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The Contribution of Cultural Institutions in the Social Reintegration of the Formerly Abducted Young Mothers in Post-Conflict Kitgum-Uganda

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Abstract

The use of children as soldiers has been a feature of armed conflicts worldwide. Formerly abducted young mothers (FAYMs) are part of the child soldiers. They are the girls who were abducted and forcefully conscripted by the Ugandan rebel outfit, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda in the two decade years' war (1986-2006) against the government of Uganda. The girls were not only forced to marry and bear children to their abductors, but they were also forced to commit atrocities against their own communities. As they return to their communities are being rejected and discriminated against. Studies have shown that there has been less focus on the role of cultural institution in social reintegration of the formerly abducted young mothers (FAYMs). The focus of this article is on the critical significance and potency of those cultural practices. Using phenomenology research design, guided by interpretivism paradigm, we have relied on individual in-depth interviews from the cultural leaders, the narratives from the formerly abducted young mothers (FAYMs) and key informant interviews from social workers and local leaders to obtain data. Findings reveal that ritual cleansing ceremonies are highly regarded in facilitating social reintegration of the FAYMs. Despite the impact of war on operations of the cultural institution, cultural leaders still play a vital role in mediating between the formerly abducted young mothers and their communities to enable peaceful co-existence and social reintegration. The cultural leaders perform ritual cleansing ceremonies that are considered vital for the formerly abducted young mothers' social reintegration

Key words: Uganda, Formerly abducted young mothers, Acholi cultural institution, social reintegration

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Introduction

From 1990-2018 an estimated 38 countries have used more than 300,000 children under the age of 18 as soldiers in hostilities by armies, rebels, militias, paramilitary and militia groups, the world over (Child Soldiers International, 2019). Almost all girls who are abducted by armed groups are forced into sexual slavery. The children endure physical and psychological abuse while in captivity. This article pays particular attention to the formerly abducted young mothers (FAYMs). While most abducted persons including the girls who had no children from captivity have to think of their own social reintegration, the FAYMs have to grapple with an additional task of protecting and supporting their rejected children conceived/born in captivity (Ochen, 2012).

Kony's rebel soldiers took the character of high handed atrocities such as abductions, rape, mutilations, killing of the Acholi people to inflict terror in population and dissuade them from collaborating with the government (Allen & Vlassenroot, 2010). The LRA had turned against its own people because its people (the Acholi) failed to support them due to their cruelty and the mysticism surrounding the LRA leadership (Amone-p'Olak, 2007). In captivity, as part of 'orientation' many of the children including the formerly abducted young mothers (FAYMs) were forced to kill other children and some adults at the order of rebel commanders. The rebels made almost all child captives to participate in or watch the killing of other children. Therefore, all the horrendous atrocities they committed have posed a change in gaining acceptance in their communities, since they suffer discrimination (Allen et al., 2020)

The captivity experiences the formerly abducted young mothers (FAYMs) underwent have led to psychological distress manifesting itself in form of nightmares and abnormal strange things (Eyerman, 2013) such as hallucinations and the forceful control of the host's voice. It should be noted that these symptoms, are interpreted using Acholi cosmology by the research participants contrary to the formal definitions of what constitutes traumatic stress according to the Western psychological tradition. This is manifested in the works of Honwana (2002) who did her research in Mozambique and pointed out that in many cultures in Africa, reactions to traumatic events such as nightmares and flashbacks are spiritually understood as the spirit of the victim struggling for justice among the living. The offence against the spirit is addressed through cleansing rituals, which are seen to appease the spirit and atone for the wrongdoing. In this way, trauma can be seen collectively and spiritually, and as affecting families and communities, rather than as an individual reaction.

Therefore given that this study is governed by an interpretivism paradigm, we were curious to learn how the formerly abducted young mothers (FAYMs) and other participants interpret their experiences with psychological symptoms associated with war from the perspective of the Acholi world view and how they perceive ritual cleanings as being beneficial in easing those symptoms to facilitate social reintegration. According to Mpyangu (2010) it is important to consider the Acholi world view in order to understand how Acholi communities receive and support the reintegration of the formerly abducted young mothers

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[Acholi traditional beliefs and practices are related to the current process of reintegrating the formerly abducted young mothers]. Additionally, we were interested in learning how Acholi cultural leaders have facilitated FAYMs' ability to coexist peacefully with their families.

In the view of the above, this article was set to answer one broad research question:

1. How has the cultural institution in Kitgum contributed to FAYMs' social reintegration?

The aim of this article is to interrogate the significance of the cultural institution of the Rwodi [chiefs, Rwodi is plural for Rwot) and unveil their contributions, if any, that deal with the social barriers the formerly abducted young mothers (FAYMs) faced in their daily life impacting on their social reintegration.

The central thesis of this article is that the cultural leaders and their roles are vital to the social reintegration of the FAYMs in their communities. Although this is beyond the scope of this article [since this was not an intervention study/Action research] basing on the little findings from the field, we believe that, knowledge of the role of the cultural leaders and what they do to influence on the social reintegration of FAYMs can inform intervention practices for addressing social reintegration challenges.

In Acholi tradition there is belief in the existence of spirits and a complex understanding of their influence on everyday life (Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2010). Spirits are understood as dynamic and human-like entities with needs and desires that must be fulfilled by living humans (Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2012). If these needs are not fulfilled, the spirits (*cen*) will react negatively and cause problems. According to a study done by Akello et al (2006) citing the works of Liu Institute for Global Issues & Gulu District NGO Forum (2005) *cen* is the entrance of an angry spirit into the physical body of a person or persons that seeks appeasement, usually in the form of a sacrifice in case of a wrongful death, compensation and reconciliation between the clan of the offended and an offender. The spirit manifests as *cen*, which will 'haunt' the wrongdoers by entering their mind or body in the form of visions and nightmares that may result in mental illness and sickness until the wrong is made right. *Cen* can also send nightmares and sickness to the rest of the family of the individual involved, so threatens not only the individual, but the family and community. As it will be seen in the interviews below, these spirits (*cen*) according to Acholi beliefs in the context of post return, do torture and haunt the perpetrators until when they are put right. This in their view calls either for prayers or cultural intervention.

There are a number of studies that have shown that support for social reintegration of former combatants and abductees through ritual cleansings for instance have eased depression symptoms and helped to promote reconciliation of the former abductees with their communities and led to harmony

Statement of the Problem

Upon returning to their communities, despite some of them going through reintegration programs, the formerly abducted young mothers (FAYMs) continue to face stigma and rejection, and still struggle to socially reintegrate into their communities (Allen et al., 2020). They are judged as perpetrators due to atrocities they committed against their own people in the 2 decades LRA war (1986-2006). They are viewed as sexually impure due violation of community norms through forced sex and forced motherhood by the rebels against their culture (Allen, 2020).

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A number of traditional cleansing rituals have been carried out by the cultural institution in Northern Uganda among the formerly abducted young mothers. This article is set to find out the overall contribution of cultural leaders in FAYMs social reintegration as well as how cleansing rituals have worked to relieve symptoms of depression and enable social reintegration of the FAYMs.

Philosophical Perspective that Guided the Research

The theoretical and philosophical lens that shaped the inquiry in this article is drawn from interpretivism paradigm (understanding the complex world of lived experience of the participants-how they feel, perceive and experience their reality), in which the research participants' points of views were paramount. They are experts in their own experiences. We as interpretivism researchers, work to privilege the voices of research participants, and so the focus was to understand their social word and not in any way to influence the findings.

Methodology and Methods

Qualitative study was deemed to be the most suitable to address the primary research question of how the cultural institution in Kitgum contributed to FAYMs' social reintegration. As we have already mentioned, this research adopted an interpretivism stance from a philosophical standpoint and adopts a phenomenological methodology.

We utilized narrative inquiries and in-depth interviewing in obtaining data from the participants. The narratives of the FAYMs helped us to obtain a holistic understanding of the lived experiences (Creswell, 2007) in captivity and in the communities they have returned to. Key informant interviewing was used to collect data from social workers. Key informants are participants experts, they have particular knowledge and have understanding of the social reintegration programs available to support the FAYMs. In-depth interviews with the cultural leaders were useful to make us understand the contribution of cultural institution in the social reintegration of the FAYMs.

Selection of Study Participants

The study population included the formerly abducted young mothers, cultural leaders and social workers i.e. former workers of NGOs and current workers of reintegration organizations. Twenty three (23) FAYMs were selected using snowballing method which is based on the uncertainty about the sample population [This article is part of the bigger study, PhD research and therefore, for instance not all the voices of the 23 FAYMs and other participants are reflected in this article.]. With some of the FAMYs having returned and settled unregistered it is hard to locate them without support from those who know them. Local leaders provide a crucial link between the formerly abducted young mothers and the larger community because local leadership provides avenues around the acceptance of the FAYMs (Corbin, 2008). Using purposive sampling, 5 cultural leaders were selected. Four (4) social workers were also purposively selected as key informants. These key informants were envisaged to provide in-depth and detailed information about social reintegration of the FAYMs because of their personal skills, or position within Kitgum community, having worked on the FAYMs, they had the potential to provide information with deeper insight into what is going on around FAYMs.

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Data Analysis

This study borrowed from grounded theory methodology, an approach that allows theories to emerge from raw data inductively (Charmaz 2006, Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data was therefore analyzed inductively using line by line method, without entirely depending on pre-conceived themes embedded on my research questions. Therefore the inductive coding enabled new ideas to be generated so that the theories we had before could be expanded basing on the new insights from the data. The transcribed data was therefore analyzed by coding the responses. We attached codes/labels to text passages. The aspects of text interpretation (codes), following the research questions was put into categories. Categories were codes that spoke the same language. The categories formed the basis for themes. Thematic content analysis was performed on all the narratives interviews from the FAYMs, in-depth interviews from the community and the key informant interviews from the local leaders, staff of reception centers and cultural leaders.

Ethical Considerations

This study was informed at all stages by the guiding ethical principle to ‘do no harm.’ We took care of the informed consent by informing respondents the goal of this study. The respondents’ privacy was highly secured through use of anonymous names in the study. The research was cleared at all levels including University Research Ethics Committee (REC), and subsequently by the National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). The Chief Administrative Officer of Kitgum District wrote to sub county chiefs of Labong Amida, Kitgum Town Council, Mucwini and Kitgum Matidi about our presence in their sub counties. Given the sensitivity of the study, we developed detailed procedures for mitigation measures to cater for psychological treatment for the participants that went through emotional breakdown as a result of the interviews. Arrangements with counsellor who had ever worked with reception centers in Kitgum to offer support the FAYMs who were to be re-traumatized in the process of telling their stories were made.

Findings and Discussion

Contribution of Cultural Institution in Social Reintegration of FAYMs- Traditional Cleansing rituals

One of the crucial parts of and prerequisite for social reintegration is reconciliation with families and communities. Reconciliation means the rebuilding of positive relationships following destructive conflict (Wessels, 2006) and to restore such positive relationships, local healing methods and rituals have to be supported. The results and discussion below covers the traditional cleansing rituals and the role of cultural leaders in FAYMs social reintegration. In order for us to understand the workings of the traditional cleansing rituals in this research we draw attention to the indigenous system of governance under which this practice operates. The indigenous system is based on the Acholi worldview and social structure; showing how their traditional beliefs and practices are related to the current process of reintegrating the formerly abducted young mothers. Understanding of the Acholi tradition and belief systems is partly about spiritual interaction. The interaction between the world of the dead and the living are a key to understanding of the ritual ceremonies in post conflict Northern Uganda (Kiconco,2015). In Acholi tradition there is belief in the existence of spirits and a complex understanding of their influence on everyday life (Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2010).

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Nyono ton Gweno (Stepping on an Egg)

According to Acholi tradition when someone has been away for so long it is assumed that where he or she has gone s/he has had bad encounters and therefore she or he is required to go through the traditional cleansing process named *Nyono ton gweno* [stepping on an egg]. It is a ritual which is performed on a member of the family who has been absent for an extended period of time, and sometimes in cases where one was presumed dead (Ochen, 2014). *Nyono tongweno* is done at the entrance of the homestead to purify such a person before he or she reunites with the rest of the community. The ritual promotes forgiveness (Baines, 2007). The egg symbolizes purity and therefore marking a new beginning in the life of such an individual (Mpyangu et al., 2014). Interviews with the cultural leaders showed that after their return from captivity the FAYMs were supposed to go through tradition ritual cleansing process before they were welcomed home. According to one of the Rwodi (cultural leader), ritual cleansings are necessary for the FAYMs basing on what they went through in captivity. Thus;

...from what these people (FAYMs) have gone through, there are some things that still disturb them, and some spirits still disturb them. For instance I was interacting with one, who said that when they were in the bush they cut off the thigh of a human being, then it was smoked dry. She was told that it was to chase away fear from her and she was supposed to be carrying it like her gun and move with it. So such people require to go through traditional cleansing because in their minds such things are fixed and such things do not disappear fast. I am not afraid to say that these people (FAYMs) if you follow them slowly they can still tell you the problems they have. From the experience I have, such things have not disappeared completely but in their minds they are still disturbed because of what they have gone through in captivity... (Rwot 1, 2019, Kitgum)

Indeed interview with many of the FAYMs show that, since they were exposed and committed a lot of atrocities, the spirit of the dead still haunt them. The cultural leaders on that basis justify as to why the FAYMs have to go through cleansing process as the interview excerpt indicate.

Mpyangu (2010) argues that from the Acholi culture and tradition, it is believed that since a number of FAYMs have also participated or witnessed atrocities against their own communities those people were not accorded dissent burial then it means the spirits of the dead are hovering and may cause harm to the FAYM who was in captivity as well as the entire family. In the last segment of the interview excerpt the Rwodi is saying he believes that ‘the FAYM could reveal more about what is disturbing her’. In another interview Rwot 2 remarked,

...these young women were fighting on side of the rebels, though they were forced by the rebels but what you should know is if someone has just returned from the bush they are very conscious and I do not think they were comfortable being followed up and opening up about what exactly happened in captivity....(Rwot 2, 2019, Kitgum)

From the above interviews with Rwot we argue that the cleansing process not only cleanse them of their sins but it also offers healing. In another interview one of the Rwodi

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explained the process of ritual cleansing. He cautioned that the cleansing is not done anyhow by anybody. It is strictly performed on someone who has been away from home for a long time and the person is believed to have gone through troubles and challenges. It is done to welcome the person home and bless him or her. It also protects the person from dangerous things the person went through

As Acholi society is traditionally clan-based and collective, the whole clan may experience negative consequences for individual violations of the moral code (Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2012). With my interaction with cultural leaders in the interviews, their views tried to suggest that an atrocity committed by a FAYM or any other formerly abducted person may have repercussions in the entire clan. This is the reason that cultural interventions are required.

In an interview with one of the former social workers, traditional cleansing ceremonies were given a special importance in Acholi community to the extent that reintegration organizations liaised with community members in ensuring that the ceremonies took place. One of the social workers, working with the rehabilitation center remarked,

...we would coordinate with the community leaders especially the cultural leaders in the clans of the person we were integrating as well as the LCs. We have a talk with the family members, follow ups on those who had bad dreams and get terrified to start up fighting. Certain rituals such as cultural rituals were practiced. We involved elders of the community so that the situation would calm. Others requested for prayer from religious leaders... (Social Worker 1, 2018 Kitgum)

In a related study that took place in Mozambique, Honwana (2006) similar practices as in excerpt above, carried out by local communities to promote healing, most especially traditional healing practices that partly have contributed to the reconciliation of formerly abducted women with their communities. The appeal of a more communally locally orientated process is claimed to lie in its potential to repair and restore communal relationships via familiar, locally grounded processes that all community members can associate with (Latigo, 2008)

In Northern Uganda just like in Angola and El Salvador (Verhey, 2001), Mozambique and Uganda (McKay & Mazurana, 2004) and Sierra Leone (Lindsay, 2006) traditional cleansings have been especially important in facilitating healing for girls who have suffered sexual exploitation, abuse, or other forms of violence, including forced services as wives even though they have not participated in direct combat. For the case of this study, from participants' voices, traditional cleansing is also meant to chase away the evil spirits from the victims who did not have and combat experience during captivity. It is believed that while they could not have participated directly in killing, but they were witnesses to the killings and also they were victims of torture, sexual exploitation and abuse. Ritual cleansing by stepping on an egg before reaching the home courtyard was envisaged to make this category of FAYM live at peace forever in the community without nightmares.

Here are the words of Arane (Not real name), the FAYM who returned when she was pregnant, in the bush she encountered a number of things including rape, seeing and stepping over rotten dead bodies, among others,

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...yes, they did something, they said because I was not home for a long time... On my return after been taken to Kicwa where I spent time, my aunt organized for me a ceremony where neighbors and elders were invited, they put an egg at the junction leading to home and I had to step on it so as to get cleansed...(Arane, FAYM, 2018, Kitgum)

There are other rituals such as 'Moyo Kum'. This ritual involves cleansing of the body. Each specific crime usually requires a unique reconciliation ceremony (Baines, 2007). Rape, being raped and participating in direct killings calls for Moyo Kum ritual. This ritual is different from Nyono tongweno which is done to everyone who returned. When someone has killed it sometimes becomes more complex and might require the expertise of a traditional healer alongside the council of elders to perform the ritual. It involve sacrificing of livestock. *Moyo Kum* is considered as a key mechanism for reintegration and peace building in northern Uganda (Ochen, 2014)

To quote the words of Angene (not real name) who was forced to kill her father on abduction and had spent 8 years in captivity, she had gone through cleansing ritual. She remarked,

...when I was in the bush, seeing killings and killing became normal for me.... Later on return I was taken to KICWA reception center for counseling where I stayed for a while and returned home with my child born in captivity. At home I went through ritual cleansing process where my relatives had gathered and a clan leader with other relatives slaughtered a goat and they smeared goat's blood on my chest, but before that as I entered the hut they powered water on the roof and it washed me. I can say that from that time have stopped dreaming bad dreams of the people I killed (Angene, FAYM, 2018, Kitgum)

From the excerpt above, Angene explains that she feels that ritual cleansing has been helpful to her because she has stopped dreaming bad dreams of the people she was forced to kill. However even though she has stopped having the nightmares she has another challenge that requires her to get help from the cultural leaders. She is being haunted by the fact that she had killed the dad and her people keep reminding her about it. She said,

The main challenge I face is the reminder by the community members that I killed my father and also missing mother who died....my life is not okay' (Angene, FAYM, 2018, Kitgum)

The excerpt above show that cleansing rituals cannot work in isolation. The FAYMs require to have family support. The family's constant reminder that she kills her dad waters down the efficacy of the rituals that earlier took place.

Previous researches indicates that women who are reported to have committed acts of violence lack a robust social support structure and live under the constant shadow of pain and discomfort that impair their general functioning (Amone-P'Olak et al, 2016). This implies that, Angene, in her situation, rituals would probably work if she had family support. Lack of family and community support hampers the subsequently social reintegration. This ecological function (combination of many actors in supporting the FAYMs) is in tandem with the theory that underpins this research-the community based theory. These processes serve the function

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of repairing the human bonds which were broken by the atrocities that were committed as well as laying the foundation for healing not only the land but also fabric of society (Ogora and Murithi, 2011)

Another FAYM, Annekiste (not real name) explained how she felt that going through ritual cleansing has helped her. While in captivity she had been forced to kill. To quote her words,

...I was rescued by government soldiers and taken to the barracks and also to Kicwa reception center for counseling....When I returned home alcohol was brewed and my elders were calledBefore I entered the house I stepped on an egg and when I entered the house they poured water on me from the roof in a grass thatched house. There was a celebration, they slaughtered a goat [*Moyo kum* ritual], and they sprinkled goat's waste on me.... and I felt better... (Annekiste, FAYM, 2018, Kitgum)

All the above excerpts imply that the role of traditional leaders and the community ceremonies of reconciliation which they mediate are crucial for trust and confidence building and the enhancement of genuine reconciliation. Interview with the participant above revealed that she was welcome to the community through a celebration. The overall aim was to rid the FAYM of evil spirits and make her welcome by the community.

In Acholi community, the clan traditionally takes collective responsibility for amending any violations committed by a family member. We learnt that 'Jok' is an ancestral spirit that enforces the moral code and he is meant to punish transgressions, but ultimately acts as a compassionate force with the clan's best interest in mind. Therefore jok can be good or bad, depending on clan acts. As a result of abominations/atrocities, spirits of the mistreated innocent dead people may develop into "cen", a malevolent type of "jok" translated as "vengeance ghost. It was said that the spirit will haunt the perpetrator. Therefore with traditions of collective responsibility, as it was pointed earlier, "cen" can extend beyond the person who carried out the killing or mistreatment and also affect his or her family members (Liu Institute for Global Issues, 2005).

Cultural leaders and Mediating Conflicts between the FAYMs and their families

Cultural leaders have a duty to mediate conflicts between the FAYMs and their families and neighbors. One of the key conflicts between the FAYMs and their families is the children that they have returned with from captivity. Some of these children especially boys face rejection from their maternal uncles and families of their mothers. Findings from the cultural leaders (Rwodi) have indicated that in case of disputes between the FAYMs and their families, they (Rwodi) are always called upon to mediate between FAYMs and their families in matters of child rejection. One of the cultural leaders (Rwot) had this to say;

These things of children rejection have been happening and they have been bringing those cases to us and we as cultural leaders have sat down with them and talked about these issues... parents reject the children born in captivity. So, when these matters are brought by the FAYMs to our attention, we first analyze the complaint and ask each party whether they accept to be mediated. Once both sides accept, we prepare a council of elders, traditional leaders, and sometimes local leaders such as LCI, and Rwodi Kwer [While Rwodi Kweri often handle conflicts between individuals, Rwodi

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Moo resolve land conflicts between clans. URI & ARLPI, S. (2012). Mitigating Land Based Conflicts in Northern Uganda. Mitigating Land Based Conflicts in Northern Uganda: A Must Guide for Stake Holder Mediation, Sensitization and Reconciliation Processes] are mobilized to mediate the case. We bring these parents together with the leaders I have just mentioned, especially leaders of the clan. We discussed with them until we take them (the children) back..... (Rwot 4, Kitgum, 2019)

The excerpt from the Rwot (Chief) about settling disputes in the community clearly indicates the role of cultural leaders known as Rwodi in Acholiland. They have the constitutional mandate to resolve grassroots level disputes. Their primary function is to guide and foster dialogue among community members.

A Rwot made the following remarks about how they resolve conflicts between FAYMs' and the community behavior,

...so some people finger point at them...and also when they (FAYMs) fight you, they can hold on you. These people were trained to fight and kill and so they can hold on you until people just grab you from them. You see, they (FAYMs) are still aggressive apart from being talked to by some of their local leaders. So the neighbors, what else do they do? They come and talk to us and we intervene.... We call them periodically and talk to them. There is my office, under that tree (pointing towards the direction of the tree), that is where we normally hold the meetings with the community and these young women. They listen to us and they get back to stay humbly...(Rwot 5, Kitgum, 2019)

The interview extracts from the cultural leaders above are describing the impact of captivity experiences in the behavior of the FAYMs, pointing out the skill and approach they use in handling the FAYMs when resolving conflicts. This signifies the crucial role of the cultural institution in mediating between the FAYMs and their neighbors and families in a manner that the intervention would lead to peaceful co-existence among the conflicting parties. The cultural leaders' intervention in most cases is respected by the FAYMs- as one of the Rwodi said 'they listen to us and they get back to stay humbly'. A study that was conducted in Gulu by Komujuni & Buscher (2020) indicates how the cultural institution of the Rwodi is still respected in playing their cultural role in upholding symbols of tradition, culture and morality. The study shows that the Rwodi have continued to play an important role in Acholi society, even during phases of weakening, fragmentation, violent oppression or abolishment (Komujuni & Buscher 2020).

Cultural Mediation: Community Accusations of FAYMs on Aggression and Violence

Findings among the cultural leaders have revealed that they have been intervening on cases that were reported to them by the community members about FAYMs being aggressive and violent. One of the roles of the Rwot is to ensure that the subjects under his jurisdiction are living in harmony. Below are some of the expressions of the Rwot concerning FAYMs aggressions that required cultural leaders interventions,

Community members report that ...some of them are violent...they are violent not only in village, but in any place they stay. A number of them have caused serious injuries to men. They spear men with knives without mercy! Others

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have killed men. Among them there are those who work in the bars..mmmmh... they are there. So when these cases are brought to our attention we call the parties and dialogue about it and parties leave when they are satisfied. Talking to FAYMs require a lot patience. So, you have to sit with them and talk slowly in a low tone, instead of shouting at them.... This is because people who have been in the bush have learnt all skills of killing. They can pick anything like panga, axe or hoe and kill you. So, you should convince her most of the time to make her forget what happened in the bush...(Rwot 3, 2019, Kitgum)

The above interview extract show that social reintegration of the FAYMs require the community to understand the experience they went through and approach them wisely in an attempt to restore the relationships between them and their community to enable them adapt to a new social structure, including the norms, beliefs and laws of a community, new behavior. It should be noted that from the interview above observation is taken that unlike the community that reacts to the FAYMs by hulling insults to them, the Rwodi approach is an understanding one. To adopt to new life, Dahal, (2015), the FAYMs require unlearning of violent rebellion behavior. This unlearning can come from the way people react to them. Community reaction towards FAYMs has only generated new violence and so the Rwot must react differently when they are arbitrating cases. A Rwot made the following remarks about how they resolve conflicts between FAYMs' and the community behavior,

...so some people finger point at them...and also when they (FAYMs) fight you, they can hold on you. These people were trained to fight and kill and so they can hold on you until people just grab you from them. You see, they (FAYMs) are still aggressive apart from being talked to by some of their local leaders. So the neighbors, what else do they do? They come and talk to us and we intervene.... We call them periodically and talk to them. There is my office, under that tree (pointing towards the direction of the tree), that is where we normally hold the meetings with the community and these young women. They listen to us and they get back to stay humbly... (Rwot 1, 2019, Kitgum)

The interview extracts from the cultural leaders above are describing the impact of captivity experiences in the behavior of the FAYMs, pointing out the skill and approach they use in handling the FAYMs when resolving conflicts. This signifies the crucial role of the cultural institution in mediating between the FAYMs and their neighbors and families in a manner that the intervention would lead to peaceful co-existence among the conflicting parties. The cultural leaders' intervention in most cases is respected by the FAYMs- as one of the Rwodi said 'they listen to us and they get back to stay humbly'. A study that was conducted in Gulu by Komujuni & Buscher (2020) indicates how the cultural institution of the Rwodi is still respected in playing their cultural role in upholding symbols of tradition, culture and morality. The study shows that the Rwodi have continued to play an important role in Acholi society, even during phases of weakening, fragmentation, violent oppression or abolishment (Komujuni & Buscher 2020). Later in the subsequent section we will discuss challenges that continue to face the Acholi cultural institution in the post conflict phase, hampering their smooth executing of their duties particularly with regard to resettling FAYMs.

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Cultural Leaders enabling the FAYMs Access Customary Parents' Land

Issues of access to land have been serious to FAYMs in their social reintegration. The FAYMs are denied land by their own families. For a number of FAYMs they seemed to be unaware of the roles and responsibilities of their cultural leaders. One of the responsibilities of the cultural leaders is to enable the FAYM to access her parents land. The Rwot does that as he involves clan leaders. It is pointed out by Atkinson (1989) that Rwot's ruling is a consensus of the clan of elders. One of the Rwodi in explaining the procedure of how the returned FAYM secures her parents' land said:

...many times cases of conflict over land come to us. When the FAYMs return to the community we ask the FAYM who her parents are. Therefore the parent that is alive or clan mate must be there. So we go to that clan mate and ask about the whereabouts of the land for the parent of the FAYM of concern who is back from captivity. We as the cultural leaders have the authority to say that customary land should be given to her, and so we move and give the right of ownership of the land to the FAYMs who has returned home. None of the relatives can take it away from her! That is where she will do her farming. As you know some of these children do not know what belongs to them. They were abducted when they were very young, grew up from the bush. We sit people down and they give back the land of her father to her. That is what we do in line with customary land ownership(Rwot 2, 2019, Kitgum)

Rwot 2 explained further:

You know some uncles especially when you father is dead, they want to sell off the land or sometimes give it to their own sons and do not care about the children of their late brother. For us, we refuse and say that the land belongs to the father of this girl and we return the ownership of land to her. This also applies to the girl who has gotten married...she also has the right of the father's land. She has the right to use customary land. Even if she is at her marital home, we tell her grandparent and they give the land to her where she can do her farming as her own land....(Rwot 2, 2019, Kitgum)

Another Rwot, made the following remarks as he emphasized their role on land distribution

...for us as cultural leaders and I can say as me, I give them land whenever they want to cultivate. I give them garden to farm in because they may not have land in their home (hmm). Our elders used to give land for cultivation to those who do not have land (hmm). It is the same thing we are doing (Rwot 4, 2019, Kitgum)

From the excerpt above the cultural leaders (Rwodi) encapsulates about the process that enables the FAYM to secure customary land from the parents. Contrary to the information that we got from the FAYMs where the FAYMs would be chased from the customary land by their relatives and they would not pursue the matter further, here the Rwot

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brings to light about their role in restoring the hopes for the FAYMs. When Rwot was asked why many FAYMs have failed to access land in their clans. He said,

...if the girls have failed to access customary land of the parents it means Ah!, this means that Rwodi did not do their work well. Otherwise those FAYMs should have been given their parents' land. Rwodi who are supposed to pick her and bring her home and they are supposed to introduce her to her people. Then show her the customary land...that 'you were from here', 'you are the child to this person'. So the customary land must be there. Even if the customary land of the real grandparents is not there, the clan is there, the chairperson in charge of household must be there. They have to give land where she should stay and cultivate! Not to stay in town!. In towns, whose place would one stay in? She would be roaming everywhere, and end up becoming a prostitute. So she should come back home and get a man who is in the village, marry and take care of her very well. There is no need for her to remain in town there!(Rwot 3, 2019, Kitgum)

From the excerpt above, ensuring that people in the community have access to land is the Rwodi's historic role that was embedded in the Acholi cultural duties in brokering people's access to land (Komujuni & Buscher, 2020) . Research has shown that even when the cultural institutions were suspended after Ugandan independence, the chiefs, even though they were deprived of explicit political authority, it did not mean Rwodi were left powerless. According to Hopwood (2017), customary law, for example in land governance, remained an important arena of customary authority. However, from the interviews with some of the FAYMs some could not be allowed access to land at their homes. We believe it was hard for them to follow matters up with the cultural leaders because the cultural institution in Acholi at the moment is going through a number of challenges it has been pointed out by Hopwood (2015) that however degraded the traditional authority structures may have been by a century of external and central impositions and the turmoil of the different post-colonial regimes, the Acholi remain attuned if not to many of their current chiefs and elders, then at least to the cosmology on which their authority was based.

Despite the challenges constraining the cultural institution (Acholi Kwer Kwaro) the Rwodi are still able to offer some of their customary services such as the above-land distribution. It should be noted that access to land by the FAYMs is very crucial because it has implication for their social reintegration and their rejected children.

Obstacles to Cultural leaders' work

One of the major problems that face the Acholi cultural institution today is lack of funds. During the conflict time, the presence of humanitarian organizations in the region enabled the cultural institution to flourish. It was no longer depending on internal sources of funds. The Rwodi would be facilitated by the donor to perform their tasks.

Currently most aid agencies have left Northern Uganda and so in the midst of their structurally impoverished and vulnerable communities, many Rwodi have been left disempowered, lacking the resources to facilitate their work and establish their authority. With their clan members depending on humanitarian assistance, chiefs could no longer receive gifts or food from their 'subjects'. In this post aid, which was also the time when this study was conducted, the Rwodi are trying to secure their position and trying their

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independent sources revenues to perform their tasks, a return to prewar positions when they used to depend on the little that they received from their subjects. One of the Rwodi remarked,

To be transparent, cultural leaders need to be facilitated so that they are able to move around doing community visits and follow ups. For example like in the Rwot office in the sub counties, if they are given say, a motor cycle, where someone can go and make follow-ups, it would be so helpful. (Rwot 1, Kitgum, 2019)

The cultural leaders in Kitgum are faced with the challenge of lack of support and being left out in the reintegration processes. In most cases the FAYMs are taken to their home straight away from the reception centers. Ideally before the FAYM or any returnee is settled at home the ritual process out to take place. This implies that the rituals the Rwodi have been performed are done way after the FAYM has settled and has started experiencing challenges. To quote the words of one of the Rwodi on non-involvement he had this to say,

There has been a challenge of us not being involved. We are expected to help the returnees settle well in the community but in most cases we are not involved in the process. We who work with the cultural institutions have been seeing how these people do their things and we are not happy. We have seen how NGOs have taken the FAYMs back home without involving us, and yet we are the ones who stay with these people in the communities. Now as you see those organizations are not on ground. We should be informed that such and such person is being brought back so that we start making follow-ups. We would make follow ups and ask them (FAYMs) and they would talk out all they have in their heart and mind since they would see that Rwot is the one asking for the information from them. In Acholi culture Rwot is an honored person in the area (Rwot 5, Kitgum, 2018)

Basing on the findings from the Rwot above the cultural institutions (Rwodi) have not been fully involved in the matters that are under their jurisdiction. From the interviews it indicated that they use their own resources to do their work. This was narrated by one of the Rwodi,

There are a lot of challenges we face because we are not paid. For instance in visits, I do use my transport to reach there. That is when I am informed through phone call so our leaders don't give us transport money and when you go to mediate, you have to stay and if you don't eat from your home, you go home and eat from your home late in the night so this is the challenge we face. Maybe if you have settled the parties who had issues and they have gotten satisfied of the solution, they may feel pity and give you some food. (Rwot 5, Kitgum, 2018)

The narration above about how the Rwodi are straining in executing their functions is contrary to how their operations are meant to be. Traditionally they are meant to raise money

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from their subjects but given poverty levels that were exacerbated by post conflict aftermath, most of their subjects are not able to raise gifts for them.

Another challenge that is faced by the Rwodi is that there has not been any form of support from the government or any other agencies. The Museveni regime currently actively promotes the image of Northern Uganda as a 'post-post conflict' zone and emerging field for development and investment (Buscher, Komujuni & Ashaba ,2018). In this post-post conflict arena, the most influential actors in northern Uganda are the state, investment companies, the World Bank. According to Buscher, Komujuni & Ashaba (2018) several of these actors do not seem to have an explicit interest in Rwodi for the delivery of their services and the realization of their legitimacy, as was the case with the donors during the humanitarian phase.

As Komujuni & Buscher (2020) point out that customary chiefs who formerly derived most of their public authority from an explicit connection with international donors (which is really not supposed to be the case, because cultural institutions are meant to be self-reliant) now deliberately reinvest in internal sources of legitimacy with their local communities. However given the devastation of the Acholi community by the war and the economic hardship of the subjects, there is little support given to the cultural institution by the subjects. People in Acholi are preoccupied with rebuilding their war torn lives. Lack of internal financial and material support hampers their work of cultural institutions as it was seen from the interviews. This also explains why there is little interlink between the cultural institutions and reintegration organizations. This was manifest in the interviews where it was revealed that the rwodi have a responsibility in allocating the clan land to the FAYMs and yet some of the FAYMs and reception center staff were not aware of such processes. If there was interlink among these institutions probably the FAYMs' clan land access would be handled amicably and the brothers of the FAYMs would probably not deter them from using the clan land.

Conclusion

This article was about the role of cultural institution and how it contributes to the FAYMs' social reintegration. The primacy is given to their mediating role over land, FAYM-community reconciliation as well as performance of cleansing rituals. The findings indicate that the cleansing rituals have been helpful to some FAYMs in that they have stopped having hallucinations and nightmares. However, cleansing rituals work in tandem with other mechanisms to help FAYMs socially reintegrate in their communities.

Conflicts between the FAYMs and their families and neighbors are the responsibility of cultural leaders to resolve. The children that the FAYMs have brought home from captivity are one of the main sources of contention between them and their families. Some of these children, particularly the boys, experience rejection from their maternal uncles and their mothers' families-due to a different paternal lineage in which they belong, and this is one of the pressing challenge in their mothers' social reintegration.

The study also found out that the FAYMs, access to land has posed severe problems as they attempt to socially reintegrate into society. It was found out that, to some of them, their own family members refuse them to access land for cultivation. Many FAYMs appeared to be ignorant of the responsibilities and roles of their cultural leaders as regards to land distribution. The FAYM's access to her parents' land is one of the cultural leaders' obligations and this is done by the Rwot with the involvement of the clan chiefs.

The study further found out that the Rwodi are utilizing their own agency in the process of reuniting the FAYMs with the community, despite the financial difficulties that are restricting their operations.

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Recommendations

The Acholi community need to support the cultural institution to strengthen its functionality. Since the Rwodi are willing to execute their duties, support is required from the community since people are now recovering from war. Cultural leaders need to be facilitated so they can visit communities and do follow-ups on the FAYMs and other former abductees.

There is need for government support for the Rwodi cultural institution because there is evidence that the institution is revered by the Acholi community especially on its role on land distribution. In the same vein, there is need to strengthen the link between cultural and local government institution as well as the few remaining reintegration organization to ensure that they work in tandem to enhance social reintegration of the FAYMs.

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