

LECTURE

SPIRITUALITY OF RECONCILIATION: A CASE STUDY OF
MATO OPUT WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE CULTURAL
AND TRADITIONAL JUSTICE SYSTEM OF THE NILOTIC
ACHOLI/CENTRAL LUO PEOPLE OF NORTHERN
UGANDA.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Historical background

Evolution of the culture of non-violence

The Five guiding principles in life

Conflict management

Personal testimony at the gate

Stepping on an egg

Confinement and isolation

Community-based collective responsibility

The process of Mato Oput (Truth-telling, Payment of compensation/reparations, Ritual of sharing food, Ritual of drinking the bitterness of violence and death)

The Benefits/Principles of Mato Oput.

The Impact of Mato Oput

The Rationale of justifiable Revenge

Conclusion

Introduction

Permit me to introduce myself before I begin this very important Lecture on the African Spirituality of *Mato Oput* or Reconciliation.

First, concerning my family name, Ochola. I am the sixth born-child of my parents. In our ancestral lineage, *Ocola* is given to the male-child and *Acola* to the female-child born in the circumstances of death or grief. This means somebody very important in our village died on the very day I was born. That is, I was born at a time when the village community was grief-stricken. But my sudden arrival into this world of sorrow and grief also became a sign of comfort and hope: my birth also became the reason to wipe out their tears and remove their grief. There is therefore a double meaning to the Central Luo name, *Ochola*.

But why Ochola II? One of my ancestors was born in similar circumstances and hence I became Ochola II. I am therefore a child of hope because my arrival into the world of death and grief announced hope beyond the grave. It is a sign of new life at a time of death that points to continuity of our lineage and, therefore, human life.

Second, concerning my ethnic cultural identity. I am an Acholi/Central Luo of Northern Uganda. This means I am part of the wider Luo Nation that spreads from South-western Ethiopia (e.g., the Anyuak), Southern Sudan (e.g. the Acholi and Shilluk, etc.). According to Professor Bethwell Ogot and late Professor Okot p'Bitek following Fr. Crazzolaro, the renowned anthropologist and author of *Lwoo (Luo) Migrations*, the Luo in Ethiopia and Southern Sudan are the *Northern Luo*; the *Central Luo* are found in Northern Uganda and Northeastern DRC as the Acholi, Alur, Chope/Paluo, Ethur/Labwor, Jo-Nam, Langi and Kumam; and the *Southern Luo* constitute the Jo-Padhola in Eastern Uganda, the Jo-Luo of Western Kenya and North-eastern Tanzania. It is the Jo-Luo of Western Kenya who have recently brought the spotlight on the Diasporic Luo Nation scattered in the Nile Basin because of their son, late Barack Obama Sr, father to the first African-American President Barack Obama!

Background

This lecture will trace the genesis of *Mato Oput or Reconciliation* to the founding narratives, myths and stories of migrations, settlements and separations of the Luo Nation from its cradle in

Southern Sudan, along the River Nile, to their present locations, as mentioned above. These stories have been passed on from one generation to another, in particular among the Acholi/Central Luo.

As a story people per excellence, the Luo have preserved many of their poignant experiences, practices and values that mark them out as a distinct nation and community in the Great Lakes and Nile Basin of Africa. Luo excellence in value-based leadership is well documented historically by Fr Crazzolaria; the sublime oratory of many Luo leaders, sacred and secular, echo to this very day; and their commitment to oppose what the Luo perceive is wrong is steadfast sometimes even at the risk of courting death. This particular characteristic of the Luo has often been caricatured by their political opponents, especially in Uganda and Kenya, as the “Luo will always oppose anything for the sake of opposing it”!

I would argue, however, that the above speaks more about the Luo sense of justice and fairness. I wish to submit this is a cardinal principle at the heart of a Luo cultural and traditional justice system. It is this, barely sketched in outline form that provides the backdrop to understanding *Mato Oput* as a cultural reconciliation mechanism worth discussing. How so?

The story of the ‘Spear and the Bead’

The history of migrations and settlements of the Luo people up to Northern Uganda had its shares of traumatic experiences. Lessons and warnings from these have been preserved in a cultural archive of stories, proverbs, riddles and folklore, etc. These have contributed to shaping Luo understanding of leadership, justice, fairness and non-violence. One of the most famous narrative is that of the separation of the two Luo brothers: *Labongo (Nyabongo)* and *Gipir (Nyipir)* over the story of the ‘Spear and the Bead’.

Among the Luo, a spear is a weapon, instrument of authority and a symbol. It is a symbol of power, leadership and heritage. In the past in particular, the ancestral spear, in particular, was also a symbol of respect for the family’s first born as an heir. That is why in the Labongo and Gipir story, there was a ceremony for handing over the ancestral spear to Labongo, the elder son, by his old father, before he went to the ‘place of no return’.

The royal bead, on the other hand, is a symbol of beauty and elegance for the Central Luo of Northern Uganda. This is also true for other Nilotic communities of the Nile Basin related to the Luo. Hence the story of the separation of the two Luo brothers, Labongo and Gipir, over the loss

of the 'Ancestral Spear and the swallowing of the Royal Bead', and the death that ensued in the family, could ultimately be construed as a Luo narrative of the consequences of fundamental disagreements within a tightly knit social group over identity, royalty and leadership.

The story goes like this.

Labongo was the elder son and Gipir the younger. As their father was on the verge of death, he invited his two sons to his bed side. He asked Labongo to swear upon his Luo ancestors, that he would guard and defend the Ancestral Spear with his life if necessary, and when his time came, he would also pass it onto to his own elder son. Labongo took the solemn oath before his dying father that he would do so. Then his father performed the ceremony of passing on the Ancestral Spear and died not too long after.

In the course of Luo migrations from Southern Sudan southwards along the River Nile, Labongo, Gipir and their families settled down along the River Nile, in the present geographical area of Northern Uganda. It was in this new settlement that Gipir lost the Ancestral Spear! This is what happened.

One morning on a misty day, an elephant invaded the garden of cowpeas belonging to Labongo who, unfortunately, was out hunting and was nowhere near home. His wife made an alarm immediately and Gipir, who happened to be at home, came out and rushed into his elder brother Labongo's house and picked one of the nearest spears around. He dashed out and with all his might speared and badly wounded the elephant that started to run away. Unfortunately the spear got stuck on it even as it escaped deep into the forest. It was then that Gipir realized he had picked and used the sacred Ancestral Spear! As the story goes, the wounded elephant went with the Luo Ancestral Spear and died deep into the forest.

In the meantime, Labongo returned home from his hunting expedition in the wild only to hear the story of the elephant that got away with the Ancestral Spear. His eyes became red with anger and demanded Gipir to follow the elephant and bring back the Ancestral Spear. Gipir pleaded with his brother that it was an emergency; and that he was not aware he had picked the Ancestral Spear until the elephant escaped. He begged his brother Labongo to accept another spear in replacement.

But Labongo would have none of it. To him, Gipir could have used any other spear but the Ancestral Spear, however bad the emergency! To Labongo, this was betrayal of the highest

order: it was betrayal of the sacred ancestral lineage bond which he swore to guard even unto death. He could therefore not imagine violating his solemn oath to his own father, and his failure to pass on the ancestral spear to his elder son and heir. Labongo saw his own betrayal of sacred trust and ending of the ancestral lineage! He then ordered Gipir to go after the elephant at once without any delay and warned him never to come back home without the Ancestral Spear.

Feeling guilty for losing the Ancestral Spear, confused and helpless because he thought he did the next best thing in such an emergency, Gipir set out into the wild in search of the Ancestral Spear.

For months nothing was heard of Gipir. Many people back in the Luo settlement thought he may have been eaten up by wild animals in the forest. Nevertheless, Gipir eventually reached the deepest part of the forest where all the elephants died. He was extremely exhausted and his hides and skins sandals were all worn out. His feet were full of sores. He was very sick and needed care immediately.

Fortunately, there lived an old kind woman in the deep of the forest who came to Gipir's help. She nursed him back to health until he felt strong.

With her help also, Gipir was able to recover the Ancestral Spear that had fallen at the spot where the elephant died. Then time came for Gipir to return home. The old kind woman gave him some dry food (*peke*, in Luo), a new pair of sandals, and some of the most beautiful royal beads the Luo people had ever seen! The royal beads greatly excited Gipir who started the journey of many months home.

Early one bright morning, the people in the Luo settlement heard what sounded like Gipir's *bila* (horn). Indeed, it was Gipir returning home, blowing his *bila*. The women and the children ran to greet him to welcome him home. But he went past them as if he had not seen them. Gipir went straight to his brother's compound and shouted: 'Labongo, come out!' He was visibly shaking with anger. As soon as Labongo came out, he called out: 'Here is your spear!' and then stuck the sharp bottom of the Ancestral Spear into the ground right in front of Labongo, and it made the sound, '*ting*'!

Before Labongo could respond and utter a welcome back to his brother, Gipir marched away still burning with anger. He walked straight to his compound found a stool to sit on brooding with his head cusped in both of his hands.

Days and months passed and everybody in the settlement had forgotten the loss of the Ancestral Spear and Gipir's journey of many months in search of it. One late morning Gipir got his hides and skin bag in which he kept the royal beads he got from the kind old woman from the deep forest. He began to thread the beads when his wife and his children, Labongo's wife and her children all came round him admiring the beads. Unfortunately some of the beads fell onto the ground. But alas, one of Labongo's daughters picked and swallowed one of them.

Immediately Gipir took the girl-child and brought her to his elder brother, Labongo, her father. He demanded for his royal bead right there and then. It was now Labong's turn to beg Gipir to accept another royal bead to replace the one swallowed. Gipir said no. How about waiting till the girl passed it out in her stool? Gipir said, "No, I want my royal bead now!" Labongo's pleas were all in vain as Gipir was ready to have his 'pound of flesh'.

Now Labongo was able to recall how he refused to listen to his brother Gipir's pleas. He felt ashamed. He then had his daughter cut open so they could remove Gipir's royal bead from her stomach and gave it back to him. And the girl died.

It was this tragic but avoidable death of Labongo's daughter that eventually led to a migration of separation between the two Luo brothers. They buried an axe (*latong* or *lee* in Luo) at the River Nile in Pakwach as a sign of their separation. Gipir and his family eventually crossed the River Nile to the western side at Pakwach and became ancestor of the present day Alur in Nebbi District and the larger Alur population in Northeastern DRC. Labongo and his family, on the other hand, remained on the eastern side of the River Nile and became ancestor of the Acholi, so the tradition says.

Some lessons and interpretations

Though the two Luo brothers and their families were separated by the River Nile as a barrier between them, however, they were also joined by the same River Nile waters they both shared. And Pakwach, the 'place of the axe' at Puvungu (Pubungu), became an important ritual center subsequently visited by many Luo groups from both west and east of the River Nile. It is an important apex of the *Luo Triangle*, according to Professor Ronald Atkinson of the University of South Carolina, USA, in his study/book of History and Ethnicity of the Acholi.

Atkinson describes the Luo Triangle connecting **Pakwach** in present-day Nebbi District to **Paluo/Chope** in present day Kibanda County of Masindi District to **Patiko** in present day Gulu District, which previously formed one Luo geographical area, as one of the most important triangles of overlapping Luo migrations in the 17th and 18th Centuries.

Pakwach on the River Nile is thus both a sign and symbol: a sign of separation for the two Luo brothers, Labongo and Gipir; but also a symbol of their sharing of life in the *waters of* the River Nile. This gives potency to the Luo saying that ‘*Wan ki ngati dong waribbo ma i kulu*’; which means that *two Luo parties* might have nothing in common except sharing the water from the same river.

In the lived realities of the Luo, therefore, there is no total separation between brothers and sisters because of our communality.

On the surface of the story, it might be concluded that the two brothers, Labongo and Gipir, took the path of revenge, instead of reconciliation and sustainable peace. This would seem to justify the Luo saying that “*alunya loyo lakwong*”, meaning “revenge is more painful than the first crime”. But it may also be from such traumatic experiences in the narratives of the Luo that a culture of non-violence evolved. This in turn may have contributed to a cultural system of restorative justice system in which *Mato Oput* developed and can best be understood.

Evolution of the Culture of Non-violence

From the story of the Spear and the Bead, we see that the polarization between the two brothers eventually led to the tragic but avoidable death of the daughter of Labongo. Out of such traumatic experiences, the Luo people gradually developed a new culture of non-violence, a process of communal truth-telling, forgiveness, atonement and reconciliation and restoration of individual and communal harmony.

These are the essential characteristics of what I describe, however tentatively, as an Acholi/Central Luo cultural and traditional justice system. Its rationale is to transform a situation of conflict, violence and death into peace, justice, healing and restoration.

Although many colonial works of ethnography and anthropology have framed the Luo as “war-like” and “violent”, in reality they are a peaceful and nonviolent people borne out of such traumatic experiences as depicted in the story of the Spear and the Beads. But make no mistake,

the Luo are fierce and resilient warriors when it comes to justified war or revenge. I would therefore say that the Luo developed what I describe as guiding principles in life as follows.

The Five Guiding Principles in life

Because of their lived realities, the Luo developed principles of being proactive to peace and stability: (1) Do not commit the first offence; (2) Have respect for all; (3) Speak the truth at all times; (4) Never lie under any circumstances, including at the risk of death; and (5) Do not steal.

- The first principle is summed up in Luo as “pe iting alli”—dont commit the first offence. This is also a common household saying in among the Central Luo. It is a preventative measure against serious crimes such as murder and crimes against humanity, including impunity.
- The second principle of respect for all is exhibited in the Luo who have very high respect for human life, rights, and dignity for all.
- The third principle is to seek to speak the truth all the time. Consequently, the Luo have been known to be open, frank, truthful, sincere, honest, faithful, transparent, accountable, credible and trustworthy. It is common, for instance, to find a Luo woman or a man freely expressing his or her feelings and or motives without fear or favour.
- The fourth principle of refusing to tell lies under all circumstances even at the point of death can be seen in many a Luo person ready to die or be martyred for what they believe to be the truth.
- The fifth principle of “do not steal” comes from a belief among the Luo of a curse upon an individual and his/her family who is a thief. A thief is an abomination to the community and cannot be allowed to marry or to be married to anybody within the community or neighbourhood. No marriage is allowed into families whose member or members are thieves. To the Luo, theft is a such a stigma that one or one’s family will carry on their back for ever as a curse. It is better to be lazy than a thief; thus, the Luo saying, ‘*Ayaa lamera wac kom loyo kwo do, Ayaa lamera yoo wac kom loyo kwo do*’ meaning “Ayaa my sister laziness is much better than theft; Ayaa my sister laziness is much better than theft”.

Because of the Luo cultural and traditional prohibition of theft, the traditional Luo house had a very simple door called ‘*kikka*’ which was not burglar proof because there were no

burglars in traditional Luo society. Kikka was not meant to keep out violence because traditional Luo society was non-violent. A child had no problem to enter a house since the kikka could easily be pulled either way, right or left. Kikka, therefore, was the symbol of a non-violent and peaceful community.

Conflict management

Over the centuries, the Luo people came to realise that conflict was a normal part of daily life even as today. However, the challenge is how best an individual, or a family or a community, or a society, can manage conflict on daily basis. Therefore the essence of conflict management is not to allow conflict to develop into overt violence. This means that an individual or a family needs to be pro-active for peace and stability on daily basis.

I would say that from experience of the last 20 years, the Central Luo people of Northern Uganda in particular have and continue to experience three major traumatic problems, namely (a) chronic poverty; (b) diseases; and (c) serious crimes against humanity with impunity.

In our experience, poverty has become a major source of violent conflicts; diseases have compounded our poverty while crimes against humanity committed with impunity in Northern Uganda have made us wonder at the seeming conspiracy of silence from the international community.

Despite these ongoing traumatic experiences, the Acholi/Central Luo people of Northern Uganda have reached deep into our cultural archives and sought to bring out our cultural resources, such as Mato Oput, to make sense of the bewildering experiences of suffering in abandonment. For decades, our people in Northern Uganda were forced to live in subhuman conditions in concentration camps called euphemistically as IDP Camps. Thousands and thousands of our children have been abducted, raped and mutilated in full view of an international community that upholds the doctrine of human rights. Our people have died like flies as it is a normal thing.

Despite all these, we have nevertheless all along called for and reached for a non-violent approach for resolving our problems because we are essentially a non-violent people. This is the backdrop to our call for Mato Oput (reconciliation) out of the Acholi/Central Luo cultural and traditional justice system to address our intra-community problems. Our call was and is not a call to mitigate neither crimes against humanity nor crimes committed with impunity. These are better addressed in a political-social-legal context different from the Acholi traditional context.

Mato Oput (Reconciliation)

As I said above, the Acholi/Central Luo cultural and traditional justice system is pro-life and holistic; it is restorative and transformative and is concerned for the care of the restored person and his/her whole community. Mato Oput therefore helps the Central Luo community to become proactive for peace all the time, and the people to always have a bigger picture of their shared and restored future for many generations to come.

Perhaps a contrast with another justice system where responsibility and accountability rests squarely on the individual offender might help here. If capital punishment were deemed appropriate for such offender, he/she is kept in isolation and confinement, as a wrong and dangerous element to the community or society. If it is life imprisonment, the offender would be put out of circulation from the larger society for ever. This is meant to serve justice for the victims and/or survivors of the offence. Presumably, it is also supposed to serve justice for the society at large as some form of deterrence. But have these forms of punishment succeeded to expand justice and reduce crimes?

We, cultural and religious leaders in Northern Uganda, have seen this premise in the argument of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in relation to crimes against humanity committed in Northern Uganda. While we don't condone impunity, we have rejected the form of ICC justice that differentiates between parties that have both committed crimes against humanity. The ICC had done this in Northern Uganda by finding plenty of evidence for the LRA but has claimed lack of evidence for GoU forces, yet both the LRA and GoU have been parties to the conflict.

The difficulty we face concerning the form of justice of the ICC, as the victim-community in Northern Uganda, can be illustrated by a metaphor. Suppose the Government of Uganda were a parent of children trapped in a burning house (Northern Uganda), which was set on fire by an arsonist (the LRA): what justice is there for the children abandoned in the burning house while their "parent" is single-mindedly focused on chasing the "arsonist" (the LRA) for over last 20 years?

And what justice is served when the children's "parent" decides to invite the ICC to join the chase of the arsonist (LRA) three to four years after his 20- or so years' chase?

In contrast, however, the Acholi/Central Luo cultural and traditional justice system would first and foremost advocate for a peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue. In other words, the Acholi cultural justice system would first and foremost focus on helping the children trapped in the burning house in the metaphor above.

Then with the assumption of Mato Oput as a cultural resource of reconciliation out of healing and restorative justice system, a new discourse of a new post-conflict community order in Northern Uganda will be sought. This means as a cultural resource of reconciliation, Mato Oput can be applicable to some of the crimes and forms of violence, such as homicides, committed in Northern Uganda in the last 20 years.

It is however important to stress that even for the traditional Acholi/Central Luo, Mato Oput did not cover all crimes, especially those committed with impunity. For example, gang-rape was unknown among the traditional Acholi/Central Luo. Therefore Mato Oput is not applicable to gang-rape. Though rare, father-daughter incest also has no provision for Mato Oput. Indeed, rape, cannibalism, incest, etc., mostly appear in folklore of the Central Luo attributed to the Ogre (*Obibi*). This may suggest those crimes were beyond the normal realm. One who indulged in them was in the realm of demons; and there was no Mato Oput with *Obibi*!

Ingredients of Mato Oput

- **Personal Testimony at the gate**

The first ingredient of Mato Oput concerns personal testimony of the Offender at the Gate of his her own village or clan. The offender is not allowed to enter into the village with the blood of his or her crime in his/her hands. He/She was expected to stand outside the gate, testify against himself or herself to the people or the community in the village. He first must tell his or her own name, his/her mother's, father's and uncle's name. This means his or her identity must be given unambiguously to all in the village.

Mother, Father and Uncle, are very key in the life of every child in the Luo community. The personal testimony also includes confession of motive for the homicide committed. The offender must also give the name, gender, and clan of the person killed and why he/she was killed.

Once the Offender's Community are convinced by the evidence in the personal testimony at the gate, the elders of the village immediately assume full collective responsibility on behalf of the offender and on behalf of his or her immediate family. The community will hold Offender responsible and accountable for bringing shame and disgrace to his/her family and also to the entire clan. The Central Luo hold murder of a human as an abomination for whatever motive.

- **'Nyono-tonggweno' (Stepping on the egg)**

The ritual of *nyono-tonggweno* is performed by the elders of the village who accept assume community-based collective responsibility on behalf of the offender. The ritual of *nyono-tonggweno* is also carried out at the gate of the village as soon as the personal testimony is given. The personal testimony at the gate is a form of truth telling that will be repeated over and over again as the most sincere and genuine evidence given by the offender him self or her self.

Over and over again, the truth and evidence of the personal testimony will be affirmed by the elders on behalf of the Offender who in effect becomes the first witness against himself or herself without coercion from anybody. The elders will then bring fresh egg at the gate of the village over which the Offender is allowed to step before he is allowed into the village.

Nyono-tonggweno symbolises (1) acceptance of the offender as still a member of the community in spite of the serious crimes committed, and the shame and disgrace brought upon the entire community of the clan; (2) purity and sanctity of human life which has been destroyed by the Offender; and (3) destruction of human life which the community accepts as an act of murder, a violation of the sanctity of human life and an abomination.

However, the offender will not be allowed to go back to his or her family but will be kept in confinement and isolation within the fence of the village for a specific period of time. This solitary life is meant to show the seriousness of the violation and desecration of the sanctity of human life. It is a time of reflection and re-examination for the Offender.

- **Offender in confinement and isolation**

According to Luo culture, whoever commits serious crimes, like, murder, must be kept in isolation and confinement for specific limited period of time before he or she is allowed to reunite with his immediate family and the community at large. While in confinement, there is no interaction or communication with anybody in community or in neighbourhood and with the immediate family

inclusive. But special ritual of cleansing will be performed by the elders of the village and the Offender will be provided with the basic necessities of life, such as drinking water, food, and fire.

Only an innocent young girl-child between the ages of eight to twelve is allowed to minister the basic necessities of life to the Offender without any contact whatsoever with the offender. Food and water are carried in separate containers and put in other containers used by the offender at specific points and times. The Offender is expected to put his or her containers at the appointed point and time before food and water is brought. The Offender is also expected to collect food and water from the same place when the girl-child is long gone. The whole ritual is to emphasize the seriousness of murder, especially with malice aforethought.

- **Community- based collective responsibility**

In times of danger and vulnerability, there is need for the community to stand together in solidarity with one another. In case of serious crimes, like, murder, the community is much obliged to assume community-based collective responsibility on behalf of the offender, and also on behalf of the offender's immediate family. The offender community is also under obligation and responsibility to urgently inform the offended community through a third party community to know about the murder of one of its dear members.

A formal request is then made to the third party community to play the role of arbitrator between the offender community and the offended community. Passing on the specificities of the truth and evidence, as contained in the personal testimony, to the third party community, by the offender community, is a matter of utmost importance and urgency. The third party community in turn passes it on in details, to the offended community, as urgently as possible. The third party community is formally asked, by the offender community, to play the role of arbitration between the offender community and the offended community.

Once the elders of the offended community are fully convinced and satisfied with the information and explanation given, they will ask for a period of grace in order to mourn the untimely death of their dear one. As already stated here above, the personal testimony given reveals the whole truth about the murder. The whole truth revealed becomes the genuine accountability that logically leads to genuine reconciliation towards restored community and sustainable peace. It also leads to harmony and peaceful co-existence.

The Process of Mato Oput

Below is a landscape of the process of Mato Oput.

- First is *truth telling* which is very rigorous, straightforward and transparent. In the Acholi/Central Luo traditional and cultural justice system, there are no denials, lies, or deceptions. Thus, whoever accepts to go through the process of truth-telling must tell the whole truth without fear or favour. The person concerned must be open, honest, sincere, transparent, and truthful, not only to him self or her self, but also to the people, the living-dead and even the unborn.

The offender community voluntarily takes the lead in the process of confrontation of telling the whole truth in the spirit of love, mutual respect, and mutual understanding. For this reason, the offender community boldly makes public acknowledgement or accepts public ownership of responsibility, on behalf of the offender and on behalf of the offender's immediate family. Such public acknowledgement, confessions, repentance, or public expressions of remorse are specifically meant to reveal the whole truth.

The whole truth revealed also helps the offended community to find time to deal with the reality of its loss and pain. Knowing the whole truth also helps the offended community to be completely different from a criminal or offender. The whole truth will also help both communities concerned to own a common memory of their recent past history. The public acknowledgement is meant specifically to deal comprehensively with malicious intent of murder.

The malicious intent to kill is called '*aneko nyong*' in Luo. The public confession, therefore, deals comprehensively with such intent of *aneko nyong*. Through public confession, the offender community becomes vulnerable and guilty for the crimes committed by one of its members. This is the fundamental basis for community-based collective responsibility of the offender community. .

The whole revealed truth functions like the naked electric wire, which is dangerous and deadly to both communities involved in the violent conflict. It can only be handled through the power of mercy and forgiveness by the offended community. This is the beauty of reconciliation when both mercy and forgiveness come out of conviction of the heart of the offended community.

- Second, is *payment of compensation*, reparations or atonement for the victims and survivors. The offender community finds itself in a state of vulnerability and guilt. It must become willing and ready to pay compensation without any question. The payment of compensation is not meant, in any way, to replace the life lost because human value is invaluable. It is simply to demonstrate or show the sincerity and the purity of the heart as graphically as expressed in the public confession.

The focus here is to address the conflict in order to bring the healing of the wounds in the hearts of those deeply affected by the offense. It is not simple compensation simply because human life is irreplaceable by materials. Compensation after truth-telling are mechanisms of conflict transformation.

- Third, is the *ritual of sharing food between the offender community and the offended community*. For the Luo Community, sharing of food with one another is a fundamental fellowship. Sharing of food expresses the love and intimacy the people enjoy through communion and fellowship with one another and with the ‘living-dead’--the ancestors.

Sharing of food is an expression of communion and fellowship with one another, not only in the presence of the ‘living dead’ and even the unborn, but also in the presence of the living God. In situations of conflict sharing of food with those who have murdered a member of your clan, is not allowed at all, under all circumstances.

In a situation of conflict, people no longer experience love, mutual respect, and mutual understanding of one another. The concept of reconciliation becomes almost impossible to talk about it, especially if the offender community refuses to accept full responsibility for the crimes committed.

However, it is important to note that whoever eats your food or drinks your water or enters into your house or gets hold of you because he or she is in danger becomes part and parcel of your life instantly. In the Acholi/Central Luo cultural justice system, sharing of food is a priority.

Sharing of food is a major part of the Mato Oput process which is a reflection of restoration and healing of previously broken human relationships. The healing of the

people with wounds in their hearts will certainly lead to harmony and peaceful coexistence with one other.

Each community involved in the conflict is required to bring a lamb without blemish for the sacrifice. The lambs are made to stand together side by side, each facing the opposite direction. The lamb from the offender community will be pleading for mercy and forgiveness. The other lamb from the offended community will be giving an assurance for mercy and forgiveness. The two lambs are slaughtered by cutting them across in halves from the middle. Each of the community receives the front legs and the head of the sacrificed lambs from the other. The shared meat is cooked by each community in different cooking pots.

The cooked meat is shared between the offender community and the offended community, as a sign of acceptance of each other into new relationship. This communion and fellowship with one another is witnessed by the living-dead and the unborn. It is an occasion where humanity, nature and God come together in solidarity and love with one another through forgiveness and reconciliation.

The blood and the waste matters of the sacrificed lambs are mixed together and used for cleansing the two communities in the conflict. The mixed blood is smeared on the forehead, on the chest, on the back, on both legs, on the back of both hands and both feet of each participant in the ritual. It is purposely used as a symbol of cleansing all the participants in the ritual of drinking the bitterness of violence and death during the ceremony of Mato Oput.

- Fourth is the ritual of drinking the bitter herbs –the Mato Oput--which symbolize drinking all the bitterness of the conflict. Oput is a tree that is commonly found in savannah land of Africa, especially in Acholi sub-region. It is a family tree that grows in small or large groups. The root of one *Oput* tree usually joins together to the root of another Oput tree standing nearby so the two become identical and share life together through their joint roots.

It is the root that joins the two oput trees that is cut off for the ceremony of Mato Oput. The cutting of the joint root causes much pain and suffering to either Oput tree which had been sharing life together through joint root. The cut piece is crushed and mixed with local brew to make the Oput juice which is sour and bitter.

The bitter Oput juice is then poured into a new calabash to be drunk by selected few participants. Each community can either select three or four representatives to represent the entire community in the ritual of drinking the bitterness of violence and death. If they select three each, the first one from each community must always be a woman. If they select four each, the first two from each community must always be women. If three representatives are selected, the first woman representative from each community must always be an aunt.

If four representatives are selected, the two women representatives must always be aunts. Representation in the ceremony of Mato Oput is gender sensitive. Moreover in Luo culture, an aunt holds a special position in a family. Her decision in family matters is always final, especially in major decisions affecting the life of the family.

Thus, her role is indispensable in the ritual of Mato Oput. Without her physical participation in the ceremony of Mato Oput, no meaningful reconciliation can take place at all. The selected participants will be invited to drink the mixed sour juice of the root of oput in pairs. The efficacy of the ritual is to taste the bitterness of violence and death.

The new calabash filled with the oput juice will be placed in the middle of the two communities. Each community sends one participant each this forming a pair at the calabash. Each pair drinks from the same calabash at the same time while the forehead of each participant touches that of the other. The ceremony of drinking the sour and bitter oput juice is the climax of the Mato Oput Process.

The Benefits/Principles of Mato Oput

- It is pro-life and holistic in order to care for the whole human person and his/her community. Thus it has the power to restore human relationships destroyed by violent conflict.
- It is healing because it brings a healing power into the wounds and hearts of those affected by conflict, violence and wars. Healing creates new trust, confidence, and hope for a shared future destiny.

- It is rehabilitating because it helps people to be rehabilitated from the impact of trauma. It provides harmonious, peaceful atmosphere, for healing and rehabilitation of injured communities.
- It is liberating because it sets both the offender and the offended communities free from their guilt, and bitterness and desire for revenge, respectively.
- It is transforming of the lives of both communities affected by conflict, violence and wars thus enabling the Luo community to be open to change for the better.
- It is saving for both the individual and community since the Luo people live a communal life, not an individualistic ally orientated life where responsibility lies with the individual person only.

For this reason, the Luo community will always take community-based collective responsibility in a situation of uncertainty created by violent conflict, on behalf of the offender.

The effect or impact of Mato Oput

By seeking to restore broken human relationships between two communities in conflict, Mato Oput re-creates trust, confidence, and hope for a shared destiny of the two communities. There is a shared justice as both the offender and offended communities are freed from their guilt and bitterness. Thus the desire for revenge on the part of the offended community is mitigated. The transformed communities become agents of peaceful co-existence.

It is, however, important to explain the rationale for justifiable revenge among the Central Luo alongside the discussions of Mato Oput as below.

The Rationale of justifiable Revenge

The Acholi/Central Luo people of Northern Uganda allow revenge if an offender and his/her community does not accept responsibility for a serious crime. In such a case, refusal to accept responsibility is taken as an abuse and a challenge to the bereaved community. It is taken especially as a challenge to the manliness of the offended community. In this case, the offended community will have the “lapir” (justification/just cause) to take revenge against the offender community.

If the offended community does not have immediate “revenge capacity”, it will bid its time for the right time. The Acholi/Central Luo people believe that in this case, “death does not get rotten”: the offended community will wait for the opportune moment.

However, if the offender community comes to its senses in the meantime and acknowledges and accepts full responsibility; the offended community will have no option but to forgive and accept to go through the process of genuine reconciliation.

The Acholi/Central Luo people also believe in the intervention of the world of spirits when justice is denied or delayed. For example, if someone was murdered maliciously by unknown people but nobody comes forward to accept responsibility, the spirit of the dead person will exact revenge not only against the murderer but also against his/her entire community. At the burial of such a murder victim, the Central Luo will implore the dead person to “*wot ki wii*” that is, “walk on your head”, meaning that the deceased victim should become ‘*lacen*’ (a vengeful spirit) against the murderer and his/her entire community.

The *lacen* (vengeful spirit) of one who died because of injustice or due to wilful negligence is very much feared by the Acholi/Central Luo. It is one reason the Central Luo will take great care of babies, children and elders from within and without the community lest any of them die from wilful negligence and become ‘*lacen*’. This is also the reason for the care, respect and love accorded to dead bodies during burials. And the Central Luo bury their dead very close to the doorway in the homestead, not in a burial ground far away from the homestead, as it is done by some Bantu communities in Uganda. The Central Luo dead are buried close to the doorway, in the homestead, because the Central Luo believe that the dead do not go away but stay with the living. Hence they are known as the “living-dead”, according to late Professor Okot p’Bitek.

Concluion: some Hebrew/Christian—Central Luo parallels

Right from naming of new born children, the Central Luo have a striking Christian parallel of naming children with a double meaning, that is, as signifiers of events surrounding birth but at the same time as prayer for the destiny of the child within the narrative of the family, clan and community. Thus, for example, Ochola, Ocan, Otto, Obol, etc., are the names given to the Central Luo child born during the time of grief who also becomes a child of hope.

We may recall the story of Jabez, the child of pain, in 1 Chronicles 4:10 who prayed that he may not cause pain (was that his parents as well as his prayers?). And we are told God answered his prayer and prospered him. Of course the supreme example for us, Christians, is of course the angel's message to Joseph about the name of Jesus: "You shall name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. (Matt 1:21)

Perhaps Mato Oput provides the best parallel to Christian reconciliation. For out of their traumatic experiences during the history of their migrations—a pilgrim people—the Luo people gradually developed a new culture of non-violence and reconciliation. This culture was predicated on forgiveness and mercy which, for us Christians, are gifts of God's grace. In the case of Mato Oput, mercy and forgiveness come out of the conviction of the heart of the offended community. Forgiveness is possible because of power of love that is able to transform a situation of conflict, hate or violence into peace and harmony. Now, God is love, and perfect love casts out fear.

Hence, according to the Acholi/Central Luo cultural justice system in which Mato Oput is intelligible, forgiveness is the power of love that transforms the hither relationship of conflict and fear between offended and offender community. It is restorative and transformative and is ultimately pro-life and holistic. It is biblical and Christian in every respect.

BIOGRAPHY

I am the sixth-born child to the family of Lucima Ameda and Atek Dina Lucima of Pobira Clan, Madi Opei Sub-County, Lamwo County, Kitgum District in the Acholi sub region of Northern Uganda.

I was born on April 19, 1936 as the second child in our ancestral lineage born in the circumstance of death and grief. I was named Ocola II because of my great grandfather born in similar circumstances to mine. Though born in times of death and grief, I was nevertheless a child of hope to my family, lineage and clan.

My childhood was a very happy experience as I grew up in a peaceful environment in our village and its surrounding neighbourhood. Right from childhood, I was taught the principle, "Do not commit the first offence to anybody". This taught me to have respect for the sanctity of human life, human rights and for humanity as a whole.

I wedded Winifred Auma Ocola and we were blessed with seven (7) children: four (4) girls and three (3) boys, namely: Joyce Adong Ocola; Florence Acola Ocola; Aciro Irene Ocola; Aber Alice Ocola; and Luwum Janan Ocola; Olara Samuel Ocola; and Ameda Douglas Ocola.

Like so many families in Northern Uganda, I have also become a victim-survivor of the LRA insurgency. Our first daughter, late Joyce Adong Ocola, died under mysterious circumstances on May 1, 1987, in Gulu. Winifred and I were still in North America at that time too far away to be of help to our daughter. She was forcefully picked from our house in Gulu by some rebels who gang-raped her. She was so traumatized that she committed suicide.

Ten years later in 1997, my dear wife, late Winifred Ocola was blown to pieces by a landmine allegedly planted by LRA rebels. She died instantly. I felt like a tree split by lightning from top to bottom. Her tragic death became one of the hardest challenges in my life. But I decided to dedicate my whole life to work for peace so other people do not suffer unjustly.

I graduated with a Bachelor of Theology (B.Th) from Emmanuel and St Chad College, University of Saskatchewan (U of S), Saskatoon, Canada, on May 1, 1987.

I was appointed Chaplain of Kitgum High School (KHS) and at the same taught Christian Religious Education (CRE) from 1973/75. I became the Diocesan Executive Secretary of the Diocese of Northern Uganda from 1976/77; 1980/84; and 1990/94.

I was also appointed as the Chaplain of St James Senior Secondary School in Jinja from 1988/90 where I was also Assistant Vicar of St James Parish, Jinja, for the English speaking Congregation. At the same time, I also taught Divinity at St James's Senior Secondary School.

I became the first Diocesan Bishop of Kitgum Diocese (Anglican) in May 1995 and served until 2002 when I retired.

I had a Sabbatical with the congregation of the Church of the Holy Family, at Chapel Hill, in the Diocese of North Carolina, USA, from September 2005 to March 2006, then with the Congregation of St Raphael's

Church in the Diocese of South Florida from April 2006 to July 2006, and later from November 2006 to February 2007.

I have been an active participant in the Juba Peace Talks as one of the Peace Observers and Consultants on behalf of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) from March 2007 to May 2008. I have been appointed Chairman of the Mediation between Pajong and Pobec Clans of Mucwini, Chua County, by the Local Governemnt of Kitgum District in January 2008 to date.

Earlier on, I was involved in the mediation process between the Jie tribe of Karamoja and Acholi in November 1999/2002; between the people of Teso and Bokora and Pian tribes of Karamoja in 2002/2004; and between Lango and Acholi following the massacres at Barlonyo in Lira District in 2004/2005.