Beyond Dichotomies: Complexifying Intergenerational Debates and Discourses on Post-War Society in Northern Uganda

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Abstract

This article analyses intergenerational debates on the future of Acholi society following the war between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan Government (1986-2006). Specifically, it focuses on the generation that was born and grew up during the 20-year war. I present selected examples of the complex ways members of this 'war generation' position themselves in the ongoing debates and make use of the various discourses on culture, tradition and modernity in order to establish, maintain and contest the social order. I argue that while it is important to acknowledge the way generational location shapes social actors' perspectives and positions in the post-conflict phase, overemphasising generational differences risks missing the many shared concerns and cross-cutting issues. By drawing on Foucauldian discourse analysis and Ferguson's concept of cultural styles, I show how taking discourses rather than distinct groups as a starting point of analysis can help to overcome such a deadlock.

Introduction

Since 2006, northern Uganda has been recovering from the 20-year war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government. The post-war period saw the emergence of intense discourses and debates on the socio-cultural changes that had occurred throughout the war years and their implications for both the present and the future. At the centre of these debates were various visions for post-war Acholi society which contained a range of often conflicting notions of social order, norms and values. A central point of debate was whether peace building activities should be directed towards re-establishing former cultural practices and conventions and 'retraditionalising' Acholi society, or towards establishing 'new' social structures, values and norms and 'modernising' Acholi society according to what was commonly seen as Western ideals.

Both local perceptions and academic analyses, including my own work, have tended to associate these position with distinct societal 'groups', the most commonly identified being elders vs. youth and men vs. women. Older men, for instance, are generally taken to be stern supporters of retraditionalising Acholi society and its inherent patriarchal power structures, while youth are mostly portrayed as agitating for modernisation. More nuanced analyses have emphasised diversity within these 'groups' based on class and educational background, age, gender, family situation, political alliance or location. However, the general focus has remained on identifying groups of actors and attributing certain characteristics and positions to them. While such a

perspective is beneficial in many ways, it also lacks complexity. By focusing on similarities within groups it risks overemphasising differences between them, thereby potentially overlooking points of overlap or convergence.

In this article I explore an approach that shifts the focus from groups to the discourses adopted by particular actors in specific contexts. Such an approach is able to capture the complexity of a social actor's positioning by focusing on the interplay of individual characteristics and positions, situational context and societal discourses. It emphasises that positions are always shaped by speech contexts and are thus, to some extent, relative and contingent.

My material is based on 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Gulu Municipality in 2010-11. My research focused on the complex ways members of the war generation[1] positioned themselves in discourses on Acholi culture and how they evaluated the changes they perceived in Acholi society[2]. Most of the research consisted of participant observation among youth in their late teens and early twenties, along with their families and friends[3]. While my original aim was to explore the war generation's perspective on the socio-cultural changes they had experienced and their imaginations of and hopes for future Acholi society, I soon realised the inherent difficulties of such an approach. The more time I spent with different interlocutors in different settings, the more I became aware not only of the diversity of their perspectives, but also how their positions shifted according to whom they were talking to and the social setting of the conversation. Even though people had strong convictions on matters of debate, whether and how they expressed them was always shaped by the speech context.

This is not to suggest, however, that their positions were arbitrary, or that their specific generational location did not matter. On the contrary, their 'similarity of location' (Mannheim 1928)[4] strongly influenced not only their outlook on life and the way they experienced the instability caused by the war and the post-war situation, but also how they were seen by society. In societal discourses the war generation was often portrayed as the link between past and future, tradition and modernity, Acholi culture and Western culture, and this liminal status placed its members in a particular situation of uncertainty and ambivalence which was reflected in the ways they strategically positioned themselves in debates about Acholi society.

Understanding how different social actors conceive of the future and their respective roles in bringing about this future is a crucial concern for researchers and practitioners involved in post-war peace building. First, because a (shared) future vision is the prerequisite for any peace building activity, and second, because negotiations of the future in societies that are recovering from war almost unavoidably entail (new) struggles and conflicts. A key debate familiar from other African post-war contexts is whether to return to or to break with the pre-war past, often referred to as 'traditional culture'. The former usually involves re-establishing pre-war social hierarchies and

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[1] With reference to the concept of 'historical generation' (Mannheim 1928), I use the term 'war generation' to refer to the generation that was born and grew up during the years of the war. I sometimes use it interchangeably with 'youth'. I take both, generation and youth, to be relational rather than absolute concepts. For a detailed discussion of the problems of defining such terms, see Vorhölter 2014: 36ff.

[2] The article summarises some of the findings from my research, which has been published as a book (Vorhölter 2014). Parts of the text have been taken and adapted from the book, especially from chapter 5.

[3] Using participant observation rather than interviewing as my main tool of research gave me the opportunity to witness how my interlocutors spoke, acted and shifted their positions in different contexts which, unlike the interview situation, were not or only to a small extent shaped by my presence. Although this article mainly presents statements taken from interviews, the analysis of these statements heavily relies on the insights that I gained from following and observing my interlocutors in different situations.

[4] For a more detailed characterisation of the war generation, see Vorhölter 2014: 193ff.

power structures (frequently characterised by [older] men having power over youth and women), while the latter entails introducing new social orders and norms, often shaped by external discourses.

In northern Uganda, peace building discourses (at least in key fields like reconciliation, justice, political representation) have been dominated by a focus on retraditionalisation. Starting with the *Kacoke Madit* conference and the subsequently commissioned report 'The Bending of Spears' (Pain 1997), international organisations started to engage in reviving Acholi cultural practices, for instance by rebuilding the cultural institution *Ker Kwaro* or supporting the performance of rituals like *mato oput* (Vorhölter 2014: 165ff.). Widespread enthusiasm for these initiatives based on the belief that using Acholi traditional culture would be the best way to (re)create social stability meant that voices that did not wholly embrace this approach (coming, for instance, from those who had held largely subordinate socio-political roles in pre-war Acholi society, especially women, youth and the economically weak) were largely ignored. And even when these voices *were* represented, often by NGOs who were carrying out youth or women's projects, they were often presented in monolithic terms, thus concealing the complexity and diversity of actual positions.

This article takes the perspective that any peace building measure must start by identifying, understanding and taking seriously the various and often incoherent positionalities of different social actors in a post-war society. This cannot be achieved by surveys alone but requires long-term ethnographic fieldwork and a frame of analysis which embraces rather than ignores complexity. As I will argue in the next section, discourses and cultural styles are two theoretical concepts which can be productively used for such an endeavour as they shift the focus of analysis to the *context* in which positions are established and presented rather than seeing a particular position as an inherent feature of an individual. Such an approach may help to discover cross-cutting issues and commonalities between groups of actors, which should be a central aim of any peace building attempt.

Discourses and Styles: Analytical Tools for Understanding Complex Positionalities

The analysis presented in this article is based on a methodological approach which combines Foucauldian discourse analysis with Ferguson's (1999) concept of cultural styles. I will briefly introduce both.

Discourse Analysis

My understanding of discourse draws heavily on the work of Foucault and those who have appropriated his approach for anthropological analysis. Following Foucault (1994), I understand discourse as a highly regulated arrangement of statements or opinions which is internally structured and follows certain rules of formation. These rules guide what can be said, how, by whom, and under which effects of power. Discourse analysis, then, is an instrument for studying power relations as reflected in societal practices and speech and, vice versa, for studying how speech acts are shaped by broader power structures. Discourse analysis allows for the interpretation of text material (field notes, interview transcripts, documents etc.) with regard to the societal context in which they were produced. Through a combination of participant observation and linguistic procedures it is possible to analyse how discourses develop and how they operate and become

manifest in concrete situations. As Dracklé states:

> *Through participant observation over a longer period in one place (...) sufficient situations arise in which discourse, its process of coming into being, and its effects can be pursued.(...) Against the background of empirical work and the participant observation of non-discursive practices, discourse theory offers the pivotal point for an anthropology of 'truth production.'* (Dracklé 1996: 33, 36)

Dracklé goes on to point out that discourses are never singular but multiple. Thus, one must also pay attention to contradictions within discourses as well as to interdiscursive effects (Dracklé 1996: 38).

In my research, I chose a discourse-analytical approach to study the ways various social actors perceived and talked about socio-cultural change in post-war Acholi society and to reveal how their (shifting) positions were affected by generational, gender and local-global power relations and dynamics. For the material presented in this article, discourse analysis is relevant in three ways. First, it takes the context of a speech act into account. Second, its key premise is that power is an inherent feature of every speech act. And third, it provides guidelines for a structured analysis of text material. While there are quite a number of elements one can seek out to dissect discourses[5], in this article I place particular emphasis on implicit rules that define who is allowed or not allowed to say what in a given situation, and on binary oppositions.

Binary oppositions are a consistent feature of discourses on socio-cultural change in northern Uganda. The most common examples revolved around distinctions between Africa and the West, modern and traditional as well as local and global. The high prevalence of such binary oppositions or 'cultural dualisms' (Ferguson 1999) in speaking about and positioning oneself in contexts of social change is not specific to northern Uganda but has been observed in other studies of perception of socio-cultural change. James Ferguson's seminal study of adult miners on the Zambian Copperbelt, who were forced to reconsider their 'expectations of modernity' in the face of rapid economic decline, is a particularly illustrative example. Like Ferguson, I treat binary oppositions in local discourses as ethnographic facts which shape people's experiences and interpretations of their lives, and thus have real effects not only on everyday thinking but on social life more generally. I also draw on his concept of 'cultural styles'.

Cultural Styles

Ferguson uses the term cultural style 'to refer to practices that signify differences between social categories. Cultural styles in this usage do not pick out total modes of behaviour but rather poles of social signification, cross-cutting and cross-cut by other such poles' (Ferguson 1999: 95). Ferguson emphasises that cultural style is 'first of all a performative competence', does not necessarily reflect 'questions of identities or commonalities' and thus 'means moving away from the quest to locate underlying "real" identities and orientation' (Ferguson 1999: 96, 97). Nevertheless, Ferguson argues that 'cultural style tends to stick with a person' because 'a style requires not simply a situational motive but an internalized capacity that can only be acquired over time' (Ferguson 1999: 96).

I adapted Ferguson's concept to the context of northern Uganda and differentiated between what I called modern and traditional styles. People in Gulu who were labelled and perceived

[5] For an overview see Hall 2001: 73f., Dracklé 1996: 37f. and Vorhölter 2014: 53f.

themselves as 'modern' often talked derogatively of Acholi culture, claimed that Uganda as a whole was still 'backward' and needed to be 'modernised', tried to avoid going to the village, spoke English even in contexts where everyone present knew Acholi, and tried to copy fashions and technologies and imitate behavioural traits they regarded as Western (and thus modern) and which they usually derived from films. People who were labelled and perceived themselves as 'traditional', on the other hand, were often nostalgic about Acholi culture and 'the good old days', had stronger ties to the village, spoke Acholi even in contexts were non-Acholi were present, and talked derogatively of those Acholi who were trying to copy the West. At the extreme ends, some members of the war generation framed their styles in very exclusive terms as either 'fully modern' or 'fully traditional', but these were by far the minority. Most young people rather seemed to be floating between these two styles, which may be explained not only by their age and life situation – youth generally being a time of uncertainty and change – but also due to rapidly changing living circumstances they had experienced while growing up.

This floating between styles seems to relativise Ferguson's argument that 'situational switching of style is possible only to a limited degree' (Ferguson 1999: 95-96), because people have to invest in their style in order to acquire an 'internalised capacity' to be able to perform it convincingly. During my research, I found that many of the young people I worked with in Gulu were still in the process of finding their style and thus were still more flexible in combining different stylistic practices (for instance engaging in traditional dance *and* hip hop) or switching between styles depending on the situation[6].

As I observed the behaviour of my interlocutors in different settings and got a more complete picture of their lives, I often had the impression that they strategically conjured different styles depending on the setting. I noted stark differences between how youth presented themselves among fellow youth in town as opposed to at home or when visiting relatives in the village. One young man, Martin, described to me very bluntly how he switched between different styles according to context: 'There is a saying that says "when you are in Rome, behave like Romans." So maybe when you go to the village, you portray those kinds of characters there. But when you come back to town, you drop the village stuff in the village, and you cope up with lifestyle in town' (Interview, 21 April 2010). Martin acknowledged that different social expectations are at work in the different settings – village and town. Although he considered himself a town person and regarded the lifestyle in the village as 'backward', he nevertheless adapted to village life because he feared that people, and especially his family, would not accept him otherwise. In the village, elders are seen to have more power to define social conventions and to sanction those who deviate from them. Thus Martin's willingness to adapt his behaviour to the village setting was also an accommodation to local power relations that define behavioural guidelines and set the rules of the discourse which govern who can say what, how and to whom in a given situation.

Fergusons's concept of style is able to accommodate the influences of discourses on social practices. Although Ferguson clearly uses cultural style to refer to *social practices,* he also draws on the work of Judith Butler to stress that differences in style are continually (and discursively) produced in the context of power relations (Ferguson 1999: 94). Both actions and ways of speaking are heavily affected by the situational context in which they occur, that is both by other social actors and supra-individual discourses. As stated, my primary aim in this article is to demonstrate the complexity of youth positioning by analysing selected statements and speech acts and placing them in a larger context. I do not focus on non-verbal practices and can only incorporate 'thick

[6] The non-verbal aspects of 'stylistic positioning' cannot be adequately addressed in the scope of this article. For a more comprehensive analysis, see Vorhölter 2014.

description' of particular situations and events to a very limited extent (for a fuller ethnographic picture of youth positioning, see Vorhölter 2014: 118ff., 188ff.).

Youth Perspectives in Discourses on Socio-cultural Change

In the following, I look at the different ways members of the war generation reflected on socio-cultural changes in Acholiland. I discern four discourses, two of which stand for different projections (retraditionalisation, modernisation) and two that encompass different sentiments (ambivalence, creativity) towards the future of Acholi society. I analyse selected statements by my interlocutors that I see as representative of the particular discourses and present some background information on each of the 'speakers' in order to clarify the subject position they are speaking from[7]. I analyse how they perceived their present situation and their opportunities in shaping the future. I do not imply that speaker-discourse positions are fixed. Although certain individuals have more affinities to one discourse than to others, speakers do switch between discourses depending on the context and its attendant power constellations.

The Retraditionalisation Discourse: Idealisation of Tradition and the Past

Although the retraditionalisation discourse was mainly attributed to (conservative) elders, it was not uncommon among members of the war generation. The basic underlying sentiment of the retraditionalisation discourse was a strong idealisation of an imagined past and a fear of future developments in Acholi society. Supporters of retraditionalisation often maintained that everything had been better when Acholi culture was still 'intact', guided by clear moral principles, and when men and women, elders and youth still had their clearly defined roles in society. Nowadays, they argued, Acholi culture had been lost and many feared that it could not be revived and reinstalled.

Tradition and modernity, in this discourse, appeared to be irreconcilable binary oppositions. Youth who supported retraditionalisation often blamed their fellow youths for becoming too modern and westernised, for no longer respecting Acholi traditions and values, and thus for destabilising Acholi society. In many ways their arguments sounded similar to the expressions commonly heard among Acholi elders, as the following statement by Denis (born 1986) reveals. When I asked him about the biggest challenges for his generation and how these differed from those of former generations, he replied:

> *This generation, I can see many young people floating. They are not going to school, [even] when they find good things they just turn their life to the worst, they don't see that they should reach some point. Mostly they turn out drinking, even you find some who come from a very good family, you find them floating on the street drinking (...). For theirs [parent's and grandparent's generation] it was good, it was better, in those times. Our parents always listened a lot to our grandparents, and when they [the grandparents] are teaching a lesson you find them sitting together (...) Storytelling could also be there, there are a lot of things those grandparents were doing to*

[7] Due to the nature of my interview date, the examples I use in this section are all from male speakers. For a detailed discussion of female perspective, see Vorhölter *forthcoming*.

our parents, so that generation was good. (Interview, Gulu, 16 April 2010)

The quote expresses very well the young man's yearning for the past, which he imagines to have been a time of family solidarity and stability. Like other young people who participated in the retraditionalisation discourse, he felt overwhelmed by the rapid changes Acholi society was undergoing. This also becomes evident through his description of his generation as 'floating'. Throughout the interview and in personal conversations afterwards, I learned that although Denis came from an economically stable family, he had faced many struggles throughout his life. After his father's death in 2000 he had grown up with relatives in town and struggled through school. He never finished his A-level and instead started different job-trainings and courses, not all of which he completed. At the time of my research, he was working in a badly paid job at a local internet café. He was deeply frustrated with the job and his future prospects. Although he sometimes talked of his dreams – to become a successful musician, to have a secure job and a family – he did not really seem to believe that they would ever come true. In an email (30 May 2010), he told me that his future plans had all failed because the people he relied on had disappointed him.

Denis' visions for the future of Acholi society seemed equally bleak. When he talked about urban youth he repeatedly mentioned alcoholism, suicide and prostitution as major problems which incapacitated many members of his generation. He lamented how young urbanites were losing all the 'beautiful things' of the past. One time, he told me that if he was to find a future wife it would have to be in the village, because girls in town were all 'spoiled'.

Denis' way of speaking about the past and the village is typical of the retraditionalisation discourse. Like him, many of those who were in favour of retraditionalisation had experienced difficult times throughout their youth in town and currently felt stuck in life. Frustrated, with no educational or job perspectives and no prospects of getting married and starting a family, they perceived their situation as hopeless and feared for their future. They were sceptical of the promises of modernisation, which had remained largely unfulfilled for them, as their daily realities contrasted starkly with images of a modern life presented in the media – of wealth, prosperity, consumer culture and individual freedom. Instead of talking about their future plans, they idealised the past and claimed to see the only solution to contemporary problems in going back to an imagined traditional culture.

However, despite this rhetoric, not all youth who claimed to support retraditionalisation were 'traditionalists' in practice. Denis, for instance, was a great fan and performer of hip hop and worked in an internet café, which for many Acholi signified a modern lifestyle. Thus, although their opinions on tradition and socio-cultural change were by no means arbitrary, what youth said and how they acted in practice did not always neatly correspond. Youth were more prone to adopt the retraditionalisation discourse in some situations, for instance, when they were specifically asked to reflect on their lives and their future prospects, like in my interviews, when they were looking for support from older people, or in specific settings, for instance the family home. In these socio-political contexts, specific power relations and ideologies were at work, which were favourable to the retraditionalisation discourse and excluded or impeded other ways of speaking about past and future.

The Modernisation Discourse: Idealisation of Life in the West

On the surface, the modernisation discourse represented the complete opposite of the retraditionalisation discourse. It was commonly supported among members of the war generation, but also among some members of the adult generation. The basic argument of the modernisation discourse was that life today should be 'civilised' and 'developed' and that African states needed to 'catch up' with the western industrialised countries. Proponents of this discourse argued that traditional Acholi culture could not accommodate the changes which were necessary to become modernised and that Western ideas were replacing it. Just like in the retraditionalisation discourse, tradition and modernity were perceived as irreconcilable binary oppositions. In this sense, the following statement by Martin (born 1984) is typical for the modernisation discourse. When asked to comment on the biggest differences between the young generation and the parent's or grandparent's generation, he responded:

> *If I compare the now and the then generation, I can see there is some change we are getting, when I [compare it] to old stone age there (...) At least you can see some modern roads here, some machinery; you know those kind of things. In those days you couldn't see these things, they were backward, they didn't even know what education is. Right now an African child can do something cool, (...) in some few generations to come we are at the same level with those white people. Though some of us, we have coped up, but there are some people still living in those mountain areas, still having those kinds of mentalities. (...) What I can say in Africa, more especially in cities, town and centres, the Westerners, they are taking over, they are bringing their culture. (...) The culture of Africa, the way I am seeing it – I can't force something – it is going to get lost. (...) Nowadays they say the world is just growing, and for you – you are still backward. Nobody wants to be called local, so people move away from their culture. And even when you know how to do something in this culture, you don't do it, you just run away to the Western life, so that is it...* (Interview, Gulu, 21 April 2010)

The quotation reveals the ambiguity of change and the feeling of being 'seduced' into giving up one's own culture in order to participate in 'modernity'. Interestingly, the respondent does not blame the West for enforcing its culture. Rather, he describes the decision to move away from the local culture as a conscious and strategic choice, which occurs, however, within a well-established (global) system of power. He seems to have internalised the widespread narrative of Africa as a place that is 'backward' – economically, culturally and socially. He does not believe that 'the culture of Africa' can coexist with elements of a modern, Western society, but rather that all spheres of life need to be modernised and westernised in order to catch up and 'grow' with the rest of the world. But, importantly, he sees himself and (some) members of his generation – those who have 'coped up' – as drivers of this (necessary) change.

Like Denis, Martin had faced many struggles in life. He had lost his father in the war and was currently staying with his uncle. Although he was originally from an economically stable family and had attended part of his schooling in Kampala, he was currently in a situation of economic uncertainty and not very optimistic about his future perspectives. However, unlike

Denis, he did not idealise the past, but in fact blamed the past for the current state of Ugandan affairs. Although he also often expressed discouragement and despair at his current situation, he seemed less resigned and always tried to initiate new projects.

When I asked Martin how he imagined his future society to be, he talked about the political situation in Uganda. He was very critical of the current government and doubtful that its policies would bring about major improvements for his generation. He stated that Ugandan politics needed substantial reforming in order to initiate a development process from which the whole country would profit. Instead of imagining a local solution to contemporary problems and a return to traditional life (like supporters of retraditionalisation), he referred to the national and even global level and saw the key to a successful future of his society in political reforms and development initiatives.

In some ways the analysis of the current state of Acholi culture found within the modernisation discourse is similar to the discourse on retraditionalisation. Both claim that Acholi traditions are getting lost because they are not reconcilable with modern life. But the conclusions drawn from these lines of argument greatly differ. While the retraditionalisation discourse attributes the current, negative state of affairs (poverty, social conflicts, future insecurity etc.) to the *loss of Acholi culture,* the modernisation discourse in fact blames the current problems on the *continuing interference of local culture* with modern life. It sees the solutions to contemporary (individual and national) problems not in tradition, but in copying the West. Thus, instead of a glorification of the past, we find an idealisation of life in the West and a deep-seated belief that the adoption of Western models can help Uganda to become modern and progressive.

The Ambivalent Discourse: Uncertainty in the Face of Change

The ambivalent discourse combined the two discourses outlined above and reflected the most widespread position among members of the war generation in Gulu. Proponents of this discourse were unclear on whether modern life in town today was better or worse than traditional village-life in the past. While they appreciated many aspects of contemporary urban life and could not imagine going back to a rural lifestyle, many still valued Acholi culture and expressed sadness that they had not practiced and learned more about traditions and cultural practices during their childhood. The ambivalent discourse, like the former two, relied on a number of binary opposition (tradition – modernity, past – future, urban – rural), but it supported a more dynamic view of culture. It acknowledged that certain elements of culture could change over time, but not Acholi culture as a whole. Therefore, while most believed that life in the past had been good and that traditional Acholi culture was something to be proud of and that should be preserved, they also acknowledged that times had changed and it was not possible to revive the past – which in some ways was good and in some ways was bad. The following statement by Odong (born 1991) typically reflects this position. When comparing his generation to former generations, he stated:

> *This modernity and this technology have changed everything, most of the things. (...) The biggest difference nowadays is respect and morals. Those days, our parents, old people those days, they were so respectful, they were uprightly brought up, they were so disciplined, but nowadays (...). These children, they are used to these video things, they are used to what they see from screens, they will start imitating (...) so that is the biggest challenge, that is the biggest difference which I see between the people of those days –*

our parents – and the people nowadays of this generation. (Interview, Gulu, 04 May 2010)

When I asked him whether he thought that 'modernity' had brought only negative things, he replied:

> *You see, everything has a bad part and a good part. But the way I see it, the bad part of it [modernity] is bigger, (...) there is so much indiscipline and no respect. You know in Africa those days, I mean in our culture, in Acholi culture, ladies were not allowed to put on miniskirts. If you put on something like that, oh – they will cane, they will chase you from home, they will call you prostitute, that you are trying to ruin and disgrace the name of the family, so those things were not allowed. (...) Anyway, modernity and civilisation have brought also good things, because it [modernity] has opened our eyes to the world. Like I told you, it has brought so many things we used not to know, but somehow somewhere it has also ruined our future and our culture – it has affected our lifestyle badly.* (Interview, Gulu, 04 May 2010)

The quotation well captures the ambivalence and uncertainty regarding the contemporary role of tradition I encountered among many youth. They had heard about formerly established norms and rules in Acholi society, for instance regarding gendered forms of behaviour. On the one hand, they seemed proud of such traditions and regarded them as desirable and well-suited to establish social order. On the other hand, they also found many traditional practices strange and outdated and very much in conflict with their modern values.

Odong had grown up and gone to school in town. He has recently finished his A-level. Throughout his youth he had participated in diverse youth activities ranging from breakdance and football to traditional dance. He was an avid supporter of English Premier League Football and a very active member of a cultural group[8]. Although he dreamt of attending Gulu University, he had been compelled to start a course at a teacher's college because he could not afford the university fees. When he spoke about his future, he always seemed torn between his dream of a modern life – with a house, a car and other luxury objects – and a more realistic vision of a life as a teacher, who might be sent to work in a rural area, who would have to struggle to provide for a family, but whose lifestyle would be closer to the 'original life' of the Acholi people. He, like many other young people, felt that it was not so much his own choice how his personal future and the collective future of the Acholi people developed, but that it was determined by external circumstances.

Unlike the former two discourses, which were adopted in situations in which the speakers had a clear opinion on whether Acholi society should be retraditionalised or modernised with regard to the matter discussed, the ambivalent discourse was adopted in situations in which the speakers were truly torn between the advantages and disadvantages of either, retraditionalisation or modernization. In this sense, the ambivalent discourse implied not just a switching between retraditionalisation in one situation, and modernisation in another, but pertained to situations, in

[8] So-called cultural groups usually consisted of children and youth and sometimes also adults. It seems that in their current form, cultural groups had only been started in northern Uganda in the late 1990s. Often supported by international donors as 'youth projects', they were seen as a way to support the revival of 'traditional culture' by providing a setting for learning and performing traditional dances and music (Vorhölter 2014: 171ff.).

which the young people I encountered were really undecided about one specific matter (for instance gender norms and roles) with regard to which they felt that they could not really combine traditional and modern elements or decide which was more desirable. This ambivalence and indecisiveness posed a major difference to the position represented in the creative discourse.

The Creative Discourse: Translating Acholi Culture

The attitude underlying the creative discourse is best captured by a statement from one of my interviewees. When I asked him whether he could imagine a future life in the rural areas, Elima (born 1990) answered: 'If I go back to the village, I will go with a new style' (Interview, Gulu, 09 April 2010). Like him, supporters of the creative discourse believed that Acholi culture was currently undergoing many changes, but that this was a natural and desirable process. Rather than blaming certain groups within Acholi society for contributing to the erosion of traditional culture, they encouraged everyone to contribute to transforming and actively shaping Acholi culture.

The creative discourse did not primarily assume a binary opposition between tradition and modernity, Africa and the West, and did not see globalization processes as a threat to 'local cultures'. Thus, rather than being in favour of retraditionalisation or modernisation, or being torn between the two, proponents of the creative discourse contended that different facets of identity could coexist and be combined. Accordingly, changes in Acholi culture were acknowledged, but they were not interpreted as a sign of cultural loss but rather as necessary adaption to changed living circumstances and as a result of cultural transitions and transformations. The following statement by Laurence (born 1990) is a typical example. When I asked him why he thought Acholi culture was changing, he replied:

> *When you are stuck to your tradition, sometimes you don't achieve much. Though I believe culture is wealth, that is true, but sometimes culture when you stick to it, it will not bring you the world. Sometimes you go and also try to copy up some other people's culture, then you come back to yours. That is when you can lift up your culture and go ahead, when you know all or maybe both cultures (...) You have to change, in order also to cope up with others – as the world grows you grow together with the world. Because if you are to remain behind, you remain for good. (...) There is much improvement because of the culture changing (...) even the system of education has changed, that is why we are also able to speak English, we are able to communicate to other people (...) you have to change your culture at times, and you know, adjust to other cultures also.* (Interview, Gulu, 28 April 2010)

Laurence stresses that people of different cultural backgrounds should learn from one another and integrate the new insights they gain into their existing cultural repertoire – without interpreting the ensuing changes of their culture as a sign of loss. Stagnation, the belief in cultural purity and the desperate latching onto one's own traditions are interpreted as hindrances to a country's or a people's development. Laurence gives the pertinent example of language and communication, which only work if people are willing to engage with and adapt to one another.

Laurence came from an economically stable family background. His mother had died when he was still young and he had grown up with his grandmother in the village and later with his father and his new wife in town. He told me that he had always been a successful student and that

his father was planning to send him to a good school in Kampala for his A-level, or even abroad. Laurence was a supporter and performer of hip hop, who felt greatly inspired by US-American rappers. But he also loved Acholi music and traditional dance. He had many different plans for his future: he told me that his father was planning to open a big farm in the village and he would probably be involved in the management of the farm, but that he could also imagine becoming a musician because he really loved music.

In some ways, Laurence was a typical representative of the creative discourse. He had a good level of education, his family was planning to set up a large-scale farming business in the rural areas and he was generally very optimistic about his future. From an emic perspective, his lifestyle (in terms of dressing, free-time activities etc.) made him appear quite westernised. But unlike the proponents of the modernisation discourse, he often proudly emphasised his Acholi identity and, unlike the representatives of the ambivalent discourse, he did not perceive his Acholi identity to contradict his modern style.

Like Laurence, most proponents of the creative discourse had economically stable backgrounds and thus had to worry less about their future than youths from more precarious backgrounds. Due to their relative economic security and higher social and spacial mobility, they could actually *choose* how and where they wanted their future to be and, even if they decided on a rural life as farmers, this usually did not mean a complete break with their urban lives[9]. This meant that they could envision themselves as self-conscious agents of change, not only regarding their individual lives but with regard to the future of Acholi society as a whole. As Hannerz (1996: 73ff.) has pointed out, although people are free to choose and can adopt various discourses, they are influenced not only by the state and the market, but also by their capacities as cultural consumers.

In sum, the examples presented here reveal that individual members of the war generation engaged quite differently with the subject of socio-cultural change. Some tended to dream of a return to the imagined stability of the past. Others were more prone to believe that they could overcome the conservativeness they saw as inherent in Acholi traditions by orienting their styles and behaviour towards what they labelled Western modernity. These different positionalities depended on individual characteristics (age, gender, social status, and life experience), situational context and societal discourses. Few of the young people I met exclusively adopted only one cultural style or supported only one of the four discourses. Rather, they switched between discourses and styles depending on the people they were interacting with (e.g. parents, elders or peers), the setting (e.g. town or village) and the power relations involved and thereby exposed different facets of their identity as Acholi youth.

In the last part of the article I situate the discourses I identified above in the broader context of intergenerational debates on the post-war future in northern Uganda. This should make clear that, although youth are not locked into a particular discourse by virtue of their generational positioning, it is also important not to lose sight of the way their generational positioning continues to structure societal discourses.

[9] However, I also met youths from more precarious backgrounds who quite successfully managed to combine urban and rural, modern and traditional lifestyles and perceived their extensive cultural repertoire primarily as a resource and not as a source of conflict.

Intergenerational Debates on Peace Building in Gulu: Grappling with the Crisis

Intergenerational relations in the post-war phase were often described as being highly conflictive. Youth and elders mutually blamed each other for the perceived crisis of contemporary Acholi society. This crisis was related to the processes of disarray and change Acholi society had undergone since the beginning of the war.

Members of the pre-war generation, i.e. those who had experienced the war as adults and elders, often blamed the crisis on Acholi youth. They claimed that today's youth were lazy, disrespectful, no longer valued Acholi cultural and moral principles, and that they had thus contributed to the breakdown and 'moral degeneration' of Acholi society. In conversations and interviews I conducted, young people's lifestyle was often described as westernized and portrayed as revolving mainly around leisure activities (hanging out in video halls and clubs, drinking and being involved in inappropriate sexual relations) and material wealth (especially phones and clothes, often inappropriate ones like miniskirts). This individualistic lifestyle was seen to threaten established societal institutions like traditional marriage, kinship systems, property laws and family-based labour arrangements like farming. In short, elders accused youth of lacking dedication to the communal values which they regarded as necessary to overcome the perceived crisis of Acholi society.

Members of the war generation, in turn, accused elders and adults of neglecting and disregarding youth and not properly fulfilling their roles as advisors, caregivers and guardians. Young people often recited a discourse according to which parents during the war-years, especially in the camps, had left their children to fend for themselves, while they drank or otherwise surrendered to the desperate situation. In the contemporary post-war situation, members of the older generations were often described by youth as being unwilling or unable to adapt to the changed circumstances and of still living in the past. Common expressions I encountered were that elders were 'backward', lacked modern education and knowledge and did not understand the changed requirements and complex challenges of life in a capitalist, globalised world. Young people felt that their parents did not respect global rights discourses, for instance regarding children's and youth's right to education, leisure time, and freedom of expression. Furthermore, they claimed that traditional family models, based on polygyny and a large number of children, were no longer viable today and, on the contrary, were the cause of many intra-family conflicts, in which especially the children and their mothers had to suffer.

However, as the above analysis has shown, despite young people's scepticism with regard to some traditional practices and beliefs, which they saw as outdated or incompatible with modern life, most of them still valued Acholi culture and wanted to integrate some of its elements and principles into their everyday lives. In fact, many of my younger interlocutors complained that they did not really know enough about Acholi culture and accused their parents and grandparents of not passing on their cultural knowledge to the young generation. For them, the essence of the crisis was the situation of uncertainty in which they currently found themselves. They had grown up in a situation of great social upheavals in which collective norms, rules and conceptions of life were in flux. They were confronted with an equally unstable future in which they had to reconcile local and global demands in addition to the overall challenges of living in a society recovering from war. These disordered experiences that many of my young interlocutors underwent during their childhood and youth are a key factor in understanding their current sense of uncertainty and their feeling of being 'stuck in between' past, present and future, tradition and modernity.

Sociological studies of biographical uncertainty have pointed out that:

> *[e]xperience and its status in biographical projecting is the key category for an assessment of the quality of the linkage of past, present and future. Experiences are characterized by a dual temporal horizon: through experience we conserve and reinterpret the past in order to orient our (biographical) action towards the future (...). [A]* ***sociological notion of biographical uncertainty*** *is generally identified as the weakening of this linkage of experience, expectation and projecting due to an erosion of intersubjectively shared certainty in a special social situation.* (Reiter 2010: 8, emphasis in original)

The difficulty of establishing a coherent link between past experiences and future actions, which Reiter identifies as a major cause of uncertainty, seemed to be at the core of the 'cultural crisis' in Acholiland. This became evident from the commonly voiced assertion that the 20-year war had undermined the very foundations of Acholi society. Expectations and projections related to the future of Acholi society greatly differed among various social actors. The relevance of the past as a guide for the future was disparately assessed, especially between members of the older and the younger generation. Consequently, one can assume that this lack of a coherent past-future 'horizon' led to an overall 'erosion of intersubjectively shared certainty' among all members of Acholi society. This, in turn, caused feelings of uncertainty not only on the individual, biographical level, but also evoked feelings of 'cultural uncertainty' at the societal level, indicated by a perceived lack of a shared value system and the disagreement about which lifestyles were to be regarded as desirable, morally acceptable and sustainable. As argued above, members of different generations experienced the manifestations of this cultural uncertainty differently and subsequently drew different conclusions and options for action from it.

Youth's reaction to the situation of cultural uncertainty involved very complex considerations. On the one hand, they resisted (in diverse and sometimes subtle ways) elders' attempts to re-establish gerontocratic principles and instead lobbied for the 'modernisation' of Acholi society based on the ideas of individual freedoms (including notions of citizen rights, children's rights, women's rights etc.). They rebelled against the roles and expectations – in terms of lifestyle, occupation, marriage and family structures – which would have been required of them in 'traditional' Acholi society and which were still envisioned by some of their parents and community elders. On the other hand, however, many were also drawn to the idea of reviving Acholi culture. They seemed to be strongly influenced by the highly emotive societal discourse (promoted especially by elders *and* international actors), which burdened the young generation with the task of 'saving' Acholi culture and suggested that only the revival and maintenance of Acholi traditions would lead to a restoration of social stability.

This then relativises the extent to which one can speak of clearly separable generational perspectives on Acholi culture and socio-cultural change. Although there are many aspects which are debated along generational lines, there are also crosscutting positions as well as intra-generational disparities. More important (and problematic) than the actual similarities or differences, however, is the general perception, (re-)produced in local discourses, that generational relations in Acholi society have become strained and conflictual. In some ways, this discursive creation of clearly distinguishable 'conflict groups', which are associated with dichotomous notions of tradition and modernity and which mutually blame each other for the crisis, might reflect

an attempt to make sense of and explain the current state of affairs. At the same time, however, it may also be detrimental to fostering inter-generational dialogue and thus should be unravelled through more differentiated analyses.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that despite generational differences in reactions to and interpretations of socio-cultural change in northern Uganda, one should also pay attention to cross-cutting issues and concerns. This may be done by taking discourses rather than distinct groups as a starting point of analysis. By providing a detailed and complex understanding of how competing visions for the future of Acholi society are negotiated among members of the war generation, I gave an example of how to make 'intra-group' differences visible. This helped to reveal that the position of the young generation vis-à-vis older generations is much less clear cut than often assumed in peace building debates.

In order to draw attention to those segments of society like women or youth, which are commonly neglected in peace building negotiations, it may sometimes be unavoidable to think in terms of 'groups'. However, a necessary second step should always entail taking these 'groups' seriously by paying attention to the various positions they represent instead of subsuming them all under one unifying group identity. It is when we acknowledge that social actors' positions are shaped by *but also* cross-cut distinct groups that a more constructive dialogue becomes possible.

In northern Uganda, members of the war generation are crucial actors for bringing about and maintaining peace and stability, which is why their various perspectives should be taken (more) seriously in any peace building measure. In local discourses, they may often be blamed for 'losing' Acholi culture, for disrespecting long-established norms and orders and for westernizing Acholiland. Implicit in these accusations, however, is also the realisation that the fate of Acholi society is left in the hands of the young generation – which in itself is a powerful incentive to engage with young people's concerns. Thus, peace building initiatives, rather than taking for granted and reinforcing conflict lines between generations, should make more attempts to instigate and strengthen intergenerational dialogue.

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