

The Rhetoric of Aspirational Development in Acholiland Uganda

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Abstract

After experiencing decades of civil war, unrest, and displacement, the Acholi of Northern Uganda returned to their homelands in the late 2000s and early 2010s, only to face more instability. One issue was regarding access and use of land, as customary practices were largely managed by patrilineal clans, and this historical infrastructure had been severely disrupted after generations in refugee camps. There is widespread agreement that when women have stable access to farmland, they can contribute to economic development within their communities. The level of chaos occurring in post-war Acholiland presented an opportunity to improve women's land rights in this deeply patriarchal region. A rhetorical process originally designed to promote women's access to education was adapted and implemented within Acholiland to address the issue of women's land rights, and this paper explores how this process worked as well as the impact that it had on the cultural perspectives and practices of the community.

Introduction

Deep cultural change often only occurs when there are enough cracks in a social construct that a prism of differing perspectives can shine through. In the Acholiland region of Northern Uganda, decades of civil war and generational displacement have resulted in a profound disruption of the Acholi's historically patriarchal clan structure, presenting an opportunity for material social change with regard to women's land rights (WLR).

But recognizing that there is a window of opportunity and taking advantage of that opportunity are two very different things. Elsewhere in Uganda, a rhetorical process dubbed aspirational or visionary development had been created as a method for changing cultural attitudes toward educating girls. Local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Northern Uganda sought to apply this approach in addressing the dubious access that women in the region had to land, a situation that was furthering an already unstable post-war environment. This rhetorical approach involves three phases of persuasion -- local facilitators, the women themselves, and community elders -- and has resulted in meaningful change in terms of both WLR and community stability overall.

Cultural and Contextual Background

During the time of the British Protectorate, lands in the south and west of Uganda were prioritized for economic development, while the communities in the north were used as fodder for manual labor and military action. Over time, civil unrest brewed, and a series of political coups and civil wars took place, beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the mid-2000s. A major player in this unrest has been the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA,) which began waging wars in Northern Uganda in the late 1980s, ultimately displacing the Acholi people and forcing them into refugee camps for decades (Minority Rights Group).

The Acholi are a deeply patriarchal, clan-based society, which historically managed interactions within and between their clans via oral methods. As Julian Hopwood notes, “the oral records of land claims had been thoroughly disrupted and in some cases lost when a large part of a generation of elders had died in the camps and boundary markers had sometimes disappeared or become unrecognisable” (2015, p. 389). As the Acholi returned to their lands in the late 2000s and early 2010s, they were not only highly traumatized people (Horn, 2013, p. 5), they struggled to reestablish customary practices such as resource claims and management. Given that land is a key resource in this region, the lack of clear rights resulted in instability, which the central Ugandan government sought to resolve through the reassertion of some of the colonial-era land tenure laws that had been in place before the LRA occupation (Hopwood, 2015, p. 388). While these laws did indicate that women have the right to use, own, and transfer property, this is in direct conflict with the customary practices of the clan structure in Acholiland, so they were difficult to implement in a meaningful way. The tension this created was causing additional strain on the region, especially in rural areas where claims on land were often heavily negotiated through clan structure, which was, in itself, recovering from decades of disruption (Hopwood, 2015, p. 390). However, this lack of stability also presented an opportunity -- given that there was a lack of formal structure, women were using land under informal agreements which may not have occurred if the entrenched clan management structure was still in place (Scalise, 2021).

Inspired by the work of Mwalimu Musheshe, who co-founded the Uganda Rural Development and Training Program (URDT) and the women-only African Rural University, local groups in Acholiland sought to adapt his methods for changing attitudes toward educating girls and women. The approach developed by URDT focuses on women as change-makers, recognizing that, “when equipped with knowledge and skills ... women are well placed to offer

the needed visionary leadership for community transformation” (ARU, 2018). A key element of this process is to facilitate individual aspirational goal development, which can then be rolled up into community goal development. Given the collective nature of the Acholi people, relating how ideas of individual rights, such as a woman’s access to land, can benefit the community as a whole is an essential step in the persuasion process.

The deeply patriarchal practices of the region include bride prices, a status that renders women a piece of property that has been “purchased” by her husband’s family. Accordingly, the idea that “property can own property” (Hannay, Scalise, 2014, p. 17) seems illogical to many elders in the community, and the customary practices reflect this. Depending on whether or not she still has young children to support, a widowed or abandoned woman can be rejected from their husband’s clan, losing her ability to access resources and land required for subsistence farming (Scalise, 2021). The focus on WLR is important because it can possibly influence poverty reduction overall. As noted by Meinzen-Dick, et al, there is widespread agreement that securing WLR can have a positive impact on the economic stability of a community (2019, p. 80), and so women’s rights should be considered when developing or revising land rights laws in regions that have historically left women out of the conversation.

Discussion and Analysis

The process of aspirational development is based on phases, which often function in tandem (Scalise, 2021). While each project begins with establishing a framework within the community, the outreach process is a cycle, moving back and forth between facilitators, women, and the community as a whole.

Phase 1: Establishing Purpose

The first phase of this rhetorical process was to establish the purpose of the project within the community. This began by identifying local community members who could help facilitate change and then function as ambassadors of sorts. It was essential that these facilitators understood all sides of the situation and the generational displacement that the Acholi have experienced actually became a benefit because, “camp life ... shifted [the dynamic] ... as younger people were the ones who were working with the NGOs and the humanitarian workers, and so they suddenly had access to information that the elders didn’t have” (Scalise, 2021). This resulted in a broad base of possible facilitators who had some educational background and experience working on human rights campaigns, while also having the cultural experience to understand both the struggle that the women experienced due to insecure land rights and the emotional responses that members of the community would have regarding the idea of WLR.

These Community-Based Facilitators (CBF) were key to the process, primarily because their work formed the basis for subsequent phases. One of the main hurdles encountered early on in the process was educating the CBFs themselves on why it's important for women to have land rights. The benefit of CBFs was that they were trusted by their community; the drawback was that they had been socialized by that same community, which did not believe that women should have rights to land. This, again, represented both a challenge and an opportunity; Scalise recalls that “we started with the law -- here is the lay of the land. And a lot of them had heard of gender equality, although that’s a bit of an issue in communal cultures like this, but they had heard of it and understood it as an aspiration, so we kind of started with that” (2021). Through their conversations with CBFs and learning how to persuade them to embrace WLR, the program

coordinators gained insight into locally specific cultural beliefs that could inhibit the rhetorical process.

Discussing cultural perspectives with CBFs engaged them in the process of understanding how traditional cultural mores were contributing to contemporary social instability. When women possess secure land rights, they can provide more stable support for their families, which has a variety of positive impacts on the community (Meinzen-Dick, et al, 2019). One of those is in regard to schooling: Rural schools aren't free and require tuition payments, so women who are able to produce income in a stable manner are able to ensure their children gain more education. With land security, women can form the substructure for the growth and development of their community as a whole, and the initial phase of this rhetorical process was to walk CBFs through how to explain the positive impact that seemingly individualized movements such as WLR can have on the broader community. This has the potential to impact the cultural perspective of the Acholi people beyond the focus of WLR, as CBFs engage in their own personal lives, clans, and villages, armed with a new understanding of the interplay between personal goals and community prosperity.

Phase 2: Giving Voice

Once this framework was established, the next phase was to work directly with the women who were being adversely affected by these issues and give them the tools to communicate effectively about their needs. From birth, girls and women in this region are socialized to believe that their needs and concerns are always secondary and not of interest to the wider community. When external facilitators attempted to engage, women often responded positively about being asked for their opinion, yet they rarely offered actionable feedback or input because of this deeply socialized perspective that what they think isn't valuable (Scalise,

2021). This type of socialized and culturally endorsed behavior also might seem like a challenge, but it, too, presented an opportunity. Once CBFs were trained in understanding the importance of WLR for the community overall, they worked with the women in their village to help them develop their voice. They did this by taking a women-first approach, guiding them through how to communicate to three very different, yet interrelated audiences: The women themselves, their intimate partners, and their local community.

Addressing the first audience was key, and often one of the most difficult aspects due to the level of socialization that grounded women's self-perception as one of little importance. The CBFs encouraged the women to identify aspirational goals and then worked with them to see how their goals were interrelated, both short-term goals such as ensuring they have a lease on their land to long-term goals such as sending their children to school. CBFs guided women through this process, helping transform their concept of themselves from event-based problem-solvers reacting to immediate issues to envisioning themselves as creative producers who were contributing to their community as a whole (ARU, 2018). When framed in this manner, women began to see the value of sharing their ideas, and how their needs aren't necessarily secondary to the needs of the community: They are the community's needs.

The second audience was also quite difficult to address, as it often required CBFs to moderate and facilitate a change in practice and understanding within the woman's household itself. As Kiconco notes, "Normally, as head of the family, the father or husband has absolute control over decision making in the household. He protects, guides and carries the responsibility of upkeeping the family. On the other hand, the wife also is a great contributor to the maintenance of the family, particularly in childbearing and rearing, as well as in providing domestic and farming services" (2018, p.66). The civil war left many widows behind, caring for

children, and doing so on land that was accessed through her children's patrilineal bloodline. In the event that she partnered with a new man, her access to the land and the income it produced would be considered the property of her husband, who has no responsibility toward her children. Accordingly, CBFs often engaged in these domestic disputes, guiding men through the process of understanding how their wife or partner's access to another clan's land could provide a positive result for their home as well as the community (Scalise, 2021). This persuasion process involved rolling up the aspirational goals of the man's wife or partner and reflecting it back to him in a way that he saw it as a benefit and not a negative comment on his status or role within the community. According to Scalise, this part of the rhetorical process is essential because it's with this audience that most of the disputes arise; and by not addressing it, all of the work in the community will ultimately fail. Teaching women how to negotiate through an internal family dispute not only improved their access to land, it empowered them to voice their needs and opinions in other areas as well.

The third audience that CBFs worked with the women to address was the community as a whole. This largely involved the creative rhetorical strategy of having the women create dramatic reenactments that accentuated their experiences and communicated their news to their elders. These dramatizations provided a safe way for women to begin using their voices, especially within the context of a theatrical production. While some villages elected to reenact their dramas themselves, many of them engaged regional drama troupes who provided another layer of protection for women who were struggling with expressing their needs. Using drama as a method of building community, inspiring emotion, and speaking truth to power is part of many Western rhetorical traditions, and this was a particularly helpful tool in a culture that is still largely oral in its linguistic practices. It engaged the creative process, thus offering another avenue for women

to transform their self-perception from simple caregivers or laborers to envisioning themselves as creative forces. Taking the learnings from the sessions with the facilitators and turning them into the core of the persuasive activity was a key part of this process. “It always starts with a woman getting kicked off her land,” Scalise notes. “There’s a bad guy, and he’s kicking the woman off her land, and this sets the tone for the whole play. Part of it is that they love the entertainment of it, but part of it is they give the elders the opportunity to see how the community is responding to these ideas; if there is acceptance, and how people are feeling” (2021). Again, the additional layer of theater enabled the other members of the community to engage in a low-stakes way with these ideas, laying the groundwork for deeper conversations, negotiation, and conflict resolution regarding customary land rights practices.

Phase 3: Engaging Community

The final phase of this cycle was to provide an avenue that the elders of the community could traverse in order to improve their own understanding of the issues at hand and how making what might feel to be monumental changes can benefit the community overall. Once a relationship was developed between facilitators and the women in the community, a cycle of outreach began, engaging and communicating with the community as a whole, using rhetorical strategies that demonstrated the issues involved and possible paths for resolution.

Women educating other women, CBFs facilitating conversations, and theatrical performances that root the entire process in pathos were all persuasive tactics that gave elders the opportunity to embrace change while still honoring the core cultural values of the community. In a collectivist society, it can be disconcerting to consider that empowering the individual can develop or improve the community. A key persuasive tactic is in demonstrating how personal aspirations such as having secure access to farmland or regularly paying school fees can

contribute to larger community goals such as economic and social stability or cultural continuity. This rhetorical process provided the necessary framework for a grassroots movement and, in some situations, that kind of momentum is all that was needed to convince the community that these changes were for the better.

In some villages, there were women elders who, due to their clan association, could function as intermediaries between women of lower status and the male elders of the community (Hannay and Scalise, 2014, p. 122). They could also sometimes handle the negotiation of land claim conflict through to resolution if they are properly trained in the available rights of all parties involved (Scalise, 2021). Engaging with these women early and often improved the traction of the program, provided support to CBFs, and enabled the women themselves the opportunity to practice expressing their opinions in an environment that was less intimidating than in a public forum.

The interplay between CBFs, women, and the community as a whole was cyclical. CBFs worked with women to help them understand their rights and help them articulate their needs, then they worked with the community elders to facilitate conversations about those needs and help broker resolution. Each time this rhetorical process played out and the community gained a bit more stability, it went more smoothly for the next woman. This, in turn, persuaded women to step forward and engage in this rhetorical process, which continued to strengthen the Acholi community. And so the cycle goes, and goes, and goes.

Results and Conclusion

This particular project took place over a twelve-month period during 2013 and 2014 and was assessed at the end by a local Ugandan organization as well as an international NGO. According to the report shared by Fletscher and Kamusiime, at the end of the twelve-month

period, a third of the women who participated reported that they had increased their access to land, while an average of 20% more community members stated that they understood the legitimacy of WLR and they supported them. The greatest increase in this regard was with the woman's partner and their partner's family, with about 60% of them saying they understood the basics of WLR at the beginning of the program, and the full 100% of them indicating that they now supported the legitimacy of WLR. As previously mentioned, many of the disputes about WLR occur within the home, so this was a meaningful change within the community.

Certainly, entrenched perspectives still existed at the end of this pilot, with some elders still not accepting that women had any rights -- this was particularly the case when elders perceived that "rights" meant power or control, and they "could not accept" that women should be allowed to conceive of themselves in that manner (Fletscher, D., & Kamusiime, 2014, p. 3). The primary purpose of this rhetorical process was to provide women with a method for creating more stability in their lives, and after the program, over 80% of the participants reported that they felt they had secure access to farmland for at least the next five years.

Acholiland may feel very far from us, nestled as it is in the center of the African continent, but these communities offer insight into how cultural shifts can -- and do -- happen. By engaging in a persuasive rhetorical process that guided the community to change their perspectives on women's rights, the Acholi are turning the immense tragedy that was decades of civil war into a cultural revolution.

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