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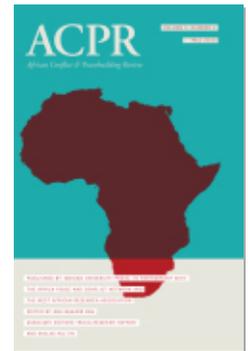
The Art of Peace in Northern Uganda

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PHOTO ESSAY

The Art of Peace in Northern Uganda

Julia R. Hanebrink and Alanya J. Smith

*“...although ‘a painting can never stop a bullet’, a painting can
stop a bullet from being fired.”*

—WILLIAM KELLY, CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND
ARTS PRACTITIONER (2003: 117)

I. INTRODUCTION

The Acholi people of northern Uganda have endured a brutal and complex war for over two decades. Although formal psychosocial support is often inconsistent, inaccessible, or culturally inapt, the Acholi's use of artistic expression—including dance, art, music, drama, storytelling, and creative writing—enables the reconstruction of social and cultural identities that have been challenged by violent conflict. The restorative qualities of art in its various forms offer great opportunity for peaceful reconciliation by serving as a vehicle for self-expression and the negotiation of individual and social identities and relations. For war-affected youth, such creative expression can enable transformation, both individually and communally, of their realities from the wreckage of war towards acceptance and a construction of peace that includes social rehabilitation and conflict prevention. In turn, artistic expression empowers young people to serve as community educators using creative skills and knowledge. This multimedia essay highlights the use of creative arts as peacebuilding tools and a means to foster personal and community empowerment among war-affected youth.

Kees Epskamp (1999), one of the foremost scholars to analyze the role of arts in peacebuilding, proposed that both the process and product of art-making may be used as tools to support reconciliation, rehabilitation, commemoration, and community building. Epskamp introduced a framework to illustrate the role arts can play during conflict and postconflict situations for the individual, community, and society alike. More recently, Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch (2008) expanded this framework to include ways the arts might be implemented within various stages of conflict and peacebuilding, including examples of potential arts-based approaches and activities that could be useful within these various stages (Figure 1).

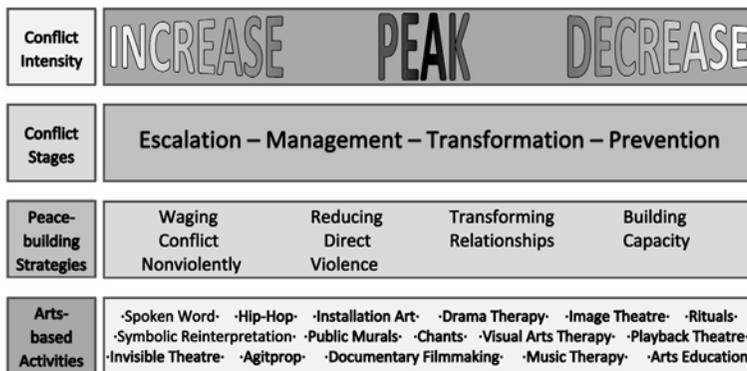
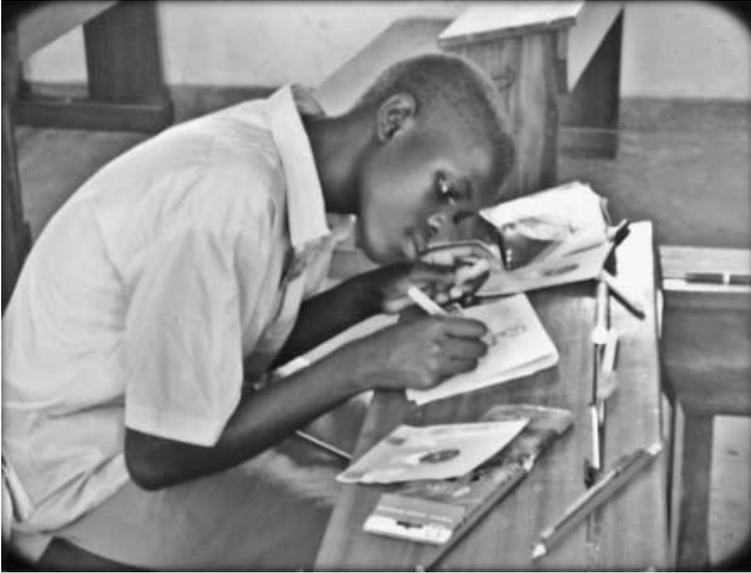


Figure 1. Diagram of conflict stages, peacebuilding strategies, and art-based peacebuilding activities (adapted from Shank and Schirch 2008: 231).

Although arts stand to play an important role in the facilitation of peacebuilding, they are often overlooked or dismissed by peacebuilding practitioners from the social and political sciences in favor of initiatives with more concrete methodologies and quantifiable outcomes (Shank and Schirch 2008: 217). Yet, art-making offers the “opportunity to express oneself imaginatively, authentically, and spontaneously . . . can lead to personal fulfillment, emotional reparation, and transformation . . . [T]he creative process, in and of itself, can be a health-enhancing and growth-producing experience” (Malchiodi 2006: 6).

Art is both physically and psychologically beneficial, particularly for those who have been exposed to events that may threaten psychosocial well-being (McNiff 1992: 1). The arts can provide a much-needed forum to integrate devastating past events into the present to allow for a more hopeful future. Furthermore, the cohesion often achieved in a



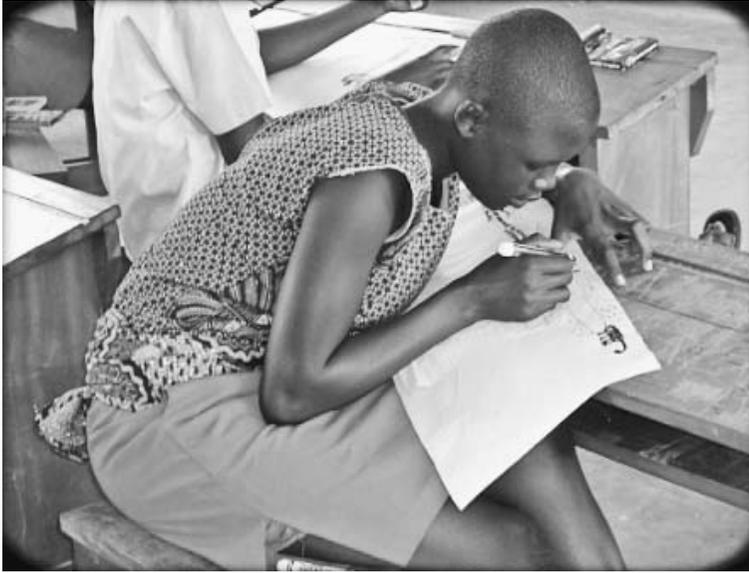
A participant explores her own image, physicality, and individual identity by using a photograph to render a self-portrait.² This activity facilitates reflection on her role within the Acholi culture, the subculture of war-affected youth, and the larger postconflict community. Photo Credit: Lily Harmon-Gross, 2009.

group setting allows for creative expression with space to incorporate culturally specific elements as well as practice in seeking and offering communal support alongside exploration of individual and group identities. Creative arts offer opportunities for expression that can elevate mood, promote insight, and stimulate recovery regardless of whether an individual is working independently or in a group (Hanebrink and Smith 2012).

This photoessay highlights the creative process as a catalyst for peacebuilding and reconciliation among Acholi youth by exploring themes of self-expression, cultural knowledge, safety, individual and cultural identities, empowerment, relationships, and nonviolence.¹

II. SELF-EXPRESSION

Communication theorists posit that the majority of human communicated meaning is nonverbal (Wood 1992). Symbols, facial expressions, and body posture convey information in ways that verbal communica-



A young woman communicates her cultural knowledge by converting a local Acholi folktale into a drawing. Artistic adaptations of tradition can help “mediate tensions between the need for historical justice and the need for a better and different future” (Yalen and Cohen 2007:1). Photo Credit: Lily Harmon-Gross, 2009.

tion cannot. Through symbolic references, many art forms enable the expression of emotions and thoughts that may be difficult to communicate verbally. When events, ideas, or emotions might be difficult or uncomfortable to verbalize, art offers alternative means for self-expression. Art can also help war-affected individuals “reclaim the body (alienated by oppression, abuse, violence) and is an important tool in liberating, transforming, and revolutionizing individuals, relationships, and societies” (Shank and Schirch 2008: 236).

III. ESTABLISHING SAFETY

An essential element for postconflict reconciliation is the establishment of safety. However, safety is not only achieved through the cessation of violence, removal of landmines, and rebuilding of infrastructure. Children who grow up in the context of war have never had their funda-



A group of adolescents create animals using clay which allows them to communicate their own personality through metaphor. By doing so they are offered a vehicle for non-verbal communication which can be of great relief to those who are self-conscious or still developing their identities. Photo Credit: Lily Harmon-Gross, 2009.

mental need for safety fully met. Thus, they may conceptualize safety through the lens of the conflict they have always known rather than the peace they are moving towards. Yalen and Cohen explain: “[W]here violence and poverty have constrained lives for generations . . . peacebuilding practitioners often must nourish people’s capacity to imagine a future different from the all too familiar, violent order” (2007: 3). While offering a safe space for self-expression, creative arts also allow people to perceive and give meaning to their own concepts of safety and security through the invention of new symbolic constructs (Cohen 1997: 162). Through art, individuals can transform their perspectives and exercise agency over their vision for the future.

IV. EXPLORING IDENTITY

Another essential element for peacebuilding and reconciliation is the reclamation of individual and collective identities. Arts facilitate com-



War-affected youth create pictures of a habitat for their previously sculpted clay animals, which enables them to imagine and create safety and security. This activity can allow for a reparative experience while simultaneously offering a sense of agency to the artist who now has the opportunity to conceive the comforts of home. Photo Credit: Lindsay McClain Opiyo, 2009.

munal forms of expression and can be employed to negotiate identity in active, dynamic ways that contribute to the creation of new social relations (Kaiser 2006: 183). Peace initiatives are unlikely to succeed if only material dimensions of conflict are addressed while ignoring identity needs and dynamics. Shank and Schirch note that peacebuilding “is about social change, transforming people’s perceptions of the world around them, their own identity, and their relationships with others. . . . The artistic experience maintains the potential to transform people’s worldviews, identities, and relationships” (2008: 237).

V. PATHS TO EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS

Many peacebuilding initiatives introduced by foreigners use external concepts of justice, peace, and reconciliation that may not resonate culturally within the contexts they are applied. Incorporating indigenous knowledge into peacebuilding efforts empowers the war-affected and



Adolescent males and females create masks to explore their inward and outward selves. While both genders were full participants, their approach to the project differed in that the females individualized each mask with great effort while the males' masks are less detailed. Additionally, the females take a more passive pose when modeling their masks, whereas the males individually offer an active stance to communicate a collective pose. Photo Credits: Lindsay McClain Opiyo, 2009.

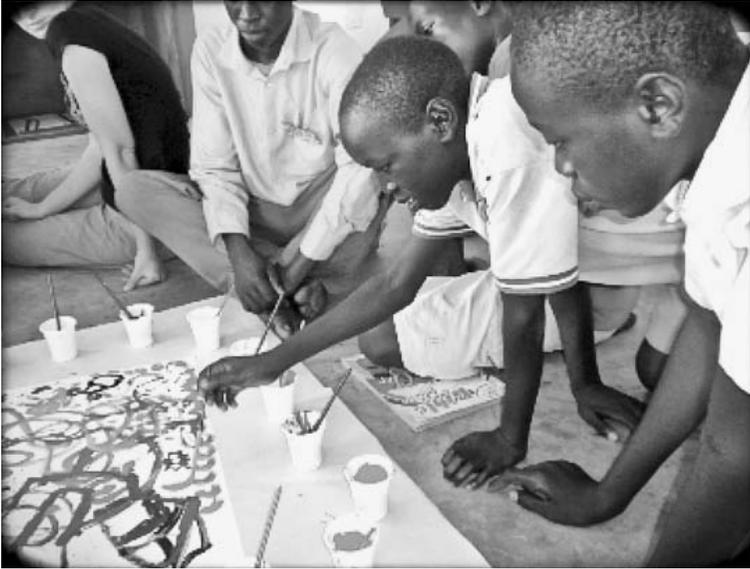


Individual vs. group expression: War-affected youth paint individually. They continue to explore their own values, identities, thoughts, and feelings; however, the close physical proximity offers a cohesive unit to develop intimacy. Photo Credit: Lily Harmon-Gross, 2009.

may mitigate the imposition of culturally inappropriate interventions. Polly O. Walker, director of the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies provides a generalized, but concise explanation:

Indigenous approaches to addressing conflict are more accurately described as conflict transformation in that they seek to address the conflict in ways that heal relationships and restore harmony to the group. In contrast, Western conflict resolution methods prioritize reaching an agreement between individual parties over mending relationships that have been damaged by the conflict. (2004: 528)

Art and artists “can bridge the gap between official peacebuilding processes and people at the grassroots, generally those who have suffered the most from human rights abuses and whose voices are all too often marginalized” (Yalen and Cohen 2007: 4). Exploring and transforming relationships are vital to conflict resolution. Combining crea-



Individual vs. group: One participant adds to a collective painting while other group members attentively observe. The young man painting is seen and experienced individually while affecting the group image with his own mark-making. Gaining such support and respect are invaluable for rebuilding emotional strength and confidence. When asked what it was like to make art with a group a young man explained, “We can’t work alone. It is good to work together in group. When you work in a group you feel better because you’re able to analyze what you are going through. You can’t know everything until you work with others and learn and become aware.”³ Photo Credit: Lily Harmon-Gross, 2009.

tive arts with culturally relevant materials can rebuild positive relationships and strengthen communities (Lederach 2005: 61).

Creative initiatives currently exist among local Ugandan artists who are using both traditional and contemporary art forms as a catalyst for social awareness and activism (Hanebrink and Smith 2012). Such artists include Sam Okello, musician/dancer/actor and founder of Hope North Uganda; Fred Mutebi, woodcut printmaker and founder of Let Art Talk; and sculptor/professor of art Lilian Nabulime. Hope North is a school for war-affected youth that uses Acholi art, music, and dance as a means to restore social ties that were fractured by the conflict. Nabulime hopes to use her art as a tool to empower illiterate



Collective expression: War-affected young women paint a group image with simultaneous participation for a collaborative artwork. Participants are able to express emotions using color with the fluidity of paint while also exploring physical boundaries within the image. The creation of such a collective foundation allows for the exploration of trust. It also permits nonverbal expression of difficult feelings that are often minimized by individuals struggling to accept overwhelming events. This can be especially helpful when students are encouraged by school teachers and counselors to “forgive and forget.” One young woman from the group pictured describes her transformation through art:

Going to school was difficult [after escaping abduction]. I was afraid of people . . . at first I had trouble falling asleep. Others have similar experiences so it’s good to share but I am reminded of the past when other children shout, insult, or do harsh things. [School] counselors advised me to forget the past when I went to them but I wanted to learn things that would make me feel good when I remember. Coming together, sharing views, and getting advice in group helps me to cope. Drawing my feelings and painting the strength I lost let me think about what to do. I learned skills and feel good about going into the school community.

Photo Credits: Lindsay McClain Opiyo, 2009.



Communal Self Expression: Participants explore traditional dance, which allows for both personal and collaborative group expression as well as the security and safety of a social identity. Dance can express emotion, and form, strengthen, or restore community bonds. Additionally, artistic expression enables youth to claim an identity outside of the context of violence. Instead of simply being a “victim of war,” a “displaced person,” a “refugee,” an “orphan,” or a “former child soldier,” arts empower individuals to declare:

*I am a dancer.
 I am a sculptor.
 I am a singer.
 I am a poet.
 I am a painter.
 I am a storyteller.
 I am an artist.*

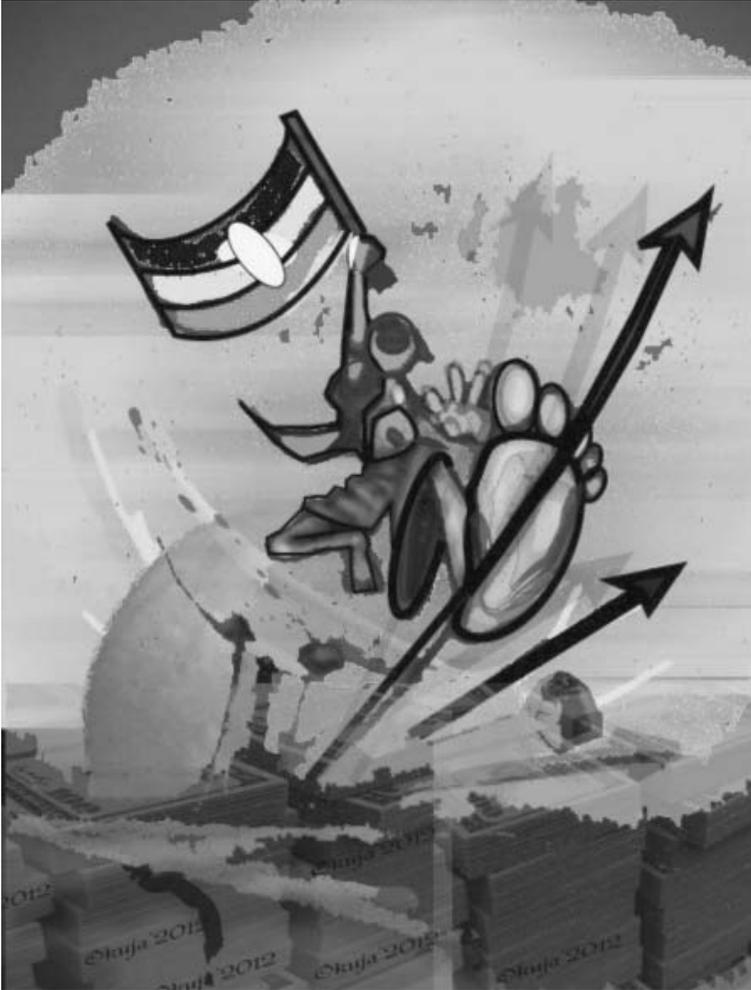
Photo Credit: Lily Harmon-Gross, 2009.



Empowerment: Healing sticks are created as fuel to move forward as individuals within the social setting. According to one of the young women pictured, “I learned new ways of dealing [like] painting the power stick to bring back the strength I lost and I can draw my feelings on paper and think about what to do. . . . I felt good going out into the school community with these skills.” Photo Credits: Lindsay McClain Opiyo, 2009.

women to express themselves, stating her belief that “art can overcome the limits of language and speech and communicate to an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse audience” (Otiso 2006: 49). Let Art Talk (2008) uses linocut and woodcut printing, painting, drawing, tie-dyeing, barkcloth production, and murals as tools for expression while building a forum for communities to meet and discuss social, economic, civic, and environmental issues as well as emerging global challenges.

Vincent Okuja, a local artist from northern Uganda and an art counselor with Gulu-based Music for Peaceful Minds, is currently using art to promote therapeutic healing among war-affected youth after experiencing his own traumatic abduction. He tries “to create a peaceful environment through creative expressions [and] trace and illustrate the missing links of creativity and culture through illustrations” (Okuja 2011). His work is designed to encourage dialogue and movement to-



Uganda, Forward We Move Backwards Never (Uganda Pe Kidok Kilong): Jumping to peaceful and innovative freedom. Vincent Okuja, March 2012.

wards a less violent Uganda with what he describes as symbols of “our continuous struggle to build freedom on a foundation that was poorly constructed. Our road to peace is not straight and clear” (personal communication, May 2012). Okuja expresses grief and frustration through images like the one below. Such anger fuels action in hopes for creating “a jump towards peace.”

Okuja describes this graphic drawing as

[a] youth jumping towards Peace (sic). Uganda has come from far since 1962 when she gained her independence from the British colonists. We have had our own share and version of political instability . . . but we all deny responsibility and keep finger pointing at each other. [I] am inspired by what my country has been going through . . . we are looking forward to a bright future, a country where we shall have freedom of speech and peace, Democracy growing and political term limits. . . . I speak as a visual artist with a universal language making lines walk across borders to express my grief hoping one day my pillar will stand firm to support our motto “For God and my country.” (personal communication, May 2012)

Lindsay McClain Opiyo (2012: 162), a co-founder of Music for Peace in northern Uganda, accurately summarizes the relationship between art and Acholi youth:

They share their plight and also their dreams for the future through their music, their art. As we—scholars, practitioners, policy makers, students, artists—seek strategies and formulas for peaceful coexistence . . . we must remember the vital role of the arts in conveying war-affected persons’ views and ideas. Through catchy rhythms and stimulating paintings, these youth compel us to listen to them, for they have much to say on what is needed in their communities in order for peace to be sustainable.

Regarding the watercolor, “It’s a Family Affair”, on the following page, Okuja explains that “making a point artistically is not only about a line but also beauty embedded in the execution. . . . I have used beauty in our way of dressing and expressions to provoke more dialogue” (personal communication, May 2012).

Beads have played an important role in Acholi culture for centuries. They have been used as commodities for trading, worn as ceremonial adornments, tied around the waists of infants to ward off disease and evil spirits, symbolized beauty and elegance, and decorated the spears of warriors. These spears not only serve as weapons; they represent authority and leadership and symbolize respect for family heritage when the firstborn in the family inherits the ancestral spear. Beads and



Dialogue: It's a Family Affair. Water color paper. Vincent Okuja, March 2011.



Spirit Bracelets—After writing a list of the people who they feel had the most impact on their lives and the characteristics they have in common with those people, a group of war-affected Acholi girls choose colored beads that remind them of these characteristics and people on their lists. The young women then make spirit bracelets to memorialize these relationships. Photo Credit: Lindsay McClain Opiyo, 2009.

spears also feature in local proverbs and folk tales, like the story of the “Ancestral Spear and the Swallowing of the Royal Bead.” This story is a tale about the separation of two brothers that also traces the history of the Acholi people during which the bead becomes a parable of peace. This narrative is meant to represent the negative social and physical consequences of conflict, revenge, and retributive justice, and the benefits of reconciliation, forgiveness, and restorative justice (Ochola 2011).

Here is the story of the “Ancestral Spear and the Swallowing of the Royal Bead,” as told by Retired Reverend Macleord Baker Ochola II (2011), a highly respected religious leader and peace activist in northern Uganda:

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 Labongo'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.



“Art has helped me in various ways. . . . I referred to what I was drawing and it reminded me of the positive. . . . It was significant because we learned a lot of togetherness. I’d like to continue this in the future.” Photo Credit: Alanya Smith, 2008.

Ochola (2011) explains that this story provides important lessons, explanations, and interpretations that influence(d) the evolution of what he calls “the culture of non-violence among the Acholi”:

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. . . . Pak-wach 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



“I have seen various [pictures of] happiness and sadness . . . in life there is time for joys and sorrows, and there is faith that there is hope for happiness. People go through both; so if I look at others’ [pictures] this reminds me that in everything there is a turn . . . it makes me feel better.” Photo Credit: Alanya Smith, 2008.

two brothers 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.

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 . . . 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.

VI. CONCLUSION

This multimedia essay explores the peacebuilding benefits of artistic expression among war-affected Acholi youth in northern Uganda. Many psychosocial initiatives based on primarily “Western” models of reconciliation focus on the individual, but when war is experienced by an entire community, psychosocial programs implemented within a communal setting are often more effective than individual interventions. Thus, it is vital to consider a collective approach to rebuilding identities and relationships shaken by violence.

The creative arts facilitate healing, growth, and transformation at both the individual and societal levels. Moreover, art as a psychosocial initiative for peacebuilding and reconciliation allows for the revival and reinvention of cultures and traditions that are often fractured by conflict, displacement, and disaster. Visual, performance, and literary arts offer participants a chance to communicate that which can be difficult to verbalize, enables agency regarding which experiences are explored, embraces the idea that adversity can have a range of impacts on one’s life, fosters problem solving and confidence, and promotes cultural expression. Consequently, young people can develop the confidence, agency, and empowerment needed to integrate the past with the present—and determine their own peaceful future.

NOTES

1. Many of the photographs were taken during an efficacy study of art therapy/art-as-therapy between 2006 and 2010 among former child soldiers and war-affected youth in northern Uganda. This study was funded by the National Institutes of Health, National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities, Minority Health International Research Training (MHIRT) grant #5T37MD001378 through Christian Brothers University. Special thanks go to: the

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2. During the research, formerly abducted youth were assigned to participate in a formal art therapy group, an art education program, or a control group that received no form of art intervention.
3. Statements from participants were obtained during group meetings and personal interviews.

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