# Unfolding Land Conflicts in Northern Uganda: Introduction

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After two decades of war and seven years of peace, the Acholi region in the north of Uganda is still struggling to regain levels of prosperity and security that existed in 1986. Family and community capital, in the form of cattle and livestock, tools, seed varieties, personal possessions and rural infrastructure, was looted or destroyed during the years of conflict and much has yet to be replenished. The land conflicts that we explore in this issue have many roots, but certainly one major cause is continuing impoverishment.

Land politics have long been a fraught issue in Uganda. At the very beginning of the colonial era, British authorities introduced in the Buganda Kingdom the land grants that became the tenure form known as *mailo* (the grants were initially in square miles). This was land politics pure and simple, a plan to restrain the power of the king of politically crucial Buganda by establishing an independent landed aristocracy indebted, or at least more responsive, to British rule. Politics, land policy and governance, born in 1900 in one part of Uganda, have persisted – and the links are certainly no less contested today, a century on.

Over the past seven years of relative peace, some 1.8 million Acholi have returned to their land, but the scars of conflict and the social and psychological effects of enforced displacement remain. Today land rights and land conflicts – actual and potential – form a pervasive discourse north of the Nile. Brothers quarrel over portions; widows and orphans seek land access and recognition; neighbours suspect each other, bearing silent grudges for current and past encroachments; clans make competing claims to territory. And it often seems everyone suspects the wealthy and the politically powerful of grabbing land – or enabling "investors" to do so. But the conflicts that typically find expression through claims to land, our contributors argue, are not *simply* about plots and boundaries. They are multi-level conflicts, embedded in history, social identity, economy and politics. Land cases conflicts must be unfolded and explored in order to be understood.

This first number of the Journal of Peace and Security presents six studies drawn from current research in land and governance in post-war northern Uganda, focusing on studies from Amuru and Gulu Districts. A core group of authors are from Gulu University, Uganda, and from the University of Copenhagen and Århus University, in Denmark, who have worked together as part of an Enhancement of Research Capacity (ENRECA) Project on Human Security (2008-13) based at Gulu University and supported by Danida. Four of the articles in this first issue were presented in the panel 'Unfolding Land Conflicts in Northern Uganda' at the biannual Nordic Africa Days conference in Reykjavik in October

2012; they appear here in revised form. The special number has been supplement with contributions by Atkinson, Owor and Göttsches, who have been working independently on land issues in Acholiland.

## Land and Relationships

The studies in this collection cover a range of social situations where conflict is expressed through claims to land. At one end of the scale are cases involving families and neighbours. Often people tell us that such disputes – or at least the frequency of such disputes – are a sign of post-conflict times, a legacy of war and internment. We learn that these cases are not simply about boundaries but also and often about rights, and thus about the social identities of the parties involved. Is the "brother" who is claiming a share of clan land, really a clansman, or simply the son of a clansman's wife whose true father came from outside? Is the woman claiming access to farmland in fact a widow? Or, perhaps equally realistically, who will speak for her if her claim is denied? Cases that appear to be about individual property rights transform into disputes about gender, affinity and appropriate descent and kinship identity. They also turn on feelings, the legacy of twenty years of violence and unforgiven injury.

Obika and Mogensen *(Speaking Forgiveness in Northern Uganda: From Armed Conflicts to Land Conflicts*) take up the legacy of post-war conflict through the optic of forgiveness – and the unwillingness to forgive. Their cases deal with close relationships, with kin and neighbours, and they focus on conflicts between people who are bound to a common place. Any conflict within such a small social space becomes, at least in part, a conflict over rights to land. Forgiveness accounts, they argue, are less about past injury and far more about future possibilities.

After 2006, when peace negotiations started, the process of "decongesting" camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) began. Over 1.5 million people were sent back to their land – but not to life as it was before 1986. A generation of armed conflict and decades in the IDP camps has meant that the practice of traditional social life had not been possible. Today most Acholi are home, but the legacy of the experience of war and camp remains. Elders, who once might have been adjudicators, have died, with no opportunity to transmit their knowledge about genealogical connections and land boundaries.

Drawing on data collected in one Acholi sub-county from 2009-12, Whyte and her colleagues (*From Encampment to 'Emplotment': Land Matters in Former IDP Camps*) explore an attempt to transform the site of a former IDP camp into a Town Board. They give particular attention to what they call the 'remainders,' women and children "overstaying" in the remains of the camp without recognised access to land, and the dead, buried on camp land away from their homes and thus also stranded in what should now be town.

The transformation from camp to town is a government initiative and it introduces a new, and individualised, form of landholding (plots). Town plots are generally accepted as commodity land, to be bought and sold, but community members see attempts to extend this tenure concept to other land relationships in the countryside as more problematic, a practice that appears to challenge ideas about clan and family rights to land.

Whyte *et al.* present the stories of "remainders"; Megan Smith Göttsches focuses on widows who have managed to make the return from an IDP camp to their country homes (*Access to Land, Securing a Livelihood and Gender Role Renegotiation: a Case Study of Widows in Northern Uganda).* These women, defined as vulnerable by camp authorities because of their status as widows, are now thrust into a social world in which

this status is no longer an entitlement. In contrast to many of the "overstayers" in Whyte *et. al.*'s study, Göttsches' women at one time were recognised wives, with a home and access to land in their husbands' clan communities. Their widowhood is recognised by their deceased husband's kinsmen and this provides some security of tenure. In contrast, many "marriages," during the IDP period were not traditionally formalised; such "wives" were not "known" by their husband's kin and usually have neither the customary right nor the social links needed to access land.

Combining qualitative interviews and survey data, Göttsches explores the ways in which her sample make use of their positions as accepted widows, and how their livelihood strategies aim to promote integration in the patrilineal space of their husbands' kin.

## Land Grabs, Ethnicity and Tenure Reform

At the other end of a scale of land conflict are struggles, perceived locally (and perhaps nationally) as land grabs, involving powerful outsiders, including government.

One example is the much-discussed Lakang case, where the High Court, in 2012, awarded 40,000 ha in Amuru District to the Amuru Sugar Works Limited, owned by the Madhvani Group of companies, one of Uganda's oldest and largest agro-industrial enterprises. At this end of the scale the involved parties include national government actors, as well as local administrations and councils, traditional authorities and NGOs promoting human rights agendas. There is national media attention; and violence, threatened or actual, is not uncommon. Conflict here can easily take a form that resembles classic segmentary opposition. When land is seen or claimed to be 'grabbed' by an 'external' party, the case has the potential to escalate rapidly and become a call for communities to unite to defend a political category identified by the structural position of the enemy. Should the land grabbers be outsiders, non-Acholi for example, confrontation risks calling forth a very broad opposition defined by clan and by ethnicity. Ethnic politics can come to dominate, over-determining legal issues.

Atkinson and Owor (*'Land Grabbing': The Ugandan Government, Madhvani, and Others versus the Community of Lakang, Amuru District*) provide us with a close historical and social reading of the recent High Court judgement in the Lakang case. They are particularly concerned with the very incomplete evidence for long-term customary tenure, which was gathered and presented to the court. Drawing on archival research and oral history studies carried out in the early 1970's, supplemented by recent oral history investigation, they identify different sources of evidence both for traditional land use in the portions of Lakang in dispute and for official recognition of customary tenure claims in the area. Atkinson and Owor demonstrate that a better and more effective collaboration between social and historical researchers and lawyers can mobilise evidence for customary tenure both here and in other parts of Acholiland.

Lenhart (*Alleged Land Grabs and Governance: Exploring Mistrust and Trust in Northern Uganda*) contributes a detailed examination of the other great Acholi land case to emerge after 2006: the Apaa land conflict. The issues at stake here are, if anything, more complex than in Amuru, and certainly more opaque. Ostensibly the conflict is over a large portion of land that the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) claims as a wildlife reserve; local Acholi claim that this land has always been theirs; after 2006 they attempted to resettle on their land and some settlements have been violently cleared. But, as Lenhart shows, this is only the beginning of the unpacking process that is necessary in order to understand – and address – the issues involved. The legal status of the Apaa block of land is one such issue: is it part of Adjumani District with its predominantly Madi population or

Amuru District, which is predominantly Acholi? What began as a localised conflict, pitting communities of resettlers (Acholi and Madi) against the UWA, has escalated – perhaps "been escalated" is the better phrase. By pitting Adjumani District against Amuru District a state of ethnic structural opposition – Acholi vs. Madi – threatens to sow further discord between groups who have lived peacefully together in ethnically integrated communities for many generations.

Lenhart concludes her review of the case by drawing attention to a disturbing development in Ugandan ethnic politics: the growing tendency towards "culturalisation" of conflicts that have roots in political and economic issues distinct from culture and ethnicity. Culturalisation clearly also plays a role in the Madhvani-Amuru Sugar Works case, where ethnic mobilisation has arguably served to disguise underlying political and financial manipulation. And the phenomenon is also readily identified in land conflicts south of the Nile.

This brings us to a final point: in order to understand events in the north it is necessary *both* to accept that the Acholi region has been transformed socially, economically, politically and culturally, by a generation of conflict and internment *and* to recognise that, on many dimensions, the region's problems are also Uganda's problems. Rural poverty, land insecurity, the transformation of marriage and its effects on women's access to land, increasing conflicts over individual rights to land – all these issues are also found south of the Nile.

However, compelling regional differences, rooted both in history and tradition, do exist. Ravnborg and her colleagues (*Land and Property Rights and Economic Behaviour in Uganda*) explore this variation using a population-based questionnaire study. Their material shows an association linking tenure insecurity with the coexistence of multiple forms of land tenure in a region. They compare Masaka, in central Uganda, with Pallisa in the east and Amuru in the north. Masaka reports both the greatest diversity of tenure forms and the highest degree of reported tenure insecurity. Amuru respondents, who report over 93 per cent customary tenure, also report the greatest degree of tenure security. At first sight this finding seems to contradict ethnographic accounts of tenure insecurity in the north. However, it is important to note that Ravnborg *et al.* are asking a sample of householders about the land they hold; our other studies draw on case methodology to unfold positioned narrative accounts of conflict. The difference is crucial when it comes to interpreting findings.

A final site of land conflict issues seems rooted in institutions and practices of governance, broadly speaking. The complex and highly pluralistic legal situation that has evolved since independence to deal with land issues now seems to challenge even judicial experts. In this complex field, transactions often appear opaque and competences are unclear. From their comparative perspective Ravnborg *et al.* suggest that the very existence of co-existing tenure forms in a region may contribute to a sense of tenure insecurity. For this reason, policy that promotes "partial interventions" by government in the existing land tenure systems in Uganda may actually increase felt insecurity.

# Speaking Forgiveness in Northern Uganda: From Armed Conflicts to Land Conflicts

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## Introduction

After twenty-two years of war in Northern Uganda, internally displaced people are in the process of moving back to their rural homes. This paper draws on an experimental programme promoting forgiveness in the Sub-county of Awach where our research group has been working for four years. Here, villagers come and listen to anonymised and taped 'forgiveness accounts' volunteered by other people. They are encouraged to record their own experiences that become part of a corpus of forgiveness accounts. Selections from the corpus itself have also been broadcasted over local radio, and listeners from a wide area have called in to comment.

Discussions of conflict and forgiveness take place in a context of close social relationships. Rarely are the 'big' wrongs of the war directly addressed; instead we see how more intimate conflicts can become a way to articulate the experience – and consequences – of these 'big' wrongs. In this paper we draw on cases and observations from our Forgiveness Project to explore how the experience of armed conflict, insecurity and mistrust is carried over into conflicts over land, and also what it may mean not to forgive particular wrongs incurred during land conflicts.

## 1. Background

The people of northern Uganda have, since 2008, finally begun to experience relative peace. The armed conflict has ended and people have started returning to their ancestral homes. A lot of literature has documented the war in Northern Uganda – its causes and the actors (see Allen 2006; Allen & Vlassenroot 2010; Atkinson 2009; Finnstrom 2008), as well as the untold suffering experienced by unarmed civilians, men, women and children (see de Temmerman 2001; Dolan 2009; Eichsraedt 2009; Green 2008). After twenty-two years of war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, and the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF), the Ugandan national army, former abductees, rebels and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) have returned home from the various camps in which they were forced to live during the insurgency.

It has often been said that this was a war of the LRA against its own people. Or alternatively, it has been presented as a two-party conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government. As with many wars, the reality is more complicated. The so-called 'LRA-war' followed on from the violence of the Amin and Obote years of insurgency and the civil war that Uganda went through in the 1970s and 1980s. The takeover by Museveni

and his National Resistance Army (NRA) in 1986 marked a dramatic shift in power, and the Acholi in the North reverted to a position of relative weakness and a sense that their social and cultural cohesion as well as their material security were severely threatened (Dolan 2009: 40). Numerous rebel groups came and went in the North, but the LRA survived for two decades. At first many of these rebel groups enjoyed some support from the surrounding Acholi population, which has largely opposed President Museveni and the Ugandan government ever since the 1986 takeover of power. It would, however, be more adequate to say that many people in northern Uganda are neither pro-government, nor pro-rebel, but have lived for two decades in what Dolan has termed a situation of extreme vulnerability and social torture (Dolan 2009). The perpetrators include the government and the LRA, but also less visible actors such as donor governments, multilateral organisations, and NGOs whose ostensible aim was to ease the suffering of victims, but in reality helped prolong their vulnerability by indirectly contributing to a prolonging of the conflict (Dolan 2009: 2).

By late 1996, the government had begun a strategy of placing people in 'protected villages' (later referred to as IDP camps). These militarised camps were supposed to protect people from the LRA; but the government also used them to prevent the population from interacting with the rebels. By 2006, 90% of the population of Acholiland lived in IDP camps or in exile (about 1.5 million people). Thousands of others had been killed by government forces or the LRA, or been forcibly abducted by the LRA. Life in the camps was characterized by appalling health and social conditions, with mortality and morbidity rates well above emergency levels (Dolan 2009).

In 1999, President Museveni amnestied all rebels in Uganda and many have since returned. In 2004, however, a decision was made to exclude the leadership of the LRA from the amnesty and refer them to the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Allen 2006). Reactions to the ICC's inquiries in Uganda have been ambivalent. While people want the LRA to be held responsible, they also fear that these inquiries may prevent LRA combatants from returning home. They are painfully aware that the LRA is composed of their own close relatives who willingly or unwillingly became part of it at a very young age and who may or may not yet have returned to live with them. Another painful reality is the knowledge that, though the Ugandan army committed many crimes against the population, soldiers will never be prosecuted. The questions of who should forgive whom – and what forgiveness and punishment actually mean – remain highly complex and the answers thoroughly ambiguous.

In this paper, we draw on forgiveness accounts and our experiences over the course of the four-year project to discuss how forgiveness is perceived and constituted among the Acholi in northern Uganda. Discussions of conflict and forgiveness take place in a context of close social relationships. The war is rarely addressed directly. Instead day to day and intimate conflicts are used to articulate the experience – and consequences of – the 'big' wrongs of the war. The excerpt below is an example of a conflict over land that we use as a case study to explore how the experience of armed conflict, insecurity and mistrust has spilled over into conflicts over land, which are rampant in Northern Uganda today.

## 2. Account: Disputes with the Neighbours

*"I forgave my neighbour in the year 2008. One day we noticed that our neighbours had uprooted a tree, a gum tree that we planted at the boundary of our land that our father left us when he died. When those people came back from their garden and found the tree we had planted, they started calling us while quarrelling, that*

*why had we planted those trees there? Then we said that that tree we planted at the boundary of our land. Then they said that our boundary was not there. 'You do not have a boundary here so you uproot this tree'. So we said that we were not going to uproot it. So they started uprooting the tree we planted at the boundary of the land of our father. And also they started insulting and cursing us seriously so I became angry. I ran to our home and picked an axe to go and cut their tree which they also planted at the boundary without consulting us. But my brothers went and stopped me from cutting their tree, so I had to leave them. 'As they are uprooting our tree let them do it one sided', my brothers said. Then I came back home, with the curse of those people that death will be seen in it. Then really not even after a long time, one of my brothers came home to Bungatira. Then when he was going back, a snake bit him in accordance to those people's curse. When the snake bit him, that's where we became angry. We started taking steps on those people because we knew that if they have said something, they meant it. Their curse had started to work.*

*We were angry and my brother was admitted in the hospital and he was released. Again after a short while, another brother was badly injured in a car accident. When he got injured, we at home started saying these are all in accordance with the curse of those people where they said that the land issue shall cause death. Even before my brother was healed, one of them from their home was sent to bring the money that one time they borrowed from that brother of mine that they had to give it back. They first waited until he was injured and the land issue rose then they started saying they are giving back the money. Why did they have to wait until all those issues were there, the accident and the land, yet they did not want to pay that money before all those? They waited until we had quarrels and conflicts, then they wanted to pay the money. Really we were very angry with them. We stayed for a long time without talking to them. I stayed for five years without talking to any of them even when I would meet them.*

*Then for me one time, the Holy Spirit came into me so I went and got saved. When I got saved, I got one guy from their home was also saved. So immediately I started praying with him, he got up and started introducing himself. So I also got up and introduced myself and released him from my heart and even went up to his home. Not after a long time again I release about two people from that home. So they started telling me that the step I took was the good thing indeed; that if someone has sinned, he/she has to repent and forgive each other, it is very good. So I have now forgiven them all. It was also in their heart that they came to ask me for forgiveness even though it was hard for them. I had to forgive them and I also said if it were all our problem, then they had to forgive us as well so that we resume living as before.*

*Forgiveness is important because, that person you used not to talk to and the act that you turn your eyes away whenever you meet them shall not be there because you will help that person and they may help you too… it makes all of you free without any bad heart or feeling. As someone who was involved in land issues…the advice that I can give to the people who are having tension on land is that someone who has wronged you, you should make a good living together. You talk to each other and be calm to each other. I want say that if you have your neighbour…you have to make sure that you forgive that person so that you have one heart. This is because the person you have done wrong to is the one who will help you or you will be the one to help."*

Thomas' (pseudonym) forgiveness account captured above is one of about forty accounts we recorded in Gulu, northern Uganda as part of an unconventional collaboration between art and anthropology in the aftermath of twenty-two years of brutal conflict. The project started in 2010, inspired by an artist who had collected accounts in other parts of the world and made artistic installations where the audience could listen to edited forgiveness accounts.

The researchers identified adults, both male and female of various ages, who were willing to share a personal experience of forgiveness. A prerequisite for participating in this study was that the participants felt confident that they had moved on from the wrongdoing and the hurt and forgave the offender. The objectives of the study were: 1) to explore individual processes of forgiveness and the creation of a space within which people can forgive and be forgiven; 2) to determine how individuals cope with or manage wrongs/ offences in their daily lives and which wrongs can or cannot be forgiven; and 3) to describe the impact of coping successfully with those wrongs and hurtful experiences.

Ten of the audio recordings, in both Luo and English, were carefully edited into clips of three to six minutes each, with chronological narrations of the situation, the wrong committed, the decision, process and impact of forgiveness. The ten edited accounts were made available to the public in Awach Sub-county, Gulu District, through a sound installation in a hut dating from the time when Awach was an IDP camp. We hoped that people who listened to an account and were 'moved by it', might be inspired to reflect upon processes of forgiveness, and possibly forgive others and ask for forgiveness where they had wronged others. Listeners were also encouraged to record their own accounts and a separate hut was made available for this purpose.

In early 2012, the Forgiveness Project launched the 'mobile unit', which visited eight parishes in Awach Sub-county once every two weeks to share the accounts and record further forgiveness accounts. Researchers have also had the opportunity to discuss some of their findings on radio talk shows (Mega FM and Radio King) and listeners have called into these shows to give their views on forgiveness.

## 3. The War Remembered Through Conflicts in Close Social Relations

Initially we expected that the accounts of forgiveness collected this way would be about the atrocities of the war, the killing, the abductions, the appalling conditions in the camps, etc. People were not allowed to cultivate their land and so became dependent on supplies of emergency aid. Rebels frequently attacked IDP camps without the national army providing much protection, and many were widely exploited by both the national army and others in positions of power (Dolan 2009: 68). In 2007, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Jan Egeland, said that the conflict in northern Uganda was the biggest forgotten humanitarian crisis in the world at the time.

However, the forgiveness accounts we recorded were not only about these atrocities. They were also about the 'little' wrongs of everyday life: conflicts and fights with co-wives, neighbours, parents, uncles, stepmothers, etc. Even when the 'bigger' wrongs of the war were part of the story, they were woven into conflicts in close social relations. Thomas, whose account is featured above, is an example of this. Thomas did not choose to talk about the government or Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA; instead he talked about the land dispute between his family and their neighbours after they left the IDP camps. Not all of the accounts had land conflicts at the core of the story like Thomas' account did. But practically, all had an element of land conflict in them: disagreements

over ownership, failed attempts to get access to land, dreams of obtaining access, and so on.

Paul, now in his forties, talked about forgiving his sister-in-law (the wife of his elder brother) for refusing to sell the rice grown on his late father's land to pay his school fees. This left him stranded at home rather than in school and as a result – as he sees it – he was abducted by the LRA and spent many years in the bush with them. Paul was clearly a broken man, but he did not connect his present situation to the trauma of abduction and his years in the bush with the LRA. When during a long hot afternoon in early 2012 he talked at length with the researchers about his sense of failure in life, he described in detail that it was his lack of access to his late father's land which had led him to interrupt his schooling and so had prevented him from moving on in life.

Denis told us that he and his brothers had been locked in a land dispute with his paternal uncle's family for more than five years. His father and his uncle had been given adjacent plots of land by their father (Denis' grandfather). Unfortunately, during the war, Denis' father died before he could complete the process of acquiring a land title, though there were some papers showing that the land was his. The uncle, according to Denis, took advantage of his brother's death and built houses on the land that was supposed to have gone to Denis and his siblings, and Denis was now ready to forgive his uncle.

Robert, another man who gave us his forgiveness account, told us how he had forgiven his maternal uncle for denying him access to family land and hence preventing him from growing crops that could be used to pay for his school fees. His situation was slightly different from that of Paul and Denis since Robert was not a 'real' son in that home. He was a sister's son (i.e. a nephew) and so a potential threat to his uncle's family, competing with them for a share of the family land for himself and his children. The problem of nephews is also central to Jenipher's account of her first-born son whom she returned with from 'the bush', i.e. the father was one of the LRA commanders whom she was made to marry after being abducted as a teenager. Her son, now a teenager himself, is still in school. She sent him to go and see her brothers, i.e. her son's maternal uncles, to ask them for permission to cultivate a small piece of land. They chased him with clubs, accusing him of being a 'child from the bush' with no rights over their father's land. But Jenipher forgave her brothers for treating her son in such a manner. Because he is a nephew (son of a sister) and not a 'son' of that home, Jenipher's son was perceived as a threat. He was a threat, because he belonged to another clan, i.e. the clan of his father, and was not entitled to land in his maternal grandfather's home. His father, and hence his own clan, however, were unknown – and since he was conceived in the bush during wartime his father is likely to have been a high-ranking LRA official.

Aparo grew up in Gulu town, where her parents had moved to prevent her and her siblings from being abducted from the rural areas of Amuru where her father's family comes from. While still studying she gave birth to a son. Her boyfriend mistreated her and wanted to stop her from studying. After they separated, she completed her studies with the help of her parents and got a job. The family of her boyfriend, i.e. her son's father, had also left their land during the war and moved to town. They had failed to claim back their land after the war and were now involved in a complicated land dispute with their relatives. She thus had no hope that her son would ever get access to the land of his father's family. When talking about her many plans for the future, the recurring theme of her story was how to get a job, open her own business so as to save up enough money to buy at least a small plot of land for her son. Aparo's hopes for marriage and a future with her son's father had been dashed when he started abusing her and eventually threw her out of the house, threatening not only her security but also that of her son. She forgave her boyfriend

however, because she knew that their relationship was over and holding on to the hurt was too heavy a burden for her to carry.

## 4. From Armed Conflicts to Land Conflicts: The Challenges of Displacement and Replacement

What we see in the preceding examples of forgiveness accounts is that people usually choose to focus on forgiveness in close social relations. We also see that many of the accounts had some element of land in them. What does this tell us?

First, we might argue that the 'hut' in which people could come and listen to the accounts is a kind of memorial, reminding people of years of suffering while also encouraging them to reflect on possible paths forward. The function of memorials is not so much to preserve the memory of the past, but rather to facilitate the preservation of particular *interpretations* of the past (Becker 2011: 521). The 'forgiveness hut' is identical to the other rural huts in which social life played out in IDP camps during the war and continues to play out today. It is a physical structure shaping remembrance in a certain way and facilitating the preservation of a particular interpretation of past and present suffering: an interpretation which locates the years of insurgency and insecurity within the home, in *domestic life* and in *close social relations*.

Second, what we asked people to give us were accounts of forgiveness. And this is what we got. We did not get accounts of the violence of the national army or of the LRA, or of the government or big corporations buying up or seizing people's land. We got those accounts where some kind of relationship had been re-established through forgiveness and where reconciliation had also taken place. If we listen to Hannah Arendt's thoughts about forgiveness in 'The Human Condition' (Arendt 1958) it is not surprising that the vast majority of accounts from northern Uganda took their starting point in the 'smaller' evils of everyday life while also being woven into – or, in more anthropological terms, 'being contextualized by' - the 'bigger' evils of the war.' Forgiving, Arendt says, and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal affair in which what was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it (Arendt 1958: 241). We got accounts of that which could be forgiven, because they were about relationships that could be (re-)established.

Drawing on Thomas' account again, we see how he described neighbours' uprooting his father's trees and planting their own whilst extending their land into that of his late father. He also describes how holding on to anger was not an option for him. He believed that his neighbours had cursed his family and the proof was that one of his brothers had been bitten by a snake and the other involved in a car accident. The reality for them was that 'the land issue shall cause death.' Later, however, Thomas was influenced by the teachings of his pastor in the church where he had found salvation. In addition he discovered that one of his neighbours prayed in the same church. As he then said, the land will always be there, so why make enemies because of it?

Forgiveness researchers do not claim there exists one universal definition of forgiveness, rather, there is broad agreement that forgiveness involves the relinquishing of negative affects and the exhibiting of more positive affects and behaviour towards the wrongdoer (Orcutt *et al.* 2005; Staub *et al.* 2005; Toussaint *et al.* 2001; Wade & Worthington 2005:165; Witvliet *et al.* 2001). In the forgiveness accounts in our study, people described forgiving as a process of 'letting go'. They would talk about 'letting go of that which one keeps in the heart' and thereby letting the relationship with this person 'flow' again instead of being 'stuck' in the heart. One person told us about the fight he had

with his brother over the use of a hut he had built on their father's land. He described the long process of forgiving, which started with shaking hands, though without any real warmth. Then through the intervention of parents and other relatives, they slowly started sitting next to each other outside the hut, speaking to each other, and then finally sharing food and drinks.

Thus forgiveness, in our corpus of accounts, is not described as an act of 'deciding to let go' but as a long process of sharing and exchanging more and more words and things until finally you can even drink and eat from the same pot. Forgiving means re-establishing a relationship with a person – or in other words: re-establishing the flow between people that constitutes a relationship. Taylor (1992: 9-11) has described how in Rwanda a flow/blockage dialectic serves as an organizing metaphor for human relations as it does in many other parts of Africa. Ideally, persons and things are exchanged in relatively continuous patterns and as Taylor reminds us, Marcel Mauss long ago demonstrated that people united by gift relations embody aspects of each other. To give something is to give a part of oneself, to receive something is to incorporate aspects of the other within the self (Mauss 1925: 19). From the forgiveness accounts, we see that the Acholi also seem to think in terms of re-establishing relationships through continuous exchanges between people of words, things and food/substances. The re-establishment of the flow between people requires that both parties are able to let go. For reconciliation to occur, both parties must acknowledge that a wrong was committed and then, they must both agree to let it go, whether they were the offender or the perpetrator (or both), and to (re)establish a relationship through various kinds of exchanges. None of the accounts we recorded are concerned with forgiveness in relation to the Ugandan government or the LRA. This is perhaps because the government and the LRA are large and abstract entities with whom one cannot re-establish a flow, and they are thus not discussed in terms of forgiveness. Instead people focus on the problems – and problematic relationships – that one can do something about.

Our focus upon 'forgiveness' and our use of the 'hut' as a memorial site of forgiveness worked together to direct people's accounts towards conflicts and forgiveness in close social relations – or rather towards flows and blockages in social life. And what these accounts also showed us was that the flow of social life involves not only flows between people, but also between people and land.

## 5. People and Land

When a displaced population that has lived for two decades in a state of 'social torture' (cf. Dolan 2009) is told to return to the land 'where the war found them', as it was formulated by the Ugandan government, it swiftly becomes clear just how complex the relationship between people and land is, and how difficult it is to re-place people, i.e. to re-establish previous relationships between people and between people and land.

Land in northern Uganda is inextricably linked to those who dwell on it. The vast majority of the population lives from the land, meaning that most people are involved in agriculture, horticulture and farming, the returns of which feed their families or are exchanged for money to purchase items that they cannot produce, or pay their children's school fees. Because poverty levels, illiteracy and unemployment rates are high, land becomes the most secure and valuable commodity and one on which people depend for their survival.

In addition, land is something that identifies people; something passed down from generation to generation; a precious possession that people guard jealously. Being

recognized and respected as a person includes being remembered as somebody who belongs to some piece of land and thus an important aspect of 'forgiving' is to re-establish links and thereby become recognized as somebody who belongs, which includes belonging to the land. More generally, we can say that social relations with the living as well as the dead are anchored in land. People's identity and sense of belonging is closely tied to land, and access to land is mediated through social relations. There is continuity between land and people, and through the land a continuity is established between the living and the dead (Meinert and Whyte 2013).

As Whyte et. al. (in press) emphasize elsewhere, the waves of violent death and disappearance, which struck so frequently during the years of war and insurgency, had devastating effects upon social relations fundamental to people's lives and upon their sense of belonging. Missing links are, however, not only due to death. During the years of war, social connections were often not properly established according to what many considered Acholi tradition (e.g. bride wealth went unpaid, children were born from the 'bush' without knowing their father's family, widows were abandoned by the husband's patriline, children born out of wedlock went unrecognized by fathers and maternal uncles etc.) (Whyte et. al. in press). These missing links are the kind of connections on which people used to rely for access to land and a sense of belonging. Therefore many people continue to suffer from the absence of connections or from having their connections being subjected to negotiation and contestation, or from having to re-establish connections to people separated from them by war or violence. When they succeed in re-establishing broken connections, then they have a story to tell about the experience of forgiveness.

During the conflict people were displaced both socially and geographically – and these two kinds of displacement are intimately linked. People's attempts to return to 'where the war found them' is complicated by the disruption of social ties that took place during the years of armed conflict, and subsequent scrambles for land further complicate the reestablishment of social ties.

## 6. Conclusion

We might argue that many of the forgiveness accounts had elements of land conflicts in them for the following reasons: People were encouraged by researchers to tell their stories about forgiveness inside a 'hut' from an IDP camp that had been made into a kind of memorial of the years of suffering. The hut facilitated a particular *interpretation* of the past and encouraged people to reflect on the possible paths forward. The forgiveness accounts that people told us show that forgiveness is a process of re-establishing close social relations; and that such accounts are not primarily about the past but about possible paths forward. For the geographically and socially displaced population of northern Uganda, paths forward go through the re-establishment of social relations and the re-acquisition of land – which again are often two sides of the same coin. The forgiveness accounts show how the experience of armed conflict is carried into conflicts over land in the sense that they are about possible paths of replacement, both socially and geographically. The 'bigger' evils of the war provide the overall context of the accounts, but the accounts themselves are mostly about present day conflicts, many of which arise from or become part of wrangling over land.

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