

WHAT OF RECONCILIATION?¹

TRADITIONAL MECHANISMS OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT IN UGANDA

by
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INTRODUCTION

In any context of social and political transition after a period of mass atrocity, the steps a society takes to deal with the aftermath of such abuses are important. As distinct from the physical infrastructure, including the rebuilding of roads, schools and hospitals, for example, the psycho-social and socio-political needs of those within the society are paramount. The social infrastructure, which might include the justice system, civil society, and participation in the political system, for example, is often also in disrepair. In most cases, the finite financial resources of the society enable it to tackle either the physical *or* the social. The trade-off in selecting one over the other can have obvious consequences. Yet engaging in the repair of the social infrastructure can have many and significant benefits. And societal acknowledgement appears to play a central role in this process.

Post-colonial Uganda provides an interesting case within which to explore this type of social repair. The population of the country was subjected to a series of horrifying human rights atrocities at the hands of brutal leaders including Milton Obote, Idi Amin, and others during the period immediately following Uganda's declaration of independence and for much of the next twenty-five years. In 1986, Yoweri Museveni was elected president, and called a halt to these vicious crimes. Among his efforts in this regard was the establishment of a truth commission, The Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights, which operated from 1986 to

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1994. However, the commission was beset by many and significant obstacles, including an extreme shortage of funding, and a paucity of political will. In the end, the social and political outcome of the Ugandan truth commission was negligible.

Building on an existing study of acknowledgement and the Ugandan truth commission, this essay looks instead at the possibility of using traditional practices instead of an externally-imposed body like the truth commission to affect a process of societal reconciliation and acknowledgement. Ugandan society is rich with traditional practices, symbols, rites and ceremonies, many of which are explored below, and all of which could prove useful in restoring and rebuilding society. The possibilities associated with the use of such informal traditional mechanisms of acknowledgement are varied, but promising. So, too, are the number of impediments associated with the potential use of traditional mechanisms. These are explored in the essay which follows.

BACKGROUND AND CURRENT UGANDAN CONFLICT

In October, 1962, Uganda declared Independence from Britain. Its first President, Milton Obote, held office from 1962-1971. Life under Obote and his successors turned out to be very different than it had been under the British. From 1962 until 1986, Uganda underwent a series of coups, culminating in a great concentration of power in the hands of the head of state. Obote's first term in power was characterized by significant numbers of riots and armed attacks.³ As it turned out, Obote's term in office merely foreshadowed the violence which would ensue in only a few short years. In 1969, the political system underwent tremendous change when Obote banned all

³ Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Rainer Sieglar, *Political Stability and Development: A Comparative Analysis of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990), 196.

political parties other than his own in order to prolong the state of emergency that had been declared in 1966.⁴ Obote's term in office, however, soon drew to an abrupt halt.

In 1971 General Idi Amin Dada overthrew Obote, suspended the constitution and ruled under a provisional government structure until 1979. To sustain his authority, Amin, who came to be known as "the butcher," carried out a reign of terror, systematically and brutally murdering and torturing those he considered to stand in his way.⁵ In 1972, Amin expelled the more than 70,000 ethnic Asians living in Uganda and confiscated their property. Violence was rampant during this period, and the military and paramilitary mechanisms of the state conducted brutal campaigns of torture.⁶ "The butcher's" lasting legacy is one of heinous torture and brutal killings.⁷ It is estimated that approximately 500,000 Ugandans were killed by Amin and his supporters.⁸ Amin was defeated in 1979 with the assistance of Tanzanian intervention. Interim governments were appointed in 1979 and 1980.

From 1980-1985, Obote returned to power. The country was once again beleaguered by "rampant human rights abuses,"⁹ this time far worse than anything they had experienced during his first term in office. The paramilitary apparatus of the state again began its practice of routinely violating human rights by means of rape, torture, murder, looting and destruction of property.¹⁰ The scale of repression and abuse was roughly the same as it had been under Amin. The only difference for many Ugandans was that their former leader (Amin) had been substituted for another (Obote) with a heightened and reinvigorated fury. It is now estimated that between

⁴ Berg-Schlosser and Siegler, 100.

⁵ Nancy G. Wright, "History From 1971," *Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara*, ed. John Middleton (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996), 306.

⁶ Berg-Schlosser and Siegler 199; Edward Khiddu-Makubuya, "Paramilitarism and Human Rights," *Conflict Resolution in Uganda*, ed. Kumar Rupesinghe (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 1989), 141-157.

⁷ Khiddu-Makubuya, "Paramilitarism", 147-154.

⁸ Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 41.

⁹ "Uganda," *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 1999*, ed. Robert Famighetti (Mahwah, NJ: Primedia Reference, 1998), 852.

¹⁰ Berg-Schlosser and Siegler, 199, Khiddu-Makubuya, "Paramilitarism", 153.

320,000¹¹ and 500,000¹² people were killed during Obote's second term in office. Obote was overthrown in July, 1985.

Yoweri Museveni, leader of the coup that overthrew Obote, came to power in January, 1986, abolishing all political parties except the National Resistance Movement (NRM) that had made his victory possible.¹³ Conditions began to improve in Uganda after Museveni took power. The human rights abuses have abated somewhat and the Ugandans now enjoy a relative degree of freedom unknown to them under the three post-independence regimes of Obote and Amin.

But not everyone supports Museveni. There have been more than twenty insurgencies since the NRM came to power in 1986.¹⁴ One of the most deadly and longest-lasting has been the nineteen-year rebellion of The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)¹⁵ in the Acholi sub-region of Northern Uganda. The LRA, which takes its name from an expressed desire to live by the Ten Commandments,¹⁶ is fighting against Museveni's control of the north.¹⁷ It is widely estimated

¹¹ Thomas P. Ofcansky, *Uganda: Tarnished Pearl of Africa* (Boulder: Westview, 1996), 55.

¹² Abdul Nadduli, LCV District Chairman, Luweero Triangle, interview by author, 17 Nov. 2004, Luweero, Uganda.

¹³ For a much more complete account of Uganda's history from 1962, see Berg-Schlosser and Siegler, 97-132.

¹⁴ These include rebellions by the Action Restore Peace, Allied Democratic Forces, Apac rebellion, Citizen Army for Multiparty Politics, Force Obote Back, Former Uganda National Army, Holy Spirit Movement, the Lord's Army, Lord's Resistance Army, National Federal Army, National Union for the Liberation of Uganda, Ninth October Movement, People's Redemption Army, Uganda Christian Democratic Army, Uganda Federal Democratic Front, Uganda Freedom Movement, Ugandan National Democratic Army, Uganda National Federal Army, Ugandan National Liberation Front, Ugandan National Rescue Fronts I and II, Ugandan People's Army, Ugandan People's Democratic Army, Uganda Salvation Army, and the West Nile Bank Front. Compiled from Lucy Hovil and Zachary Lomo, *Working Paper 11: Behind the Violence: Causes, Consequences and the Search for Solutions to the War in Northern Uganda*, (Kampala: Refugee Law Project, Feb. 2004), 4; and Hovil and Lomo, *Working Paper 15: Whose Justice? Perceptions of Uganda's Amnesty Act 2000: The Potential for Conflict Resolution and Long-Term Reconciliation* (Kampala: Refugee Law Project, Feb. 2005), 6.

¹⁵ The LRA is led by Joseph Kony, whose campaign follows that of the Holy Spirit Movement, led by a woman called Alice Lakwena who claimed to receive visions from God that told her to carry out vicious attacks. In 1986, Lakwena claimed to have up to 18,000 soldiers, although others estimate the number at 7,000-10,000. Lakwena is now in exile in Kenya. See Tim Allen, *War and Justice in Northern Uganda: An Assessment of the International Criminal Court's Intervention* (London: Crisis States Research Centre, Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics, Feb. 2005), 14; and Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999), 67.

¹⁶ "Lord's Resistance Army," [article on-line]; available from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/lra.htm>; internet; accessed 29 June 2003.

¹⁷ Catherine Barnes and Okello Lucima, "Introduction," *Accord* (2002) 11: 1.

that 30,000 children¹⁸ from that region have been abducted by the rebels, the boys to act as soldiers, and kidnapped girls to be used by rebels as sex slaves and as carriers of supplies. More than 1.6 million people from the region have been forced to flee their homes and currently live in several internally displaced persons (IDP) camps throughout the region.¹⁹ Fighting and abduction continue, although throughout late 2004 and early 2005, various cease-fires have been declared and negotiations are on-going, although similar initiatives including the Pece Stadium Accord (1988) the Addis Ababa Accord (1990) and earlier peace talks (1994) failed.²⁰ In 2000 the government enacted the Amnesty Act. By January 2005 the Amnesty Commission had received 14,695 applications for amnesty.²¹ The International Criminal Court began investigating possible war crimes committed in the war between the LRA and government forces in July 2004. It is uncertain how far such investigations will go, as Acholi leaders are calling for a halt to proceedings, while the government is pressing for indictments.²² Still, the government allocated only \$164,239 CAD, which represents a scant 0.01% of the national budget, to reconstruction efforts in Northern Uganda in the 2004-2005 budget.²³

Another area of instability within Uganda is Karamoja, a large geographic area located in the Northeast of the country. The Karamojong live separately from the rest of Uganda in a traditional²⁴ and highly stratified society centred around cattle, which figure prominently in all

¹⁸ Tim Allen points out that “the scale of abduction is a matter of speculation” due to insufficient monitoring. See *War and Justice in Northern Uganda*, iii.

¹⁹ Geresome Latim, Secretary to the Paramount Chief of Acholi, interview by author, 22 Nov. 2004, Gulu, Uganda.

²⁰ *Listen to the People: Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Uganda* (Kampala: HURIPPEC, 03 May 2004), 92-93.

²¹ Amnesty Commission internal statistics cited in Hovil and Lomo, *Working Paper 15: Whose Justice?*, 7.

²² “Uganda: ICC could suspend northern investigations – spokesman,” *Reuters AlertNet*, 18 Apr. 2005 [article online] available from <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/IRIN/05158e1f65cf131af987dec5d00012c2.htm>, accessed 28 Apr 2005.

²³ Confidential interview by author with Office of the Prime Minister official, 30 Oct. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

²⁴ Levi Ochieng, “Peace Initiatives and Challenges in Karamojong Conflicts,” in *Living Beyond Conflict: For Peace and Tolerance* (Kampala: ABETO, 2000), 153.

aspects of life, including bride price, status, and religious and ceremonial practice.²⁵ Traditionally, cattle raiding was originally carried out with spears, but in modern times the Karamojong have adopted the use of automatic weapons, variously stolen from or supplied by the government in Kampala and other allies, including the Sudan People's Liberation Army, and others in Somalia and Kenya. "The current government of President Yoweri Museveni allowed the Karamojong to retain their arms in order to protect themselves from external raids by the Turkana and Pokot in neighbouring Kenya."²⁶ But the Karamojong have begun to raid farther afield. The Department for Karamoja Affairs "was set up to address the special social, economic and security needs of the area and its neighbourhood."²⁷ In 2000, it was estimated that the Karamojong people possessed between 100,000 and 150,000 weapons.²⁸ In December 2000, the government passed the Disarmament Act, offering iron sheets and ox-ploughs in exchange for weapons. The programme was initially resisted by the Karamojong, and in the end less than 10,000 guns were ever recovered.²⁹ In 2004, the government continued to pursue policies of development, including agriculture, employment and education in Karamoja, along with reconciliation.³⁰ Yet, Museveni maintained a hard line on the issue: "This is the last warning to those fools. We are preparing a last dose for Kony and those holding illegal guns in Karamoja.

²⁵ Bruno Novelli, *Aspects of Karimojong Ethnosociology* (Verona: Museum Combonianum no.44, 1988), 83.

²⁶ "Uganda: Focus on growing tension in Karamoja," *IRINNews.org*, 22 Mar. 2000 [article on-line] available from http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=24150&SelectRegion=East_Africa&SelectCountry=UGANDA, accessed 28 Apr. 2005.

²⁷ Government of Uganda, "Presidential and Foreign Affairs Committee Report on the Ministerial Policy Statement and Budget Estimates for the Financial Year 2003/04," [report on-line]; available from http://www.parliament.go.ug/presidential%20rpt7_session3.htm; internet; accessed 01 June 2004.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Karamoja Data Centre, "The Disarmament Process in Karamoja," [data on-line] available from <http://www.karamojadata.org/disarmament.htm>, accessed 28 Apr. 2008.

³⁰ Alex Okello, Under Secretary of Pacification and Development, interview by author, 04 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

We want peace everywhere.”³¹ Still, budget allocations for Karamoja amounted to \$87,075, which represents just 0.00015% of the total national budget.³²

These are just two of the conflicts which have played out and continue in the country. Ugandans are still living with the legacy of the one million people who were killed between 1962 and 1986, and real rebuilding has never really begun. The Ministry of State for Luweero Triangle, for example, is only just now attending to rebuilding the houses and schools destroyed between 1980 and 1985.³³ Uganda itself is a country much in need of healing, both physically and socially. It is one of the states in the world most badly affected by the HIV and AIDS.³⁴ NGOs have been forced to assume much of the encumbrance of the provision and contribution of support,³⁵ as the state itself has failed to provide much of what is needed, due in part to its inability to afford financial assistance.³⁶ And although its government boasts of the country as a “forged union of many peoples... [who] live and work together as one people, all proud to be Ugandans, while each cherishes their history and traditions,”³⁷ the reality is far different.³⁸

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO RECONCILIATION

Getting past that reality is very difficult. In countries like Uganda, where chronic conflict has been on-going for long periods of time, the rebuilding of that society, both physically and socially, is an especially difficult task. And, although there seem to be no shortage of donors

³¹ “Uganda's Museveni vows to punish corrupt troops,” *Reuters AlertNet*, 04 Apr. 2005 [article on-line] available from <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L04222434.htm>, accessed 28 Apr. 2005.

³² Confidential interview by author with Office of the Prime Minister official, 30 Oct. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

³³ Semakula Kiwanuka, Minister of State for Luweero Triangle, interview by author, 01 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

³⁴ “Mariandina AIDS Research Foundation,” *National Information Centre*, <http://www.mariandina.or.ug>, accessed Sep. 11, 1999.

³⁵ Hansen and Twaddle, 15.

³⁶ Susan Dicklich, “Indigenous NGOs and political participation,” *Developing Uganda*, eds. Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 145.

³⁷ “Uganda Arts and Culture,” *National Information Centre*, <http://www.nic.ug/Arts>, Sep. 11, 1999.

³⁸ *Listen to the People*, 56-60.

ready and willing to provide funds to repair the physical infrastructure in its many forms, and to address the outward signs of poverty and destitution, the repair of the social infrastructure is often overlooked. Reckoning with past injustices, however, is an important step in the process of acknowledgement and forgiveness, leading to the rebuilding of a viable democracy, a restructured judicial system, and strengthened networks of civic engagement, all of which may lead, ultimately, to increased levels of social trust. And these are particularly important in overcoming the causes of conflict within divided transitional societies.

As I have written elsewhere, there is a strong and causal relationship between acknowledgement and forgiveness, social trust, democracy, and reconciliation. Acknowledging the events of the past and one's complicity in them is particularly important. My theory of acknowledgement presupposes that acknowledgement is necessarily a multi-faceted process, comprised of separate and distinct acts to be undertaken by individuals within a given society.³⁹ I have identified several of the components of acknowledgement, all of which are important in moving beyond acknowledgement to strengthen those aspects of civil society which are necessary for it to function as a cohesive whole. It is my hypothesis that acknowledgement is the one stage through which any successful process of societal recovery must pass.

In order for any society to begin to move forward, it must come to terms with its past. By this, I mean that people must be called to account for past events. In facing the details of history, past events can be revisited, evidence uncovered, people and institutions potentially held accountable, and a rationale of deterrence⁴⁰ made possible. Some, however, believe that such

³⁹ I believe it to be possible for individual acts or sentiments, particularly of trust and memory, to be extrapolated to the collective; that is to say, those acts which might normally be ascribed to an individual might often be attributed to groups of people, keeping in mind that groups are "logically distinct" from their members. See Trudy Govier, *Social Trust and Human Communities* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 206.

⁴⁰ Diane F. Orentlicher, "Settling Accounts: The Duty to Prosecute Human Rights Violations of a Prior Regime," ed. Neil J. Kritz, vol. 1, *Transitional Justice: How Emerging Democracies Reckon with Former Regimes* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995), 406-407.

details should instead be left well enough alone.⁴¹ And, while it is true that history tends to alter memory, leading to questions of accuracy⁴² and credibility,⁴³ both individuals and societies appear in many cases to benefit from talking about those events which have taken place. It is in the open discussion of these atrocities, in the revealing of the criminal actions of the perpetrator, that the victim can begin to take control of her circumstances. By implication, a society filled with powerless individual victims comprises a suffering, struggling whole. If wrongs are never discussed, the dregs of past atrocities are simply left to fester under the surface of that society.

Similarly, the expression of emotion, although terribly difficult in many cases, is a healthy response. A simple accounting of the stages of grieving⁴⁴ – denial/isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – reveals that individuals must go through a wide range of emotions before they are able to move beyond the overwhelming feelings of loss experienced in traumatic situations. The theory cited here was developed around the grieving process of “ordinary” individuals, who deal with many of the same feelings as those people in societies recovering from an extended period of atrocity:⁴⁵ feelings of loss, lack of self-worth/self-respect,⁴⁶ and helplessness.⁴⁷ Often, however, victims and their families are forced to carry on with the tasks of everyday living without benefit of reflection on the past. These people may

⁴¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?” ed. Geoffrey Hartman, *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 114-116.

⁴² Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1938), chapters 1,6.

⁴³ Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 37-38.

⁴⁴ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (Don Mills: Maxwell Macmillan, 1969), 34-105.

⁴⁵ There is no question that trauma and grief are, indeed, related, and that trauma can complicate the grieving process. See Cynthia Blomquist, “Comfort for the Grieving Child,” in *Healing the Children of War*, ed. Phyllis Kilbourn (Monrovia, CA: MARC Publications, 1997), 58-61.

⁴⁶ Jeffrie G. Murphy, “Retributive Hatred: an essay on criminal liability and the emotions,” in *Liability and responsibility: Essays in law and morals*, eds. R.G. Frey and Christopher W. Morris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 360.

⁴⁷ Trudy Govier, *Revenge, Forgiveness and the Unforgivable* (Calgary: unpublished manuscript, 2001), 24.

consciously remember nothing of past events.⁴⁸ The daily trauma they continue to experience may simply become normalized.⁴⁹ Or else, a conscious decision is made to reject the truth surrounding the past, as witnessed in denial and revisionism,⁵⁰ and this denial becomes internalized as a means of coping, in much the same manner as those who normalize events. Not until the facts are recognized and people have come to terms with the events of the past can the society begin to grieve its losses.

The combination of coming to terms with the past and emotional response hinge upon memory, and the remembering of past events. Past recollections form a critical component of the acknowledgement process. Individual memories, in fact, appear to become situated “within the larger narrative of the community,”⁵¹ forming a cultural⁵² or social⁵³ collective memory. In this way, remembering by individuals contributes to the creation of a self-portrait of the larger society. Others, however, disagree, citing the recollection of past events as divisive,⁵⁴ and having the capacity to jeopardize the future of the society.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, memory has long been recognized as a fundamental element of the building of stronger societies.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Hillel Klein and Ilany Kogan, “Some Observations on Denial and Avoidance in Jewish Holocaust and Post-Holocaust Experience,” in *Denial: A Clarification of Concepts and Research*, ed. E.L. Edelstein, Donald L. Nathanson, and Andrew M. Stone (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), 299-304.

⁴⁹ Rafael Moses, “Denial in Political Process,” in *Denial: A Clarification of Concepts and Research*, ed. E.L. Edelstein, Donald L. Nathanson, and Andrew M. Stone (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), 291-295.

⁵⁰ Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 20; and Trudy Govier, “What is Acknowledgement and Why is it Important?” (Calgary: unpublished manuscript, 2000), 11.

⁵¹ Mark Osiel, *Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory, and the Law* (New Brunswick (USA): Transaction Publishers, 1997), 258.

⁵² Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 2.

⁵³ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1-3.

⁵⁴ Paula K. Speck, “The Trial of the Argentine Juntas,” in *University of Miami Inter-American Law Review* 18 (1987) 491-533 in Mark Osiel, *Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory, and the Law* (New Brunswick (USA): Transaction Publishers, 1997), 14.

⁵⁵ Lawrence L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, 38.

⁵⁶ Carina Perelli, “*Memoria de Sangre*: Fear, Hope, and Disenchantment in Argentina,” in *Remapping Memory*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (1994), 39, 49-50 in Mark Osiel, *Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory, and the Law* (New Brunswick (USA): Transaction Publishers, 1997), 14; Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *The Art of Forgiveness: Theological Reflections on Healing and Reconciliation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 43.

This mental act of remembering is often complemented by its physical manifestation: memorialization and commemoration of specific events or people. In many societies, monuments and memorials are erected to honour both victims and survivors. These are sometimes hospitals or schools named after war heroes or former leaders, or actual memorial markers raised in tribute such as the Vietnam War Memorial or the military cemeteries of the British Imperial War Graves Commission. In other instances, days of remembrance are held to bring to mind past events. Israel, for example, observes Yom Hashoa in memory of those lost in the Holocaust. The physicality of memory serves as an indication of social acknowledgement, bearing in mind an inclination of statesmen toward the revisionism of events by the victor.

Once acknowledgement, in its many forms and guises, has taken place, the barriers to forgiveness are significantly reduced. And genuine forgiveness, the setting free or dismissal of the debt of the perpetrator, can then transpire. This is not to suggest that in forgiveness, hurts magically disappear, or that the victim will necessarily be able to forget the offence. Rather, through the process of forgiving, the victim is granted some measure of grace and comfort.⁵⁷ The benefit of forgiveness, then, has much less to do with the perpetrator than with the victim, and is of potentially more benefit to the person engaged in forgiveness than to other people. For the carrying of grudges and outright discrimination and bitterness that come with resentment and unforgiveness are the stuff which keeps acknowledgement from taking hold, and truth-telling from having any meaningful impact.

And this setting free enables the victim to start again to pursue relationships of camaraderie and friendship. Moreover, through the establishment of such interaction the victim is able to establish bonds of trust, and begins to participate in various social interactions and

⁵⁷ Richard Foster, *Finding the Heart's True Home* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2000), 199-200.

organizations.⁵⁸ For it appears that in societies devastated by mass atrocity, the ability to trust is one of the parts of civil society which is most badly damaged. Without trust, there is apt to be distrust or worse. People inevitably stop believing their neighbours, stop accepting the word of their superiors, and stop participating in the stuff of civil society.⁵⁹ They become afraid and suspicious, and begin to keep to themselves, eschewing community projects.

Trust, that sentiment which informs interactions between and among individuals, has been identified as a “functional prerequisite for [even] the possibility of a society.”⁶⁰ It may be ascribed equally to groups with little difficulty.⁶¹ Furthermore, trust has also been identified as an essential element in the development of networks of civic engagement⁶² and in the creation of strong political structures.⁶³ It is also fundamental to the sustainable cooperation that must exist in order for any kind of restoration of relationships or acknowledgement of past events – reconciliation – to occur. A society’s beginning to trust, and the connection of such interpersonal trust with the laying of the foundations of democratic participation, the strengthening of civic institutions, and the re-establishment of social relationships, then, can have significant implications for that society’s transition from a divided, dysfunctional society.

Acknowledgement in and of itself is not an end point, as are strengthened civic institutions, for example. Nor is it, in and of itself, able to bring about some kind of meaningful change. Rather, it forms a necessary but not sufficient condition for outcomes such as

⁵⁸ Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *The Art of Forgiveness: Theological Reflections on Healing and Reconciliation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 36.

⁵⁹ Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), chapter 10.

⁶⁰ David J. Lewis and Andrew Weigert, “Trust as a Social Reality” *Social Force*. 63 (1985): 968.

⁶¹ Govier and Verwoerd warn against four inferences: the fallacy of composition, in which an individual’s characteristics may be ascribed to the entire group; the fallacy of division, in which an individual’s characteristics may be inferred from the characteristics of the entire group; hypostatization, whereby the nature or “ontology” of the group is seen as different from that of its members; and atomization, whereby the individual is understood only within the context of her group affiliation. See Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd, “Trust and the Problem of National Reconciliation,” (Calgary: unpublished manuscript, 2000), 13-14.

⁶² Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 163-185.

⁶³ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) chapter 6. See also Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*, 264-265.

democratization and judicial reform, and reconciliation, along with social trust, to be realized. Ultimately the effect of the progression of acknowledgement, as outlined above, is to make possible both the *act* and the *process* of forgiveness.⁶⁴ And forgiveness itself, through acknowledgement, makes possible the creation of the bonds of social capital and social trust, which foster those democratic goals sought by transitional societies.

What, then, of this thing called reconciliation? In past writing and teaching, I have been reluctant to address the issue of reconciliation for a couple of reasons: First, even with the innumerable articles and books available on the subject, the definition of reconciliation has proved illusive, and I have never understood completely just what “reconciliation” was supposed to be. And, second, especially in light of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (among others) and its emphasis on reconciliation, I have been skeptical of any government quite literally mandating this kind of difficult interpersonal process with expectations of real and successful outcomes. While the state can make right the conditions to support and encourage this kind of healing, it simply cannot do more.

Recently, however, I have come to see the use of this term as something of a catch-all, an old expression appropriated simply for the sake of modern convenience without the trappings of its original meaning. It seems to me, first, that any notion of biblical connection or significance, which formed my original basis of understanding and perhaps my later confusion, has been removed from the very essence of the word. As de Gruchy, points out, in Christian terms, reconciliation is meant to “express the sum total of what Christians believe about God’s saving work in Jesus Christ... and is interchangeable with ‘salvation’, ‘redemption’, or

⁶⁴ Schumm draws a distinction between the *aphiemi* or “letting go” act of forgiveness performed by God, and the “process” or struggle that humans often undergo in attempting to do the same. See Dale Henry Schumm, “Forgiveness in the Healing Process,” in *Healing the Children of War*, ed. Phyllis Kilbourn (Monrovia, CA: MARC Publications, 1997), 274-275.

‘atonement’... [It also describes] God’s redemptive activity in its different aspects.”⁶⁵ Clearly, this is not what is meant by the current secular usage of the term.

Dwyer has offered a definition of reconciliation that focuses instead on the interpersonal understandings of those in conflict with each other. Reconciliation, she says, is “bringing apparently incompatible descriptions of events into narrative equilibrium.”⁶⁶ Yet this “narrative incorporation”⁶⁷ does not address those physical aspects of reconciliation mentioned above. So this definition, too, falls short.

Another conception of reconciliation comes from its applied use. Waliggo has delineated a typology of reconciliation which includes four categories: *fully Christian reconciliation* conducted using signs, symbols, prayers and rituals of the church; *fully African traditional reconciliation*, “done by those supposed to do it, with all the signs, symbols, actions, and rituals that go with it in each cultural area”; *Christian-African tradition*, a blend of the first two; and *fully secular, modern, professional reconciliation* such as that carried out by the myriad of truth commissions.⁶⁸ Even this does not fully address the use of the term.

“Reconciliation,” is articulated very differently in a variety of circumstances. Those who use it seem to be aiming broadly at the same goal. But, especially because it appears that the restoration and rebuilding programmes being written about and attempted in Uganda and elsewhere are premised on and seem to hinge on this behemoth (reconciliation) that no-one seems yet to have articulated or understood satisfactorily, its definition is critical. In Uganda, for example, the people I spoke with use the term to mean a variety of things, including: the actual resolution of conflict, or bringing the war to an end; building a lasting peace; reintegrating rebel

⁶⁵ John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 45.

⁶⁶ Susan Dwyer, “Reconciliation for Realists,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 13 (1999): 89.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁸ John Mary Waliggo, “Reconciliation as a Means of Resolving Conflict and Restoring Relations,” (paper presented at AMECEA Pastoral Institute, Eldoret, Kenya, 6 June 2003) author’s collection, 1-2.

soldiers and child abductees; amnesty; reconstruction of the physical property damaged in the conflict; compensation; and repaired relationships. Clearly, these are disparate in both outcome and meaning.

It seems that what they do have in common is their quest to capture those bonds of social capital and social trust mentioned above. This thing at which they are aiming, which might more appropriately be called *social cohesion*, is intertwined with the notion of social capital. “Social capital forms a subset of the notion of social cohesion. Social cohesion refers to two broader intertwined features of society: (1) the absence of latent conflict... and (2) the presence of strong social bonds – measured by levels of trust and norms of reciprocity, the abundance of associations that bridge social divisions (civic society), and the presence of institutions of conflict management, e.g., responsive democracy, an independent judiciary, and an independent media.”⁶⁹ Social cohesion is the “key intervening variable between social capital and violent conflict.”⁷⁰ It is, effectively, reconciliation.

This being the case, I find myself better able to cope with the use of the term “reconciliation” and all that it implies. This is not to suggest that “reconciliation” will be easily attainable. Rather, recent studies have pointed to the extreme difficulty that Ugandans and others who have lived through prolonged conflict will encounter: Moser and Holland found that declining social capital leads to a climate of fear that directly impedes citizens’ ability to participate and cooperate.⁷¹ And Colletta and Cullen have described the detrimental effect of violent conflict: “This damage to a nation’s social capital – the norms, values and social relations that bond communities together, as well as the bridges between communal groups (civil

⁶⁹ Lisa F. Berkman and Ichiro Kawachi, eds., *Social Epidemiology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175.

⁷⁰ Nat J. Colletta and Michelle L. Cullen, *Violent Conflict and the Transformation of Social Capital* (Washington: The World Bank, 2000), 13. See also Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

⁷¹ Caroline Moser and Jeremy Holland, *Urban Poverty and Violence in Jamaica: Latin America and Caribbean Studies Series* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1997).

society) and the state – impedes the ability of either communal groups or the state to recover after hostilities cease.”⁷² Nonetheless, agencies have begun to recognize this and to plan for it. “Development needs to nurture and transform social capital in order to create and maintain the mechanisms and institutions necessary for strengthening social cohesion, managing diversity, preventing violent conflict, and sustaining peace and reconciliation.”⁷³ With this in mind, programmes which are being developed should, then, allow countries like Uganda to begin to finally get past their own reality.

UGANDA’S TRUTH COMMISSION

As part of an earlier study, in order to test the kinds of assumptions which I had made about acknowledgement, I looked at the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights, which was appointed in 1986 and finished its work in 1994. In setting about rebuilding the shattered nation in 1986, Museveni outlined a ten-point programme in which he emphasized democracy, security, national unity, independence, restoring and rehabilitating social services, ending corruption and misuse of power, dealing with the plight of displaced people, pan-African cooperation and pursuing a mixed economy as the basic tenets of his philosophy.⁷⁴

In pursuit of these goals, Museveni established, among other institutions, a truth commission to address the wrongs which had been perpetrated. The role of the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights (CIVHR) was to inquire into “the causes and circumstances” surrounding mass murders, arbitrary arrests, the role of law enforcement agents and the state security agencies, and discrimination which occurred between 1962 and January, 1986 when Museveni and the NRM assumed power. It was also meant to suggest ways of

⁷² Colletta and Cullen, *Violent Conflict and the Transformation of Social Capital*, 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷⁴ Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, 217.

preventing such abuses from recurring.⁷⁵ The Commission was also expected to determine the role of various state institutions in both perpetrating and hiding gross human rights violations; the government promised that the results and findings of this Commission would be treated seriously.

In seeking to understand this process much more clearly, I spent nearly three months in Uganda in the summer of 2001. While there, I carried out archival research and conducted a series of open-ended elite interviews that focused specifically upon the Ugandan experience of coming to terms with its past, and which looked for evidence of acknowledgement, and the social trust which might be expected to result from the process. I spoke with truth commissioners, government and opposition officials, members of the NGO community, and representatives of civil society. In the end, I was able to interview nearly forty people. To date, this represents the only study that has ever been undertaken of the Ugandan Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights.

But like so many institutions implemented by regimes facing deficits in virtually all areas, the path of the truth commission was not easy. The Commission faced a number of significant impediments throughout its difficult existence. Although it had been scheduled to complete its work within a couple of years, it did not actually finish until eight years later. Despite the best efforts of those who saw the work of the commissions through to their final conclusion, ultimately the commission faced political and practical limitations that would prove to be its un-doing.

One of the biggest institutional constraints that beleaguered the Commission was adequate funding. The government, which appointed the Commission, was not willing or able to

⁷⁵ The Republic of Uganda, "Legal Notice No. 5 of 1986: The Commission of Inquiry Act," *The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights* (Kampala: UPPC, 1994) 3-4.

contribute the monies required to employ staff, acquire office space, or conduct investigations. As a result, the Commission was chronically short of staff. Even the basics, such as stationery, were in short supply. And the printing of the findings of the Commission was significantly delayed until money could be found. In the end, it was the international donor community, both governmental and NGO, that came to the rescue. It was only after several large infusions of cash, along with supplies and expertise, were dispatched, that the work was able to continue.

Similarly, the overall capacity of the Commission was extremely limited. The commissioners themselves had left professional, prominent and often well-paying jobs, and had set aside family and other social obligations in order to carry out the work of the Commission. Moreover, their work was not easy. They faced significant opposition by those both within and outside of the very governments that had appointed them, which often translated into death threats and the disappearance of key evidence. Other agencies which should have been able to provide support were themselves in disarray, and unable to provide the institutional safeguards that are necessary to ensure the success of such commissions. And the public at large, which had for so long been disenfranchised, seemed reluctant to talk about what had happened, and sensed that their participation in the work of the commissions could lead to renewed retribution.

Time itself proved to be an insurmountable difficulty. Particularly where the abuses under consideration were sometimes more than twenty years old, details had become blurry and evidence which might once have existed in support of the testimony given had disappeared. And the various delays faced by the commission contributed substantially to this.

Additionally, a lack of political will and commitment to the mandate of the Commission severely limited its success. The Commission quickly realized that the government, under whose auspices the commission had, in fact, been created, had merely been paying lip service to the

idea of a commission. And the Commission found it extremely difficult to investigate the former political elites, and were mostly unable to do so.⁷⁶

Ultimately, the Commission's legacy is small. The majority of Ugandans appear to be unaware of the Commission and its work. And those who do know of it are critical of its findings, which they see as inherently biased toward the NRM. It seems that there has been little, if any, acknowledgement, either in influencing the outcome of the commission or in the subsequent rebuilding undertaken in its wake. In fact, the Commission is seen by many to have been a bureaucratic panacea that turned out to be almost universally unsuccessful for a variety of reasons, including those listed above. The modest and still-growing civil society indicates that some acknowledgement had taken place. But democracy was not firmly entrenched, and Museveni shows no sign of allowing it to take hold. As a result, growth of civil society in the country remains stunted. It seems that the Commission was unable to affect real and lasting political stability, let alone foster social trust and social capital.

INFORMAL MECHANISMS OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Yet many of those to whom I spoke in Uganda in 2001 suggested that some form of acknowledgement had, in fact, taken place. Although there was no evidence of the cultivation of acknowledgement through the formal mechanism of the truth commission, it seemed likely that some of the traditional and informal practices that are carried out within the country might be capable of producing this kind of acknowledgement. And that even without the formal structure of the truth commission, some communities might have been acknowledging the events of the

⁷⁶ These limitations are discussed in greater detail in Joanna R. Quinn, "Constraints: The Un-Doing of the Ugandan Truth Commission," *Human Rights Quarterly*, 26.2 (May 2004), 401-427 and in Joanna R. Quinn, "The Politics of Acknowledgement: Truth Commissions in Uganda and Haiti," (Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, 2003).

past and coming to terms with them. I thought an exploration of this kind of traditional acknowledgement in Uganda could provide much needed insight into one of the reasons that truth commissions and other institutions often called upon in the rebuilding process are not effective.

In October and November of 2004, I returned to Uganda to I returned to Uganda for a period of six weeks to study first-hand these informal mechanisms of acknowledgement, both in areas where traditional acknowledgement has been reported and those in which it has not. I interviewed more than 45 people, mostly society's elites and leaders, about such alternative mechanisms of acknowledgement. These people included leaders of the communities involved, officials of the Roman Catholic and Africa Inland Churches, the Uganda Human Rights Commission, various Secretaries of State and other government officials, as well as national and international aid workers, missionaries and other support organizations including Africa Inland Mission and World Vision. I also spoke directly to some of the beneficiaries of such acknowledgement: people who have been received back into their communities and their families.

Certainly, this kind of traditional acknowledgement has been used widely in other societies. Notable examples of traditional acknowledgement found in North America include aboriginal healing circles, such as the one established in Hollow Water, Manitoba,⁷⁷ and other community justice fora, including the traditional elders court in Attawapiskat, Ontario,⁷⁸ and the Sandy Lake, Ontario, community court,⁷⁹ all of which are supported by special programming of

⁷⁷ An excellent description of Hollow Water's Community Holistic Healing Circle is found in Rupert Ross, *Returning to the Teachings* (Toronto: Penguin, 1996) 29-50.

⁷⁸ The Attawapiskat traditional justice pilot project ran from 1991-1994, and the traditional court of justice has been sitting ever since. Bryan Phelan, "Provincial court barred from Attawapiskat," *Wawatay News* Vol.21 #10 [article on-line] May 19, 1994; available from <http://www.wawatay.on.ca/index.php?module=pagesetter&func=viewpub&tid=1&pid=536>, accessed 30 April 2005.

⁷⁹ Ross, *Returning to the Teachings*, 223.

the Royal Canadian Mounted Police⁸⁰ and other federal agencies. The Navajo Tribal Courts in the United States hear civil cases which are decided upon by a panel of elected adjudicators according to Navajo common law.⁸¹

Traditional justice is not used only in North America. In New Zealand, Family Group Conferences, based on traditional Maori principles including teaching, settlement, and community restoration have been available instead of Western-based sentencing since 1989.⁸² And in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, village courts adjudicate according to customary law.⁸³

Many of these also exist in various African countries. “Each community or society has its own set form of restitution... for various offences, both legal and moral.”⁸⁴ In response to the long-running conflict in Angola, many IDPs there have turned to *conselho*, traditional psychological healing based on “the general encouragement given to people to abandon the thoughts and memories of war and losses.”⁸⁵ In both Angola and Mozambique, holistic purification and cleansing rituals, attended by the family and broader community, are carried out in welcoming ex-combatant child soldiers back into the community.⁸⁶ A variety of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are used by the Pokot, Turkana, Samburu and Marakwet tribes of

⁸⁰ “Community Justice Forums,” *RCMP Aboriginal Policing*; [description on-line]; available from http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/ccaps/aborig_e.htm, accessed 30 April 2005.

⁸¹ Philmer Bluehouse and James Zion, “The Navajo Justice and Peace Ceremony,” in *The Mediation Quarterly* 10.4 (Summer 1993): 328.

⁸² Teresa Olsen, Gabrielle M. Maxwell and Allison Morris, “Maori and Youth Justice in New Zealand,” in *Popular Justice and Community Regeneration*, ed. K. Hazlehurst (London: Praeger, 1995) 89-102.

⁸³ Sarah Garap, “The struggles of women and girls in Simbu Province,” *Development Bulletin* 50 (October 1999): 48.

⁸⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy* (Kampala: East African Educational Publishers, 1969, 2002), 211.

⁸⁵ Carola Eyber and Alastair Ager, “Conselho: psychological healing in displaced communities in Angola,” *The Lancet* 360 (Sep. 14, 2002) 871.

⁸⁶ Alcinda Honwana, “Children of War: Understanding War and War Cleansing in Mozambique and Angola,” in *Civilians in War*, ed. Simon Chesterman (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001) 1137-140, and Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 142-152.

Western Kenya.⁸⁷ In Sierra Leone, group ceremonies are held to “cool the heart[s]” of child ex-combatants upon their return to their home communities.⁸⁸ Inkundla in South Africa comprises a series of traditional small claims courts.⁸⁹ And Rwanda still utilizes its tradition of *gacaca*, a form of traditional dispute resolution mediated by chiefs and tribal elders, most recently revamped, formalized, and used to deal with crimes of genocide.⁹⁰

Many of these same kinds of traditional mechanisms operate in Uganda. Article 129 of the 1995 Constitution provides for Local Council (LC) Courts⁹¹ to operate at the sub-county, parish and village levels.⁹² Under the subsequent Children Statute 1996, these courts have the authority to mandate any number of things including reconciliation, compensation, restitution, and apology.⁹³ And within many of the 56 different ethnic groups across Uganda, traditional acknowledgement customs and ceremonies are practiced. Among the Karamojong, the *akiriket* councils of elders adjudicate disputes according to traditional custom⁹⁴ which include cultural teaching and ritual cleansing ceremonies.⁹⁵ The Acholi carry out ceremonies of *mato oput* (drinking the bitter herb), and *nyouo tong gweno* (a welcome ceremony in which an egg is stepped on over an *opobo* twig) in welcoming ex-combatant child soldiers home after they have

⁸⁷ Ruto Pkalya, Mohamud Adan, Isabella Masinde, *Indigenous Democracy: Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms*, eds. Betty Rabar and Martin Karimi (Kenya: Intermediate Technology Development Group – Eastern Africa, Jan. 2004).

⁸⁸ Rosalind Shaw, *Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: Lessons from Sierra Leone*, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 130 (Feb. 2005): 9

⁸⁹ *Gacaca, Inkundla, traditional systems of justice being looked at in the US as “Restorative Justice.”* Herndon, VA: Marek Publications, 2001, [article on-line]; available from <http://www.marekinc.com/GovernanceINT100901.html>, accessed 22 July 2002.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Peter E. Harrell, *Rwanda’s Gamble: Gacaca and a New Model of Transitional Justice* (New York: Writers Club Press, 2003).

⁹¹ The LC Courts were formerly known as Resistance Council Courts and “were first introduced in Luweero in 1983 during the struggle for liberation. In 1987 they were legally recognized throughout the country.” John Mary Waliggo, “The Human Right to Peace for Every Person and Every Society,” (paper presented at Public Dialogue organized by Faculty of Arts, Makerere University in conjunction with Uganda Human Rights Commission and NORAD, Kampala, Uganda, 4 Dec. 2003) author’s collection, 7.

⁹² “Uganda: Constitution, Government & Legislation,” [article on-line]; available from <http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/world/uganda.htm>, accessed 30 April 2005.

⁹³ Government of Uganda, *The Children’s Statute 1996*.

⁹⁴ Bruno Novelli, *Karimojong Traditional Religion* (Kampala: Comboni Missionaries, 1999) 169-172, 333-340.

⁹⁵ Peter Lokeris, Minister of State for Karamoja, interview by author, 18 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

been decommissioned.⁹⁶ The Baganda use the traditional *Kitewuliza*, a juridical process with a strong element of reconciliation, to bring about justice.⁹⁷ The Lugbara, in the northwest of the country, maintain a system of elder mediation in family, clan and inter-clan conflict.⁹⁸ And in 1985, an inter-tribal reconciliation ceremony, *gomo tong* (the bending of spears) was held to signify that “from that time there would be no war or fighting between Acholi and Madi, Kakwa, Lugbara or Alur of West Nile.”⁹⁹

In other areas of the country, however, these institutions are no longer so vibrant. Among the Sabinu tribe in the northeast there is no longer a council of elders, although the clan system is still very active. “These ceremonies are not widely practiced now – the cows are no longer there. But the clan system of punishment is still strong. It is still the role of the clan to make sure that the perpetrator faces repercussions.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, the Bakiga, a tribe from the southwest of the country, used to regularly consult the *abakuru b'emiryango* (council of heads of lineages) which would adjudicate cases of dispute or wrongdoing, although this is no longer done.¹⁰¹

Even in areas where these ceremonies and rites are no longer regularly practiced, however, there remains a common understanding of the meanings and symbolism behind them. “The situation is complicated because of diversity of ethnicity but there is some commonality. The shedding of blood, for example, is a common element throughout all districts in Uganda; it

⁹⁶ For an excellent description of *mato oput* see 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.

⁹⁷ Waliggo, “The Human Right to Peace,” 7. Also, idem, “On Kitewuliza in Buganda, 3 May 2005” author’s collection, 1.

⁹⁸ 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.

⁹⁹ Finnstrom, *Living With Bad Surroundings*, 299.

¹⁰⁰ Confidential interview by author with Sabinu man studying at Makerere University, 7 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹⁰¹ Paul Ngologoza, *Kigezi and its People* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1998) 20-22.

cuts across all groups.”¹⁰² In other cases, eating and drinking together, the shaking of hands, and the exchange of gifts can all symbolize the restoration of peace, as well as the slaughter of animals, the exchange of dried coffee berries, intermarriage, and blood relationships.¹⁰³ Although some argue differently,¹⁰⁴ my interviewees stated that the younger generation maintains a healthy respect for traditional institutions:

Under Obote I, Obote II, that was the climax of leaving out those traditional things, because people had to find their own way to survive. Those who are there, some do remember, but many more who have gone to Kenya do remember more those traditional methods. My dad, in particular, has some memory of what happened with traditions, and my grandma also – she is in her 80s, I think. The new generation does not belong anywhere. They are neither new nor old. But everyone respects these traditions.¹⁰⁵

However, “the traditional values, cultural knowledge and social institutions of everyday life are threatened.”¹⁰⁶ And the social meanings of the ceremonies which are still practiced appear, in some cases, to be shifting¹⁰⁷ as people move farther away from their *gemeinschaft* communities. This is especially true in regions where large numbers of people have been forced out of their homes and into IDP camps.¹⁰⁸ As another Sabinu interviewee put it: “Circumcision is the main ceremony for our people. People are taught how to behave. Teachings are taught before and after the ceremony. You are becoming an adult. So the ceremonies are a period of education for a people to teach about how to raise children and live in harmony and how to behave in society. But now many are not cut, so we do not know. Maybe they should leave out cutting and still

¹⁰² Dixon Kamukama, Professor of Development Studies and History, 15 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹⁰³ Waliggo, “Reconciliation as a Means of Resolving Conflict,” 2. Also Sister Specioza Kabahoma, Justice and Peace Commission, interview by author, 10 Nov. 2004, Nsambya, Uganda.

¹⁰⁴ Allen reports that a study funded by the Belgian government revealed that young people no longer automatically respect the elders. Allen, *War and Justice in Northern Uganda*, 76.

¹⁰⁵ Confidential interview by author with Sabinu man studying at Makerere University, 7 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹⁰⁶ Finnstrom, *Living With Bad Surroundings*, 201.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

have these teachings.” The same growing lack of cultural education holds true for custom and ceremony among the Karamojong¹⁰⁹ and also among the Acholi.¹¹⁰

Yet, even institutions no longer in common use provide strong examples of social structures that might still be used to maintain order and bring some relief to those struggling in post-conflict communities.

It would be wrong to imagine that everything traditional has been changed or forgotten so much that no traces of it are to be found. If anything, the changes are generally on the surface, affecting the material side of life, and only beginning to reach the deeper levels of the thinking pattern, language content, mental images, emotions, beliefs and response in situations of need. Traditional concepts still form the essential background of many African peoples, though obviously this differs from individual to individual and from place to place. I believe ... that the majority of our people with little or no formal education still hold on to their traditional corpus of beliefs.¹¹¹

These kinds of ceremonies “help us deepen our experience of events, cope with them, humanize them.”¹¹² And reconciliation continues to be an “essential and final part of peaceful settlement of conflict.”¹¹³

Altogether, these ceremonies have many things in common. The most prominent is their community-based restorative approach to justice and punishment: These communities “view a wrongdoing as a misbehaviour which requires teaching or an illness which requires healing.”¹¹⁴ They “emphasiz[e] restoration to harmony with others and the community.”¹¹⁵ Krog describes the process as such:

If you have harmed my child, it is because something has gone wrong with you to such an extent that you could do that. That which has gone wrong for you is now harming my life. It means I cannot be the kind of human being I want to be because you are no longer human. So it is in my interest – my interest – as the victim, to get you and assist you to

¹⁰⁹ Novelli, *Karimojong Traditional Religion*, 201-225.

¹¹⁰ Finnstrom, *Living With Bad Surroundings*, 76, 219. See also E.E. Evans Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937) 154.

¹¹¹ Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, xi.

¹¹² Aylward Shorter, *African Culture* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 61.

¹¹³ Waliggo, “The Human Right to Respect,” 9.

¹¹⁴ Ross, *Returning to the Teachings*, 5.

¹¹⁵ Bluehouse and Zion, “The Navajo Justice and Peace Ceremony,” 25.

get your humanity back so that I can become human again... This is a fundamentally different way of looking at a community and looking at what to do with evil. African traditional religion has no such thing as Satan. The biggest evil is to live in complete disregard from others.¹¹⁶

Therefore, “the Community exercises responsibility of being part and parcel of the clan because whatever happens to the individual happens to the clan, and whatever happens to the clan happens to the individual.”¹¹⁷

And so, it seems that these kinds of institutions ought to be fostered and encouraged.

Waliggo calls for a system based on African traditional values and institutions: “No society can build a civilization on borrowed values. In order for Africa to have a real civilization for peace, tolerance, world understanding and democracy, human rights, authentic integral liberation and development, Africa must look at its own heritage, and basing on its best values in that heritage, build the real and permanent culture and civilization of peace and peaceful resolution of conflicts.”¹¹⁸ Many others advocate the careful use of both western and traditional methods. Another said, “People feel that western methods are more sophisticated so traditional methods are not being used.”¹¹⁹ “Maybe the western method on its own, or the traditional method on its own, will suffice. Or maybe we need a blend.”¹²⁰ “We should maybe look back at what went wrong, and how people used to solve issues and use traditional roots to inform current policies.”¹²¹

IMPEDIMENTS TO THE SUCCESS OF TRADITIONAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

¹¹⁶ Antjie Krog interview by Philip Coulter, in *Walk to Freedom (Ideas, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2004)*.

¹¹⁷ Ndrua, “A Christian Study of the Lugbari,” 42.

¹¹⁸ Waliggo, “The Human Right to Peace,” 9.

¹¹⁹ Rose Othieno, Centre for Conflict Resolution, interview with author, 5 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹²⁰ Confidential interview by author with NGO official, 1 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹²¹ Confidential interview by author with Sabin man studying at Makerere University, 7 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

Many different people and groups have begun to call for the implementation of a national programme of reconciliation. A conference on this issue was held in Gulu in December 2004; those gathered clearly addressed the issue of national reconciliation.¹²² Several other conferences have also been held around this theme.¹²³ These include regions other than Acholi, where the conflict continues – although calls for such a programme are perhaps strongest there.¹²⁴ Other regions, however, as mentioned above, have not yet recovered from the abuses suffered at various times from 1962 to the present. These, too, are calling for reconciliation both within and between particular regions. Various individual agencies I met with reported discussing or carrying out mediation and reconciliation between Sabiny and Karamojong,¹²⁵ Baganda and Teso, Bukiga, and Acholi,¹²⁶ Iteso and Karamojong,¹²⁷ Banyoro and Baganda,¹²⁸ and Langi and Acholi.¹²⁹ And a good number of these are interested in the inclusion of traditional acknowledgement as a main focus.

ACTORS AND STAKEHOLDERS

¹²² “Conference Report,” (Gulu: Reconciliation: The Way Forward, conference organized by Ministry of Internal Affairs, Cultural Leaders of the Acholi Sub-Region, Religious Leaders of the Acholi Sub-Region, and Northern Uganda Peace Initiative, 9-10 Dec. 2004), author’s collection, 21-22.

¹²³ For example, the Centre for Basic Research and the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (Salzburg) held a conference entitled, “Historical Memories of Cooperation, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Uganda,” in Jinja, Uganda, 8-9 July 2004. And the “Youth Partnership for Peace and Reconciliation Conference: Reconciliation: Rising up Against the Challenge” conference was organized by Northern Uganda Peace Initiative in Gulu, Uganda, 14-16 Mar., 2005.

¹²⁴ The Acholi case is an example of unclear understanding of reconciliation, as people are calling for a gamut of repairs including ending the war, amnesty, and rehabilitation. Several of the NGO agencies I spoke with in Uganda share this concern, asking “Who is asking for reconciliation? Do they understand what they are asking for?” Confidential interview by author with NGO official, 1 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹²⁵ Wilson Waswa, Association of Evangelicals in Africa Commission on Relief and Development, interview with author, 18 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹²⁶ Jonnes Bakimi and Jonan Kasango, Mission for National Reconciliation, interview with author, 19 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹²⁷ Rose Othieno, Centre for Conflict Resolution, interview with author, 5 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹²⁸ Simon Rutabajuuka, Centre for Basic Research, interview with author, 27 Oct. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹²⁹ Cecilia Ogwal, Member of Parliament for Lira Municipality, interview with author, 20 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

There are many actors and stakeholders involved in this effort, for a variety of reasons. The international community, through international NGOs (INGOs) and other agencies, including DANIDA, SAVE Uganda, World Vision, United Nations Development Programme, World Bank, and Northern Uganda Peace Initiative (funded by USAID) are spearheading this push. The international community has been involved in Uganda for a number of years and continues to provide food and development assistance, as well as support governance and democracy programming, are increasingly focusing on reconciliation. Between these agencies and the international diplomatic community in Uganda, support for such a programme of acknowledgement is high. And these agencies indicate that they are becoming increasingly willing to pressure Museveni into choosing to build sustainable democracy¹³⁰ through a process of acknowledgement.¹³¹

The Ugandan government, or at least parts of the Ugandan government, has also been pushing for a process of reconciliation and acknowledgement. The creation of the Undersecretariat for Pacification and Development within the Office of the Prime Minister signals the government's commitment to assist those communities who have struggled or who continue to struggle with conflict. Part of its mandate is post-conflict resolution, in the north and elsewhere. The Ministries of State within the unit include the Ministry of State for Luweero Triangle, the Ministry of State of Karamoja, and the Ministry of State for Northern Uganda Reconstruction. As well, the Minister for Internal Affairs is again working with Betty Bigombe, the government's chief LRA negotiator, trying to put together a peace agreement in the north.

¹³⁰ "U.K. aid cut pressures Uganda," BBC News [article on-line]; available from <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/449838>, accessed 1 May 2005.

¹³¹ Confidential interview by author with NGO official, 11 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

The government has also expressed support for traditional and cultural leaders,¹³² and cultural institutions,¹³³ which some see as leading the way for the establishment of traditional reconciliation. The government's reasons for supporting this kind of programming appear to be two-fold: First, embracing such policies buys them popularity with the public. Second, it allows them to continue to deny wrong-doing in any conflict, past or present. Some within government do openly support this type of acknowledgement, as do a number of "opposition" M.P.s. As well, arm's-length government-funded agencies including the Amnesty Commission and the Uganda Human Rights Commission continue to push for acknowledgement. They are, however, censored and threatened with the roll-back of funding.¹³⁴

A majority of civil society, too, seems to favour acknowledgement. Certainly, at a formal level, NGOs and CBOs (community-based organizations) are working toward acknowledgement. "Lots of voices are being heard about how to solve the Northern Uganda conflict, for example, because civil society started to do it. The grassroots/normal people said, 'Let's talk.'"¹³⁵ Agencies mentioned above, including the Mission for National Reconciliation, and others including *Ker Kwaro Acholi* (Traditional Acholi Leaders), the Gulu District Reconciliation and Peace Team, along with denominational and religious bodies including the Uganda Joint Christian Council, and the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic church, have mobilized to bring about acknowledgement. Academics and research centres, too, including the Centre for Basic Research and the Refugee Law Project, are beginning to formulate policy outlines, and have begun to talk seriously about putting in place a programme of acknowledgement. And

¹³² Government of Uganda, "Government White Paper on (1) The Report of the Commission of Inquiry (Constitutional Review) and (2) Government Proposals Not Addressed by the Report of the Commission of Inquiry (Constitutional Review)," Sept. 2004, 11.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 59-62.

¹³⁵ Rose Othieno, Centre for Conflict Resolution, interview with author, 5 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

individual citizens and citizens' groups are also talking about such a goal. "But whereas civil society is trying, we are not yet convinced that government has taken it as a priority."¹³⁶ For civil society, the reason for pursuing acknowledgement is simple: people are simply tired of living in a stunted civic environment, haunted by or still plagued by up to 40 years of war.

POTENTIAL IMPEDIMENTS

The convergence of all of these groups on this one issue gives the acknowledgement and reconciliation programming broad appeal. And the implementation of a national body to coordinate the efforts at acknowledgement and reconciliation seems likely. Several people with whom I spoke seemed quite keen to explore this process. As one put it:

The peace process in Uganda could start from below. Anything that can come from above will be questioned by the people. Anything from below can have a better chance. A commission should be there to guide and eventually receive recommendations from each different district. The moment you begin working it from below, it can grow bigger and work. It will be hard to coordinate, but we have had things like the Human Rights Commission. And it would be an expensive exercise to coordinate 50+ centres, but in a situation like Uganda, uniqueness must be borne in mind. We must try to avoid situations where people are talking about things from above going down.¹³⁷

In the west, in Fort Portal and Kasese, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Uganda Catholic Secretariat has already begun to put this into practice. "Community reconciliation groups/teams of 45 members were formed, and reconciliation ceremonies have been held. They have turned most traditions into modern-day practices. A manual has been developed to help each diocese to sort out what peace means in each district, which will be published in 2005. What we wanted

¹³⁶ Stephen Kisembo, Uganda Joint Christian Council, interview with author, 11 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

¹³⁷ Dixon Kamukama, interview with author, 15 Nov. 2004, Kampala, Uganda.

was for them to figure it out according to their understanding and using their own means, not asking for resources from elsewhere, just using their own resources.”¹³⁸

Indeed, the kind of institution envisioned might look to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission for its strong regional offices, each connected to a central body located in Kampala. In a country like Uganda, with no fewer than 56 different ethnic groups, this could effectively mean the establishment of 56 different offices, one to handle the needs of each ethnic group: one for the Bakiga, one for the Baganda, one for the Banyankole, and so on. In this way, each office could focus on a particular group, and attempt to meet its particular needs.

But there are a number of issues concerning the development of a programme of acknowledgement, and problems which will have to be overcome if such a process is to go ahead. Four of these are discussed below:

The first difficulty with building a national programme of acknowledgement is that different regions are at different stages of conflict and post-conflict resolution. The war in the north is still going on. However, for other groups, there has been no physical violence for fifteen, twenty, or even twenty-five years or more. The areas targeted by Obote II, for example, like Luweero Triangle in central Uganda, mentioned above, have not seen violence since 1984. As a result, the needs of these groups vary substantially. The transitional justice literature, along with a recent report by the United Nations Secretary-General¹³⁹ supports Finnstrom’s presupposition: that reconciliation must be preceded by peace talks that bring the conflict to an

¹³⁸ Sister Specioza Kabahoma, Justice and Peace Commission, interview by author, 10 Nov. 2004, Nsambya, Uganda.

¹³⁹ United Nations Secretary General, *The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies*, 23 Aug. 2004, S/2004/616.

end.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, the Justice and Peace Commission of Uganda clearly states that “peace goes with justice, but justice must come first, then peace next. Reconciliation must be part of this.”¹⁴¹ Even once the war in the north has ended, a national programme of acknowledgement would have to address these varied needs. It seems likely that the devolution of real powers to the regional level would be useful.

Another issue is the great ethnic diversity that exists. As mentioned above, many of the different ethnic groups in Uganda, although they do share some commonalities, are extremely different in almost every other way. For this reason, a national institution to coordinate acknowledgement, if implemented, would face a variety of difficulties. The Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights faced this, although the ethnic composition of the commissioners themselves went some distance to address this, and a similar composition could likely be worked out. Language itself provides a barrier, because although English is Uganda’s national language, it is widely spoken only in Kampala and among elites, although it is growing. But even moreso, the traditions and practices of one group do not all translate to one another. For example, killing cattle in Karamoja has deep significance, but would be meaningless in other areas. Any national reconciliation programme is going to have to take these differences into account, many of which could be solved, first, by focusing on common rites and symbols, and, second, by allowing the different ethnically-based groups to work out their own programmes and understandings.

A third difficulty, of course, is the fact that some of these kinds of institutions and ceremonies have begun to disappear. The fear is that there may be no link between these traditions and the present day, or that institutions used now will be somewhat different. The

¹⁴⁰ Finnstrom, *Living With Bad Surroundings*, 302.

¹⁴¹ Sister Specioza Kabahoma, Justice and Peace Commission, interview by author, 10 Nov. 2004, Nsambya, Uganda.

literature tells us that culture and its institutions are dynamic and subject to regular change,¹⁴² and evidence shows us that many of these traditional systems have, indeed, been rearranged.¹⁴³ Yet it is likely that these traditional institutions may be “useful tools in re-building communities – something that requires collective acceptance of certain social hierarchies... and making explicit certain norms. It should be added that the ceremonies and ritual behaviours that emerge to do this are by no means always old ones that are taken ‘off the peg’, but rather ideas about old models are often used to help shape new ones.”¹⁴⁴ “These practices, far from being dislocated in a past that no longer exists, have always continued to be situated socially. They are called upon and performed to address present concerns. Of course, like any culturally informed practice, with time they shift in meaning and appearance.”¹⁴⁵ It appears, then, that many of them may be dusted off, refined, and pressed back into service.

The fourth difficulty is one that I have alluded to at several points above: the potential difficulty in finding enough sustained support for such an exercise to be carried out to completion. It is clear, when looking at the experience of the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights that a lack of government support was enough to derail the process. At this point, indications of support from government are few and far between. From quasi-governmental agencies, they are much more positive. Certainly, INGOs and the international diplomatic community in Kampala support the process, and many of them spoke openly to me about forcing Museveni to go along with the process. That, coupled with the strong levels of support and efforts already put into practice, suggests that a national programme of acknowledgement and reconciliation could meet with some success.

¹⁴² Shorter, *African Culture*, 23, 29.

¹⁴³ Allen, *War and Justice in Northern Uganda*, 77.

¹⁴⁴¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 84.

¹⁴⁵ Finnstrom, *Living With Bad Surroundings*, 299.

Even so, there are strong indications of support for this kind of programme of acknowledgement in Uganda. And many of the above questions are merely logistical, and will be worked out by stakeholders in the negotiations leading to the implementation of such a process. It remains to be seen whether and how the kinds of traditional practices that have so far been used only on a small scale in local communities will be incorporated into a national programme of acknowledgement. And if they are, how the various difficulties of such a programme will be accommodated.

CONCLUSIONS

The devastation of the social infrastructure of a country is but one manifestation of the horrors of mass atrocity. Yet its repair is one of the most important parts of rebuilding such societies. It appears that acknowledgement, the process of coming to terms with the past, emotional response, memory and remembering, forms a necessary building-block of the repair of the social infrastructure. It is an important factor in the creation of the bonds of social capital and social trust, which foster the democratic goals sought by transitional societies. Once past activities have been acknowledged, individuals and their communities can begin once again to form relationships with their neighbours and to participate in the social activities and civic structures of society, finally defeating the deep-rooted conflicts which have served to paralyse that society. And this social interaction or social cohesion ultimately represents the much sought-after outcome of reconciliation.

All of this is especially applicable in Uganda, a country which has seen the murder of more than one million people since Independence in 1962. Its social and political development is stunted. Perhaps worse, many regions of the country continue to experience insecurity and conflict.

Attempting to reckon, therefore, with the country's traumatic past seems an essential undertaking. Various stakeholders and actors within the country and outside will play a role in how that process unfolds. Yet many remain convinced that utilizing traditional practices from Uganda's rich tapestry of ethnic and cultural heritage will provide the best foundation for the reestablishment of acknowledgement, reconciliation, and a healthy, re-built society.