

‘There’s no thing as a whole story’: Storytelling and the healing of sexual violence survivors among women and girls in Acholiland, northern Uganda

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Abstract

Storytelling has become an acceptable intervention tool among transitional justice promoters and peace-builders because of its cathartic nature and ability to help society in transition to come to terms with a traumatic past. It has played a significant role in the area of truth finding and accountability and has been widely used in several countries in the last decade. In this article the focus is on Acholi women and girls in Acholiland, northern Uganda, who have suffered most severely from the impact of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony. Their stories of trauma in the face of terror have not been properly acknowledged. This paper examines the role of storytelling in the healing of sexual violence survivors. It argues that constructive storytelling projects can

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provide an avenue for survivors of sexual violence to acknowledge trauma and attain healing, and counter the violent narrative of the group. Finally, the paper proposes a platform for a community initiative storytelling project.

Keywords: Sexual violence; Storytelling; Survivors; Northern Uganda

Introduction

Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and rape in situations of armed conflict. This kind of violence is often used to instil fear and to humiliate individuals and communities, and it indeed leads to devastating psychological trauma. The United Nations (1993) identified sexual violence and rape as one of the most prominent problems in post-war peacebuilding in northern Uganda.

From independence in 1962 to date, Uganda has had nine different heads of state with varying tenures. Dr Milton Obote, who received the instruments of power from the British at independence, became the first president with executive powers and set the trend for the future leaderships. The significant turning point towards a manipulative style of leadership in Uganda came in 1967, when Obote abrogated the independence constitution and introduced the republican constitution which granted the president the means to exercise his executive powers according to his whim (Odongo 2003:87).

The advent of manipulative politics paved the way for the rise of armed conflicts in the country. Since it began in 1986, the armed conflict in northern Uganda has gone through various stages and transformations, with several groups emerging to fight the government of Lieutenant-General Yoweri Kaguta Museveni. They have included the soldiers of the former Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) (the army formed to oust the Idi Amin regime); the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA) led by the late Brigadier Odong Latek; the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF), led by a prophetess, the late Alice Auma Lakwena (who died in February 2007 in a refugee camp in Kenya); the Holy Spirit Movement II

(HSM II) led by Alice's father, Severino Lukoya; and the Uganda Christian Democratic Army (UCDA), led by Joseph Kony, which changed its name in 1991 to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and is still active with devastating consequences.

The attacks serve an even more sinister purpose, as the LRA uses its raids as a means of exerting control over the Acholi population by creating a constant state of fear. Common LRA tactics used to instil such fear included not only rape, but also mutilation by cutting off breasts. The LRA has abducted more than a thousand women and girls, who have then been subjected to or forced to witness – or commit – atrocities that compelled them to remain with the LRA as fighters, porters, or 'wives' (Human Rights Watch 2003). Also, large numbers of women and girls are still displaced in northern Uganda, especially in the provinces that constitute Acholiland – Gulu, Lira, Kitgum, and Pader.

As Dolan (2011:214) reveals, many survivors of sexual violence and rape in northern Uganda live with the experience of multiple traumas, as a result of having experienced or witnessed violence enacted either on themselves, or on their family or community. Sexual violence and rape have acute physical, psychological and social consequences for those who experience and witness them, and also have long-term effects on the survivors. If not well addressed, such effects may make them more vulnerable to other social ills (Henttonen et al. 2008:124).

Considering the plights of survivors of sexual violence and rape, and the silence surrounding their situation in Acholiland, this article attempts to critically examine the role of storytelling in the healing of survivors of sexual violence and rape. Informed by storytelling discourses, the argument is that constructive storytelling exercises can provide an avenue for survivors of sexual violence and rape to acknowledge trauma, attain healing, and counter the violent narratives of the group. The article is structured in four parts. Part one briefly identifies which categories of people are appropriately labelled 'sexual violence survivors'. Part two conceptualises

the storytelling approach and reviews its strengths and weaknesses. Part three presents several stories of survivors of sexual violence and rape and examines such storytelling in the context of post-war peacebuilding reconstruction. The final part proposes a community initiative storytelling project as a possible approach for the healing of sexual violence and rape survivors in Acholiland.

1. Sexual violence survivors

Definitions and characteristics

Watts and Zimmerman (2002:1232) define 'sexual violence' as:

... any violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality, thus including both physical and psychological attacks directed at a person's sexual characteristics, such as forcing a person to strip naked in public, mutilating a person's genitals or slicing of a woman's breasts as well as situations in which two victims are forced to perform sexual acts on one another or to harm one another in a sexual manner.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) definition was adopted by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), and used as the basis for its guidelines on sexual violence interventions in storytelling settings, which were published in 2015:45). In what was not meant to be a legal definition, 'sexual violence' was defined as:

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work (Inter-Agency Standing Committee 2015:45).

It has been widely acknowledged that the majority of persons affected by sexual violence are women and girls, a result of unequal distribution of power in society between women and men. Further, women and girl survivors who have

been sexually abused, suffer from specific consequences as a result of gender discrimination. As summed up by United Nations Children's Fund (2012:27):

The primary targets of sexual violence are women and girls, but not only are they at high risk of sexual violence and rape, they also suffer exacerbated consequences as compared with what men endure. As a result of gender discrimination and their lower socio-economic status, women have fewer options and less resources at their disposal to avoid or escape abusive situations and to seek justice. They also suffer consequences [on their sexual and reproductive health], including forced and unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions and resulting deaths, traumatic fistula, and higher risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

The LRA victimised not only the direct survivors but also entire communities and the nation by spreading fear through sexual violence (Akumu et al. 2005:9). The United Nations Children's Fund (2012:28) broadens the categorisation of sexual violence victims to include all civilians, and the society as a whole 'who are indiscriminately targeted regardless of their status or function, or public institutions'. There is a number of factors to be taken into account in determining who is a survivor of sexual violence. For instance, who puts the label on survivors, and how legitimate is such labelling? In addition, the notion of 'survivor' may create an act of marginalisation for the people who have survived the violent acts of the LRA. For this purpose, the article will use the label of 'survivors' to acknowledge the resilience of those who have been affected by the LRA in Acholiland.

2. Storytelling

The concept

Storytelling awakens us to that which is real. It is the purest form of communication because it transcends the individual. The Kalahari Bushmen have said, 'A story is like the wind. It comes from a far-off place, and we feel it'. Those things that are the most personal are most general, and are, in turn, most trusted. Stories bind. They are connective tissues. They are basic to who we are (Chaitin 2003).

Storytelling is one of the most fundamental means of making meaning. As such, it is an activity that pervades all aspects of healing. When storytelling becomes overt and is given expression in words, the resulting stories are one of the most effective ways of making one's own interpretation of events and ideas available to others. Through the exchange of stories people involved can share their understanding of a topic and bring their mental modes of the world into closer alignment. In this sense storytelling is relevant in all areas of sexual violence and rape (Chaitin 2003). In the telling of stories, a wide variety of ideas can be heard, considered, compared, interpreted, and acted upon. The bridges built in oral play or oral presentation are lengthened, their partially exposed signposts organised and labelled in ways that commit the storyteller to travel in particular directions. The subject can be more broadly explored, using more devices of language and philosophic thought: It is the academic inheritor of the creative wisdom of play (Chaitin 2003).

Storytelling develops positive skills in the area of social responsibility: self- and cultural awareness, recognition of social roles, and opportunity for reflection (Burk 1997:3). Hilder (2005:158) quotes the influential anthropologist Levi-Strauss when she describes stories as a kind of healing tool due to their 'power ... to fix affective responses to the messages'. Storytelling connects our emotions, which help us to remember (Hilder 2005:164). Adam Hutchinson (1999:85) claims 'stories, like persons, originate alogically'. Due to this 'alogical' origin, diverse forms of storytelling should be acknowledged (Nicholson and Nicholson 2005:23). While there is a familiar dominant story structure existing in Western culture, others exist as well. To deny these alternative voices is to deny the teller his/her self, and to exclude alternative ways of being (Nicholson and Nicholson 2005:25). Hutchinson (1999:86) recognises the existence of diverse story forms when she highlights the accommodating qualities of stories: they have the ability to hold at once all of the 'ambiguities, contradictions, and breaks in meaning that occur in a life'. Such accommodation does not always occur in linear, logical, climactic order. For Hilder (2005:176), storytelling must be approached with the intention to 'deconstruct exclusivity and invent inclusivity'. This involves exposure

to and experience with various forms and structures of a story. Dyson and Genishi (1994:3) examine the risk of not allowing 'inappropriate' stories such as those of violence, or abuse.

Through stories 'societies create, recreate, and alter social identities, memory, and emotion' (Simmons 2006:181). Stories 'influence our ability to recall events, modulate our emotional reactions to events, cue certain heuristics and biases, structure our problem-solving capabilities, and ultimately perhaps even constitute our very identity' (Simmons 2006:105). Storytelling also 'include[s] a temporal ordering of events and an effort to make something out of those events; to render, or to signify, the experiences of persons-in-flux in a personally and culturally coherent, plausible manner' (Simmons 2006:219). During a storytelling project, 'events are selected and then given cohesion, meaning, and direction' (Burk 1997:5). Telling a story could be done through a variety of means. The choice of the medium and method used in telling stories depends on the societal context and the preferences of the storyteller and, perhaps, on the needs and cognitive abilities of the listener(s).

Stories are easily told and disseminated through different outlets: oral, written, gestures, images, paintings, theatre, music, documentary, film, and drawings (Barton and Booth 2000:76) and may be told chronologically. The notion of time and sequence of events is essential to the act of storytelling. When recounting experiences, survivors of sexual violence and rape often begin their narrative from the period before the crisis, then narrate their actual experience of the violence, and conclude by sharing experiences of grief, trauma, and grievances after the violent events (Chaitin 2003).

Quite aside from the notion of time, stories are told within a specific context. The effectiveness of a storytelling project may depend on the kind of atmosphere and space wherein it occurs. The context in which stories are told 'influences what, how, and why elements within the story are seen as relevant' (Daemmrich 2003:215). Closely related to the notion of context are the minds of the audience which according to Miller (1996:46) 'are the canvas on which storytellers paint their narratives'. The role of the

audience is to identify with the storyteller in a manner that will touch their hearts and lead them to transformative action (Sogol 2014).

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Telling one's story brings to consciousness experiences that may have been buried in the pursuit of forgetting. Forgetting is a passive experience. The experience of intrusive memories might also be classified as passive. But both are often experienced as a loss of control. To counter this, narrative in a supportive context becomes an active decision. Narrative can be empowering when the individual decides how and where they are willing to share memories (Brison 2002:52). Based on personal experience of the narrative act of remembering, Brison (2002:54) argues that traumatic memories feel as though they are passively endured, and that narratives are therefore the result of certain obvious choices. Survivors are often taught by their perpetrators and/or community not to acknowledge the abuse, but to forget their experience, and to believe that their experience does not constitute abuse. This makes the act of remembering and retelling all the more important. Narratives can therefore be seen as an active way of regaining control of one's memory, and recognising the perpetrator's actions as wrong.

Through narrative, survivors of sexual violence and rape can transform their relationship with their memory of trauma. As Herman (1997:1) posits, 'remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites for the healing of sexual violence and rape survivors'. In theory, survivors of sexual violence and rape are able to reclaim their own humanity, and establish a connection to and control over their own life story. As a conscious act of remembering, sexual violence and rape survivors are able to use narrative to integrate the experience of past trauma into a larger life story. Narrative provides an avenue for human connection.

Like trauma, narrative is inherently relational and requires an audience, providing a witness or witnesses to the act of telling one's story. Brison (2002:53) explains that 'in order to construct self narratives we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and

willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them'. Yet, the witness can take many different forms, influencing the questions that are asked, how the narrative is formed, and the way in which the story is heard. Watts (1992:85) explains 'the idea of framing the speaking of memories as storytelling is then directly aimed at the release of such emotions through a collective process of narrating life experiences'. As a collective process, narrative allows survivors of sexual violence and rape to discover that they are not alone. This reduces the burden of self-blame and isolation. Uncovering similarities and overlap among the stories, survivors of sexual violence and rape are able to reconstruct their own identity in relation to others. The telling of a survivor's personal story can be employed to reconstruct the past, providing consideration and potential healing for the individual's current identity.

Storytelling also has the potential to transform broken relationships among survivors of sexual violence and rape in a community that is recovering from armed conflict or war. As Sogol (2014) notes, through the act of telling their stories, survivors of sexual violence and rape 'engage in a dialectic way, with their past and also exchange information and perspectives, externalize grief, loss, and anger, and try to reach some form of consensus as to a way forward'. In addition, storytelling creates 'a familiar learning space, a safe space, a communal space, an empowering space, and an imaginative space' for sexual violence survivors and rape (Sogol 2014). These spaces instil confidence, courage, and create understanding and transformational dialogue among survivors of sexual violence and their community members. In Herman's (1997:1) work, narrative is associated with reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring connections between survivors of sexual violence and their community. Through narrative, survivors of sexual violence and rape piece together their past, and in this process connect with others. In her work on trauma recovery among survivors of sexual abuse, Herman (1997:1) emphasises that 'the fundamental stages of recovery are reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors of sexual violence and rape and their community'.

An advantage of the collective sharing of trauma is that it empowers people who have a common adversity, and as the narrative 'evolves from personal stories to a group story, the narrative gains potency.... The new group narrative becomes a new framework for thought and blueprint for action' (Chaitin 2003). At the same time, when survivors share their experience with the public, they transform their situation from a 'narrative of shame and embarrassment to a narrative of witnessing and healing' (Chaitin 2003). Once a 'story has been made public, the person who tells it can regain further healing toward reconciliation' (Miller 1996:45). Sharing and integrating one's experiences of trauma with that of others is the empowering aspect of storytelling, and in 'recounting one's own story, one salvages and reaffirms, in the face of dispersal, defeat, and death, the social bonds that bind one to a community of kindred souls' (Odongo 2003:89).

3. The narratives of sexual violence survivors

The narratives of survivors of sexual violence and rape and other forms of sexual violence reveal that many still suffer the effects of psychological trauma, as well as discrimination and stigma from the community. The researcher interviewed thirteen (13) of the women and girls who suffered sexual violence and rape. They were selected through purposive and random sampling techniques, and were from the following districts: Pader (4), Gulu (4), Kitgum (2), Lira (2) and Amuru (1). They were ensured that their real names would not be disclosed and that their stories would be used with due discretion. They understood that the purpose of the project was not only to share their own experiences and feelings with the public and the world, but also and especially to propagate the creating of similar opportunities for many others to share stories, experience healing and spread encouragement. The interviews took place between 3 and 21 December 2012.

Joanna (not real name) (14 years) and Alice (not real name) (13 years) in Kitgum narrated their ordeal as follows:

On our way home; we met two LRA rebels at a junction in the road.

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The LRA rebels told us to sit on the ground. Then they asked if we have chickens at home. Alice replied in the affirmative, and one LRA rebel then said, 'If they are there, let's go and get them.' At a certain point, one LRA rebel stopped and began to prepare the ground, stepping on the grass. According to Joanna, He said to us to sit down and then ordered us to take off our clothes. First we refused, and one of the LRA rebel said that if we didn't, he would shoot us. Then he told us to lie down. When Alice [her cousin] didn't, one of the soldiers kicked her in the chest. The darker LRA rebel took Alice a short distance away, while the other one stayed with me. He threatened me with a gun and raped me. I was just crying. The other LRA rebel raped Alice. Then the darker LRA rebel who had raped Alice called me to him and raped me too, while the other one raped Alice. It is the time we need to let the world know what we have gone through.

In another story in Pader district, a female survivor named Evelyn (not real name) (15 years) narrated her ordeal as follows:

LRA raped many women and some of them were taken and [they] never came back. We don't even know what happened to them, maybe they became wives. Some who came back had children and they told us they were everyone's wife, any man in the jungle could be their husband and the women had no choice. I wish to tell and share my story with the next generation if the Ugandan government can give me the opportunity.

A female survivor in Gulu, Victoria (not real name) (16 years), who was kidnapped narrated her experience in the LRA camp thus:

Sexual and domestic violence was common because of the congestion in the camp and thus people used to conflict amongst them[selves] in homes and in the community. ... they used to tell us not to walk at night because you can meet the rebels and they rape or kill you. It happened to me when I was trying to move to another village but it was during the day and I met them with two other women and they raped all of us and then told us to run or we will be dead. I was too weak to run but I tried. My story is yet to be shared for people to hear but if I can have the venue to share my story the government of Uganda can have better event for us in Acholiland.

Discussion with Akullo (not real name) (13 years) a female survivor in Pader revealed that:

... without any delay, he started demanding for sex forcefully while pulling my clothes until he made it. After raping and defiling me I decided to have him as my husband. I lived with him for two years and gave birth to two children but later on he started mistreating me. We used to over quarrel and fight in the house. I also want to share my story for the next generation to learn about my ordeal and if the government can organise a program for those of us that we are passing through this situation, the Acholi society will be a better place to live.

Another survivor, Janet (not real name), was abducted from a secondary school in Pader when she was 15 years old and she spent five years in captivity. She said:

I was given to one of Kony's senior commanders. I was his fourth wife. He soon brought in four other young girls. They were to become his wives when they were slightly older. In the meantime, they were told to baby-sit for his other wives. When you are given a commander as your husband, you are expected to produce food. You are also given a gun and expected to fight. I was often picked to go out on patrols. I became pregnant in early 2002, when Kony predicted an attack from the UPDF on our bases in Sudan. By June, our whole group [had] sneaked back into Uganda and hid in the Imatong mountains. This was the most difficult time for captives. My husband was part of the attack on Anaka [a village in Gulu District]. He was shot in the chest by the UPDF. He died a few days later. I gave birth to a baby boy, but he died after a month. We need to share our story if we have that opportunity. We are ready to move from one school to the other and one community to the other in Uganda for people to see hear what we have pass through and for justice should not be delay again.

17 year old Arach (not real name) from Pader district narrated her ordeal in the hands of LRA rebels and she explained:

Even though I am back to the school and my life is normal, I still hallucinate and dream a lot about what happened to me in the forest. I dream about my

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forced marriage with the Joseph Kony's commander and I was made to kill and others who were killed during our time with the LRA ... Because of my experience, I sometimes find myself shouting uncontrollably...

25-year old Angela (not real name) of Kitgum district told the author:

I was abducted and forcefully married to LRA soldier with whom I stayed with, against my will, for seven years. During this period, I underwent many abuses ... Upon returning to my village, I was helped to trace my home within a matter of days ... The time spent at the reception centre was very short – about three days. I have heard what some other abductees underwent ... Because of my psychological problems which relate to the painful memories of my experience.

Many survivors experienced sexual violence. Another survivor is 14-year old Atim (not real name) from Gulu district who narrated how she was abducted by the LRA when she was only 8 years old. She was made to carry heavy luggage and walk for long distances inside the thick forest without food to eat and water to drink and eventually married to a rebel. She also explained how her experience in captivity affects her today:

I was only ten years old when I gave birth to the LRA rebel's child. I was not ready to carry the pregnancy and remember very well how painful the experience, I bled a lot and feared that I would die as I just gave birth in the forest. One of the unforgettable of my experience is that I feel pain as a result of the experience. The memory of my experience has left a big mental scar on me. From time to time all this come back and haunt me ... I feel constant pain around my waist and feel that this is as a result of the difficult childbirth that I had and a result of repeated beatings by the LRA rebels with sticks around my waist.

Most survivors of sexual violence and rape who suffered during the conflict still endure the psychological effects of their experiences. These public sessions have given them an avenue to share their unforgettable experiences with the public in order to be healed.

16 years old Eunice (not real name) of Amuru district explained that psychological trauma remains with her and people in the community are also not in support of her. She said:

I have a friend whose LRA rebels was also abducted and killed in LRA camp. Now her parent vents out her anger on me and says she wishes I was killed too because I am a ghost haunting them ... Although it is not true, my friends tell me that because of the period I spent in LRA camp my behaviour does not conform with that of the community again. Even my father now tells this to my mother although I am his child ... Since God has brought me back home and given me training and showing more love to me, let me concentrate, maybe I'll do better in future. This is the only hope I have ...

20-year old Jacqueline (not real name) of Lira district who is also a survivor of abduction and forced marriage by LRA narrated how she would not be left at home with her relatives' children because people often think she would kill them. Another one is 22-year old Jane (not real name) from Lira district, also a survivor of LRA abduction who narrated to the author how she was rejected by her mother upon returning back to the community when her mother was traced and brought to see her at the NGO reception centre. As a result, she has had to live at an NGO reception centre since she returned eighteen months ago. She 'hopes that one day my mother will have a change of heart'.

The story of 30-year old Kihika (not real name) of Gulu district is more illustrative. She explains:

I was abducted with 7 other girls ... All of us were about 10 to 12 years old ... and we were made wives at a very young age. After about 4 years of life in captivity, I managed to escape and came back with 2 children and I now live with them here as a single parent. These children have difficulties. We have no money for food, school fees ... And the culture ... My children are treated differently, they have no clan, they don't belong. It is as if they are not meant to be ...

Regarding the lack of a comprehensive reparation program targeting survivors of sexual violence, Kihika (not real name) added:

What breaks me down is that we were abducted and forcefully married to LRA rebels, many of whom are now granted amnesty and resettlement packages when they return ... Some of us women and girls that come back with children to care for are not given opportunity to share our narratives with public for next generation to learn from what they have done to us and for us to be able to receive psychological healing. The government should see that this is not fair ... Most of us are in need of some medium to be able to share our stories. We need well organised government project or comprises of all the survivors of sexual violence in the camps of LRA.

Many women who have been survivors of sexual violence have also been widowed. This has come with its own complications. In addition to having to cope with the consequences of the sexual violence they suffered in the hands of LRA rebels, they have to take on the role of sole family breadwinners. Nearly all survivors who were interviewed by the author expressed the need for them to narrate their ordeal in an organised community initiative storytelling event and be able to express their views in such a set-up. They recommended that such an event should be developed in consultation with them. The article therefore proposes the creation of a well-organised environment for the staging of constructive community initiative storytelling projects where survivors of sexual violence and rape can take charge of their situation (Caruth 2001:8). Given this, therefore, section 4 will present a scenario of a storytelling exercise that could be organised for the healing of LRA sexual abused survivors in Acholiland.

Storytelling of sexual violence survivors in post-war peacebuilding

Storytelling has already been used in post-war peacebuilding situations by community development practitioners, peacebuilders and transitional justice promoters (Folami and Olaiya 2016:17; Van Zyl 1999:652). Storytelling has indeed been found to be therapeutic (Folami and Olaiya 2016:13; Guthrey 2015:9) and therefore very valuable in post-war peacebuilding reconstruction. Storytelling, like mediation and other conflict resolution methods, as well as peacebuilding approaches, has its

antecedents in traditional healing culture. Moreover, many storytellers emphasise that we are all natural storytellers. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between constructive stories (Senehi 2009:203) which may promote healing in a post-war peacebuilding setting and others which may not have such a potential value.

Storytelling does not require a special environment. In any situation, stories can engage the emotions of the teller and the listener and offer the possibility of empathic response. What storytelling requires, is the imagination of both the teller and the listener, and what it can bring about is moving the heart and the mind of both. Telling a story of pain, violence and suffering to a concerned and empathic group of witnesses can lead to a much needed catharsis.

According to Lederach (2005), cultivation of the art of imagination allows post-war peacebuilders to work in the messy and chaotic complexity of real conflict. Storytelling is one way to harness these imaginative impulses so that they provide real images for tellers and listeners to explore. In the context of healing, the importance of personally narrated truth is foremost. Care should be taken, however, to guard against any tendency to seek a hasty conclusion of healing in order to absolve past truths without adequately addressing the problems that have arisen. Therefore, although special circumstances are not a prerequisite for storytelling, it is usually worthwhile in a post-war context to create conditions conducive to uninhibited storytelling.

Apart from nurturing healing, storytelling can also play a valuable role in nation building (Schaffer and Smith 2004:52) and the development of a new culture. Where transitional justice is being sought, the revelations from stories may help to acknowledge the complexities of a spectrum of possibilities beyond guilty and innocent. In a dialogue between different truths stories about pain and violence may make an important difference.

To summarise, storytelling has been described as a part of post-war peacebuilding mechanisms that have assisted in the area of healing and reparations without any effect. Storytelling has been found to be a useful

post-war peacebuilding mechanism (Sogol 2014) in deeply conflicted communities. In the post-war peacebuilding era, storytelling can contribute to psychological healing for sexual violence survivors and rape. But, in order for the storytelling to be effective, it must engage the self and others, and provide a narrative that is both cognitively and emotionally compelling (Hancox 2011:8). Storytelling ‘remains unquestioned as one of the marks of being human’ (Daemmrch 2003:23).

4. Community initiative storytelling project for survivors of sexual violence and rape

In post-war peacebuilding, the already weakened social fabric of society necessitates the implementation of healing and community building activities (Dryden-Peterson 2006:385). Storytelling is one medium through which individuals and communities affected by sexual violence and rape could restore hope and receive healing within and among themselves, reclaim their lives, and acknowledge trauma. Compared to other post-war peacebuilding initiatives, storytelling is one of the ‘expressive intervention strategies that have few obstacles, and can be conducted regardless of socio-economic restraints and in the dire conditions that often exist at post-war peacebuilding’ (Ntakarutimana 2008:163).

Based on the argumentation in the previous sections, a community initiative storytelling project is suggested, specifically for Acholiland, but also for other regions where needed. Its primary purpose would be the healing of survivors of sexual violence and rape, but an obvious secondary purpose would be to encourage other young survivors of sexual violence and rape wherever such violence exists. It may also be envisaged, however, that others more indirectly affected by LRA abuses would participate in the event. Such other prospective participants might include leaders from communities where victims were abducted by the LRA, and both local and foreign civil society groups.

The event could be carried out by the ministry of arts and culture, in conjunction with transitional justice organisations in Uganda, and

non-governmental organisations and humanitarian agencies working in the area of sexual violence prevention. At the beginning of each local occasion, the purpose of the community initiative storytelling intervention project should be emphasised, possibly by one of the transitional justice promoters in attendance. The introducer should underscore the relevance of the storytelling exercise in terms of its potential to foster healing, as well as to create the opportunity for survivors of sexual violence to express themselves.

It is hoped that the survivors' stories of courage, persistence, faith, and resilience will instil healing in the minds and hearts of those people present at the community initiative storytelling intervention project. After the survivors of sexual violence and rape have shared their stories, the Ugandan transitional justice promoters of the project may encourage those who attended the event to engage with those survivors and acknowledge them with expressions of gratitude. They might also validate the survivors and offer some words of support and encouragement. They could share what they might have learned from the survivors' stories of trauma. As stated, there is always the possibility of re-traumatisation to occur during such an exercise. To avoid or manage such an outcome, survivors should be adequately prepared and introduced to some of the necessary tools of counselling. It will be important to keep in mind the aim: to heal their past. The support of the Ugandan transitional justice promoters may be needed when survivors of sexual violence become emotionally exhausted or re-traumatised.

A possibility that might be explored, only where the storytellers do give their consent, is the documentation of the stories in a documentary film in which identities would not be disclosed. This could form part of early warning material that may help to prevent further wars and may be used as a tool by transitional justice practitioners, peacebuilders and conflict resolution practitioners in Uganda. If such a project in Acholiland is judged by the community development practitioners and transitional

justice promoters to be successful, it could be replicated in several regions of Uganda where there are many survivors of sexual violence and rape by the LRA.

Storytelling, especially in the context of post-war peacebuilding reconstruction, can also open discussions on broader ethical issues and challenge survivors to re-consider values and beliefs that may be detrimental to their wellbeing and the stability of their society. The stories of the survivors can also play an important role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding and in empowering the upcoming generation of females to be peacemakers.

Conclusion

This article has examined the potential role of storytelling in the healing of survivors of sexual violence and rape in Acholiland. Having defined and conceptualised the notions of survivors of sexual violence and rape and of declaration storytelling, some real stories served as illustrations of the role played by storytelling. Thereafter, a potential community initiative storytelling project was proposed and discussed. The article underscored the need for the Acholiland women and girls in northern Uganda who have shown remarkable courage, in spite of or because of their victimisation by the LRA, to share their stories during the research project. It has been argued that the survivors' stories can serve as source of healing to themselves and others, and that if documented, they may also serve as a teaching tool for post-war peacebuilding in Uganda. In the final analysis, it is worth noting that storytelling is a strategy for the healing of survivors of sexual violence and rape. It is proposed in this article as one medium through which survivors of sexual violence and rape can acknowledge and own their trauma, take charge of their lives, and transform their societies. The hope is expressed that such a storytelling project will be well supported by the transitional justice system in Uganda. Storytelling can indeed play an important role towards basing the resolution of the conflict on unveiling the truth and pursuing justice.

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