

## In and Out of Culture: Okot p'Bitek's Work and Social Repair in Post-Conflict Acoliland

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In 2008, on my fifth visit to Northern Uganda, I was staying with Nyero's family in Padibe Internally Displaced Person's (IDP) camp, in what is now Lamwo district. At that time, the cease-fire of the previous year and a half had changed things considerably. People all over Acoliland<sup>1</sup> (Northern Uganda) had begun to return to their villages after a decade of forced displacement into squalid camps, where inhumane conditions killed—according to one study—in excess of about 1,000 individuals per week (UMH 2005). Like much of the 90% of the population who had been forcibly displaced, Nyero's family was planning to return to their “traditional” village at the end of the year. Finally, land was being cleared, seed sown, water wells checked, gardens planted, grass cut, and huts built.



Fig. 1. Padibe Internally Displaced Person's Camp, Northern Uganda. January 2007. Unless otherwise indicated, all photos are by the author.



Fig. 2. Beatrice and Kilama start to clear land for farming after living in Padibe IDP camp for 5 years. July 2008.

At the same time, however, Acoli men, women, children, youths, families, and villages struggled to deal with the past two decades of war between President Museveni's Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group. Forced displacement, confinement, poverty, and social torture (Dolan 2009) by the Government of Uganda, together with brutal abductions and terrorization by the LRA, squeezed the population between the two sides.

<sup>1</sup> I use the spellings Acoli and Acoliland rather than the more common anglicized versions (Acholi and Acholiland) after Okot p'Bitek himself.

Children and youths who grew up only in the congested, squalid conditions of the camp were reintroduced to “normal” village life primarily based on subsistence agriculture. Youths who escaped from the LRA struggled to reintegrate into their families and villages. Extended families tried to cope with the brutal effects of the decades of violence and internment, as well as the humiliation of their forced dependence on humanitarian aid. Conflict over land was common, and food was not yet plentiful. Tens of thousands of youths were, and still are, missing with their whereabouts unknown. Tens of thousands of deaths have not been properly mourned. Bones have not been buried. Ghosts roam free.

While relieved from the threat of armed violence (from both rebels and the Ugandan military) and the confinement, hunger, and disease of the IDP camps, some of the rural youths I spoke with in Padibe expressed anxiety about their disconnection from *tekwaro* (culture/tradition/history).<sup>2</sup> Their angst was shared by many of the rural adults and elders who feared that youths who had grown up only in the IDP camps or with the LRA did not know, or were “out of,” *tekwaro*.<sup>3</sup> It was intriguing and somewhat perplexing to me that rural elders, adults, and youths repeatedly used the concept of youths’ disconnection from, or ignorance of, *tekwaro* to communicate their post-conflict reconstruction and/or reconciliation concerns. Although scholars have written about how contemporary intrastate conflict in Africa tends to overturn generational structures (Richards 1996; Hoffman 2003; Cheney 2007; Finnström 2008; Honwana 2005), there has been little research on how the overturned structure affects the intergenerational transmission of oral tradition, and what impact that effect itself has on post-conflict processes of social reconstruction, reconciliation, and social repair.<sup>4</sup> Interested in the community’s concerns about *tekwaro* in this post-conflict context, and heeding calls from Baines (2010) and Finnström (2010) to study the social processes that order morality and relations in post-conflict Northern Uganda, I therefore returned to live with Nyero’s family in their rural village of Pabwoc for the better part of 2012 as part of my dissertation fieldwork.

Fundamental to my understanding of what is happening in Pabwoc today—and other places in Acoliland as well—are Okot p’Bitek’s academic works that explore how Acoli oral tradition shapes moral agents’ formations and understandings of their place in the universe (p’Bitek 1962, 1963, 1973, 1986). He views oral tradition as a form of social action that accounts for how people act and make meaning in the world, and he emphasizes the performative, intersubjective processes involved in the transmission and performance of cultural knowledge. According to p’Bitek (1973:90), oral tradition shapes social relations, and those vital relationship-building oral tradition practices are found in daily meaningful activities or life as it is actually lived.

p’Bitek’s largely overlooked academic scholarship on oral tradition offers great insight into Acoli communities’ post-conflict social repair processes that center around the rebuilding of culturally sanctioned social relations. Although p’Bitek was virtually ignored in academic

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<sup>2</sup> The Acoli word *tekwaro* is generally referred to as “culture” or “tradition,” but as in English, the word itself has a large semantic range that also includes history.

<sup>3</sup> Such fears corroborate Finnström’s note (2010:144) that elders referred to youths as “out of culture.”

<sup>4</sup> Exceptions are the preliminary warnings by Tefferi (2008) and Honwana (2005).

scholarship when he began writing at the time of *uhuru*<sup>5</sup> in the early 1960s, he critically explored processual and performative theoretical approaches long before they became common academic currency decades later. And while his literary work has been globally celebrated, his important and prolific academic work on oral tradition, for example, has been largely ignored within the discipline.

Much of p'Bitek's impetus for his 1963 B.Litt. thesis in anthropology, titled "Oral Literature and Its Social Background among the Acoli and Lango"—as it was also for his literary "songs" and later work on African "religion" (1971)—was to correct mistaken Western conceptual categories of literacy, social organization, and belief that he maintained were denying African nations the complex, elaborate, and rich histories and cultural practices that were their legacy (p'Bitek 1963, 1973:18). What makes Okot p'Bitek's work even more important today—in addition to its contemporary relevance to the history of the field of oral tradition—is the observation of the challenges of returning to "everyday" life, variously termed as "social repair" or "social reconstruction," after two decades of war and displacement in Pabwoc. While international and national organizations are fiercely debating transitional justice practices in Northern Uganda (Hovil 2011), there is a dearth of attention to the everyday micro-processes and -practices of social reconstruction, reconciliation, and community building—especially in rural areas—that hundreds of thousands of Acoli are engaging in daily. p'Bitek's work on oral tradition as social action provides insight into these everyday micro-processes, and, like contemporary articulations of Indigenous epistemologies and approaches to the theorization of oral performance, it valorizes community and place-based methods of moving on after violence and/or conflict.

I will begin with a brief history of the general effect of war and displacement on intergenerational relations in Northern Uganda. I will then describe the village of Pabwoc in 2012 (about 2 years after the majority of its residents returned home from Padibe Internally Displaced Person's Camp), their history during the war, and some of the resurgent oral tradition practices I encountered there. I will then review p'Bitek's main theoretical points on oral tradition and, building on a p'Bitekian framework, examine how the acknowledgement of oral tradition practices as social action leads to a better understanding of contemporary transitions in rural "post-conflict" Northern Uganda.

## Methodology

My work in northern Uganda spans eight years and began in 2004. I spent four months traveling throughout the north in 2004 and 2005; a total of four months living specifically in Padibe IDP camp in 2007, 2008, and 2010; and a continuous six months living in one rural village, Pabwoc-East, in Padibe West Sub-County in 2012. During those last six months, I participated as much as I was able (or capable) in daily life and learning the language. I also moved around among every household compound in the village, conducting a complete survey

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<sup>5</sup> *Uhuru* refers to the African movement for, and actualization of, independence—mostly in reference to East Africa.

of families' histories during the war and their perceptions of *tekwaro*. Group interviews were held with lineage and chieftain councils within Padibe West and East Sub-Counties, as well as with groups of youths in five villages. Village-wide *kabake* (debates) were held in those same five villages in March and April 2012. In addition, I participated in and followed a youth group's "cultural revival" programming within Padibe East and West Sub-Counties from March to September 2012.



Fig. 3. Author washing dishes in front of her hut in Pabwoc-East village. August 2012. Photo by Ryan Gauvin. Full reproduction permissions given.

### The 1986-2006 War in Northern Uganda

The two-decade war in Northern Uganda technically saw President Museveni's military at war with the Lord's Resistance Army rebels. But the massive displacement and confinement of the rural population by the government, the abduction and forced soldiering of Acoli youths by the rebels, and the recruitment of other Acoli youths by the government—combined with the targeting of Acoli civilians by both sides—made the majority of the Acoli people (and Acoli youths specifically) both primary perpetrators and victims of the violence (Baines 2010; Mawson 2004). In addition to the massive loss of life, high levels of violence, displacement from the land, and the resulting poverty, the separation of children and youths from their close kinship networks at various times in the conflict was unprecedented in Acoli history, even in its most tumultuous past.<sup>6</sup> Up to 25% of youths have been abducted at some point by the LRA and forced to serve as soldiers (Annan et al. 2008:vii).

Tens of thousands of "night commuter" children walked nightly, also without any form of adult guidance, to the three city



Fig. 4. This boy escaped from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) Rebel group five days before this photo was taken. The LRA is made up mostly of abducted children. October 2004.

<sup>6</sup> All seven power shifts since British colonial rule (ending in 1962) have involved various forms and degrees of civilian-focused violence, and the Colonial administration policies before "independence" in 1962 were often themselves violent. Additionally, coercion by Arab slave traders, inter-chieftdom wars, and cattle raids were also common in the pre-colonial Acoliland area (Atkinson 1994).

centers in Acoliland for fear of abduction (Cheney 2007:206). And even before the decade of forced displacement to IDP camps, most children and youths would hide and sleep in the bush apart from adults for self-protection (Baines and Paddon 2012).

Within the IDP camps, one could see the devastating effects of the war on everyday patterns of residence, social relations, and activities. For example, *wang'oo*, nightly fireside storytelling that acted as a vital mode of social control and education, fell out of practice. Because of a lack of firewood, imposed curfews, and the dense population of a camp with huts built quite close together, *wang'oo* was no longer feasible or safe.



Fig. 5. Up to 50,000 children walked each night to the three city centers in Northern Uganda at the height of the war in order to protect themselves against abduction by the Lord's Resistance Army. October 2004.



Fig. 6. Fires that spread quickly throughout the IDP camps were quite common due to massive overcrowding. Anaka IDP camp, March 2005.

In addition, with no or limited access to their gardens, youths grew up alienated for the most part from everyday practices of subsistence farming, traditional foods were replaced with World Food Program emergency aid, and food preparation routines (which most other daily activities in this rural context aimed at supporting) were significantly altered.

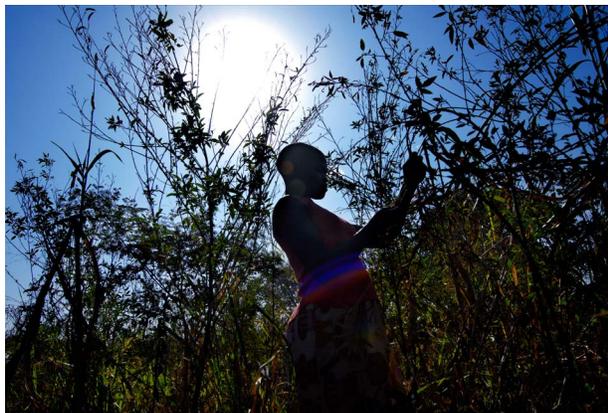


Fig. 7. Beatrice harvests peas (*lapena*) on her neighbor's plot just outside Padibe IDP camp. January 2007.



Fig. 8. Throughout the long war, residents were wholly dependent on food aid from the World Food Program for survival. Purongo IDP camp, March 2005.

Lineage authority waned as access to land through customary tenure lost its centrality in people's everyday lives. Families torn apart by the war lived together in one hut, contrary to previous practices that had girls at puberty move to a hut with their grandmother for teaching and saw boys at puberty move into a bachelor hut. In addition, ceremonies such as funerary rites—

elaborate occasions that addressed mourning, inheritance, and reconciliation of extended kin relations—were significantly curtailed because of the impossibility of travel (due to confinement or issues of security), lack of funds, or, in many cases, missing bones. Furthermore, youths were taught “Child Rights” by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) so that the youths felt empowered enough over their elders to refuse working in the home (now seen as “child labor”) and to refute traditional corporal punishment (now seen as “beating”). Considering p’Bitek’s assertions about social relations and everyday practices as they relate to performance in oral tradition, one can imagine the profound transformations that two decades of war wrought on community, morality, and personhood.

### Pabwoc Village

Pabwoc Village is about a 75-minute walk southeast of the former Padibe IDP Camp, which had before the war been a trading center and is now a town center. The village is divided

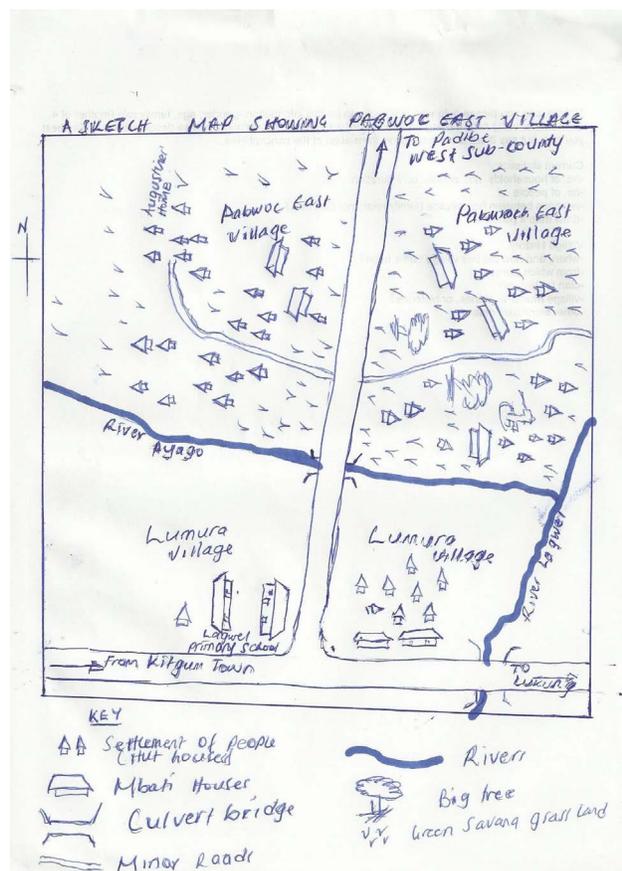


Fig. 9. Augustine (the author’s research assistant and friend) drew this map to represent his home village of Pabwoc-East. March 2012.

for administrative purposes into Pabwoc-East and Pabwoc-West, but the name Pabwoc (*pa* = “of;” thus, Pabwoc = “of Abwoc”) indicates a common ancestor of the people who live there.<sup>7</sup> There are approximately 600 people in each Pabwoc (East and West), residing in about 120 homesteads respectively. Within Pabwoc, there are three lineages along which residents trace their origins: the Otuna, Ocuga, and Abonga. Pabwoc-East, where I myself lived, is composed mostly of the Ocuga lineage. In most of rural, subsistence-farming Acoliland, land title is through customary land tenure,<sup>8</sup> and the lineage, sub-clan, and clan are therefore important and primary means of social organization and survival. Today, the village also counts itself as part of the Padibe Chieftainship and within the parish of Lagwel, the sub-county of Padibe East, and the district of Lamwo.

Pabwoc-East does not have electricity or solar panels. The water borehole that serves the village is often broken, and water is fetched from the neighboring

<sup>7</sup> Some scholars would use the term “sub-clan” to indicate the relationship between Abwoc and the Bobi clan.

<sup>8</sup> Approximately 70-80% of all rural land rights throughout Uganda are based on customary land tenure.

village's (Pabwoc-West's) borehole, about a 20-minute walk each way, depending on the location of one's homestead. The village itself consists of various homesteads—each containing collections of two to eight huts that house close family members, a granary, a pit latrine, fruit trees, and a central fire pit. Each homestead is surrounded by small gardens and can be reached by footpaths. There are communal grazing lands (*alot*) on the east boundary of the village and large communal gardens to the west that are used for the intense agricultural production that sustains the people.

Almost everyone in Pabwoc Village was displaced from their land in 1997 because of the war. Then most residents traveled to Kitgum—the capital of their district at the time—on account of increased rebel and military activity around their homes. A few stayed behind, at great risk of violence and abduction, to care collectively for livestock. Those who fled were first put up in a public primary school in Kitgum, and after two months they were then moved to relief tents at Gang-Dyang, still within Kitgum. Because of overcrowding and poor conditions, cholera broke out at Gang-Dyang, and the government expanded its policy of turning former trading centers within the rural areas into “protected villages,” or Internally Displaced Person's camps. The government transferred those who had fled to the town back to the trading centers within their home sub-counties. For Pabwoc, that was Padibe. Some residents tried to return home at that time to farm for a few years, but by 2003 everyone had shifted back to Padibe Camp as the rebels took increasing control of their homeland and the government army declared anyone who remained in their homes, outside the camps, a rebel.

The years in Padibe camp were bitter and difficult. Unable to access their land consistently, residents were dependent on the World Food Program for survival. Livestock, which was their wealth and longstanding financial security, was looted (by Karamajong or government soldiers) and disappeared. Firewood was scarce and dangerous to collect, and it was thus used sparingly for cooking rather than for the traditional nightly gatherings of *wang'oo*. Disease was rampant because of a lack of hygienic facilities and water, as well as because of overcrowding. Raids by rebels were common, and people built huts almost on top of one another out of fear and a lack of space. Major fires broke out in the camp, further destroying the few possessions people had left. Although families originally settled by village (sub-clan), as space became scarce, everyone mixed. Social control by family, lineage, and sub-clan eroded in this environment. Children grew up without knowing who their extended relatives were (issues obvious at home when village boundaries are physical manifestations of one's relations). Incest,



Fig. 10. The homestead of the author's family in Pabwoc-East village, Lamwo district, Northern Uganda. September 2012. Photo by Ryan Gauvin. Full reproduction permissions given.

according to Acoli's far-reaching conceptions of relatedness,<sup>9</sup> became rampant. Alcohol abuse—perhaps an effect of either the idleness of the camps, the humiliation of dependence on aid, or the trauma of the war—became common.

In addition, the population was exposed to immense amounts of foreign ideology through the new presence of international NGOs in the camp and their “trainings.” As discussed by Lederach (1995), “trainings” are not merely the apolitical delivery of aid, but the “packaging, presentation, and selling of social knowledge” (6)—social knowledge that is, inherently, full of the cultural, religious, moral, and philosophical biases of those behind the aid and trainings. For example, most Pabwoc residents speak of their disdain for the trainings related to “child rights” that undermined parental, lineage, and sub-clan responsibility and the ability to control their children socially.

In an academic context, Chris Dolan has asserted that the IDP camps in Northern Uganda facilitated “cultural debilitation” and that the overcrowded living conditions were “vectors for social breakdown” (2009:168-69).<sup>10</sup> Baines (2007:96) has also explored the idea that the war, and all its effects, represents a fundamental imbalance in the Acoli moral, social, and spirit worlds, and Finnström (2008) has spoken of the cosmological crisis that the conflict provoked for Acoli. According to the people of Pabwoc, exile from the land, the breakdown of kin authority in the crowded camps, and foreign interventions all contributed to these failures and crises.

After a ceasefire in late 2006, though amidst a failed peace negotiation in 2008,<sup>11</sup> residents finally began returning home in late 2008, and by 2010 almost all residents of Pabwoc who intended to do so had left the IDP camp. The years since their return have also been difficult, and adults' efforts have been focused almost exclusively on survival and the social organization it entails. As I was reminded often by Yolanda, a mother in her forties, “returning home, rebuilding huts, latrines, and digging land from bush . . . it is really, really hard. It takes a lot of work . . . all of our time and energy.” Women work almost exclusively in the gardens. Men for the most part do garden work as well, but some have jobs in “the center” (the former camp), Padibe, teaching or making furniture. Children spend most of their days going to and from school, working at the appropriately gendered household chores, and helping in the gardens on the weekends and school holidays. According to people in Pabwoc, some youths who grew up in the camp have slowly adjusted to rural and subsistence-farming life. Others have a hard time returning to a home and lifestyle that is both foreign and undesirable to them, and as some adults and elders say, “they now think they are too good and refuse to dig! They only want to make money so they don't have to be good people.” To be independently wealthy, the elders explained

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<sup>9</sup> One is related to whole other villages—and therefore sub-clans and clans—through maternal families and in-laws.

<sup>10</sup> Dolan (2009:1, 171, 221, 236, *et passim*) further asserts that this debilitation has occurred in line with the government's plan to “inclusively subordinate” the Acoli, replacing traditional authority structures with governmental ones.

<sup>11</sup> Despite the failed peace negotiations, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) withdrew from Northern Uganda. It continues to be active in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and the Central African Republic (CAR).

to me, was very dangerous since it permitted an individual to be unaccountable to their kin, and therefore socially irresponsible.

Today, despite the tumult of the displacement and war years, lineage, sub-clan, and clan structures and practices have all strongly, and perhaps surprisingly, revived since the return to the land. *Wang'oo* have also mostly returned. According to my village survey, approximately 85% of households engage in this practice within their own compounds or visit an elderly family member to practice with them. In addition, 100% of Pabwoc-East residents now survive upon subsistence farming.



Fig. 11. *Wang'oo* (nightly fireside gathering) in Pabwoc-East village. August 2012. Photo by Ryan Gauvin. Full reproduction permissions given.

The Acoli have a classic patrilineal (inheritance through one's father) segmentary lineage system and traditionally marriages are patrilocal, with the wife moving to her husband's village.<sup>12</sup> 100% of the residents of Pabwoc-East are either descendants of Abwoc or have married a descendant of Abwoc, and they can all trace themselves to one of the three lineages mentioned earlier. During my time in Pabwoc I observed how kin structures deal with a multitude of problematic issues connected with stubborn youth, domestic violence, land disputes, theft, and collective farming, and I even saw how a homicide passes through the various levels of kin and chieftain organization towards resolution. If and when issues cannot be settled through these means, the police and courts then offer potential alternative solutions.

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<sup>12</sup> However, there are numerous exceptions when a woman returns to her father's village as a result of divorce, barrenness, or ill treatment by the husband. There are also some examples in Pabwoc of families tracing themselves through their mothers to Abwoc.

### Okot p'Bitek (1931-1982)

Although in literary circles Okot p'Bitek is considered one of the most important African post- and anti-colonial writers and cultural revolutionaries, his critical academic work—with a significant amount of it treating oral tradition—is not widely known or applied. p'Bitek was born in 1931 in Gulu, Northern Uganda; his mother, Serena Laca, was widely known as a storyteller and dancer, and his father, Jebedayo Opi, was a schoolteacher. He wrote his first novel, *White Teeth*, in 1952 and traveled to England in 1958 with Uganda's national football team. While there, he decided to pursue academic studies—first in law and then, as his interest in the legal practices of his own Acoli people grew, in anthropology at Oxford, partially under the prominent Sir E. E. Evans-Pritchard. p'Bitek's first writings on oral tradition appear at that time. He returned to Northern Uganda soon after, continuing his writings, and is credited with founding “the East African Song School” of literature with his most famous work, *Song of Lawino*, originally published in 1966. Importantly, the song style of his literary work advocated for reconsidering what was

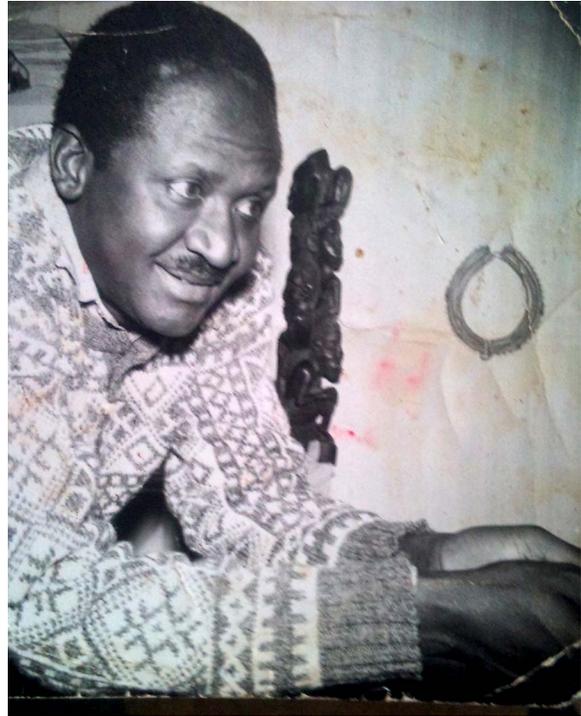


Fig. 12. Okot p'Bitek. Photo and reproduction permissions provided by Okot's daughter, Julie Bitek.

conceptualized as literature, and p'Bitek succeeded in questioning binary thinking regarding illiteracy and orality by basing his literary work in an oratorical style.

p'Bitek moved to the capital, Kampala, in 1966, where he became the first African director of the National Theatre. He was forced into exile (in Kenya) in 1968 and began teaching in the University of Nairobi in 1971. He also taught briefly at the University of Iowa, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Ife in Nigeria. During those years, he wrote the collections of Acoli oral literature *Horn of My Love* (1974) and *Hare and Hornbill* (1978), as well as *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1971) and a collection of critical essays entitled *Africa's Cultural Revolution* (1973). He also continued to compose his “song” literature. After Idi Amin's reign, p'Bitek finally returned to Uganda in 1980 to a teaching position at Makerere University in Kampala. He died tragically of a stroke in July 1982 and was buried in the town of his birth. Another collection of essays, *Artist, the Ruler* (1986), was published posthumously.

In 1963, Okot p'Bitek wrote his B.Litt. anthropology thesis, “Oral Literature and Its Social Background among the Acholi and Lango.” In order to correct the false, and consequently harmful and destructive, impressions that Western scholars and missionaries had made of his people, he documented what he called their “knowledge,” variously understood as the social philosophy, worldview, or religion manifest in the “oral literature” of the Acoli. p'Bitek's holistic

view conceptualizes oral literature and tradition as representing and enacting a people's general approach to life, and he argues that the practices embodied in Acoli oral tradition (and other primarily non-written cultures) are the main method by which society interprets itself and its members relate to each other and the outside world (p'Bitek 1973:27). In this and all his subsequent academic writings (1962, 1963, 1971), p'Bitek provides powerful arguments to counter the decontextualizing, non-holistic, and patronizing way that Western scholarship had previously studied the oral traditions, philosophy, and culture of African peoples.

Beginning with the basic acknowledgement that the fullness of Acoli life exists only within the bonds of kinship relations, p'Bitek contrasts the relationality and social collectivism of the Acoli with the Western concepts of autonomy and individuality (1986:19):<sup>13</sup>

Man is not born free. He cannot be free. He is incapable of being free. For only by being in *chains* can he be and remain "human." What constitutes these chains? Man has a bundle of *duties* which are expected from him by society, as well as a bundle of *rights* and *privileges* that the society owes him.

Emphasizing the idea that Acoli identity is relational, he sees the processes of socialization and the basis for creating those relationships as embedded in the oral tradition. Such views can help us to better understand the angst of Pabwoc's youths and elders regarding youths being outside of *tekwaro*. If the basis of creating, and ostensibly maintaining, social relations is embedded in oral traditional practices—and if those practices are foreign to youths who grew up in the IDP camps—then considerable practical and existential uncertainty can be attributed to the havoc or break caused by the war and the subsequent displacement from their land. Extrapolating from p'Bitek's assertion, then, a break from *tekwaro* and the oral tradition associated with it also means a break in social relationships. Interestingly, privileging the importance of relationships also resonates with the contemporary emergence of an Indigenous research paradigm (see, for instance, Tuhiwai Smith 1992; Alfred and Corntassel 2005; Wilson 2008). Wilson explicitly explains that the core of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality, whereby "relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality" (2008:7).

Following upon his arguments about the relationality of social existence and that oral tradition is inextricably linked to social relations, p'Bitek emphasizes that the social philosophy (or "knowledge," per contemporary Indigenous scholarship) of a people is not communicated through abstract speculation or by seeking experts within the culture, but that it should be sought in the meaningful practices of people's daily activities, or in life as it is actually lived (p'Bitek 1973:90). p'Bitek's adamant insistence, in the 1960s at least, on focusing upon the practices of everyday life is seen reflected in later works on orality such as David W. Cohen's (1989) observations among the Busoga, which emphasize that historical knowledge is not located in specific formulaic narratives, but that it is constantly "voiced, addressed, and invoked all through everyday life" (13), and that the working intelligence of daily life is necessarily based on knowledge of the past. Deemphasizing expert knowledge and processes also resonates with many Indigenous researchers in the Americas and Australia today who insist that Indigenous

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Imbo 2002:131.

knowledges are acquired through daily experience (for instance, Wilson 2008; Dei et al. 2000).

As corroboration, during my time in Pabwoc there were very few instances of formal story or history telling. Rather, when walking to the garden for digging, for instance, one's elders might point out the boundaries of the sub-clan, identify neighboring villages or sub-clans, recount past conflicts over land, or speak of which crops were grown before. While gathering



Fig. 13. Dorkus leads the author to her garden, explaining who gardens in the other plots along the way, where the next villages begin, and what the histories are between Pabwoc-East and their neighbors. July 2012.

firewood, I even heard a story about the last elephant shot in the area (in the 1950s). Due to the proliferation of arms when Acoli soldiers from England's King African Rifles Regiment returned home from the Second World War, big game was quickly hunted out. These examples make it clear that

oral tradition practices, which according to p'Bitek create and maintain social relations, are indeed found in everyday life practices such as gardening and wood gathering—the exact everyday practices that were dormant during the long years of war and displacement from the land when the population was confined to the camps. This performance-oriented conceptualization of oral tradition also finds resonance with more recent academic concerns, first with “context” in oral tradition, as per Ruth Finnegan's *African Oral Traditions* (1970), and later in a more fully elaborated form with “performance studies” in cultural production and reproduction, as described, for example, by Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs almost two decades later (1990:61):

Performance-based study challenges dominant Western conceptions by prompting researchers to stress the cultural organization of communicative processes. . . . We attempt to provide a framework that will displace reified, object-centered notions of performativity, text, and context— notions that presuppose the encompassment of each performance by a single, bounded social interaction.

A performative approach to oral tradition not only facilitates engagement with context, but also further considers its practices as social action—action that is representative and at the same time constitutive of social, moral, and political worlds.

Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank (1997) takes a similar approach when she speaks of storytelling as social action at a Yukon storytelling festival and explores how speaker, audience, context, histories, and occasion intersect in performance as they actually serve to *do* something in the world. In Pabwoc, I have found such performative social action in far less-formal oral tradition practices. There were countless days around the homestead where Mama and the Aunties instructed the young girls (and myself) on how to prepare food properly, how to serve food and drink properly, how to sit properly, when to bathe, and many other activities essential to being a good Acoli woman. While these instructions may at first glance be seen as utilitarian,

there are bountiful moral and social lessons—especially regarding social relations—bound up in the Acoli concept of *woro* (“respect”) that were transmitted on those occasions.

While p'Bitek's observations on relationality, everyday practice, and performance certainly find resonance in various spheres today, his disinterest in reconstructing history—in addition to his anti-colonial sentiments—minimized academic response at a time when academia was mainly focused on the legitimacy of oral traditions as historical sources. Jan Vansina's groundbreaking work in establishing the legitimacy of oral history had only just been published in French (1961) at the time when p'Bitek was researching and writing his thesis (1963). And while Vansina's



Fig. 14. Mama (the author's adoptive mother) instructs the author and other young girls on how to serve the evening family (often extended) meal. April 2012.

work fundamentally challenged Western conceptions of documentation and history on one level, his preoccupation with legitimizing oral history in his search for “validity” and “reliability” by giving “confidence that the components of an oral narrative could be disembedded from the present and from the performance” (Curtin 1968a, quoted in White et al. 2001:11) was directly opposed to p'Bitek's more holistic, fluid, and constitutive social philosophical and action-oriented approach to orality.

### **Becoming Human after War: Oral Tradition As Social Action**

Studies of oral tradition generally examine verbal and non-verbal communication in order to better understand a wide array of social processes. p'Bitek's work on oral tradition's building of social relations, its everyday forms, and its performative nature provides significant insights on social repair and forms of “localized transitional justice” (Shaw et al. 2010) practices in communities recovering from violence and conflict. For instance, with p'Bitek's assertions in mind, one recognizes that Acoli oral traditions are the principal means of socialization and education (despite formal schooling), whose transmission promotes moral development (Apoko 1967; p'Bitek 1962), enforces social norms (Okumu 2000), serves as conflict resolution, and provides the conceptual tools to examine and act in all aspects of social life (p'Bitek 1963, 1974). Furthermore, there is an Acoli concept termed *odoko dano* that refers to the socialization process of creating a real human being (*dano adana*), who, according to Finnström (2008:25), is someone who “is able to take advice from elders and contribute to household maintenance” and who, according to Apoko (1967:49), “knows their duties.” In conjunction with Acoli conceptions of personhood, then, becoming a human being largely depends on the intergenerational transmission of cultural values through oral tradition (narratives, practices, everyday work

activities, and the like),<sup>14</sup> and according to Acoli processual notions of the transmission of culture (*tekwaro*) and the making of humanity (*odoko dano*), oral tradition involves—both practically and conceptually—social action that constitutes social, political, and moral worlds.

In Pabwoc, I heard many times about the humiliation people felt at having to survive by “begging” from the NGOs, and many agreed with one man when he said that “getting something for nothing was never in the Acoli culture. Living in the camps has changed many of our youths—and even our elders.” Emphasizing their distance from the land, their loss of livestock, their subsequent loss of self-reliance, and youths’ abhorrence of gardening are all common vernaculars for speaking about the war and its devastating effects on personhood and community. (This is not to say that the violence of the war is trivialized or ignored, but the violence experienced has actually very little bearing on these individuals’ efforts to retake control and rebuild their lives.<sup>15</sup>) Such a situation reminds us of the observations found in this essay’s introduction where adults in Pabwoc expressed their angst about youths being “out” of *tekwaro*; being “out of” *tekwaro* is the colloquial way of referring to the war’s devastating effects on social relations and Acoli ideas of personhood.

Taking the subjective and intersubjective processes of communication involved in oral tradition as a site for the creation of meaning, world-views, relationships, and ultimately, reality, provides important focus for examining how people engage in processes of social repair. This emphasis on actual communication processes and colloquial forms partially explains, for example, why survivors of war and violence tend to under-emphasize the facts of violent events, including dates, physical descriptions, and so forth. And although the lack of chronology may be frustrating to evaluators in formalized truth-telling processes (Krog et al. 2009; Ross 2001), attention to what is emphasized by survivors reveals far more about how people make sense of lethal violence and remake their lives.

Emphasizing the creation of personhood and relatedness through oral traditional practices—the resurgent practices (for instance, *wang’oo*, work parties, lineage councils, sub-clan meetings, and subsistence farming) I saw in Pabwoc relating to the strengthening of lineage and kin relations—specifically constitutes an embodied, practice-oriented form of social repair. Considering *odoko dano* and Acoli notions of becoming human through oral tradition and participation in one’s kin community, the important resurgence of lineage, sub-clan, and clan authority and institutions following a return to traditional land makes good sense. In fact, in addition to the central role of kin structures in everyday survival and organization, approximately

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<sup>14</sup> According to Opiyo Oloya (2013:17): “The stories we were told as children had moral endings that instructed us how to relate to the people around us as *dano adana*, human persons, a core identity endowed on each individual, and which determined how the individual viewed self, and how the individual was treated by others within the community. In essence, these stories told us how we should live . . . as my parents put it, *kit ma omyero ibed calo dano adana*, ‘how you should live like a human person.’”

<sup>15</sup> The devastating violence experienced during the war, at least in Pabwoc and Padibe generally, is indeed bracketed away from standard Acoli ways of dealing with conflict. Usually, for example, in instances of an individual being killed—and differing from the individualist, Western approach to justice—the sub-clan of the perpetrator, and not the perpetrator him/herself, is responsible to the sub-clan of the victim. In post-conflict Acoliland, however, the scale of the violence experienced during the war, as well as the circumstances of much of it (most LRA rebels were abducted as children and forced to kill), precludes an adherence to these collective responsibility standards.

90% of villages within the Padibe Chiefdom (the chiefdom that incorporates the villages in the sub-county) have “raised” an *abila*, the lineage or sub-clan’s ancestral shrine. And although Pabwoc has yet to raise theirs, the *Won Abila* (“father of the shrine”) is planning for it to be raised “soon” in order to “help bring the *kaka* [a term variously used for lineage, sub-clan, or clan] together and heal all the sickness that happened from the war” (Rosenoff Gauvin 2012). Reestablishing these shrines strongly supports the centrality of kin institutions, oral tradition, and relationality to post-conflict social repair in Pabwoc, Padibe, and rural Acoliland more generally.

These quite quick resurgences in organizational structures and related practices suggest the variability of forms in which the people of Pabwoc and Padibe reconcile history (even when violence has been involved), restore self and community, and rebuild after conflict. Connerton’s (1989) assertions that our experience of the present is largely dependent on our knowledge of the past and that it is chiefly through bodily performances that societies remember the past also support the notion that the resurgence of kin structures and their related practices indicates intense and dynamic local processes of repair.

To clarify an approach to everyday processes of social repair that is theoretically grounded and practically informed, it is useful to recognize p’Bitek’s groundbreaking work and appreciate the performative nature of oral tradition as well as its vital role in creating personhood and social relations as social action. Relating these concepts to the field of post-conflict social reconstruction and social repair elucidates critiques regarding the Western philosophical bias to truth-telling and judicial processes, for example, and prioritizes locally relevant processes of relationship-building practiced by communities themselves that may reject binaries between remembering and forgetting, speaking and silence, truth and fiction.

### **Place-Based Approaches to Post-Conflict Inquiry**

The use of p’Bitek’s incredibly rich scholarship on oral tradition to understand and explain people’s post-conflict concerns and actions beginning from their own cultural concepts around *tekwaro* helps clarify the vital significance of everyday resurgent practices in contemporary Acoliland. Okot p’Bitek’s work, decades ahead of its time, inherently acknowledged the “local” as a primary place of knowledge and capacity (as subsequently urged by Baines [2010] and Finnström [2008]). His main points, that oral tradition shapes personhood and social relations, and that oral traditional practices are performed within everyday social interactions and activities, provide a logical framework to understanding how communities are actively engaging in processes of social repair.

Keeping in mind p’Bitek’s work on the fluidity of oral tradition, social philosophy, education, religion, and moral positioning, one of his main concerns was that the nations of Africa should be built on actual African foundations. Rather than calling for a retreat to traditionalism from “modernity,” as some critics have charged, p’Bitek instead propounded the development of African institutions based on African, and not specifically European, biases, values, and ideas. And in relation to questions concerning post-conflict processes of social repair—a topic of urgent concern in Northern Uganda and elsewhere—p’Bitek’s work emphasizes that for transitions to succeed, the definitions, values, and terms of “repair” or “justice” must be those

that are meaningful and relevant to a majority of a specific people's everyday lives. That is not to say that people in Northern Uganda may not want a variety of approaches to transition, but that attention to everyday oral traditions and vital socialization practices will provide invaluable insight into indigenous, sustained, effective, and longer-term processes of social relationship building. Indeed, those of us that have not lived through two decades of war are, at best, students open to learning about transition and social reconstruction from the experts themselves—survivors whose daily lives embody the theoretical, moral, and practical challenges of that reality. And for that access and privilege, I am grateful.

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**Appendix: Portraits of Survivors/Residents of Pabwoc East**

Portrait 1. Almarina and Justo (husband and wife). April 2012.



Portrait 2. Yolanda. September 2012.



Portrait 3. Alice and Grace (co-wives). August 2012.



Portrait 4. Okot. September 2012.