

**“The Thing Behind the Thing”:
The role and influence of religious leaders on
the use of traditional practices of acknowledgement in Uganda¹**

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The use of traditional practices to socially acknowledge past abuses is not yet fully understood. In places like Uganda, it has recently become fashionable to urge the use of traditional mechanisms. Yet little is understood about how or why such practices work or whether their use ought to be supported. As one piece of a larger study of traditional practices in Uganda, this paper considers the role and influence of Uganda’s religious leaders on the use of traditional practices. It considers the stands six major faith groups on the use of such traditional practices, before turning to their consideration of the use of neo-traditional practices.

Religious Landscape

The religious make-up of Uganda is as follows, according to 2002 census data:

- Roman Catholic 41.9%
- Protestant 42% (includes Anglican 35.9%, Pentecostal 4.6%, Seventh Day Adventist 1.5%)
- Muslim 12.1%
- Other 3.1%
- none 0.9%³

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³ Uganda Bureau of Statistics, *Uganda Population and Housing Census 2002* (Kampala: Government of Uganda, 2003).

Traditional Practices of Acknowledgement

Traditionally, societies around the world had highly complex, highly developed systems for dealing with conflict and the social deficits it brought about. These systems carried out a number of functions, including mediation, arbitration, adjudication, restitution, punishment, restoration and reconciliation⁴—the same retributive elements included in systems familiar in “modern” justice, all of which typically functioned in tandem.

These practices were largely shoved aside to make way for modern, Western practices. Colonial rulers disparaged traditional customs, and relegated them to the “natives”, establishing separate mechanisms for use by “non-natives,” creating a dual system.⁵ In Uganda, traditional practices were prohibited at the time of Independence, in favour of a harmonized British court system.⁶ Despite this, traditional practices have continued to be used in different parts of the country.⁷

Legislation authorizing traditional practices includes Article 129 of the 1995 Constitution, which provides for Local Council Courts, and the Children Statute 1996, which grants these courts authority over reconciliation, compensation, restitution, and apology.⁸ These practices were included in the recent Agreement on Accountability and Reconciliation and Annexure, which emerged out of the Juba Peace Talks.⁹ Although these mechanisms fulfill different roles within their respective societies, their commonality is their reliance upon traditional customs and ideas in the administration of justice in modern times.

⁴ Joanna R. Quinn, “Tried and True: The Role of Informal Mechanisms in Transitional Justice,” a paper presented at the International Society of Political Psychology Annual Meeting, Toronto, 6 July 2005.

⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1996), 109-110.

⁶ The British Colonial Office, *Report of the Uganda Relationship Committee*, 1961.

⁷ Briggs, *Uganda*, 22.

⁸ Government of Uganda, *The Children’s Statute*, 1996.

⁹ These documents are part of a five-part agreement signed in June 2007 and February 2008, respectively. Joanna R. Quinn, “Accountability and Reconciliation,” a paper presented at “Reconstructing Northern Uganda,” held by the Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict Research Group, The University of Western Ontario, London, ON: 9 April, 2008.

Traditional practices are widely used by many of the 56 different ethnic groups, particularly across Northern Uganda, where a violent conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army and Government of Uganda has been on-going since 1986.¹⁰ For example, the Acholi use a complex system of ceremonies in adjudicating everything from petty theft to murder;¹¹ in the current context, a number of ceremonies have been adapted to welcome ex-combatant child soldiers home, including *mato oput* (drinking the bitter herb), and *nyouo tong gweno* (a welcome ceremony in which an egg is stepped on over an *opobo* twig).¹² The Langi, Iteso, and Madi use similar practices.¹³ The Lugbara and Karamojong use systems of elder mediation in family, clan and inter-clan conflict.¹⁴ In 1985, an inter-tribal reconciliation ceremony signified that "there would be no war or fighting between Acholi and Madi, Kakwa, Lugbara or Alur of West Nile."¹⁵ A similar ceremony, *amelokwit*, took place between the Iteso and the Karamojong in 2004.¹⁶

In some areas, and particularly in the "greater south," these practices are no longer used regularly.¹⁷ From time to time, however, the Baganda use the traditional *kitewuliza*, a juridical process with a strong element of reconciliation, to bring about justice.¹⁸ The Bafumbira settle land disputes, in particular, through traditional practices.¹⁹ The "Annexure to the Agreement on

¹⁰ Joanna R. Quinn, "What of Reconciliation? Traditional Mechanisms of Acknowledgement in Uganda," in *Reconciliation(s)*, ed. Joanna R. Quinn (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 174-206.

¹¹ Thomas Harlacher *et al.*, *Traditional Ways of Coping in Acholi: Cultural provisions for reconciliation and healing from war* (Kampala: Thomas Harlacher and Caritas Gulu Archdiocese, 2006).

¹² Sverker Finnstrom, *Living With Bad Surroundings: War and Existential Uncertainty in Acholiland in Northern Uganda* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology no. 35, 2003), 297-299.

¹³ Government of Uganda and Lord's Resistance Army/Movement, "Annexure to the Agreement on Accountability and Reconciliation" (Juba, 19 Feb. 2008), Art.21.1.

¹⁴ Joseph Ndrua, "A Christian Study of the African Concept of Authority and the Administration of Justice among the Lugbari of North Western Uganda," (M.A. diss., Catholic Higher Institute of Eastern Africa, 1988), 42-56; also Bruno Novelli, *Karimojong Traditional Religion* (Kampala: Comboni Missionaries, 1999), 169-172, 333-340.

¹⁵ Finnstrom, *Living With Bad Surroundings*, 299.

¹⁶ Iteso focus group, 31 Aug. 2006, Kampala.

¹⁷ Joanna R. Quinn, "Here, Not There: Theorizing about why traditional mechanisms work in some communities, not others," a paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Meeting, 06 June, 2007.

¹⁸ John Mary Waliggo, "On Kitewuliza in Buganda, 3 May 2005," author's collection, 1.

¹⁹ Hon. Jus. Patrick Tabaro, High Court Justice, interview, 14 July 2008, Kampala.

Accountability and Reconciliation” also lists those mechanisms used by the Ankole, called *okurakaba*—although I have uncovered only weak anecdotal evidence of their continued use.²⁰

People from nearly all of the 56 ethnic groups in Uganda report that “everyone respects these traditions,”²¹ and that reconciliation remains an “essential and final part of peaceful settlement of conflict.”²² But many, particularly young, urban, educated Ugandans, also report that they have never participated in such ceremonies.²³ Still, a common understanding of these ceremonies and their meanings remains throughout Uganda—even in those areas where such practices are no longer used.

One element of these practices that is often overlooked is the spiritual dimension.²⁴ Religion in Africa encompasses both “imported” religions and African Traditional Religion (ATR)—a set of beliefs, practices, religious objects and places, and moral values.²⁵ Mbiti claims African religion is often misunderstood as ancestor worship, superstition, animism/paganism, magic/fetishism.²⁶

Many Ugandan Christian leaders equate traditional worship with satanism and spirit worship. “The common traditions all involve sacrifice and slaughter. Christians do not practice that kind of sacrifice because Jesus sacrificed once and for all. If I were to attend a traditional ceremony, I couldn’t be sure that they are not hiding some kind of sacrifice behind that thing. I

²⁰ Government of Uganda and Lord’s Resistance Army/Movement, “Annexure,” Art.21.1. Also G. William Katatumba, *Enganzi* (Prime Minister), Ankole Kingdom, and Chairman, Nkore Cultural Trust, interview, 24 June 2008, Kampala.

²¹ Confidential interview with Sabiny man studying at Makerere University, 7 Nov. 2004, Kampala.

²² John Mary Waliggo, “The Human Right to Peace for Every Person and Every Society,” a paper presented at Public Dialogue organized by Faculty of Arts, Makerere University with Uganda Human Rights Commission and NORAD, Kampala, Uganda, 4 Dec. 2003, author’s collection, 9.

²³ Northern Uganda focus group, 23 Aug. 2006, Kampala.

²⁴ David Westerlund, “‘Insiders’ and ‘Outsiders’ in the Study of African Religions: Notes on some problems of theory and method,” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minn: Paragon House, 1991), 17.

²⁵ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd rev. ed., (Kampala: East African Educational Publishers, 1991), 11-12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

would want to find out, for example, if 100% of the meat is eaten, or if some is left behind to hang on a tree for the gods, or if some of that blood is sprinkled to the gods.”²⁷ Many Christian leaders are reluctant to discuss the role and use of traditional practices of acknowledgement because of their association with spiritism. For them, because these practices have customarily been carried out within ceremonies of ATR, that link, and the traditional religious significance that many attribute to it, prevents them from sanctioning their use.

Particularly in Northern Uganda, scholars have included the role of ancestral spirits in their analyses of traditional practices of acknowledgement.²⁸ Yet most have sidestepped the poorly-understood importance of the spiritual in attempting to understand the social importance of traditional practices. This is problematic, since

[r]eligion... in Africa, if it is involved in everything, is also confused with everything: with laws and received customs, feasts, rejoicing, mourning, work and business, events, and accidents of life... it is included under the general expression “customs”—what is received from the ancestors, what has always been believed and done, the practices which must be observed to maintain the family, the village, the tribe, and whose neglect would bring about certain misfortunes.²⁹

“Traditional values, beliefs, practices... continue to be revered and manifested in almost all spheres of life and co-exist with modern values and values of the other three religions [Christianity, Islam, Baha’i], producing an interesting and complex mixture.”³⁰

[E]very African people has a set of beliefs and customs. Beliefs are an essential part of religion. Customs are not always religious, but many contain religious ideas. Religion helps to strengthen and perpetuate some of the customs; and in turn the customs do the same to religion. Beliefs and customs often go together. They cover all areas of life. Beliefs generally deal with religious ideas; customs deal with what people normally approve of and do.³¹

²⁷ Rev. Canon Job Bariira Mbukure, retired Bishop, Church of Uganda, interview, 02 October 2008, Kampala.

²⁸ Finnstrom, *Living With Bad Surroundings*, 270-272; Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda 1986-97* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1999).

²⁹ Bishop Alexandre LeRoy, *La religion des primitifs: Études sur l’histoire des religions, no.1* (Paris, 1925 [sic]), 57-58, cited in Vincent Mulago, “Traditional African Religion and Christianity,” in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, Minn: Paragon House, 1991), 127.

³⁰ Peter Kasenene, *Religious Ethics in Africa* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1998), 18.

³¹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 29.

Understanding the spiritual dimension, whether through the lens of “imported” religion, or ATR, is critical to understanding opinions about and reactions to traditional practices of acknowledgement.

What They Said

All the religious leaders I interviewed have some knowledge, both explicit and implicit, of these kinds of traditional practices of acknowledgement. With the recent focus on such practices in Northern Uganda, Ugandans, generally, are conversant about such mechanisms. Yet the religious leaders’ responses to my questions about traditional practices of acknowledgement were clearly divided, in ways that surprised me: on one hand, Catholics, joined with less fervor by Anglicans and Orthodox worshippers, support these kinds of practices; on the other hand, the “evangelicals” (including some Church of Uganda priests, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, Presbyterians, the Africa Inland Church and others),³² are against what these practices might represent, and have some difficulty supporting these practices, because of the “spiritual” attachment these ceremonies have traditionally had. These divisions and distinctions are elaborated below.

Roman Catholic Church

The doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) has explicitly embraced a doctrine of *inculturation*: “the continuous endeavour to make Christianity

³² Muslim representatives were also consulted, although this paper focuses solely on responses from Christian leaders.

truly “feel at home” in the cultures of each people.”³³ In Uganda, Catholic leaders have sought to “critically engage society and church leaders in debate, and encourage them to keep the indigenous values and ideas”³⁴ And so “the church [has adopted] some of the rituals used in crowning Kings in Buganda and Ankore, for example, in the liturgy of the feast of Christ the King.”³⁵

Regarding traditional practices of acknowledgement, the Roman Catholic Church is clear in its support of such practices—although this support has been clear only since the early 2000s.³⁶ Catholic leaders have embraced their use. “At the diocesan level, there is no resistance to traditions in our training manuals and that kind of thing. Often, we use traditional methods as a starting point, then move to Christian practices, because our participants are more familiar with traditional practices than Biblical ideas.”³⁷ Through the Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative, for example, Catholic priests regularly participate in the *mato oput* ceremony:

This reconciliation is achieved through the intertwining of the Christian... reconciliation ceremony together with that of the Acholi tradition... For the returning abducted children and/or rebels, this ceremony is preceded by a Church ceremony of reconciliation where a Catechist, a priest or whoever is leading the ceremony reads from the Bible, gives a homily stressing the point of reconciliation and *metanoia* and then performs a ceremony of reconciliation... That this practice is allowed and even accepted by the Church in Acholiland must be seen against the background of the early missionary and Church’s attitude towards any of the cultural practices where all cultural practices were uncritically and wholly condemned as ‘satanic’.³⁸

A number of Catholic priests have urged, “[t]he culture of traditional reconciliation and the modern way of life should aid each other for the real peace, progress and the common good of

³³ Rev. Fr. Dr. John Mary Waliggo, “Making a Church that is Truly African,” in *Inculturation*, eds. J.M. Waliggo, A. Roest Crolius, T. Nkéramihigo, J. Mutiso-Mbinda (Kampala: St. Paul Publications, 1986), 12

³⁴ Rev. Fr. Dr. John Mary Waliggo, interview, 09 Nov. 2004, Kampala.

³⁵ Laurent Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2004), 77.

³⁶ Robert Lukwiya Ochola, “The Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative in the Battlefield of Northern Uganda,” (M.A. diss., Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck, June 2006), 127-128.

³⁷ Godfrey Onentho, Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, interview, 26 Sept. 2008, Nsambya.

³⁸ Ochola, “The Acholi Religious Leaders,” 146.

man.”³⁹ “Aware of divergences between Ugandan traditional reconciliation, illustrated in *mato opwut* [*sic*], and the Scriptures, we honour the similarities...”⁴⁰

The Catholic bishops’ pastoral letter of 2004 explicitly supports the use of such practices in conjunction with Christian practices: “We need to build strong institutions for peace in the country and in every community, using fully both the good traditional means and the modern ones and particularly the Christian means of peace making, forgiveness and reconciliation.”⁴¹ This approach was endorsed by Pope John Paul II, who said, in an audience with Ugandan bishops in 2003, “As Bishops you have a serious duty to address the issues of particular importance for the social, economic, political and cultural life of the country to make the Church even more effectively present in those areas. Working out the implications of the Gospel for Christian life in the world and applying it to new situations is crucial to your ecclesiastical leadership...”⁴²

Church of Uganda

“The Church of Uganda believes that traditional culture has a contribution to make to the Church.”⁴³ The Archbishop has recognized this: “Darkness has come upon this country that even young people don’t know their culture.”⁴⁴ Although it is not nearly as strongly stated as within the Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion’s official position is that

³⁹ Vincent Emmanuel Okot Oburu, “Reconciliation: A Moral Therapy for Uganda,” (Ph.D. diss: Pontificia Universitas Lateranensis, 1987), 75.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴¹ Bakyenga, *A Concern for Peace, Unity and Harmony in Uganda*, 15. This letter was “a response to the invitation of the priests of the then diocese of Gulu to the Uganda Episcopal Conference as early as 1996.” Letter of the Priests of Gulu Diocese, Gulu Deaconry, to the Chairman of the UEC, Bishop Paul Kalanda, 02 August 1996, as cited in Ochola, “The Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative in the Battlefield of Northern Uganda,” 129.

⁴² Address of Pope John Paul II to the Ugandan Bishops, 27/9/2003, as cited in Bakyenga, *A Concern for Peace*, 7.

⁴³ Mbukure interview.

⁴⁴ The Most Rev. Henry Luke Orombi, Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, *The Dawn of a New Era*, 2nd ed. (Kampala: H.L. Orombi Publications, 2007), 10.

[t]rue inculturation entails a willingness to incorporate what is positive, and to challenge what is alien to the truth of the Christian faith. It has to make contact with the psychological as well as the intellectual feelings of the people. This is achieved through openness to innovation and experimentation, an encouragement of local creativity, and a readiness to reflect critically at each stage of the process - a process that, in principle is never ending.”⁴⁵

Yet “[a]lmost all African Christianity is fundamentalist [and] nearly all African Christians approach the Bible rather uncritically.”⁴⁶ And so a division exists between Ugandan Anglicans on the role of culture and faith.

Some, including the Bishop of Luweero Diocese, argue that “if it is bringing in a cultural method of reconciliation, let it come. If we can still use that tradition to resolve the conflict, we should. The Church of Uganda applies African theology, to see where is the will of God in this.”⁴⁷ This has been the approach of retired Bishop Macleord Baker Ochola, who has played an integral role in activities throughout Northern Uganda, including the “settlement of grave criminal offence [*sic*] through traditional means of reconciliation (*mato oput*).”⁴⁸ Others, and particularly evangelical believers within the Church of Uganda, “reject these traditional things altogether.”⁴⁹

Uganda Orthodox Church

The position of the Uganda Orthodox Church toward traditional practices of acknowledgement, as articulated to me by the Metropolitan, is straightforward:

⁴⁵ Victor Atta Bafoe and Luke Pato, “Proposition 3,” *Six Propositions for Anglicans* (Ecumenical Affairs Commissions Inter Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission); <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/commissions/iatdc/docs/2002propositions.cfm>; accessed 14 May 2009.

⁴⁶ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1999), 42.

⁴⁷ Bishop Evans Mukasa Kisekka, Bishop Luweero Diocese, Church of Uganda, interview, 30 September 2008, Luweero Town.

⁴⁸ Rt. Rev. Macleord Baker Ochola II, “Hope in the Storm: Experience of ARLPI in Conflict Resolution of the Northern Uganda Armed Conflict,” a paper presented at the Swedish Seminar on Northern Uganda, Mission Church of Uppsala, Uppsala, Sweden, 15 April 2004.

⁴⁹ Joshua Kitakule, Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, interview, 24 Sept. 2008, Kampala.

Jesus took over humanity, not to remain man, but to make man become God. So when coming to culture, this does not mean that the Gospel must remain culture, but that the culture must become Gospel. Many things in Buganda have come in to Christianity and people understand very well when they begin those cultural things. Some things must be cleaned up and reformed and can be accepted after cleansing. So any culture that does not fit with the Gospel does not go.⁵⁰

The UOC has little understanding of the conflict in Northern Uganda, and is disconnected from Ugandans outside of its slim membership in southern parts of the country. Even its support of the ecumenical Uganda Joint Christian Council and its peacebuilding initiatives is tenuous: “Because of certain issues in Uganda, we will be seen to be participating.”⁵¹ Similarly, the UOC has adopted a complicated position with regard to its involvement in the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda: “In the IRCU, it is difficult to find consensus, since it is not based on the Christian faith”⁵²—the implication being that the UOC chooses not to support issues within the IRCU on which it disagrees.

Pentecostal Churches

The Pentecostal Churches in Uganda are divided into several denominations, all “externally influenced” by Pentecostal churches in Canada, Singapore, U.S.A., and Kenya.⁵³ Yet the leaders and members of the various Pentecostal churches have a common view on the matter of traditional practices of acknowledgement, “rejecting any assimilation between the church and the world, and between Christianity and African custom.”⁵⁴ Said one pastor, “If there is an

⁵⁰ The Metropolitan of Kampala and All Uganda, Jonah Lwanga, Uganda Orthodox Church, interview, 30 Sept. 2008, Namungoona.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Gifford, *African Christianity*, 100-102.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 96.

opportunity for cultural involvement, it should come in through the church.”⁵⁵ Another pastor explained,

The bottom line is that we want to support a Jesus culture. The challenge with those traditional practices is *the thing behind the thing is the thing*. Traditional practices facilitate traditional worship and that’s where we part company. So in Uganda, there is a rise of talking about our culture—that’s about cultural worship, and traditional gods... The biggest challenge with traditional peace practices is a resurgence of traditional worship, which pushes people toward syncretism. So we try to steer clear of these.⁵⁶

Another pastor echoed this thought: “Cultural institutions are not the problem. The differences between Believers and non-Believers rests on the issue of rituals. And some rituals should be thrown out because Christianity can offer better ceremonies. Being discernful [*sic*] and looking into traditions can offer better redeemed tradition and culture. Even with diversity, the only culture we will follow is God’s.”⁵⁷ The prevailing evangelical sentiment is that “the only way to be faithful to Christian commitments is some form or other of withdrawal to constitute a superior Christian culture.”⁵⁸

Presbyterian Church

As with the Pentecostal Church, the Presbyterian Church is divided into several different associations. While all are evangelical at their root, their stated positions on the use of traditional practices of acknowledgement are similarly divided. On one side, a reformed Presbyterian pastor told me that “there are still some kind of practices between those who live in a life of misfortune, who consult the witchdoctor who demands money, slaughter cows, give fetishes and

⁵⁵ Pastor Jonnes T. Bakimi, Mission for National Reconciliation, interview, 19 Nov. 2004, Kampala.

⁵⁶ Pastor Franco J. Onaga, Kampala Pentecostal Church, interview, 01 Oct. 2008, Kampala.

⁵⁷ Pastor Patriot Jonan Kasango, Mission for Reconciliation, interview, 19 Nov. 2004, Kampala.

⁵⁸ D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 80.

drugs. We can see no logic in it. Even funeral rites have become attached to some kind of spirits. So the Church does not go through these ceremonies to pay homage to the spirits.”⁵⁹

Other Presbyterian pastors are more willing to consider the incorporation of traditional practices. “Evangelical Christians in Africa were more colonized and therefore alienated. So they will not have anything to do with it. Some evangelical churches are led by those without any formal training [and so are ill-equipped to deal with such things]. Other evangelical pastors have responded to people’s needs. For example, they pray for people’s cows or their coffee trees. What they get from the Bible, they now bring back to earth and speak it at the common level.”⁶⁰

Seventh Day Adventist Union of Uganda

Seventh Day Adventists “do not discard culture completely. But if the cultural trait is satanic, we discard it. The prayer of the witchdoctors would be rejected, but slaughtering [an animal as a representation of reconciliation] and eating together would be okay, since eating together allows us to draw near and begin to be together. The SDA works for replacing cultural things with God, and the power of God is okay. If you want people to reconcile, you invite God to be in your midst.”⁶¹ The President of the SDA Union added:

Seventh Day Adventists believe that at salvation, a person parts with some things from his old life. The SDA believes when we wrong each other, as Christians, we must ask forgiveness from God, who will forgive all sins; after you are clear with God, you can go to your brother and discuss. If you agree on that level, and make a declaration that my faith does not go into the sacrifice [of an animal for slaughter in a reconciliation ceremony], we can share a meal together. Some traditional practices are good, because they bring the communities back together.⁶²

⁵⁹ Pastor Emma Kiwanuka, Dean, Westminster Theological College and Seminary, interview, 03 Oct. 2008, Kajjansi.

⁶⁰ Hon. Rev. Dr. Kefa Sempangi, First Presbyterian Church, interview, 18 Nov. 2004, Kampala.

⁶¹ Pastor William Bagambe, Seventh Day Adventist Union of Uganda, interview, 29 Sept. 2008, Kampala.

⁶² Pastor John L. Wani, President, Seventh Day Adventist Union of Uganda, interview, 01 Oct. 2008, Kampala.

Africa Inland Church

The Africa Inland Church was founded out of the revival movement of the 1920s-1940s, when revivalists “def[ied] the authority of the [Anglican] church... [because they] found several practices within the [Anglican] church objectionable.”⁶³ The AIC was founded by Africans and run by Africans in line with contemporary African thinking.⁶⁴ It was, therefore, among the first of the African churches to allow the “free use of spontaneous African music” and other cultural practices.⁶⁵ Its contemporary pastors, however, are not as keen to sanction traditional practices of acknowledgement: “If people want to do that and believe in traditional methods, we will also teach them the Word of God. We want to start with known ways to build peace and then move to the unknown. Evangelicals know that traditionally people have been doing these things, but want the Bible to shape their lives. We are trying to allow them to use symbols of peace, and then change them with Christ.”⁶⁶ Still, that same pastor allowed that “some traditions are not bad. They should not be rejected entirely, but harmonize them.”⁶⁷

Understanding the Complexities of the Positions of the Faith Groups

One complicating factor, of course, is that although census respondents may nominally claim adherence to one particular faith group, there is no way to properly gauge their commitment to that faith. This is important for two reasons: First, it is difficult to tell just how much influence

⁶³ F.B. Welbourn and B.A. Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 34-35.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 93-94, 99-100.

⁶⁶ Wilson Waswa, Africa Inland Church, interview, 18 Nov. 2008, Kampala.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

the policies and practices of the religious leaders have on their respective populations.⁶⁸ Second, it is quite common for Ugandans to adhere *both* to their stated faith community as well as to ATR, which is not reported. There is significant evidence, anecdotal and otherwise, to suggest that Ugandans carry out the requisite ceremonies of both faiths on important matters, “just to be sure.” For example, “in many cases still... after [church] baptism the parents of twins visit traditional healers for protection rituals.”⁶⁹ Even Vice Presidential candidate Prof. Gilbert Bukenya, a nominal Roman Catholic, prayed publicly at a witchdoctor’s shrine to “ask his ancestors for peace and to grant President Yoweri Museveni a third term in office.”⁷⁰ The census data do not reflect this duality of faith and practice.

There is also a disconnect between those who are affected by conflict and those who are not.⁷¹ This is important for peoples’ understanding of traditional practices of acknowledgement. Many of the religious leaders I interviewed noted that “those who have been through the conflict have a better idea and can witness cleansing ceremonies.”⁷² And there was some recognition that the responses of religious leaders in conflict-affected communities in the North was necessarily different because of the affect of conflict in those communities. “Bishop Odama’s experience [in Kitgum] is different. His view is from an experiential perspective, whereas Fr. Waliggo’s [a Kampala-based priest and academic] is from an intellectual perspective.”⁷³ “If I were in Northern Uganda, I would allow it. But then when they have done this, I would sit with them and demonstrate the sufficiency of the blood of Jesus to cleans much better.”⁷⁴

⁶⁸ The Uganda census provides no measure of religiosity, such as church attendance, to judge the importance of religion to respondents.

⁶⁹ Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 81.

⁷⁰ Eddie Ssejjoba, “Bukenya visits shrine for third term,” *New Vision* 08 Dec. 2004.

⁷¹ The disconnect is at many levels, but significantly between Bantus in the south and Nilotics in the north. Quinn, “Here, Not There.”

⁷² Sister Specioza Kabahuma, Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, interview, 25 Sept. 2008, Nsambya.

⁷³ Onenthon interview.

⁷⁴ Mbukure interview.

Modification: A Possibility for Unanimity?

While there is no common position among the religious leaders I interviewed, as demonstrated above, on the use of traditional practices of acknowledgement, it seems to me that one possibility might be the modification of some elements of the traditional practices to make them acceptable. Indeed, the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda “wants to support a hybrid model.”⁷⁵ And so I also asked the religious leaders about this.

For example, I inquired about the possibility of holding common services of prayer. This has been done with high levels of participation from Ugandans in Luweero and Soroti,⁷⁶ across the Greater North,⁷⁷ and elsewhere. Roman Catholic, Church of Uganda, and Uganda Orthodox Church officials indicated that they would be pleased to participate, and had done so. Other religious leaders, however, were more or less supportive. Pastor Wani, SDAUU President, for example, said, “We have no problem praying for others. We believe that there is a God who listens to all religions. God’s serious concern is for all people, so we can pray together.”⁷⁸ One Pentecostal pastor said, “If there is a joint service, [our church] will join to say we are together in this course.”⁷⁹ Not everyone, however, was in agreement. One reformed Presbyterian pastor expressed his discomfort praying with non-Believers, saying “We would go to a common prayer, but if a Muslim offers prayers, we would not say Amen.”⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Kitakule interview.

⁷⁶ Bakimi interview.

⁷⁷ Gilbert M. Khadiagala, “Case Study Two: The Role of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) in Peace Building in Northern Uganda,” in *Greater Horn of Africa Peace Building Project* (Mar. 2001), 3.

⁷⁸ Wani interview.

⁷⁹ Onaga interview.

⁸⁰ Kiwanuka interview.

I also asked about the possibility of holding communal meals to demonstrate that reconciliation has taken place. This has roots in African Traditional Religion.⁸¹ As we;;, “worldwide, to eat together is a symbol of common union among people; and if these people had previously been at odds and perhaps harming one another, the shared meal clearly says that they regret this and wish the alienation to cease.”⁸² Yet not all of the religious leaders were in agreement: The Seventh Day Adventist Church advocates a cautious approach: “Eating together would be okay. Eating together allows us to draw near and begin to be together.”⁸³ “Slaughtering as a feast to celebrate coming together to share a meal is okay. Slaughtering is not okay to appease the spirits.”⁸⁴ One Pentecostal pastor said, “Anything that fosters peace in the community, it would be good for us to participate, mindful of these barriers. Seeing the churches cooperate on reconciliation is a good thing.”⁸⁵ Even the multi-faith UJCC is in agreement: “We want to pull out what is good. We can eat together, and that sort of thing. Those who use them should explain their practices to those who don’t understand so we can sit together.”⁸⁶

The Metropolitan of the UOC, however, expressed a contradiction, saying, “the Orthodox Church is not able to be active within a system of ecumenism.”⁸⁷ This is somewhat puzzling, since the UOC has been strongly ecumenical. A reformed Presbyterian pastor said, “I hesitate to

⁸¹ In Tooro, “after talking [former enemies would] sit together for a meal, eating from the same dish, drinking from the same pot, to signify that now we are together.” Sister Specioza Kabahuma, Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, interview, 10 Nov. 2004, Nsambya. In Acholi, after the conflict is resolved, “both sides begin eating together. After eating inside the house, the lower jaws of both sheep are taken by both sides, and the heads of the clans will take and carry back to their homes to be put safely away as a living testimony that the blood of the sheep had cleansed the once-hostile clans.” Geresome Latim, Ker Kwaro Acholi, interview, 22 Nov. 2004, Gulu Town. In Busoga, “reconciliation would end with a meal contributed to by both sides.” Fr. Richard Kayaga, Director, Cultural Research Centre, interview, 23 Sept. 2008, Jinja.

⁸² Bernard J. Cooke and Gary Macy, *Christian Symbol and Ritual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 111.

⁸³ Bagambe interview.

⁸⁴ Wani interview.

⁸⁵ Onaga interview.

⁸⁶ Stephen Kisembo, Uganda Joint Christian Council, interview, 02 October 2008, Kampala.

⁸⁷ Metropolitan Lwanga interview.

sanction it. We can eat with Muslims and Catholics and others. But when traditional ones are involved... [we can't].”⁸⁸

As such, there is relatively strong agreement between the various religious groups about common rituals that might be jointly adapted and then adopted. It is, then, possible to imagine that these kinds of elements might be adapted in the development of “neo-traditional”⁸⁹ symbols and ceremonies to be used in furthering peace, justice and reconciliation.

Conclusions

Religion is important in Uganda. Fully 83.9% of the population claims adherence to Christianity. And these faith communities are active throughout the country.

The disagreement between the various religious groups surveyed in this study, however, is not as broad as it initially seems. 77.8% of the population adheres either to the Roman Catholic Church or to the Church of Uganda, both of which are strong proponents of the incorporation of traditional practices of acknowledgement.⁹⁰ The other remaining Christian faith groups discussed above (SDA, Pentecostal, AIC, Presbyterian) amount to only 7.4% of the population—and on issues of adapted, updated, neo-traditional practices, many of these agreed that they could be part of such activities.

All of this is relevant because these kinds of practices continue to provide a common basis of understanding for nearly all people across the country. It is important to utilize those kinds of systems in which people trust, and that they understand—contrary to the results of the use of “Western” mechanisms like the truth commission in Uganda and elsewhere. The promotion of social acknowledgement is a necessary condition for the successful rebuilding of

⁸⁸ Kiwanuka interview.

⁸⁹ Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 192.

⁹⁰ This figure climbs to 77.94% when UOC membership is added.

any community.⁹¹ And so a “blessing” of the modified use of customary practices by the religious leaders to work toward such a goal seems promising.

⁹¹ Joanna R. Quinn, *The Politics of Acknowledgement: Truth Commissions in Uganda and Haiti* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), *forthcoming*