienced in the war. In *Ayela Ayela* ("Disturbance in the World"), the singers capture the air of uncertainty and insecurity thus:

> Now if you are cooking
> You don't know if you will eat the food
> Going to sleep at night
> You don't know if you will wake up alive
> Now, when you start a journey
> You don't know if you will return

The total disarray brought to community life in Acholiland did not escape the singers' attention: dead economy ("our businesses can't continue because of war; our families are scattered because of war; rain soaks us in the bush; hunger is killing us because we can't farm"

—*Ayela Ayela*). All of this is to ensure that the past is not hurriedly buried unexamined, but is properly accounted for.

The appeal for peace is a major theme in the lyrics of the indigenous communicators. Instructively, peace, in their views, can be achieved by talking. Cetkana's *Twero Pa Kuc* (meaning "Power of peace"), like most others, anchors peace on dialogue following the suspension of violence:

> The power of peace must be respected
> Come back home and we talk
> Kony, if Museveni has done
> Wrong it's better you talk
> But not fight
> We now appeal to the rebel leaders
> Otti Vincent,
> Come back home and we talk
> Major Odiambo,
> Come back home and we talk
> Lukwiya Raska,
> Come back home and we talk
> Onen Kamdulu,
> Come back home and we talk
> Major Sam,
> Come back home and we talk
> We are calling you back home
> For nothing but peace
> So that we can develop

In other words, Museveni's errors did not justify the insurgency, especially in the face of the atrocities resulting from it. The war could only result in a pyrrhic victory. The refrain "come back home and we talk" emphasizes the Acholi belief in non-violence as the ultimate solution to wars.

The Keptong group in *Amnesty tye pi timo kisa* even goes one step further by naming and commending ex-combatants in the LRA who had returned home. These are seen as those paving the way for peace:

> Amnesty is here for everybody
> You children in the bush come back home
> So that we get peace .
> And we continue with our education
> Mzee Banya (rebel commander)
> We welcome you back home
> For you have done well to relinquish fighting
> Now we know we are soon getting peace

Other rebel commanders mentioned in the song were Apire Ray, Onekomon and Abola.

The proposed coming together to talk is an Acholi affair. Again, like the extra-mundane communication earlier discussed, the singers believe intra-ethnic reconciliation is more important than reconciliation supervised by national and international truth commissions or courts of justice. In *Pi Kakaka Na*, the singer advises:

> We have suffered for a long time
> Kony, we have had enough bloodshed
> Kony, if you think of your people
> then stop fighting
> And come back home and talk peace
> This talk of ICC should be put aside
> So that peace can first prevail

As a substitute (or a transition) to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other non-indigenous methods of reconciliation, the singers advise that the elders and the rebels should confer. Jude Pato in *Adunde* even names such leaders and fighters:

> Bishop Orombi . . .
> Albert Opara . . .
> Captain Zulu . . .
> Okumu Ringa . . .
> Let us come together
> Love one another
> Understand one another
> And talk peace

A strong sense of self-efficacy is manifest in the content of the songs. The war and its aftermath were seen as a problem plaguing the Acholi, but which can be surmounted through the human and cultural resources of the communities concerned. The way out is not through punishing the offenders, even if that were possible, but in reconciling. There is a strong emphasis on talking, loving and forgiving. It is instructive how very often words like "together", "one another" and their semantic equivalents occur in the songs, thus emphasizing cooperation and unity in addressing the problems. Peace is not to be imported into the Acholi community; rather, it is to be engineered and nurtured from within.

Effectiveness of the indigenous communication activities

Do the indigenous communication practices under discussion indeed produce or promote reconciliation and healing? This is a question of effect and effectiveness. In communication studies, this question is known to be a problematic one. Whereas researchers agree that communication has an effect, the precise nature, precursor, direction and extent of the effect has been a subject of academic debate and research. Beyond experimental designs, which are often flawed by their reduction of humans to laboratory subjects, researchers have adopted roundabout measures to studying effects, such as studying the content of rejoinders in order to understand the effect of the primary communication content, or relying on extra-content matters

to determine the effects of such activities as communication interventions (Ojebode, Onekutu and Adegbola, 2010).

In assessing the effectiveness of the indigenous communication activities deployed for postconflict reconciliation and healing by the Acholi, we did not adopt any of the above measures. Rather, we interpreted the trends in adoption and general popular response to the practices.

Afako (2006) reported that about 17,000 former LRA child soldiers and commanders have taken part in various indigenous cleansing rituals. An estimated 12,000 ex-child soldiers and commanders have been cleansed through nyono tong gweno rites(Latigo 2008). These large figures imply a strong belief in the efficacy of the rituals. It is not unreasonable to conclude that returnees were attracted to the rituals because they noticed the effect of the rituals on fellow returnees who had gone through the rituals. They saw returnees being reintegrated into their former communities; they saw erstwhile brutally belligerent ex-soldiers eating and socializing together with their communities again, and desired that reconciliation and reintegration for themselves which, in this case, required going through mato oput or any other relevant rituals. The diffusion of innovations theory supports the position that demonstrable results often encourage onlookers or laggards to adopt an innovation (Rogers, 1983).

Popular responses to these communication actions also lead us to conclude that they were not mere inconsequential rituals. In 2007, when the song *Pi Kakaka Na* was first sung, it became a widespread chant in northern Uganda, and rebels and abductees came back home in droves about that time. This might have been a coincidence. However, returnees were often heard chanting the lyrics of this song on their way back.

Latigo (2008) reported an incident that strongly demonstrates the effectiveness of the *gamo tong* (bending the spear) ritual. The incident, interestingly, involved the Acholi on the one hand and the

people of West Nile on the other. The Acholi had been killed in large numbers by Idi Amin who was from the West Nile. When Amin fell and an Acholi man came to power, the Acholi revenged, killing hundreds of West Nile people. It seemed the cycle of violence was established with each side seeking a chance to attack the other. In 1985, however, the gamo tong ritual was organized for the two sides—although only one side was Acholi. The solemn ceremony centered on a vow taken by both sides to end hostilities and never to return them. The test of this covenant came shortly after Museveni took over power. He deployed West Nile Fronts I and II to fight LRA, who were mainly Acholi. The soldiers in the Fronts I and II, who were mostly West Nilers, refused to fight the LRA, citing the 1985 'bending the spear' ceremony which bound them to every Acholi person eternally.

The Mato Oput Project (2009) reported that about 86 percent of their respondents believed that the mato oput ritual effectively promoted peace and reconciliation. It also reported interviews with participants in mato oput who stated how the ceremony brought them an experience of genuine forgiveness, peace and a sense of belonging in the community.

Reconciliation, the experience of forgiveness and peace are all subjective and difficult to measure scientifically. Yet, they manifest in observable actions such as erstwhile enemies socializing together. Through participants' reported claims and observable trends, it is tenable to conclude that the indigenous communication activities are effective in promoting reconciliation and healing among the Acholi of northern Uganda.

Lessons for the practice of post-conflict communication and reconciliation

In this section of the chapter, we deal with the question of application by addressing lessons that peace professionals can learn from the post-conflict reconciliation events in northern Uganda. We discuss

lessons that should inform a professional's choice of communication media first, and then the communication role of the professional, especially in a third-party position.

Spectacles, receptacles and tentacles

The communication approach chosen in reconciliation efforts is critical to the entire reconciliation process. In a post-conflict situation, the peace agent is dealing with people who are hurt and confused. The agent should not increase their confusion by choosing a mode of communication that does not easily reach the people. Three modes of communication are commonly deployed in post-conflict communication: mass media, group communication, and interpersonal communication. Indigenous communication is rarely adopted.

In his study of the role of the mass media in conflict management, Jakobsen (2000) noted that the mass media are hunters for violent conflict. They are most active when the conflict is raw and, at its peak, and take delight in reporting high rates of casualty and most bizarre forms of bestiality, but they do poorly in post-conflict reporting (see also Ojebode, 2008). It seems that the unwritten aim of the mass media, especially international media such as CNN, BBC and Aljazeera, is to turn communities in conflict areas into spectacles for the viewing delight of the audiences in their safe sitting rooms.

Local media are not innocent of this charge either. Among many others, Isola (2010) quite brilliantly demonstrated the contribution of the Nigerian mass media to electoral violence, especially in Western Nigeria. Yet, reconciliation experts are wont to quickly resort to the mass media in their search for peace and reconciliation outlets. In many cases, the mass media are a wrong choice in post-conflict mediation unless media workers are appropriately trained and monitored. This is possible mostly for community media workers.

Most of the small and large group communication activities performed in post-conflict efforts are in the form of peace workshops and public addresses. At these workshops, citizens are told what to do and what not to do to ensure that the peace is maintained and reconciliation is promoted. Experts are invited from outside the community — most often strangers who understand little about the community, the little gleaned from books and the internet. With much 'book knowledge', the experts pontificate and educate, pouring into citizens 'knowledge that promotes peace'. Put simply, the citizens are seen and treated as empty receptacles that need to be filled with knowledge.

Interpersonal communication in post-conflict reconciliation and empowerment also, more often than not, treats citizens this way— telling them what they need to know, do or avoid for their condition to be improved. Efforts in teaching citizens income-generating activities, counselling and postconflict therapy, though important, fall into this category. Treating citizens as empty receptacles to be filled violates communication ethics which requires communication to be an exchange, rather than a transfer of knowledge; it erodes the self-esteem of citizens, a self-esteem already shredded by the war situation. Therefore, rather than healing and reconciling, these methods may further complicate matters for people.

Indigenous communication is part of the wide communication tentacles of the citizens, reaching all the different aspects of their lives, including aspects where the pains of war or conflict are felt most. Violent conflict affects more than the economy or physical wellness of citizens. Therefore, a communication mode that will promote total healing and reconciliation should be one that is in itself comprehensive. From the Acholi example discussed in this chapter, it is evident that indigenous communication is comprehensive, taking care of both the physical and spiritual aspects of life.

It is compatible with the worldview, culture and native logic of the citizens. The logic behind the African worldview is often depicted

depicted as irrational and superstitious. But who can assail the soundness of the logic behind mato oput that *moc pe kweyo moc* (fire does not quench fire)? How does murder cure murder? Indigenous communication goes down to the cultural roots of the citizens and speaks in images and metaphors that resonate with their transgenerational experiences, heritage and mores in ways that they cannot ignore. This is the explanation for the acceptance of mato oput and other extra-mundane communication practices. The African world, it is traditionally believed, involves the unborn, those living in the visible world, and those who have relocated to the invisible world, the last group comprising spirits and ancestors. Modern faiths and confessions have not totally dislodged this consciousness from the minds of most Africans. The tentacles of indigenous communication is still able to reach all these planes of existence.

The Acholi experience also teaches that indigenous communication can be inclusive and participatory—contrary to notions that depict religious rituals as esoteric actions shrouded in scary secrets. For example, women, often depicted in literature as second-class citizens in Africa, are active role players in mato oput. They do not just cook food, sing and shrill during the ritual, but also play practical and integral roles in the core aspects of the process. They may function as arbiters, and often hold the heads of the men who are to do the ritual knocking of heads, making sure that the heads are indeed knocked properly.

Most indigenous communication activities are participatory and may well be ahead of even the mass media in fulfilling Jürgen Harbermas's principle of non-excludability (Habermas, 1995). Unfortunately, in their search for participatory development practices and methods, development workers have continued to largely ignore indigenous communication—picking and choosing only aspects of it that are compatible with their unilaterally-selected development goals and procedure.

Mediation: meddlers or midwives?

The range of activities described as mediation in conflict situations is broad, spanning from meddling in a community and a nation's affairs at one extreme to midwifing a community's management of their own conflict at the other nobler extreme. There are mediators described as authoritarian mediators who plunge into a conflict and exert their influence and resources to ensure that the conflict ends the way they deem best even if neither of the parties involved in the conflict chooses that end. Powerful nations such as the United States and Russia are examples of such nations (Akpuru-Aja, 2007). There are also powerful individuals who have sufficient clout to enter a conflict as apparently credible arbiters and swing events in the direction that they think they should go. Akpuru-Aja (2007) mentioned names like Jimmy Carter, Henry Kissinger, Nelson Mandela and Kofi Annan on the international scene. Many governments, non government organizations and individuals have shown themselves to be powerful arbiters in the northern Ugandan post-conflict reconciliation.

Many meddlers consider mediation as a source of enrichment and often swing conflicts in the direction that will benefit them. Analysts have accused the United States of America of this kind of interested mediation in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Isola (2010) pointed out that even the mass media meddle in conflicts in a way that, if one might use the cliché, feather the nest of their proprietors, patrons and advertisers.

There are, however, mediators that are midwives assisting post-conflict or conflict communities to amicably arrive at peace and to sustain the peace. These arbiters are as detached as possible and do not bring their own formulas and agenda into the conflict. They are committed to assisting communities to identify and deploy culturally valid, and enduring indigenous methods and practices to combat the conflict situation. They may come with resources and suggestions, but these are not imposed on the communities. In northern Uganda,

the USAID demonstrated this by supporting, rather than supplanting *nyono tong gweno* ceremonies collectively conducted by the Ker Kwaro Acholi — the Acholi cultural organization that has been actively involved in post-conflict cultural revival in Acholiland. Between 2004 and 2006, the USAID also supported 54 mato oput ceremonies. Thousands have benefitted from the support given to these two ceremonies (Latigo, 2008).

A major lesson in mediation that the Acholi experience provides is that the role of the third party should be to support the unleashing of a community's potentials to handle their own conflicts, rather than imposing external ideas and measures on the community, no matter how tested and trusted these foreign ideas might be. This calls for a balance of power between the post-conflict communities and the arbiters or development agents.

Conclusion

Communication for post-conflict reconciliation and healing should not focus on individuals alone—as counselling, therapies and empowerment for income-generating activities do. Focussing on the community as well and assisting it to reach inwardly for healing strength is important. Violent conflicts dislodge communities, wreaking unimaginable havoc on age-old customs and relationships, wrenching communal ties and violating sacred ancestral symbols of kinship. Communication resources for reparation, reconciliation and healing must be those that are capable of mending these broken links. The Acholi experience in northern Uganda leads us to conclude that there is no form of communication that does that as effectively as the indigenous communication system.

The foregoing is not to suggest that the mass media are completely irrelevant in post-conflict reconciliation and healing. A careful combination of mass and indigenous media is capable of promoting reconciliation and healing. A prime choice for this partnership between indigenous and mass media are community

newspapers and radio which, by virtue of their location and ownership, are thoroughly accustomed to the indigenous communication resources of the communities.

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whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level (Fountain, 1999: i).

Commenting on the value of peace education, Salomon (2004: 2), of the Centre for Research on Peace Education at the University of Haifa, Israel noted that ". . . peace education in its different instantiations . . . speaks of changed attitudes, increased tolerance, weakened stereotypes, changed conceptions of self and of 'other', reinforced senses of collective identity, and the like."

The position of this paper is that the opposite of peace education is violence education. What peace education does, violence education undoes. Whereas, in peace education, the focus of