

*Forging Forgiveness: Collective Efforts Amidst War in Northern Uganda**

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This paper is a case study analysis of the sociological phenomena of forgiveness occurring in an ongoing two-decade war in northern Uganda. Building on a long-term relationship with the region and utilizing the methods of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a qualitative questionnaire, I identify two especially important social mechanisms that correlate with the prevalence of forgiveness discourse amongst the Acholi people of northern Uganda: (1) a communal sense of war fatigue and (2) a sense of Acholi collective identity, which the religious and cultural leaders have emphasized to promote a pervasive public dialogue of forgiveness. While recognizing that forgiveness in northern Uganda is contested, findings from my study point to how forgiveness opens a space for some Acholi to assert power and express agency in their lives after years of being portrayed largely as victims. Furthermore, forgiveness also offers the opportunity for some Acholi to experience interpersonal empowerment by maintaining a locus of control through meaning-making.

In 2004, Jan Egeland, the then-United Nations chief humanitarian officer, stated that, northern Uganda “remains the biggest neglected humanitarian emergency in the world” (Associated Press 2004). Indeed, northern Uganda was rife with suffering from the abomination of war. This was especially so for the Acholi people, who had been longest and most deeply affected by the war. Yet, alongside the extreme difficulties resulting from two decades of violent conflict in Acholi was a powerful discourse about—and an apparent process of—forgiveness. At a peace-building advocacy workshop I attended that same year, I watched my fellow Acholi participants physically embrace and murmur words of forgiveness to a former Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) rebel commander, who had fought in the bush for years and had likely played a hand in the deaths of hundreds of people (Gulu town, July 2004). A few weeks later in a conversation over a cold drink, I listened to three middle-aged male Acholi clergy—one who had lost his father to the LRA, another who had forty-one of his students abducted one evening—advocate for reconciliation and forgiveness options while denouncing retributive justice (Kitgum, August 2004). At first, I was simply curious about this seemingly peculiar juxtaposition. But after months of dialogue and qualitative research, my query

became more focused as I began to understand the complexity of the process of forgiveness, the multiple variables that may propel or obstruct it, and the various individuals and groups who might either benefit or lose out from such a process.

Scholars have for years probed questions related to the viability of forgiveness in numerous post-conflict contexts such as South Africa, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, and Bosnia (Appleby 2000; Bole, Christiansen, and Hennemeyer 2004; Digeser 1998; Gobodo-Madikizela 2003; Minow 1998; Schimmel 2002). Rather than return to a typical debate on the merits and limitations of forgiveness as opposed to retributive justice initiatives, this paper will focus on the Acholi case for ways in which it suggests possible sociological correlates associated with the phenomenon of forgiveness and possible opportunities for those aggrieved by war to actively define their experience. While several social science studies have explored forgiveness and reconciliation as they relate to issues of justice and accountability in northern Uganda (see, for example, Allen 2006; Baines 2007), little attention has been given to social factors that may correlate with expressions of forgiveness and what its possible impact may be for the populace.

In a classic sociological study, Emile Durkheim examined suicide, an occurrence seemingly psychological in nature, by looking at two social factors—integration and regulation—which influenced suicide rates in various societies (Durkheim 1951). In this paper, I argue that expressions of forgiveness in northern Uganda are similarly critical sociological phenomenon. I identify two especially important social mechanisms that correlate with the prevalence of forgiveness discourse amongst the Acholi of northern Uganda: (1) a communal sense of war fatigue and (2) a sense of Acholi collective identity, which the religious and cultural leaders have emphasized to promote a pervasive public dialogue of forgiveness.

Obviously, the Acholi people are a diverse and heterogenous populace. My fieldwork, though, is based largely on data collected from or through Acholi religious and cultural leaders (including elders). While the perspectives of these individuals are not necessarily representative of the entire Acholi community, the important and respected roles that they play in Acholiland make their narrative of forgiveness one that deserves attention and interrogation. I seek to understand what social factors may be influencing their choices to promote forgiveness after 24 years of war and suffering.

My argument that a communal sense of war fatigue is a possible factor pushing the Acholi to embrace forgiveness is premised on the fact that over two decades of violence in Acholi communities has inflicted pain and suffering that has been felt throughout the society. Within this context, the pursuit of forgiveness by Acholi leaders has offered a way to focus on the future

rather than on the painful past. Furthermore, the options pursued to date by the Ugandan military, diplomatic negotiation, and the intervention of the International Criminal Court (ICC) have failed to end the war, further entrenching a harrowing sense of war fatigue. In the trajectory of war in northern Uganda, forgiveness has been a promising means for shifting communities from war to peace.

In addition to a communal sense of war fatigue, a strong Acholi collective identity and a leadership in Acholi that has emphasized that identity has also been an important factor relating to efforts for forgiveness. Numerous cultural practices, social norms, and institutions—including the Church, Acholi elders and cultural leaders, and various peace-building communities—that help shape Acholi collective identity have legitimized forgiveness as a viable option. Furthermore, long marginalized and even stigmatized by a dominant political discourse promoted by the current Ugandan government, the Acholi people risk further incrimination and stigmatization if they promote criminal prosecution or other forms of retributive justice.

I begin by describing my methods and briefly outlining major theoretical understandings of forgiveness. I follow this by an overview of the relevant contextual factors in northern Uganda and a discussion of the divergent forms of forgiveness there. After thorough investigation of the two phenomenon that I correlate with the prevalence of forgiveness discourse in northern Uganda—communal war fatigue and a sense of Acholi collective identity—I turn to the impact of forgiveness in Acholiland and argue that it has opened space for some people in that war-ravaged area to express agency and maintain a locus of control through a processes of meaning-making.

The Study

The methods used to carry out this case study were participant observation; semi-structured interviews; a qualitative questionnaire; and extensive content analysis of secondary materials related to northern Uganda, including published texts and policy papers made available through the civil society networks active in northern Uganda. I conducted the primary fieldwork in 2004 with several follow-up visits through 2008, spending a cumulative total of approximately eight months in Uganda working with various civil society organizations and academic institutions in the capacities of researcher, trainer, and program officer.

Through my roles in these organizations and personal networking, I have met formally and informally with members of the human rights and peace-building communities and have participated in two intensive week-long workshops exploring issues surrounding peace-building and transitional justice. Utilizing the snowball method, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews

with Acholi traditional chiefs, civil society leaders, and academics in northern Uganda. I supplemented these with public presentations about transitional justice in northern Uganda and Boston.

In conjunction with a local peace-building advocacy NGO in northern Uganda,¹ I designed a qualitative questionnaire to assess the attitudes and perceptions of Acholi people regarding the LRA members that were returning in 2004 and their corresponding impact on the conflict and the peace process. Members of the NGO edited and carried out the questionnaire in several internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, schools, and civil society organizations in northern Uganda. Respondents for the questionnaire were chosen by NGO staff and peace committee members to reflect a variety of opinions: civil society leaders, students, camp residents, and elders, which spanned the spectrum on age, gender, religious background, and educational level.² In total, 26 surveys were collected.³ The data from the interviews and questionnaire were analyzed using grounded theory, an approach that allows the researcher to organize themes as they emerge organically rather than enter the study with particular thematic lines of inquiry (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Forgiveness in Comparison

In the political sphere, forgiveness is often considered when communities grapple with what to do after episodes of mass violence. The notion of political forgiveness essentially refers to a dynamic process of forgiveness occurring not only between individuals but between groups (Bole, Christiansen, and Hennemeyer 2004). Other transitional justice processes often considered along with political forgiveness are reconciliation and retributive justice, with the former very akin to, and the latter a sharp contrast to, forgiveness.

I define the notion of forgiveness as a social process in which victim(s) release resentment toward perpetrator(s) yet acknowledge the wrong done to him/her. The outcome of the process of forgiveness is understood to be a release of negative feelings and a shift in orientation by the victim from the traumatic past toward a more forward-focused approach. McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen (2000) explain, “when people forgive, their response toward (or in other words, what they think of, feel about, want to do to, or actually do to) people who have offended or injured them become more positive and less negative” (p. 9). While a bilateral process of an offered apology and acceptance does constitute forgiveness (Galtung 2001), forgiveness can also be the unilateral release of resentment by the victim without any remorse or apology demonstrated by the perpetrator (Govier 2002).

There are several defining aspects of forgiveness; the first is how it emphasizes relationship between people. Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) elucidates, “forgiveness, while not disregarding the act, begins not with it but

with the person. Forgiveness recognizes the deed, its impact having been and continuing to be lived by the victim, but transcends it" (p. 95). The perpetrator(s) is perceived as fallible, distinct from his/her acts, and capable of improvement (Govier 2002:59). And while forgiveness is about relationship, it does not necessarily require sustained contact between former adversaries.

Forgiveness also is a process in which victims can make meaning out of traumatic experiences. Matthieu Ricard reflects, "for the victim, forgiveness is a way of transforming his own grief, resentment, or hatred into good" (Wiesenthal 1998:236). When people experience atrocities such as rape, abduction, looting, torture, or murder, profound pain and suffering ensues. Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) remarks that in some cases, "victims themselves sometimes seem to be looking for an opportunity to forgive, because they see this as something that can bring an end to a life of hatred, which ties them so inextricably to the perpetrator" (p. 97). In such cases, forgiveness offers an opportunity to make meaning out of otherwise wholly negative experience.

Finally, many of the world's faith traditions hold forgiveness in high esteem as Gopin (2002) explains, "patience with human failing...infinite compassion, and forgiveness, are seen as basic characteristics of God in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an" (p. 117). Yet, espousing a particular religious faith is not necessary in order to engage forgiveness; in fact, it is this religious dimension that can prevent people from exploring the strategic utility of forgiveness (Bole, Christiansen, and Hennemeyer 2004:31).

Reconciliation, aligned with forgiveness in many ways, is a social process that strives to build relationships between antagonists (McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen 2000). At a point in which concerns of the past and the future meet, the four critical elements of reconciliation—truth, mercy, justice, and peace—converge (Lederach 1997:27–35). Comparatively, reconciliation requires that both victim(s) and perpetrator(s) be equally engaged. It illuminates the important distinction that "forgiveness can be unilateral, while reconciliation is always mutual" (Appleby 2000:197). Reconciliation is often conceived as a broader process of which forgiveness is a component or "the end of a process that forgiveness begins" (Shriver 1995:8–9). It is often exemplified in the associated processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa.

Retributive justice, as another option for communities to consider after mass violence, is a process that is centered on legal accountability for the specific wrongful deed(s) that were committed. Furthermore, retributive justice often separates the act from the person and puts attention toward punishment for the behavior with little effort toward relationship-building or healing for the victims and perpetrators involved. In international politics, retributive

justice manifests itself in criminal trials such as the ICC or country-specific tribunals such as the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia.

In Table 1, I provide a summary of the comparison of these three processes, which many communities consider after episodes of mass violence and trauma.⁴

Violence and Intervention: Life in Acholiland

Since 1986, war has prevailed in northern Uganda. The main actors have been the current government of Uganda and its army, the Uganda People's

Table 1
Reconciliation, Forgiveness, and Retributive Justice

Process	Reconciliation	Forgiveness	Retributive justice
Central focus	Person-centered	Person-centered	Behavior-centered
Direction of process	Bilateral	Unilateral or bilateral	Unilateral
Influence of religious tradition	Religious or secular	Religious or secular, principles based in Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist traditions	Secular
Outcome	Permanent restoration of relationship	Release of negative feelings, no sustained contact required	Legal trials, punishment of perpetrator
Meaning-making	Victims and perpetrators can utilize process to make meaning out of traumatic experiences	Victims direct process and can utilize it to make meaning out of traumatic experiences	Largely guided by the law and the judges and lawyers involved
Party(ies) participating	Individuals or groups	Individuals or groups	Individuals

Defense Forces (UPDF) (formerly the National Resistance Army (NRA)), and the LRA. Over the years, numerous other parties have been brought into conflict including the government of Sudan, the Southern People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), and now the governments and armies of South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic (CAR), as well as numerous civilian militias, international aid agencies and donors, and the Ugandan, Sudanese, Congolese, and CAR civilian populations (Finnstrom 2008).

With roots in the British colonial legacy dividing the north and south of the country, the conflict in northern Uganda emerged as the NRA entered northern Uganda after President Yoweri Museveni took power in Kampala after a five-year "bush war" (Atkinson 2009). Expecting a popular Acholi insurgency, the NRA "launched a counterinsurgency without the insurgency" in Acholiland (Branch 2007a:146). As NRA abuses against civilians and former soldiers continued, insurgent predecessors of the LRA began fighting the NRA (Atkinson 2009). In the late eighties, the insurgency came under the leadership of Joseph Kony and his forces which eventually took the LRA name.

Over the years, the LRA has lost popular support and has violently turned against civilian populations as a form of punishment for their betrayal and as a way to propagate its power (Human Rights Focus 2002). They have abducted thousands of people and terrorized the civilian population through tactics of torture, looting, and murder. Meanwhile the Ugandan army fighting the insurgency has been widely and vehemently accused of abuse by the Acholi (Human Rights Watch 2005).

The exploitative history of colonialism, a Ugandan government policy of forced civilian encampment in Acholiland, and a saturating international community presence have stripped civilians of agency and livelihoods, resulting in a starkly undignified experience for millions living in the subregion of Acholiland.⁵ The grave humanitarian situation in northern Uganda has been further complicated by the ICC and its decision to issue its first public arrest warrants for the top LRA leadership.⁶

Contested Contours of Forgiveness in Acholiland

Amidst the dire humanitarian situation and in opposition to those supporting international criminal justice efforts, some Acholi have sought to embrace expressions of forgiveness through the promotion of the Amnesty Law, through the cultural rituals of *nyono tonggweno* and *mato oput*, and in their own words. However, the embodiment of forgiveness within Acholi society is not universal; and the degree to which it is practiced and desired is contested. This section will outline how forgiveness has manifested in Acholi society and address some of the questions regarding its pervasiveness.

Interestingly, manifestations of forgiveness in northern Uganda have largely been observed as a process occurring solely between former members of the LRA, the perpetrators, and the affected Acholi population, the victims.⁷ Thus, forgiveness in northern Uganda is largely an intra group phenomenon, as both perpetrators and victims have experienced intense violence. As Afako (2002) explains, “the majority of Acholi recognize that most combatants in the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) were forcibly abducted and have themselves been victims” (p. 64).

Politically, forgiveness is noted in the Amnesty Act, which provides amnesty and pardon to those involved in political insurgencies throughout the country.⁸ The content of the act itself was initiated and eventually cultivated into law from the concerns and determined advocacy performed by many Ugandan citizens. Following the failure of the 1994 peace talks, many civilians in northern Uganda mobilized in a grassroots fashion, vehemently calling for a peaceful resolution to the war and an “enactment of a comprehensive amnesty” (Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative 2002).⁹ After tireless work, “the insistence of the people won the day,” and the government accepted the proposals to enact a comprehensive amnesty law (Acholi Religious Leaders 2002:7). While the existence of the act infers some involvement by the government of Uganda, the institution of the law was largely possible because of the persistent cry of Ugandan activists, particularly the Acholi (Afako 2002; Allen 2006). When an earlier version of the Amnesty Act was introduced in 1998, Acholi leaders responded by “reject[ing] the partial proposals and strongly advocat[ing] the adoption of a general amnesty,” believing that any threats of prosecution could thwart peace processes (Afako 2002:66). In recent years, the existence of the Amnesty Act has allowed for many prominent leaders of the LRA to integrate, in some form, back into Ugandan society. Whether authentic forgiveness is expressed through the act or whether it is merely a strategic tool for ending violence, the strong civil society involvement that led to its realization has caused many in northern Uganda to regard the Amnesty Act with pride.

In the cultural arena, forgiveness is upheld through Acholi traditional beliefs and rituals; in particular several cultural ceremonies, which differ from one another significantly but each embody a noteworthy spirit of healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness.¹⁰ Finnstrom explains, “compensation and reconciliation rather than revenge or blood vengeance is the institutionalized Acholi way of handling disputes, homicides and unnatural deaths” (Finnstrom 2008:220). One of these ceremonies is called the *nyono tonggweno* (stepping on the egg), an event that involves a symbolic cleansing for people who have been away from the tribe for several months or more and have been contaminated by outside pressures, acts, and influences. On August 13, 2004,

I attended such a ceremony in Layibi, a few kilometers outside of Gulu town, and made the following observations:

The soft bellow of the cow-skin topped drums resonated from the road as the colorfully clad crowd slowly emerged from their seats under the blue plastic UNHCR tarps decoratively strung over the wooden benches. The mass of individuals, comprised of men and women of all ages and a myriad of skipping barefoot children, slowly gathered along the roadside in the bushy grasses, anxiously peering over each others' shoulders to witness the cleansing ritual about to take place for the newest group of returnees from the LRA. With anticipation, the music began to crescendo, accompanied by voices and colorful dancing. Nervously shifting their noticeably thin legs and solemn faces, the returnees, mostly youth between the ages of twelve and twenty-five, formed a narrow queue off to the side. As the music climaxed, the first individual in line, a dark-skinned adolescent boy fourteen years of age, walked briskly with intent and determination, directing the sole of his left foot for the top of the white raw egg that awaited its breaking. Suddenly, the shell crumbled and the thick, yellow yolk burst forth, seeping in between the boy's toes and over the symbolically placed branches. Smiles spread across the faces of spectators as the line of returning youth moved forward and each individual stepped on the raw egg. Naturally laid from a hen and with no mouth to symbolize innocence, the egg had been placed at the intersection of the *Opobo* branch, slippery and soap-like representing cleansing, and the *Layibi* stick, used to open the granary and thus symbolizing nourishment. With the assistance of a few men from the community, young mothers, who had been forcibly impregnated by the LRA commanders, grasped their children's feet to ensure that they too each touched the yolk of the broken egg and received the cleansing. Immediately beyond the symbolically placed egg and branches, stood the Acholi chiefs and elders, adorned in *kanzu*, the traditional long white robes worn over their Western dress clothes. The returnees approached the proud-looking Paramount Chief who greeted each one of them with a handshake as they nervously steered their eyes towards the ground, avoiding direct eye contact (Layibi, August 2004).

While centrally about reentry and cleansing, *nyono tonggweno* implies a spirit of forgiveness through its expression of warm welcome on behalf of the Acholi community.

At the core of Acholi pride for their cultural insight on forgiveness is the traditional reconciliation ceremony called *mato oput*. It is the final step in a complex process of reconciliation, which is preceded by a long process of mediation between the clans of those involved, the offender and the offended. Responsibility must be assumed for the committed act as well as a capacity to pay compensation (Harlacher et al. 2006:78–91). After these requirements are met, representatives from each community perform several rituals including mock fighting, sharing food, and simultaneous drinking of a bitter root extract from the same bowl (Harlacher et al. 2006:78–91). While some will contest the viability of *mato oput* to support reconciliation in the current war (Baines 2005), the contemporary discourse surrounding *mato oput* symbolizes an important Acholi ethic of forgiveness and reconciliation. Harlacher et al. (2006) explains, "It is essential to consider that there *are* strong values of forgiveness and reconciliation in the Acholi culture and for many Acholi this

spirit of forgiveness and beginning anew is associated with the term and ritual of *mato oput*" (p. 90).

Finally, forgiveness in northern Uganda today is also apparent through the words of the Acholi people, particularly those connected to the religious and cultural institutions. At the aforementioned *nyono tonggweno* ceremony I attended, Rwot (Chief) David Onen Ocana II, the Paramount Chief of Acholi, related in Acholi, "For us, war is not the way to resolve any problems." He proclaimed that the Acholi people were an exemplar of forgiveness and he challenged the community to demonstrate to the ICC how they model how forgiveness is performed (Layibi, August 2004). Similarly, a civil society leader explained to me during an informal conversation that the ICC needed to learn about "forgiveness and reconciliation" from the people in Acholiland. He went on to say that the "eye for an eye" form of justice that the ICC was putting forth was not appropriate in Acholiland, "where it is widely perceived here that this is primitive" (Gulu town, August 2004). Beyond the local leadership, forgiveness discourse can also be heard by some ordinary civilians. One student informant shared, "I feel these former LRA commanders and members [wives and children] should be forgiven whether it was their own plans to join the LRA or not their own making" (Gulu, August 2004).

Although forgiveness remains a difficult process to measure, the creation and implementation of the Amnesty Law, the Acholi cultural rituals, and words emanating from the Acholi indicate that it is being expressed, at least to some degree. To what extent and for what reasons forgiveness is expressed in Acholi society is, however, disputed. Allen (2006) questions NGOs, activists, and the media that have "presented as a kind of 'received wisdom' that the Acholi people have a special capacity to forgive" (p. 129). He posits that while forgiveness is espoused publically, in private, many Acholi express more ambivalence; some state a desire for punishment of former LRA members.

In general, studies on perspectives of forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice in northern Uganda have had divergent findings. Pham et al. (2005)¹¹ posits that of those interviewed, 66 percent desire punishment for the LRA yet 58 percent do not want lower-rank LRA members to be held accountable, and 48 percent believe that cultural ceremonies would be useful in dealing with the LRA (Pham et al. 2005). Baines (2005)¹² found that 81 percent of formally abducted persons who understood the meaning behind traditional rituals experienced a positive change after the ceremony (Baines 2005). *Making Peace Our Own* (2007)¹³ emphasized the pluralistic views of people living in northern Uganda, arguing that "forgiveness is far from an inherent or primordial aspect of society but rather a deliberate, often reluctant, choice" (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2007:30).

Finally, Beyond Juba's *Tradition in Transition* (2009)¹⁴ emphasizes contemporary grassroots support for traditional transitional justice practices; also asserting that "the notion of forgiveness as a means of ending cycles of violence and achieving normal social relations remains perhaps the most widely appreciated aspect of traditional justice" (p. 29).

Amidst these contending assertions about the viability of cultural ceremonies and forgiveness and reconciliation in Acholi, most agree that those in Acholi society who most vehemently espouse forgiveness are the cultural leaders, Acholi elders, and religious leaders. In the tradition of cultural sociology, I am less concerned with the accuracy and authenticity of their claims of forgiveness and more so with "how and under what conditions claims are made, and with what results" (Alexander et al. 2004:9). Thus, my question of inquiry remains—why do the Acholi, markedly the cultural and religious leaders, advocate for forgiveness? With retributive justice also an option, why is forgiveness so prominent in the discourse about how to deal with the tragedies of this war?

Before I proceed with my argument, I must acknowledge that the Acholi leaders who champion forgiveness may possibly do so for the ways it personally benefits them. The majority of these leaders are older adult men. In the duration of this two-decade war, Acholi men have lost power in society as they've been stripped of their livelihoods, humanitarian interventions have emphasized programs that benefit women, and violence against their families can be interpreted as an assault on their masculinity and capacity to protect. Indeed, it is plausible that Acholi leaders may readily promote forgiveness for the ways it allows them to maintain power and placate women in Acholi society (Baines 2007). Even the TRC in South Africa, often modeled as an embodiment of forgiveness, was critiqued for misrepresenting and even silencing women's experiences of violence (Madlala-Routledge 1997).

Yet while forgiveness, like other social processes, can be pursued for multiple reasons, including self-promotion, my own personal encounters with many Acholi leaders leads me to believe that maintaining their own power is not the integral factor to why they promote forgiveness. I posit that war fatigue and a strong collective identity are critical to Acholi leaders' embracement of forgiveness and now turn to an examination of each of these factors.

Communal War Fatigue

The war in northern Uganda is the longest running war in Africa today, with over 100,000 deaths in its 24-year tenure (Resolve Uganda 2009).¹⁵ In 2003–04, almost 50,000 children walked several miles each evening to seek safety in city shelters and hospitals rather than face the insecurity of possible

attack by the LRA (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2004). Cumulatively over the years, approximately 66,000 children have been forcibly abducted into the LRA to fight as soldiers or serve as wives in forced marriages (Survey of War Affected Youth 2006). And at the peak of the violence, two million people were forcibly displaced into IDP camps, the largest concentration in the three Acholi districts of Pader, Gulu, and Kitgum where over 90 percent of the population were displaced and living in the squalid camps (Harlacher et al. 2006:1). These grim statistics all translate into harsh lived realities of the burden of war upon the civilian population. A vehement plea for peace is particularly noteworthy, as one recent report concluded that the Acholi demand was "peace first, justice later" (Refugee Law Project 2005). It is this utter exhaustion from war, which has, perhaps, pushed many to turn to the process of forgiveness as a viable way forward.

Another factor contributing to the sense of communal war fatigue and thus a tendency toward forgiveness is that other methods employed for both peace-building and justice have largely failed to produce consequential results for the Acholi. The military option pursued by the Ugandan government has allocated millions of dollars and manpower hours toward operations in the northern region, in southern Sudan, in the DRC, and in the CAR, yet there have been few sizeable achievements over the years (CSOPNU 2006). In fact, the military operations in northern Uganda themselves have generally been characterized as weak and ineffective in protecting the civilian population, entrenching a relationship between the civilians and Ugandan military marked by severe mistrust (Atkinson 2009). On numerous occasions, Ugandan army offenses have only resulted in a backlash of civilian atrocities.

Diplomatic negotiations pursued to end the war in northern Uganda have also had limited successes in furthering the causes of peace or justice. Historically, failure of the negotiations has been attributed to a perceived lack of political will and coordination on behalf of the government and the LRA, an unwillingness to release power, and the impact of the Terrorism Act after September 11, 2001 (International Crisis Group 2004; O'Kadameri 2002). The most recent iteration of negotiations that occurred in Juba, southern Sudan were suspended in 2008 when Joseph Kony refused to sign the final agreement, subsequent LRA attacks subsumed in southern Sudan and northeastern Congo, and the UPDF made plans for a military operation into Congo to destroy the LRA (Atkinson 2009). The Juba negotiations were the most promising in over a decade, producing the "longest and most thorough silencing of the guns since the war began" (Atkinson 2009:45). Yet, without a final signed agreement and both the UPDF and the LRA at large in Congo, Sudan, and Central African Republic, peace is still "relative, tentative, and fragile" (Atkinson 2009:45).

Finally, efforts at criminal prosecution pursued through the ICC have not yielded any tangible outcomes for the Acholi to date. As people have grown wearier over the years, many have grown less tolerant of the associated costs and resources required for the retributive justice-centered initiatives. In Uganda, one of the thirty lowest ranking countries worldwide on an index of human development, widespread poverty may explain some of the emphasis on forgiveness and deflection of retributive justice initiatives (Human Development Reports 2008). Indeed, a focus on the apprehension of three men—to imprison them in The Hague, where they'd enjoy privileges such as Internet access and an indoor gym among other amenities—is not an attractive option for many Acholi, who live with extremely modest means after decades of war (Nyakairu 2007). One 56-year-old mother whose daughter was abducted in northern Uganda in 1996 and never returned explained, “We have lost too much and restitution is just impossible, nobody can compensate us, this is why I am for unconditional forgiveness to the rebels because only forgiveness can restore what we have lost. For us, parents of abducted children, justice as punishment is not a priority. I don't believe in putting out fire with petrol” (Acholi Religious Leaders 2004:37). Similarly, two women in their mid-twenties who each spent seven years with the LRA, responded to the question of how justice can be done to the victims of war: “Justice? Just help us to have a better future. We have nothing. We need land, studies, and housing” (Acholi Religious Leaders 2004:10). Thus, those who pursue forgiveness in northern Uganda may not be undermining the value of justice, rather they may be simply seeking it in another form—restorative justice.

I argue that this intense experience of suffering that is pervasive throughout the society coupled with the failure of other methods for peace have resulted in an opportunity for forgiveness in northern Uganda. This opening did not exist at the onset of the war; in fact, it is this strong sense of war fatigue that has emerged after so many years of violence, which has created space for Acholi to choose forgiveness. While the Amnesty Act and Acholi cultural rituals have been around for much, if not all, of the duration of the war, it is the contemporary annunciation and discourse around them that leads me to identify communal war fatigue as a possible correlate with forgiveness. With time, forgiveness of former LRA members has become one strategy to help bring peace and acquiesce the Acholi's search for urgent consolation and release of negativity. Indeed, not all Acholi are prepared to truly forgive, but espousing a process of forgiveness has sometimes been useful for moving forward and focusing on peace efforts after the unfathomable suffering of war.

The experience of war fatigue by the Acholi does not lead to a desire for criminal prosecution largely because that process is perceived as a time-consuming, technical initiative that transplants control of the process away

from the Acholi toward outsiders. After 24 years of war, the plea for peace is robust and urgent and criminal prosecution appears incapable to respond to the appeal. Retributive justice, particularly through the ICC, is guided by international law that feels largely irrelevant to many of the average Acholi person's experience. While reconciliation, a bi-lateral process, may be the desired long-term outcome, forgiveness, is a first step that many seek now.

Strong Acholi Collective Identity

As the previous section outlined, after over two decades, almost every member of Acholi society living in northern Uganda has been vulnerable to the harsh realities of war. The social ramifications of night commuting, child abductions, and, in particular, forced displacement have penetrated throughout society. Dolan (2005) argues that this existence is one of "social torture" in which the "principal victims are the population within the 'war zone,' and whose ultimate function is the subordinate inclusion of the population in northern Uganda" (p. 16). The coping strategies utilized to handle such forms of "social torture" have largely been communal experiences and have helped to shape contemporary Acholi identity. This is best illuminated through a lens of cultural trauma developed by Alexander et al. (2004), which posits that

trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors 'decide' to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go (p. 10).

Alexander et al. (2004) further explains that "collective agents of the trauma process," incorporate the collective experience of trauma from war and the associated coping mechanisms into a collective identity (p. 11). In the case of the Acholi, the traumatic experiences from the war are not something that must only be dealt with in the inner hallows of one's own psyche; rather, group forms of forgiveness, such as those embodied in the Acholi cultural rituals, permit people to embrace those struggles in a less isolating manner. Alexander et al. further elucidates, "by allowing members of wider publics to participate in the pain of others, cultural traumas broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy and they provide powerful avenues for the new forms of social incorporation" (Alexander et al. 2004:24). Cultural traumas create the space for victims to "identify the existence and source of human suffering"...and "take on board" some responsibility for it" (Alexander et al. 2004:1).

In this construction of cultural trauma in northern Uganda, Acholi religious leaders, cultural leaders, elders, and prominent civil society members from the peace and human rights sectors act as "carrier groups" who frame

and reframe the traumatic experience, creating a “socially mediated attribution” in which responsibility for the trauma is outlined (Alexander et al. 2004:8). In northern Uganda, these successful “carrier groups” prevail because of their social status and their connections to transnational networks. Acholi leaders have depicted the crisis in northern Uganda as one in which the victims, their own Acholi people, are *not* simply sufferers who must wait for the international community to reconstruct their communities and handle issues of accountability and reconciliation. Rather by drawing on a narrative of forgiveness, they are managing the process, emphasizing that the Acholi are *not* solely a band of African victims idly standing by after yet another episode of barbaric hostility carried out by African power-hungry madmen, a narrative which they are all too familiar with being imposed upon them.

The Acholi leaders are partly able to accentuate forgiveness as an integral aspect of the Acholi collective identity through social norms and infrastructure that legitimate the practice of forgiveness. The emphasis on institutions as a tool to further understand salient social forces is underscored by Durkheim, who wrote: “it is society which informs our mind and wills, attuning them to the institutions that express that society” (Durkheim 1982:236–237). Govier expanded on this point, “whether forgiving its enemies is a real option for a group will depend on its culture, teachings, and public deliberations, and on the individuals who come to occupy leadership role within it” (Govier 2002:98). In northern Uganda, the encouragement of forgiveness flourishes largely because of the cultural and religious institutions that facilitate it. As these institutions preach forgiveness, creating norms and infrastructure, a collective opportunity to actually opt for forgiveness is created. Similarly in South Africa, forgiveness and reconciliation were partly able to thrive because of the framework of the TRC which supported it and guided the transitional justice discourse.

Another aspect to how a strong sense of Acholi collective identity prevails is that many of the victims and perpetrators in northern Uganda share an Acholi collective identity, which is an unusual and important feature of this case.¹⁶ Afako (2002) explains the ramification of Acholi victims becoming perpetrators of violence against their own communities through coercion from the LRA:

This generates the realization that anyone could be subjected to the conditions that produced the perpetrators of the crimes experienced in the conflict. Combined with a profound weariness with the war and the suffering it has caused, this creates a moral empathy with the perpetrators and an acknowledgement that the formal justice system is not sufficiently nuanced to make the necessary distinctions between legal and moral guilt. As a result, most Acholi have decided to promote reconciliation, rather than a retributive understanding of justice, to create conditions to end the war and reintegrate the community (p. 64).

This intra group closeness may, indeed, be one of the important factors that allows for the forgiveness discourse to prevail. In many ways, the perpetrators are already perceived as kin, who have also been wronged and coerced to participate with the LRA.

Forgiveness then presents an alternative mechanism for accountability in which the Acholi do not incriminate members of their own community; an opportunity that is not afforded in a process of criminal prosecution. Within a collective identity community that has been marginalized in broader society, members may be quite hesitant to incriminate a subgroup of the community. In the African American community in the United States, this ethos of “when one of us suffers, we all suffer” has proven salient in consideration of African American women’s hesitancy to prosecute African American men who have raped them (Crenshaw 1991; White 1999:86). By disclosing episodes of intraracial rape and implicating African American men, African American women risk further eroding public perceptions of African Americans as well as exposing members of their collective identity group to an unfair criminal justice system (Washington 2001). Thus, a reluctance toward public disclosure of the experience of trauma ensues. This notion of how implicating members of one’s own identity group can lead to suffering of kin and contribute to broader group social stigmatization is resonant with the Acholi’s reluctance to pursue retributive justice for the LRA and their corresponding affinity toward forgiveness of former LRA members. The avoidance of further group stigmatization also helps expound why Acholi leaders encourage the Acholi to forgive the former LRA, rather than insist they be tried by the ICC and be further defamed by an international justice system and the international community at large who hold racist ideologies about African insurgents.

Furthermore, in a related study on violence against women of color in the United States, Kimberle Crenshaw concluded that one strong form of resistance for disempowered groups is to explicitly and positively name their identity, transforming it from a socially imposed name into a an empowering form of self-identification (Crenshaw 1991:1297). In this tradition, the Acholi cultural leadership have occupied and defended their cultural and ethnic identity both within Uganda, where they have been marginalized by the Southerners in the country dating back to colonialism, and within the international community, who have often patronized African war victims who occupy a tribal identity. These leaders have emphasized the Acholi identity in order to promote a dialogue of forgiveness. Within northern Uganda, it is the Acholi—and not the Langi or Teso populations who have also experienced negative consequences due to the war but who do not share a collective identity with the Acholi—who more readily embrace the rhetoric of forgiveness of the LRA.

From this viewpoint, it can be reasoned that the strong sense of collective identity of the Acholi has not led to retributive justice. Such efforts may implicitly or explicitly cede control, whereas forgiveness allows the Acholi to remain in control. Furthermore, in efforts of criminal prosecution, meaning-making is largely driven by esoteric laws that are not created by the victims meanwhile the process risks damaging Acholi collective identity. Similar to the phenomena of communal war fatigue, a strong Acholi collective identity may contribute to a process of reconciliation, but forgiveness is a first critical step. In a climate of war and suffering, this emphasis on forgiveness has had important sociological consequences, which I will illuminate in the next section.

From Victimhood to Empowerment: Pondering Impact

Expressions of political forgiveness in northern Uganda create an opportunity for the Acholi to assert power and control in their lives. Whether forgiveness is engaged by the Acholi leaders or the wider population, this assertion of power by the Acholi has been one way to resist the ICC and those espousing values of retributive justice. Furthermore, it has provided space for the Acholi to reclaim agency after years of largely being perceived as another assemblage of African war victims. A second significant impact, which the phenomena of forgiveness in northern Uganda created space for, has been the empowerment of some Acholi by maintaining a locus of control through the mechanism of meaning-making.

The forgiveness discourse in northern Uganda has become a form of resistance to the ongoing ICC investigations. Many people in the human rights and peace-building communities, who have embraced the narrative of forgiveness, have also responded to the ICC with copious disdain. The complaints of the ICC intervention are numerous and have been well documented before, namely that the intervention is one-sided and ignores the crimes perpetrated by the Ugandan military; that the ICC has not adequately addressed victim protection; that it jeopardizes peace negotiations; that it eviscerates the Ugandan Amnesty Act; and that it legitimates further militarization (Branch 2007a). By utilizing forgiveness as a central tenet to their claims in the process of cultural trauma, these individuals have been able to resist pressure to support the ICC investigations meanwhile also ensuring that their other grievances with the court are voiced. Forgiveness has also offered a way for them to maintain control of rebuilding their communities after two decades of war. The recent CSOPNU (2005) briefing paper expanded on this point:

...ancient Acholi rituals...have the support and confidence of the majority of Acholis....shouldn't communities be allowed to handle the conflicts in their own manner, especially if their manner is most likely to bring peace to the affected community?

Implicit in the discourse is a pervasive attitude throughout Acholiland that outside experts telling locals what to do with former LRA members is neither needed nor desired.

Expressing forgiveness has also been empowering as it is a way for the Acholi to manage a locus of control after the experience of trauma. Meaning-making, in which victim(s) seek to find deeper meaning, and often a positive interpretation, from an experience of trauma, is a process that illuminates how the Acholi, as survivors of trauma, can maintain a locus of control amidst deeply unsettling experiences (Janoff-Bulman 1992). Like the quest narrative which Frank (1995) discusses as an option for people who have experienced serious illness, meaning-making “meet(s) suffering head on... and seek(s) to use it” in the belief that “something is to be gained through the experience” (p. 115). Through the embodiment of forgiveness, the Acholi, and in particular the leaders, confront an experience of trauma from war and seek to create something positive out of a painful experience. This can reassure the population in general, and also serves to legitimate the leadership’s role since the experience of trauma is not interpreted solely as a result of the leaders’ failure to protect.

Furthermore, for some who partake in forgiveness, they can emerge with a transformation emotionally, spiritually, and/or politically in which they experience a strengthening sense of unification. Digeser (1998) explains, “Like adopting an angle of repose, forgiveness is a kind of weapon that victims can use to reassert their worth vis-à-vis their government. To be able to forgive another implies a form of power that can raise those who have been harmed and lower those who have gained something by doing wrong” (p. 716–717). Forgiving a perpetrator can provide a victim with dignity, something many seek after humiliation or wrongdoing. This interpersonal empowerment experienced through forgiveness is one way the Acholi make meaning of their trauma and gain something.

Conclusion: Fostering Forgiveness Beyond Acholiland

This paper has sought to explore why the Acholi, markedly the cultural and religious leaders, advocate for forgiveness. With retributive justice also an option after decades of suffering, why is forgiveness so prominent in the discourse about how to deal with the tragedies of the war in northern Uganda? In the end, I argue that the prominence of communal war fatigue and a well-developed sense of collective identity that Acholi religious, cultural, and political leaders emphasize have both played instrumental roles in encouraging forgiveness in northern Uganda. Furthermore, forgiveness has offered a sense of empowering agency for the Acholi people to resist the globalizing structures of the ICC and to experience interpersonal empowerment by maintaining

a locus of control through meaning-making. But what does this case teach us about possibilities for forgiveness in other locales emerging from years of violence?

First, for forgiveness to be viable, it must be a locally driven process. Since the burden of trauma lies on the victim(s), it is their decision whether or not to embrace forgiveness. Tutu reminds us of this and warns of over romanticizing forgiveness:

people who have been tortured, whose loved one were abducted, killed and buried secretly...can testify to the Commission and say they are ready to forgive the perpetrators. It is happening before our very eyes. But there are others who say that they are not ready to forgive, demonstrating that forgiveness is not facile or cheap. It is a costly business that makes those who are willing to forgive even more extraordinary (Tutu in Wiesenthal 1998:267).

Indeed, forgiveness is an effective and sustainable option only when it is chosen freely by the actors in the conflict and not prescribed by any authority or intervening institution. This is more difficult to achieve than may be expected; even in the case of northern Uganda, some are critical of forgiveness because of the ways it is being largely guided by local cultural and religious leaders.

Secondly, there must be social and cultural infrastructure to support the process of forgiveness. In South Africa, the TRC, the leadership of Nelson Mandela, and the concept of *Ubuntu* played a pivotal role (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003; Murithi 2005). In northern Uganda, the Amnesty Act, the Acholi cultural rituals, and the religious and cultural leaders have provided the infrastructure for a discourse of forgiveness to occur. Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) elucidates, “the question is no longer whether victims can forgive ‘evildoers’ but whether we—our symbols, language, and politics, our legal, media and academic institutions—are creating the conditions that encourage alternatives to revenge” (p. 118).

Finally, some argue that there are significant deficiencies in any approach to transitional justice—forgiveness and reconciliation or criminal prosecution; in fact, “closure is not possible” (Minow 1998:5). Indeed as I touched upon, there are numerous limitations to the practice of forgiveness; namely, an avoidance of interrogating the structural conditions from which perpetrators operate, which if avoided over time, could maintain a status quo that perpetuates violence. These authentic risks of forgiveness will persist, but in some cases, such as in northern Uganda, social mechanisms may converge that encourage forgiveness. While certainly not guaranteed, the possibilities of such a process can be empowering to those affected by violence and its consequent immeasurable suffering.

ENDNOTES

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¹The NGO is a local interfaith initiative, established in 1998 to promote peace in northern Uganda through peace-building programming, research and publications, and national and international advocacy efforts. The organization has a staff of approximately fifteen and an active board of directors comprised of individuals of diverse faith backgrounds.

²In Kitgum district, NGO staff visited four different IDP camps outside of town to hold meetings, both general as well as specific meetings with local leaders and women's groups to gather opinions on the questions presented. As well, NGO staff conducted interviews with local leaders and also sent copies of the questionnaire to four different international and local NGOs involved in humanitarian and conflict-related operations. In Gulu, NGO staff circulated the questionnaire through the established peace communities in the IDP camps and through various civil society and education institutions throughout town.

³Both English and Acholi language versions of the survey were circulated and most meetings and interviews were conducted in Acholi and translated into English afterwards.

⁴While I outline reconciliation as a separate process from forgiveness, the two are closely related in discussions of transitional justice and in the case of northern Uganda. Thus, in the rest of the paper, my argument will juxtapose the process of forgiveness with retributive justice and *not* with reconciliation.

⁵This includes meager sanitation and access to clean water, inadequate primary health care and education, and constrained physical movement resulting in dependence upon humanitarian agencies for sustenance (Human Rights Focus 2002)

⁶The ICC is the world's first permanent international criminal justice mechanism designed to prosecute "the most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole," including "the crime of genocide; crimes against humanity; war crimes; and the crime of aggression" (Rome Statute 2002). In December 2003, the government of Uganda became the first state to voluntarily refer a situation within their own territory to the ICC and by July 2004, the Office of the Prosecutor had commenced investigations in northern Uganda. In 2005, arrest warrants for the top five leaders of the LRA were released, two of whom have since died.

⁷It is critical to acknowledge that 90 percent of the LRA are presumed to have been coerced to participate in the insurrection; thus the Acholi are largely forgiving members of their own community who have been forced to fight with the LRA. It is also imperative to underscore that the LRA is not comprised solely of Acholi people. The LRA has abducted community members from Lango and Teso subregions in Uganda as well as southern Sudan and northeastern Congo.

⁸Within the act, passed in January 2000 by the Parliament of Uganda, amnesty is defined as "a pardon, forgiveness, exemption or discharge from criminal prosecution or any other form of punishment by the state" (African Rights 2001).

⁹This push for full amnesty was also likely encouraged by the then ongoing Uganda-Sudan negotiations in Nairobi in the late 1990s, in which many believed that the LRA and the SPLA would cease receiving government support, thus depleting their means to fight, eventually allowing the "rebels" to come home (Acholi Religious Leaders 2002:7).

¹⁰There are multiple Acholi healing ceremonies that focus on distinct themes of healing, cleansing, and reconciliation after episodes of violence. *Nyono tonggweno*, *Lwoko pik wang*, and *Moyo tipu* are all rituals related to receiving returnees back home. *Tumu kir*, *Mato Oput*, and

Gomo tong focus on conflict resolution. *Moyo piny* and *Ryemo gemo* are rituals for cleansing areas where violence has occurred. *Moyo kom*, *Kwero merok*, and *Ryemo jok* are rituals that focus on individual healing. See Harlacher et al. 2006 for detailed descriptions.

¹¹This population-based survey of attitudes about peace and justice in northern Uganda, conducted by the International Center for Transitional Justice and the Human Rights Center at the University of California Berkeley, relies on data collected from interviews with 2,585 residents of Gulu and Kitgum (Acholi districts), Lira, and Soroti (non-Acholi districts) in April and May 2005. It is not surprising that an inclusion of non-Acholi perspectives yields more interest in punitive justice and less interest in forgiveness.

¹²This research was carried out by the Liu Institute for Global Studies with assistance and support from the Gulu District NGO Forum and Ker Kwaro Acholi. The research was conducted from February–August 2005 in 16 IDP camps in Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader districts. The study was primarily qualitative, although a quantitative survey was administered with formerly abducted persons. Participants included 120 interviews with elders, 506 formerly abducted persons, 2 former LRA commanders, 80 displaced persons, and a variety of religious groups and NGOs.

¹³This qualitative study was carried out by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights during 6 weeks from February to March 2007. It included 1,725 interviews, 69 focus groups, and 39 key informants from Acholiland, Lango, and Teso subregions.

¹⁴This qualitative study carried out by the Beyond Juba project, a transitional justice project of the Faculty of Law, Makerere University, the Refugee Law Project, and the Human Rights & Peace Centre, was conducted in 2–3-week stints throughout 2008 in Acholi, Lango, and Teso regions. A total of 171 interviews and 34 focus groups discussions were recorded.

¹⁵This estimate is perceived as low given that a 2005 World Health Organization report found an excess mortality of 1,000 people/week in Acholiland due to war-related disease and violence (World Health Organization 2005).

¹⁶It must be noted again that neither all victims nor all of the LRA are Acholi; other ethnic identity groups are also represented. Yet, the core participants of the LRA and the epicenter of the war, where there has been the largest number of victims, are largely Acholi.

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