Cultural Responses to the Reintegration of Formerly Abducted Girl Soldiers in Northern-Uganda

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This paper explores the contribution of a socio-ecological lens to understand identity in social reintegration of young mothers and their children returned from captivity in the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group in Northern Uganda. Rather than focusing on the reintegration experiences of the girls themselves, this paper takes an inverse lens and examines the processes by which members of girls communities of origin relate to girl mothers and their babies on their return. The analysis focuses on the identity challenges presented by the returned girl and her babies to the community of return, and the transformative tension that this presents for the collective society. Drawing on interviews with women, men, community leaders, Acholi Elders, local authorities and traditional healers, this paper engages in a situated exploration of the meanings of social ritual in post-accord healing and reconciliation, particularly spiritual reconciliation and healing rituals related to rape and sexual violence.

The 21 years of armed conflict in Northern Uganda have been characterised by widespread atrocities perpetrated against the civilian population; forced displacement, massacres, rape, and the abduction of over 66,000 children by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) for use as soldiers (SWAY, 2006; 2008). It is estimated that over 90% of LRA combatants are, or were, abducted children (Amnesty International, 1997), and it is universally acknowledged that the reintegration of these child soldiers is a fundamental aspect of sustainable peace-building. Female formerly-abducted child soldiers, in particular those who have returned with children born in captivity as a result of sexual slavery or forced marriage, have been identified as an extremely vulnerable group with regard to psychosocial reintegration (McKay & Mazurana, 2004) and, as in many post-conflict settings worldwide, are often excluded from Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programmes offered to former combatants (McKay & Mazurana,2004 ;Keairns, 2002; Verhey, 2004; Bennett, 2002). Not surprisingly there is a significant correlation between the abduction or forced recruitment of girls and the subsequent abuse for sexual services within armed groups (Brett, 2002).

Alcinda Honwana (2006) theorises the space occupied by child soldiers as existing between 'child' and 'soldier' an unsanctioned space wherein multiple dialogic identities are negotiated. The contradictions manifested in this apparent oxymoron are grounded in culturally meaningful systems such as the inversion of established birth order and the cultural taboos surrounding the association of children with death and unsanctioned violence. Homi Babha's concept of interstitial spaces

informs this analysis 'In-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood –singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation...' (Babha, 1994 *cited in* Honwana, 2006). Mikhael Bakhtin's insights into the polyphonic or dialogical self become relevant in this context facilitating understanding of negotiated contested identities. Bakhtin's treatise on Dostoevsky and the polyphonic novel (1973) illuminated the existence of multiple voices within the self. Thus the self is conceived not as a fixed and rigid entity but as a process of negotiation and dialogue with multiple voices both externally and internally. Moving beyond the myth of the isolated mind, as exemplified in the cogito and pervasive in the Western psychological thought, this view of the self stimulates interest in post-colonial contexts, contact zones, borderlands and Babha's 'interstitial spaces'. Hermans (2001) draws on the work of Bakhtin and Wiliam James (1890) in his proposal of the decentralisation of both the concept of self and the concept of culture. He combines the polyphonic dialogism present in Bakhtin's work with James' concept of the 'I' position as opposed to 'me', which refers to the 'I' as volitional, agentive and with an element of continuity. The preservation of the centrality of this 'I' position is somewhat questionable in many non-western cultures, where the boundaries between the individual and the communal are much more porous, and particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the boundaries between the spiritual and the temporal may not be said to exist in any meaningful way (see for example Chabal & Daloz, 2000). An incorporation and consideration of the spiritual or metaphysical elements of experience as voices within the dialogical self has been identified in the literature as s point of departure for future research (Roland, 2001.)

Hermans (1992, 2001) conceives self and culture as a multiplicity of positions among which dialogical relationships can be established. The idea of travel is employed as a metaphor for capturing the relationship between cultures; travel decentralizes the notion of culture because cultural action and the construction of identity occur not in the core of a dwelling but in the contact zones between nations, peoples and locales. This idea of the contact zone has been related to post-colonial contexts in an analysis of the dialogical immigrant self of Edward Said (Bhatia and Ram, 1997), which explored the mechanisms by which the dominant discourse of colonial rulers may be internalized creating an oppressive voice within the polyphonic dialogical self. Frantz Fanon's '*Black Skin White Masks'* (1986) formulates the colonial encounter as a central and defining moment in the construction of identity. He states that the violence of the colonial encounter was unprecedented; and concieves of colonialism a method not only of appropriating of a land and territory but as taking possession of culture and history themselves and thus taking possession of the means and resources of identity. The colonization of a land, its people, its culture, is also, in a sense a 'colonising of the mind' to use Ngugi wa Thiongo's phrase (wa Thiongo, 1986.) Post-colonial criticism bears witness to these 'unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world' (Babha, 1994). In contemporary psychological practice there is a 'continuation of colonial patterns of injustice' (Wessels, 1992), in that the indigenous systems of knowledge and practice

are marginalized and belittled. In Sub-Saharan African contexts Western psychological theory and practice may disregard the traditional, communal and spiritual aspects of experience. The fundamental differences between cultures in world-view, cultural norms and ways of being may not be recognized as western methods are blindly transferred to African settings. It is therefore important to examine the appropriateness of direct importation of Western psychological interventions into non-western countries (Dzokoto & Wen Lo, 2005). Wessells & Monteiro (2000) discuss the dangers of this process with regard to psychological programmes involving children affected by armed conflict in Angola whereby inappropriate interventions medicalise problems that are essentially communal and spiritual. In particular a medical discourse of trauma may be harmful in non-western settings as it can serve to disenfranchise local sytems of knowledge and practice. The impact of war on mental health is a matter of some contention within the literature. The almost hegemonic position of the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a response to children in armed conflict has widely been criticised in the psychological literature (Wessells, 1992; Bracken, 1998; Summerfield; 1999; Young, 1995; Harlacher et al., 2006). Local knowledge is marginalized due to the imposition of Western knowledge and practice but also through internal silencing whereby local people downplay their own traditions of knowledge and practice out of a desire to appear scientific and avoid embarrassment (Wessells & Monteiro, 2000).

Mike Wessells and Carlinda Monteiro advocate the integration of traditional spiritual beliefs and practices into psychosocial programming; 'In order to succeed in the Sub- Saharan context work on healing must step beyond Western boundaries and include culturally defined practices' (Wessels & Monteiro,). Through Christian Children's Fund in Angola they have been instrumental in research and practice in this area through the development of programming initiatives to foster traditional healing rituals in post-conflict healing and reconciliation and the reintegration of child soldiers. Alcinda Honwana's research on social pollution in Angola and Mozambique has been central to this work (Honwana, 1998). It is proposed that the idea of the complex, contested identities of child soldiers be expanded to include the spiritual or metaphysical voices that are incorporated within the self in Acholi concepts of identity. This speaks to the communal and social-relational aspects of experience wherein culture may act as a protective factor in the lives of girls. Theorists of ritual from Emile Durkheim through to Arnold Van Gennep (1960) and in more recent times Victor Turner (1967;1969;1982) treat ritual as social action aimed at particular transformations often conceived in cosmic terms. Rituals have complex roles in violence and peace-making; for example the initiation of children into the rebel group in Uganda was marked by spiritual rituals within the LRA (Veale and Stavrou, 2006). For Turner;

'Every type of cultural performance including ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre, and poetry is an explanation of life itself, what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depths of socio-cultural life, is drawn forth – Dilthey uses the term 'Ausdruck' – an expression,from ausdrucken, literally to press

or squeeze out." "Meaning has been squeezed out of an event which... cries out for penetrative or imaginative understanding"

(Turner, 1982 p.13)

Central to the processes of social ritual is Van Gennep's concept of liminality, or the threshhold whereby identities may be suspended or transformed within the ritual space (Van Gennep, 1960). This is particularly salient in rituals of reintegration and reconciliation whereby the identities – singular and communal – of those partaking in the ritual may be renegotiated or contested contributing to an evolving form of social and relational meanings. This is essentially a communal processes involving not just formerly abducted children but interpersonal processes at clan level as people reclaim social relationships and cultural identity. High levels of ideological commitment may be a protective influence on the mental states of former combatants (Kanagaratnam et al 2005;Punamaki, 1996), indicating the centrality of 'social memory' (Summerfield, 1998) in understanding individual and communal experiences during war. Summerfield argues that the experience of armed conflict are construed depending on the social context and on what these events mean to the people involved. This would indicate that communal re-construal of social memory may be an integral resource for healing following experiences of atrocities during war, and a means of reclaiming culture and identity through activity, re-enactment, and performance.

These cleansing rituals have been described in a gender-neutral fashion within the literature and these accounts do not mention the participation of, or possible spiritual consequences for, children of girls associated with armed groups. There has also tended to be a focus on more general cleansing of violence rather than on more specific instances such as cleansing victims of rape. Within the reintegration literature there have been calls for research into the gender aspects of rituals (Denov, 2007; Stavrou, 2003) spiritual issues surrounding children born within armed groups (Honwana, 2006; Jareg, 2005) and the legal and social issues related to these children (Jareg, 2005). This research attempted to address these issues through an exploration of local Acholi systems of healing and reconciliation in the reintegration of formerly abducted girls and their children.

METHODOLOGY

Participants:

Participants were identified through local contacts, and asked if they would be interested in participating in the research. There were fifty participants in total, thirty-nine female and eleven male, all were over eighteen at the time of the interview.

Procedure:

In-depth interviews were employed with cultural informants such as Acholi Elders,

Ajwakas (traditional healers), and the Camp Commandant of an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp. Focus group discussions were held with community girls and women, Acholi Elders, local leaders and Ajwakis. Interviews and focus groups generally lasted 1.5 hours, although there was an amount of variation in this dependant on the wishes of interviewees, for example two interviews with Acholi Elders lasted over three hours. Interview and focus group schedules were constructed with reference to the guidelines outlined by Smith et al. (1995). It was deemed beneficial to use a semi-structured interview schedule, structured along thematic lines, as it allowed participants a great deal of flexibility in exploring and elaborating on divergent themes and ideas.

A local interpreter was present during all interviews, and provided assistance when necessary, the level of interpretation varied across interviews. In cases where participants communicated solely through Luo, interpretation would sometimes take the form of summaries, rather than simultaneous translation which would have interfered with participants train of thought and was deemed overly cumbersome in some contexts. In these cases recordings were later transcribed in detail into English in order to retain the richness of the narratives. The final transcripts are thus in essence a construction based on multiple voices; the interpreter, the participant(s) and myself. I employed two interpreters, one male and one female, both of whom were briefed about the nature of the research before interviews took place, and engaged in role play interviews in order to identify any potential concerns and agree on culturally appropriate translations of key terms.

Ethics:

This project was informed at all stages by the guiding ethical principle to 'do no harm.' All participants volunteered to be involved in the study, and were fully aware of their right to cease their participation at any time, withdraw their data or refuse to answer certain questions. A detailed informed consent process was undergone in Luo (the local language) and verbal consent procedures were in place whereby participants had the option to mark the form once it had been read and explained to them and have the signature witnessed by a third party. Participants were members of a war-affected population and as such present specific ethical concerns, This research was focused on cultural and spiritual responses to girls and their children, and thus did not focus on personal experiences of the conflict or require participants to 'tell their story' which would have been inappropriate and potentially distressing. In cases where individuals offered personal experiences or experiences of others in order to illustrate a point, (as is common in Acholi oral histories and the tradition of the *wangoo*), space was given to do this without intrusive questions or undue focus on the personal. Rather interviews and groups were focused on shared meanings and communal aspects of experience. In addition to this great care was taken to avoid causing stigma by targeting specific groups of victims, as has occurred previous cases of research and NGO programmes, and in particular that no formerly-abducted child soldiers be interviewed in the course of this research.

ANALYSIS

This research is part of a wider project which is also concerned with issues of justice in reintegration, however for the purposes of this paper I will briefly discuss aspects of the following three categories; 'Things Fall Apart', 'The Internal Stranger', 'Reclaiming Identities; social ritual and performance in reintegration'. Grounded Theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006) was employed in the analysis The categories and themes were densely interconnected and interwoven and so certain false boundaries have been employed in the process of analysis.

Things Fall Apart

The title of this category is taken from Chinua Achebe's (1958) novel of the same name, which explores the affects of colonisation on the culture of the Ibo trine of Nigeria. The novel begins with the following quote from Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming'

'Turning and turning in the widening gyre; the falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.'
W.B. Yeats, The Second Coming

This theme attempts to collate the sense of social disruption, displacement and the chaos of war that was prominent throughout the interviews and focus groups, and explores transformations in collective identity as made manifest through complex cultural values, norms and taboos, in particular those surrounding girls and young women.

(i) The core of life;

You see the girl is the core of life. Life is centred on the girl that is why they were treated special. One they bring in wealth, they are the people on which the whole life of the family is centred on the girl. You see much actually happened, as I was telling you these girls were removed sometimes in front of the family... They were taken away to the bush and a lot of things happened there, things that should never be happening.
Okello - Acholi Elder, Gulu

In this extract from an interview with Okello, an Acholi Elder, the archetypal image of 'the virgin or the young girl' is described as central to cultural life and identity. The phrase 'the core of life' may be seen to express the shared meanings implicit in communal identities, which are made manifest throughout the narratives. These meanings are expressed through reference to symbolic actions and customs surrounding courtship, payment of brideprice, taboos surrounding men's access to food, protections in place with regard to victimisation, and crucially, reproduction. This position of the young girl as the future of the clan, giving birth to future generations, situates the symbolic meanings surrounding her identity in an embodied sense. Thus we see how the representations of innocence and purity

afforded to the image of the young girl may be equated with ideas of the purity or viability of the Acholi tribe as a whole. These ideas were illuminated by Otim, an Acholi Elder in Gulu;

"Traditionally an Acholi man would be the last person who would be happy seeing his wife being abused or his daughter being abused. The way the women were raped the way the daughters were raped in the presence of their parents. The men were very very hurt. In fact it is just a reflection, an indication or a confirmation by the perpetrator that the man was useless, because the impossible could happen in his presence. So the man, women should not take it that men didn't suffer, psychologically men suffered worst."

Otim, An Acholi Elder, Gulu

Sexual violence enacted against girls, crucially not solely perpetrated by the LRA but also by the Government of Uganda armed forces (UPDF may be here understood symbolically as an attack on culture. In a sense this attack on the body of a girl may be also understood as an attack on the 'body politic'. Here, the 'Acholi man' is positioned as the embodiment of a 'traditional' cultural identity, an in this context the rape of girls is imbued with meaning as a symbolic act, directed not solely at the girl but at her family and her culture. Ideas of suffering and victimhood are salient here, particularly the idea that certain groups may be seen to have been specifically victimized. Otim stresses the commonality of experiences of war, and a sense of shared suffering, particularly communal and familial suffering following sexual violence. It is important to note here that there is significant disagreement as to the extent to which the rape of girls in the presence of family members has actually happened in Northern Uganda, and this was in fact disputed within this interview. These kinds of war stories, particularly related to young girls or pregnant women (Nordstrom, 1997) exist within many cultures involved in armed conflict and contribute to collective and divergent narratives of terror, suffering and/or resistance.

(ii) The breaking of taboos, abomination and social pollution.

The breaking of taboos or the committing of *kiir* (abomination) affects the sense of balance or social harmony in Acholi cosmologies. Social and spiritual actions are required to regulate this behaviour, in order to restore 'nature', balance or harmony. The sheer scale of the atrocities committed and taboos broken since the beginning of the conflict was almost overwhelming for many respondents, in particular Elders and Ajwakas, who expressed anxiety that these unsanctioned acts were not appropriately dealt with and at the future ramifications of this.

'In our culture women are very special people, because of the war most of these cultural norms that have been associated with women have been destroyed. For instance an Acholi girl would not be taken outside and slept with in the bush. You will not sleep with a girl outside... It is taboo, a very big one. Girls are not exposed to killing, these are the jobs of men. Most of these girls have been subjected to this kind of thing,

they were taken by force, taken to the bush, exposed to this kind of thing, they did killing, they killed people and these are not feminine kinds of things. When the war ends there will be big problems, one they need cleansing – they have been abducted, taken out, slept with, forced to do things that are not feminine and this is going to be a big problem. I think by now you will be beginning to see now even women now some of them becoming mad. This is very rare, very rare to get an Acholi woman or an Acholi girl becoming mad, because they were not exposed to those kinds of things.'

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Okello, Acholi Elder, Gulu

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There exists a strict taboo prohibiting sexual activity occurring outside the confines of the clan compound, the 'wildness' of the bush is exemplified in the free spirits that are present there, and it is thus deemed to be particularly dangerous for girls. The breaking of this taboo and the mass sexual violence perpetrated against girls is thus deeply problematic and, due to the sheer numbers of girls who were affected, becomes a cultural or societal issue rather than solely related to individual girls. Taboos related to violence and death are also enacted surrounding women and children. Gender norms prohibit the participation of women and girls in violence, and thus the witnessing or participation of girls in violence is presented as particularly damaging. This is exemplified in the 'unfeminine' and the perceptions surrounding 'madness' in girls. There is a sense of a breakdown in this, a sense of disintegration of the traditional concept of who an 'Acholi girl' is or should be.

(iii) The chaos of war; Social disruption and displacement, disintegration of familial, clan and community structures.

This theme encompasses the affects of social disruption and displacement on clan structures, collective identity, and the sexual vulnerability of girls.

"the attack comes, you begin running, at the end of it all you find a little girl running and running and ending up nowhere, maybe in the hands of a stranger."

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Focus group with girls in Omuru

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The complexity of perspectives denies the existence of one 'community' voice, rather contested negotiated meanings surround the experiences of girls. This was illustrated powerfully in this group with community girls in Omuru, where girls constructed an involved, sustained account of the sexual vulnerability of adolescent girls during the insurgency. Thus, formerly abducted girls experiences are situated within the wider context of experiences of girls in warzones and social disruption, displacement and separation from family supports are seen as powerful contributory factors in experiences of sexual violence.

" the rebels come and they attack a certain area and you a girl they get a chance of torturing you and your brothers too. You as a girl you have more chance of being given out to the soldiers, by the soldiers to their bosses.
   R. And that one comes as a result, they rate them according to beauty, a beautiful girl the bosses take them, a reasonably beautiful girl the medium class and then an

ugly girl to the escorts, just like that. So even if you are 12 years old, even if you are 15 once you are given to a boss you have no choice because once you are given to a boss that is it, because one thing they give you for is sexual satisfaction, they give you to be a wife for that man. So there is no way that a girl can say, like we negotiate like a husband and a wife."

Focus Group with girls in Omuru

In this narrative we see that rape of girls is understood not as a deliberate attack on culture, rather it is understood or referred to within the sphere of sexual needs and marriage, through the rating of girls based on physical attractiveness, and being 'given' to a boss as a 'wife.' A sense of an abnormal or subverted meaning of the institution of marriage is evoked, within which the girl 'cannot negotiate like a husband and wife' and thus has no agency or control over her body, sexual activity or reproduction. From this perspective the act of rape is abhorrent, not because of the harm done to the culture or any inferred meanings related to intentions or design in inflicting that harm, but because to give a girl as a prize of war denies her agency and humanity.

The Internal Stranger

Werbner (1989) discusses how the arrival and integration of strangers is accompanied by shifts in discourse; distinguishing, as Fortes (1975) had done previously, between external and internal strangers. Heike Behrend proposes that this concept of the 'internal stranger' is central to understanding Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit movement, the precursor to the LRA, in that Acholi soldiers returning home after the military coup which ended Obote II in 1986, in a sense were believed to have brought the evil that they experienced during this regime back with them into the community (Behrend, 1999). Alice's movement was necessitated by these shared meanings and anxieties. I propose that the concept of the internal stranger is useful in understanding aspects of reintegration during the current conflict. This theme explores collective meanings surrounding children's lived experiences during the war and the tension this creates within their communities of return.

Ideas of the *unknown* are related to systems of knowledge surrounding spirit possession, in particular related to *cen* - the spirits of the dead - which may affect the person who killed them or people who come into contact with them, and are believed to 'graft on', fuse with or enter the person. Spiritual or possession issues also surround the breaking of taboos surrounding rape, resulting in a curse or posession by a spiritual entity which could result in the inability to reproduce. These metaphysical meanings are central to the concept of 'Stigma' as contact with affected persons, particularly those affected by *cen* may lead to harm - this particularly becomes salient with regard to marriage.

You see when they return, one thing they need to do is question these girls, find out the kind of different spirits they have been exposed to. We have river spirits, mountain spirits, tree spirits and all sorts of spirits. For an Acholi girl to be exposed to these kinds

of things, especially the sexual that is really the worst thing an Acholi girl can be exposed to, the worst thing of all. Once that has been done to an Acholi girl the girl is not likely to bear a child.

Okello: Acholi Elder.

Sek, the Camp Commandant of an Internally Displaced Persons Camp in Kitgum also described this process and explained that ritual cleansing is thus necessary in order to restore the girl's ability to reproduce;

'She is now possessed by this spirit and in most cases when the drum is being beaten she will begin dancing…At times she cannot speak, she can stay even three days without eating. It is then that the parents will go to the ajwaka.

Sek: Camp Commandant of and IDP camp.

This curse, an echo or remnant of the rape, manifests itself through spiritual possession of the girl. The physical power of the spirit over the girl is demonstrated in control over behaviour, such as dancing, eating and also control over reproduction, thus there is a strong embodied sense of this metaphysical experience. The girl may be considered to enact little agency, as the powerful spirit other enters the self and creates a dominant presence within the self. Thus communal ritual cleansing is sought enlisting the help of a cultural expert, the Ajwaka.

Reclaiming Identities; social ritual and performance in reintegration

This theme explores the complex and varied mechanisms by which communities engage in processes of social ritual related to reconciliation, justice and healing. The ritual is a fascinating site for the negotiations of identity, through successful engagement in social ritual, identity, shame and guilt may be redistributed and transformed. Thus there exists within the ritual space a site for the *reclamation* of an identity and role within the community which is then made manifest – this identity is public, named, legitimised, and validated through social ritual. There is a strong sense within these accounts of ritual of the spirit as a shared enemy and the need for the community to come together to save the girl, to expel the danger to the clan. This shared activity is focused on the well-being of the girl, a sense of *communitas* (Turner, 1982) is evoked within the ritual as those involved co-operate on the shared goal of reclaiming the girl by defeating the entity which has possessed her.
The following extracts from an interview with Aber, an Ajwaka in Kitgum, presents a short account of a ritual following the rape of a girl while within the LRA, it is presented here to briefly illustrate some of the elements incorporated in healing rituals.

'the bush there where that girl has been raped there are also some bad spirits there which can graft on to her in the process of the rape. That's why they do those things to chase those bad spirits away. So that chicken which they move four times around the girl it is to move the bad spirit which is within that girl. So that bad spirit will go into

that chicken'…
'That blood is a blessing that that girl should also get a kid, that blood
wash away those bad spirits, those bad heart, everythings so that girl will be
clean, that heart will be clean, she will go on and produce'.…
'The chicken, they will give it to the father of the girl, who will throw the pieces
towards where the sun sets, the sun sets…then the mother will take the girl back
home.' …
'The mother will give her to drink the herbs, the remaining one to be put through the
hair and smeared on the body.'…
'Before the ceremony they will first counsel the girl, so that the girl will change after
the ceremony, that torture will also disappear because they will counsel her before and
during the ceremony. 'now we have cleansed you, there is no bad, you don't have any
bad luck now, you need not to worry anymore because you will go ahead and marry
and you are going to produce, so you will remove that worry from your mind.'
I. And so after that/
A./the girl will feel fine.

The ritual described in this interview involves the sacrifice of an animal at the site where the rape took place or, if the place is unknown, at the road the girl was taken when being abducted from her family. The ritual elements employed are rich with meaning, the death struggle of the chicken as expressing the violence that was enacted upon the girl. Dilthey's (1912; 1954) sense of *ansdrucken* is recalled here as the violence is *pressed out,* or performed and thus purged. Two elders, one male one female, act as ritual performers and are named here as the father and mother of the girl, thus illustrating how kinship structures of the community are reflected in the ritual space. It is the father figure who removes the spirit by casting it towards the setting sun, this strong physical image ties the ritual process to the natural world and symbolizes a break with the past. The mother figure brings the girl back home to her own mother who treats her with herbs, putting them through her hair and on her body, thus the physical embodied sense of these ritual elements is palpable. Van Gennep's (1960) concept of liminality (the threshhold) may be useful in this context to theorise the process by which the girl enters the ritual, participates in symbolic activity in an expert-novice interaction, and following the ritual has been absolved, or cleansed of the embodied metaphysical affects of the rape. Thus her identity, and that of her child, is *transformed* within the community, in that respondents stated that there are no longer issues of shame or stigma associated with either the girl or her child. As Alice, an Ajwaka in Gulu, explained 'This will cleanse all the bad things that are on the mother and on the child.'

DISCUSSION

The reintegration of girl soldiers and their children is a complex issue that demands sustained international attention and research. Psychosocial programming aimed at addressing the diverse needs of this population would benefit from the integration of local systems of knowledge and practice. Within Acholi communities there exist dynamic, evolving local mechanisms, which are central to processes of healing and

reconciliation. Through ritual a community may engage in collective actions of resistance to violence and respond to social and psycho-spiritual needs. There exists a vast system of local knowledge related to healing the 'social wounds of war' (Honwana, 1998) and, in tandem with income generation, education and training, these resources should be drawn upon and supported in reintegration processes of those to whom they are meaningful.

The spiritual and cosmological aspects of the conflict in Northern Uganda are generally neglected within academic and policy based research and these issues are deemed to be essential to successful post-accord peace building (Piwang-Jalobo, 2005). The peace agreement negotiated in Juba in Southern Sudan is as yet unsigned by Joseph Kony, leader of the LRA, although it is predicted that it will be signed and implemented within a short timescale. Under section three of this agreement 'Reconciliation and Accountability' it is agreed that local 'traditional' rituals will be utilised in tandem with a Truth Commission or Special Court, setting the stage for a unique hybrid justice and reconciliation process, incorporating spiritual and cultural dimensions, in Northern Uganda. This offers considerable opportunities for facilitating the participation of girls and their children in meaningful processes of justice and reconciliation The challenge is to understand and to utilize different approaches to healing in ways that complement each other, and to afford some space and dignity to local practices and rituals. It is necessary to recognize the complexity of Acholi society which is constantly changing and evolving, Neither glorifying local practices as the only cure, nor devaluing and dismissing them, as is more common due to the harmful legacy of colonialism and the 'heart of darkness' theme prevalent in euro-centric writing, are practical responses to girls, their children and communities who seek assistance in their suffering. Indeed, we need to devote more attention to local beliefs and practices surrounding conflict resolution and healing among populations involved in the Northern Uganda conflict, this is vital not only during formal post-accord reconciliation processes but will be even more relevant within the longer processes of reintegration, resettlement and re-establishment of sustainable livelihoods over the years to come.

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