

THEME:

RECONCILIATION PROCESS (MATO OPUT) AMONG THE ACHOLI TRIBE IN
NORTHERN UGANDA

A COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS MADE DURING THE CEREMONY FOR 21ST
NIWANO PEACE PRIZE AWARD IN JAPAN

BY HIS GRACE, ARCHBISHOP JOHN BAPTIST ODAMA
CHAIRMAN ACHOLI RELIGIOUS LEADERS
PEACE INITIATIVE

The Northern Uganda Conflict

Perceptions and attitudes to the intractable conflict in Northern Uganda are very much colored by the North-South Divide. For it is in Luwero district that the Acholi tribe were constructed as the epitome of backwardness, violence representative of all Northerners and responsible for all atrocities committed by the Uganda National Army in the Luwero Triangle. Though a significant number in the Uganda National Army, the Acholi were by no means the majority. But subsequent reports by peasants of Luwero interview about atrocities committed during Obote II regime always attributed the worst to the Acholi as if they were synonymous with the UNLA soldiers. (Records of Uganda Human Rights Commission set up by the NRA Government).

Then some of the victorious NRA soldiers reached Acholiland with revenge motivation in 1986. For later the same year, revenge killings and arbitrary arrests of abled-bodied young Acholi men started. This provoked a reflexive reaction from many of the former UNLA soldiers who had laid down their arms and settled down in peace, they took to the bush in self-defense grouped under the UPDA (Uganda Peoples Democratic Army). In June 1988, they signed a peace agreement with the NRM government in Gulu called the Pece Peace Agreement. But a splinter group refused and was absorbed into a new spiritualistic movement called the Holy Spirit Movement of Prophetess Alice Auma Lakwena, which was defeated by the NRM Government in Iganga district. Ist offshoot was the Lord's Resistance Army of Joseph Kony, Alice Lakwena's cousin that has caused untold destruction in Northern Uganda to date.

However, a regional factor is the military and logistical support given to the LRA by the Government of the Sudan in retaliation to Uganda's support for the SPLA. This has further complicated the conflict. In addition, the US Government support to the SPLM/A has added another complicated dimension to the conflict. Furthermore, the proliferation of small arms in the hands of wrong elements in army African societies also worsens conflicts in Africa. Small arms are the major cause of death, injury, massive displacement and dislocation of civil populations, refugees and violations of human rights.

Reconciliation in African culture with special reference to Acholi (Lwo) Society.

The Lwo ancestral myth of the separation between the two brothers Labongo and Gipir is the foundation to the narrative that informs Acholi understanding of the pain of broken relationship and hence the need for reconciliation. What took place between Labongo and Gipir is retold as the defining myth of Acholi (Lwo) community to avoid the folly of brotherly separation, and by implication, to be open to reconciliation because a deep split in a fundamental relationship as between brother and brother is fatal.

The separation between the two brothers, Labongo and Gipir, resulted from a dispute over the ancestral spear and the bead.

Despite their separation, the two brothers and their families were however, united by their common access to the waters of the River Nile from which bother families continued to drink on the east and west banks of the river. The Acholi saying "waribo ma I kulu" refers to this bond by the River Nile.

The ancestral myth of Labongo and Gipir is central to value formation in most of Lwo societies including in Acholi. It has given rise to the five guiding principles of community living among the Acholi:-

-  Do not commit the first offence
-  Have respect for all regardless of human difference
-  Speak the truth at all times
-  Never tell lies under any circumstance, even if your neck is being cut off: it is better for you to die for the truth than to tell lies
-  Do not steal.

Thieving was unheard of and unexpected in Acholi. No young person was expected to grow into a thief in Acholi culture. It was like a curse on a young boy or girl's family if she were known as a thief. No one would marry from such a family or vice versa. Thus traditional Acholi houses had simple doors called "Kika" which could slide sideways and could even be pushed by a child. Kika was not meant to be a burglary proof door since burglary was not anticipated in traditional Acholi community living. "Kika" therefore, reflected the inter-communal security guarded by traditional norms and values.

Criminal offence in Acholi did not merit a death sentence. Traditionally, the Acholi community did not pass a death sentence on any one accused of a criminal act. Instead, provision was made for forgiveness. Forgiveness therefore is a reflection of a non-violent community. This is illustrated by the rule of hospitality over any criminal intentions. For example, whoever ate my food, drank water from my house or sought refuge in my house instantly became part of my family. I would have the moral obligation to protect such a person. Even if s/he were an enemy, she would no longer be regarded as one. This was the Acholi humane way of responding to some difficult human relationships regarding so-called enemies.

The process of reconciliation, Acceptance of responsibility

In the event that a member of a family committed a crime such as murder, the person's whole clan or tribe takes on the guilt as a community. Any member from the offender's clan or community has no social intercourse with the victim's clan or community.

However, the quest for peace and reconciliation compelled the offender's community to accept collective responsibility was followed by collective repentance and remorse for the murder committed. At this stage, the offender's community is vulnerable and bears the guilt of the murder that weight heavily on every community member. Thus fellowship and communion is not possible until the process of reconciliation is completed

Repentance

The collective acceptance of responsibility was followed by collective repentance and remorse for the murder committed. At this stage, the offender's community is vulnerable and bears the guilt of the murder that weighs heavily on every community member. Thus, fellowship and communion is not possible until the process of reconciliation is completed.

Forgiveness

Once genuine repentance was received from the offender's community, the victim's community would have no option but to forgive in good faith. Forgiveness was an essential element of reconciliation. Forgiveness, in essence, was mercy that was graciously extended to the offender's community who, otherwise, should have been condemned to death. The assurance of forgiveness was a great relief and gave high hope for peace to the offender's community. It was an assurance that the victim's community was on course of reconciliation despite their bereavement.

Compensation (restitution)

The genuine of repentance was tested by the readiness and willingness to pay compensation as required in traditional Acholi culture. Compensation depended on the circumstance and nature of crime committed. Traditionally, the depended on the circumstance and nature of crime committed. Traditionally, the offender's community was required to pay 10 heads of cattle if the murder was not deliberately committed. However, if it was proved to have been a deliberated murder or crime, the offender's community was required to give one of their young daughters to the victim's community. The girl-child given at the age of 6 to 10 years would become, by adoption, a daughter to the victim's community. Compensation was not a punitive imposition but it was deemed as a process for healing, affirmation of personhood and for the enhancement of life within the community. Compensation, therefore, opened the gateway of reconciliation so both sides can walk through and approach each other (reconciled with one another).

Ceremony of reconciliation

After compensation, a third party invited both the offender and the offended parties for the important ceremony of "mato oput". The major feature of reconciliation was drinking juice made from the bitter roots of the Oput tree from the same calabash. The bitter roots symbolize the bitterness in conflicts that end in bloodshed. The red Oput juice symbolizes the sacred blood of a human being. The very process of drinking the Oput juice from the same calabash is highly symbolic. Two people, each from the offender and offended containing the Oput juice with hands behind their backs. They would then sip the bitter juice simultaneously with their heads toughing in the process. This goes on in pairs until every member from each community frank of the Oput juice.

The second major feature was the sharing of meals together in the presence of the ancestral living-dead and the creator as a witness to the covenant of peace. Sharing meals in Acholi culture is always a profound fellowship that makes someone become part for family. Communion and fellowship was a celebration of life on a daily basis among the Acholi people.

Implications

Looked at positively, the role of a girl-child in compensation, especially for premeditated murder, was understood as "girl-child salvation" as a means of conflict resolution among the Acholi. The willingness and readiness of the offender's community to sacrifice one of their daughters to the victim's community affirmed the genuineness of their commitment to peace and co-existence through the whole process of reconciliation. The presence of the girl-child as a new member in the victim's community becomes a "bridge of communication" to both communities who were formerly aggrieved and cut off from each other. Her physical presence and life guaranteed life to all in both communities. It was as if her presence and life was a recreation of both communities. She was therefore a guarantee of life and peace to recreated people and transformed communities on both sides.

However, looked at negatively from an individual's rights and gender based approach, the role of a girl-child in compensation was a gender oppressive and violation of the rights of the girls child who was sacrificed on behalf of the entire offender's community. She had to bear the pain of separation from her own family and taste the bitterness of violent conflict on behalf of the entire community.

At any rate, this ancient practice among the Acholi, symbolized the collective responsibility, guilt and suffering for any kind of crime committed by a member of a community. It was a deterrent to every community not to be the first criminal offender.

General beliefs of the Acholi

Primarily, there was no court of law among the Acholi community. Everything depended on the truth and ready acceptance of responsibility for one's actions. Thus, every individual was expected to abide by the five guiding principles of life. Though this was not humanly possible because of human nature, if any crime were committed, the person concerned becomes the primary witness. The offender had to make a declaration at the entrance of the village that he or she had committed murder. S/he immediately became ritually unclean and was cut off from all ties of social interaction with the immediate family unit, the whole clan and tribal community. The offender had to undergo a ritual cleaning ceremony in order to be allowed to go through the entrance of the fenced village. The offender remained in solitary confinement until the whole process of ritual cleansing was complete. A young girl was set apart and allowed to give the offender food and drinking water only throughout the solitary confinement.

Lwo (African) values are people centered based on relationship as the essences of life. Thus, an individual exists in community. Nobody is alone but all together are a community, whether a family unit, clan or tribe.

Conclusion

Our identity as African peoples is in the recognition that we are part of humanity entitled to enjoy all the universal privileges of the human community on earth. In Africa, the universality of the human community is fully recognized and accepted as a gift from the Creator to all races and languages of the world. There is no individual person without community. "Dano dano" means a human being is a human being regardless of colour, creed, gender or social status. Thus a community and individuals enjoy the fullness of life through daily communion and fellowship of love with God, the ancestral living-dead and with one another. The restoration of broken relationship is a way of transformation of people and recreation of communities through reconciliation. Nevertheless, legacy of barbaric wars inspired by economic interest and political power, the crime of slave trade against humanity and colonial domination of Africa's peoples will continue to haunt Africa's international relations for years to come. Thus, there is need for international reconciliation between African's colonial exploiters, masters and the peoples of Africa.

Out of the colonial legacy has come genocide in Rwanda, Burundi, DR Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Chad, Ivory Coast, the Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Uganda. Failed leadership, corruption, lack of democracy, violations of human rights, etc, which are marks of Africa's internal weaknesses have not fared well on a troublesome colonial legacy.