



## Culture and Domestic Violence Among the Acholi People of Northern Uganda

### KEYWORDS

Culture, Domestic violence, Patriarchy, Acholi, Dominance

### Dr. Charles Amone

Senior Lecturer of History, Gulu University-Northern Uganda and Fulbright Visiting Scholar, Millersville University of Pennsylvania-USA.

**ABSTRACT** *The spread of the feminist movement across the globe has contributed to the acknowledgement of domestic violence as a worldwide problem. Many scholars have posited that the experiences of victims and perpetrators of domestic violence are best understood against the backdrop of the social contexts that frame their lives. This illuminates the need for the expansion of research to unravel the socio-cultural dynamics that create and perpetuate the problem. This paper analyses the prevalence of domestic violence among the Acholi people of northern Uganda from the perspective of the culture of the people. I conducted a phenomenological study and carried out eighteen key informants' interviews in three of the largest Acholi districts. The conclusion is that domestic violence in this society is a factor of the patriarchal culture.*

### Introduction

Domestic violence is broadly defined as a pattern of abusive behaviors by one or both partners in an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating, family, or cohabitation. It occurs in many forms, including physical aggression or threats thereof; sexual abuse, emotional abuse, controlling or domineering, intimidation, stalking, passive/covert abuse (e.g., neglect), and economic deprivation (Lagoro et.al, 2012). In most cases, domestic violence is used as a tool by an individual or groups of individuals to assert power or maintain control over another physically, sexually or emotionally in the context of an intimate or family relationship.

Fernando (2004) reports that men of color in the United States of America who are physically abusive frequently use their native culture as an excuse: "Where I come from everybody does it." "It's just about being a man. This is normal." "All men from (back home) beat their wives." Instead of denying their behavior, they say that their partner was disrespectful, that she argued or yelled or that she refused to do what he told her to do. This revelation makes it threadbare that culture has a bearing on the level of domestic violence.

Culture is the conceptual system that structures the way we view or respond to the world. It is both descriptive and symbolic. It descriptively refers to norms, customs, values, habits, conventions and characteristic practices of specific society. Culture influences our identity. It's the way we interpret phenomena and understand symbols and symbolic actions (Amone et.al, 2013). This means that different societies have different norms, values, customs and convention. Tuyizere (2007) defines culture as all learned behavior which is socially acquired, that is the material and nonmaterial traits which are passed from one generation to another, they are acquired by society's ability to learn and not by genes; these change over time. These beliefs and values are not biologically inherited; rather, they are learned or copied. Cultures are made by people to give a framework and meaning to life.

### Methods

This was a phenomenological research. I relied on interviews, narratives and observation in selected sub counties of three Acholi districts, Gulu, Kitgum and Pader. These are the oldest Acholi districts. Prior to each interview, I wrote brief memos about my own thoughts, feelings, experiences and expectations. After each interview, I wrote another brief memo about how my thoughts and suppositions were affected by what was said from my dialogue with the participant. After each interview, I reviewed the tape recording to become more famil-

iar with the story and context that the participant had shared, and to get a sense of their reality and the meanings they constructed from it. I then transcribed each interview verbatim, after which each transcript was reviewed to explicate the meanings of what each participant said. After transcribing the interviews, the transcripts were reviewed to ascertain the units of general meaning. This was followed by the process of reviewing each unit of meaning to ascertain that which was relevant to the major research questions. To ensure that the meanings and themes which emerged from the interview represent the reality of the participants, I checked the validity of the summaries by asking the participants to review the data and make corrections if there is any data that was misrepresented.

### Culture and domestic violence

The Acholi are a Lwo people currently occupying seven districts of northern Uganda namely Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, Amuru, Agago, Nwoya and Lamwo. They are also found in the Magwi County of Southern Sudan. The Acholi are patrilineal. There is a small handmade stool in every typical Acholi home. It is called "Arwot ki Oda" (Personal communication with Antonio Okee, an Acholi elder). Only the man, the head of the family, sits on this stool. This is his symbol of authority over the household. "Arwot ki oda" is translated as "I am the paramount chief in this home". The man, among the Acholi, is a patriarch. He owns all assets of the family including land, animals, birds, crops and anything movable or immovable. He also wheels control over his children and wife/wives. In case one of the wives or children gives out or sells anything belonging to them without the permission of the man, he is entitled to discipline the culprit. The disciplinary measure may take the form of spansks, lashes of the cane, hard work on the family garden or strong reprimand.

Property ownership is clearly written in the unwritten rules governing the Acholi family. The man owns everything. His deputy is the first male born. A woman who wants to slaughter a cockerel for the family meal will get permission from the head of the family or her first male born. The irony is that every member of the household contributes to the acquisition of the family's asset. The land, for instance is tilled by men, women and children. Crops produced, however are owned by the man. Excess surplus is always sold by the woman and the money given to the man to spend sometimes on drinking sprees. Women and children have no authority over the crops they produce and all this is because the lands on which the crops are produced belong to the man.

This brings me to the issue of freedom of movement in northern Uganda. On days or hours when the man is not engaged in his daily chores at home, he is free to travel, say to visit friends and relatives and on market days, he can spend time with folks till late or till the next day. Some actually spend two to three days. They don't have to explain to anybody where they delayed. Men and boys control their movements while the wife and girls are controlled by their husbands and brothers respectively. Onen Lateny, an Acholi elder said to me that there is a popular saying among the Acholi that "Ka wot pa coo pe kipenyo" loosely meaning "Men don't have to explain where they are going or have been". If a man or boy is leaving home or has returned home after unusually taking long out and his wife, mother or sister enquires where he is going or has been, the man or boy is often offended. His answer will be "ka wot pa coo pe kipenyo". Women and girls on the other hand, cannot leave home or spend long outside without the permission of their husbands and brothers. The exception to this is when they are working on the family garden or doing such roles as collecting firewood and drawing water. But even here, the women are not expected to take long. They are supposed to return early and release the men to go for whatever they chose including fool's errands.

Division of labour is equally abusive. Acholi culture promotes hard work but women are expected to perform extra duties. The man, his wife/wives and children of seven years and above are expected to work on the family garden. Children lead the way, followed by the wife and the patriarch is last. As they return home in the evening, the woman, her baby on the back, is carrying firewood, the cassava or sweet potatoes for today's dinner, her hoe and the man's. The man is empty handed or carrying an axe or spear. Upon reaching home, the woman's additional responsibilities begin including fetching water, bathing children and preparing dinner. Children and women are overworked in this setting yet they get the least reward for their labour. When the women or children complain, they are punished for acting contrary to cultural dictates.

The least reward women get for hard work is because they are regarded as foreigners. The Acholi political systems, like most systems of Africa, are clanic. The wife is regarded as member of another clan. "Dako pe wati", or "a wife is not your relative" is a common adage. Not a relative because she belongs to another clan (Personal communication with Geresoni Obong, an Acholi elder). A relative must be a clan mate. When boys are being tested whether they are old enough for marriage, they are asked "If ordered to kill either your wife or daughter, which one will you kill and why?" The intelligent boy is expected to say he will kill the wife because he can be exorcised of that crime. The Acholi believe that one who advertently murders a relative will never

be cleansed. One's daughter is a relative because she is a clan mate. This opinion about women is not unique. A Dinka (southern Sudan ethnic group) riddle poses that: If you were crossing a river with your cow and wife and there is danger of drowning and you can save only one of them, which one would you save? The answer is that you save the cow because with it you can marry another woman.

### Conclusion

Domestic violence as stated by (Guileine, 2012) is a crime that can include physical abuse, emotional abuse, economic abuse, and sexual abuse. It is a pattern of behavior used to establish power and control over another person through fear and intimidation, often including the threat and use of violence. Partners may be married or not married; heterosexual, gay, or lesbian; living together or dating. Those involved in a domestic violence situation may be romantically involved or not, e.g., they may be related to each other or simply living in the same house or belong to the same family. Among the Acholi, like most Africans, domestic violence stems from culture. Cultural attributes empower men and boys to have absolute control over their wives and sisters. In the process of exerting their cultural hegemony, the men and boys commit domestic violence inadvertently. Due to cultural dominance, the victims may not even know that domestic violence has been committed.

### REFERENCE

- Charles Amone, Apiyo Lilly and Annet Julie Okwir (2013), Formal education and cultural changes in northern Uganda, 1911 to 2011, *Journal of Education Research and Behavioral Sciences* Vol. 2(8), pp. 126-134, August, 2013 | | Fernando Mederos (2004) *Accountability and Connection with Abusive Men: A New Child Protection Response to Increasing Family Safety*, Massachusetts Department of Social Services Domestic Violence Unit | | Gill, Hague and Ravi, Thiara (2009) *Bride-Price, Poverty and Domestic Violence in Uganda*, MIFUMI, Uganda project report | | Guileine, F. Kraft (2012), *Domestic Violence: Cross-Cultural Considerations*, Caravel Institute-USA | | Jeannie, Annan and Moriah, Brier (2010) *The risk of return: Intimate partner violence in Northern Uganda's armed conflict*, *Social Science & Medicine* 70 (2010) 152-159 | | Kitara, D.L., B.M. Odongkara, D.A. Anywar, P. Atim, C. Amone, D. Komakech (2012) *Domestic violence in Gulu, Northern Uganda, East and Central African Journal of Surgery*, 2012 March/ April; Volume 17 (1) | | National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Available on: [www.womenslaw.org](http://www.womenslaw.org). Downloaded on 19/03/2014. | | O'Hagan, K. (1999). *Culture, cultural identity, and cultural sensitivity in child and family social work*. *Child and Family Social Work*, 4, 269-284 | | Williams, Durel D. (2010), "Immigrant Survivors of Intimate Partner Abuse: Their Experiences with Domestic Violence Services", *Open Access Dissertations and Theses*, Paper 4572. |