

UGANDA

Boys Becoming Men

In "Men of the Global South: A Reader". Zed Books (in press)

*Jane Gilbert*¹

Almost all gender work on “development” has focused on women. Only recently has it been recognized that men also have been profoundly affected by societal and cultural change, and that changes in men’s traditional roles contribute to instability within societies. In the West, there is increasing concern about the lack of appropriate role models for boys and their underachievement in school, along with public debate about what constitutes masculinity in western society. But for *any* society, it is crucial to understand what stories are told to a boy about becoming a man. What roles are possible for him? How is he to define his masculinity?

Whether a baby is born male or female is the most important “fact” in all cultures. Gender remains the core of one’s identity, affecting all aspects of life, both individually and socially. The concept of “hegemonic” masculinity recognises that in each community, particular forms of masculinity will be considered desirable and particularly valued. This hegemonic masculinity determines which men are considered “successful” by their own society, and strongly influences how boys and men judge themselves in turn. This essay is based on the personal accounts given by participants attending a workshop on “Masculinity and Conflict” in Gulu, Uganda, and supplemented by personal testimonies from men in that region.

¹ Special to this volume. Jane Gilbert is a Clinical Psychologist in the UK who has lived and travelled in Africa for many years, working in the Gambia, Uganda, Lesotho and Ghana.

Hegemonic masculinity in traditional Acholi culture

The workshop group was mixed in terms of sex and age, but there was almost universal agreement about the “ideal” man, i.e., the model of hegemonic masculinity in traditional Acholi culture. A man was considered successful if he married, had a home, provided for his family, could solve problems, “controlled his temper,” and was respected by the community. Women participants also stressed the need for a man to be a good provider, and not be “harsh or rough” with his wife. All participants considered it essential for a man to be able to provide security, protection, and food for his family, and to earn his own living by working the land and hunting. He should defend the family and provide education, medical care and clothing for his children.

Certain aspects of the division of labour between the sexes were held to be non-negotiable. For example, the idea of a man cooking provoked laughter from both male and female participants; the idea was considered demeaning and ridiculous. All participants stated that women should not construct houses or dig graves, and men must not grind meal or collect water. In extreme circumstances, men *could* collect water – but only on their bicycles, not on their heads as women do. If a woman had paid work outside the home, she would employ another woman to help, but would not expect domestic help from her husband.

Thus, the “ideal” man was seen by both sexes predominantly as a successful breadwinner who was respected by his community. Men’s valued attributes were almost completely instrumental. Very little comment was made about any aspect of “personality,” or of nurturing characteristics, and most participants viewed the fundamental role-changes brought about by conflict in Uganda as a cause for despair and regret.

Growing up as an Acholi boy

The identity of each child, whether male or female, is formed in part by the cultural messages received in childhood. Children of both sexes are controlled and punished, often very subtly, to make them conform to their society's image of how men and women should be.

To consider what these "messages" are in traditional Acholi culture, workshop participants were divided into male and female groups. The women were asked to compare their own upbringing with that of their brothers, and to consider how they were bringing up their own sons compared with their daughters. The men were asked to consider their experiences of boyhood. Unsurprisingly, the differences in upbringing between boys and girls were profound and specific, beginning at an early age.

The women stated that boys were expected to be involved in community decision making, while women were not. Girls' education was also considered less important. "Being a girl" involved not running about, not arguing or playing, but doing housework. Girls were mocked if they ran around the compound (the Luo equivalent of "tomboy" is a pejorative term). They were expected to be "humble" and to accept the authority of elders. Because girls were expected to marry and bring in a dowry for the family, the women felt that girls were fed and dressed better than boys, and protected by boys when groups of youths went out together. However, the women commented that boys were encouraged to "own" women; many of the female participants described being brought up in families where their brothers had been allowed to physically beat them. All the women felt that boys were more "free." After the age of twelve, boys could sleep outside and go where they wished, while girls could not.

The men's descriptions of how they had been expected to behave as boys was clear and detailed. Many tasks, such as cooking, fetching water, grinding, babysitting, and serving food,

were off-limits to them. Boys and men were expected to hunt, care for domestic animals, clean the compound, make the fire (girls were never allowed to do this), learn traditional dancing, and travel to far-off places for messages, even if they were afraid to do so. (Girls, by contrast, were always kept at home.) The men admitted they had sometimes felt isolated and lonely, particularly as they had to sleep apart from their mother from the age of three or four. But they were expected not to cry or protest. It seemed as if the provision of physical closeness and comfort to boys stopped abruptly at the age when they began sleeping separately. A number of the men stated that they had envied younger children, and had often cried alone.

Masculinity through “doing”

A boy’s traditional socialization included specific training: to hunt, throw a spear, and learn the origins of his clan; to receive bracelets from girls who liked him; to learn traditional rituals and dances; to build a hut and respect his elders. He was also expected to be brave enough to defend his family, control his sisters, delegate responsibilities to younger boys, and help when someone died. Almost all of these are public duties, exposed to community surveillance. Boys pay a price for this focus on the outside world and greater freedom: comfort and sustenance for their vulnerabilities are denied them. They must learn rapidly how to be brave, or pretend to be, and to deal with their emotional needs alone.

Traditional socialization by fathers and uncles was held to have many advantages. A boy would have clear role models, and know what was expected of him. He would be aware of his role in passing on traditional knowledge to the younger generation. As a child’s identity is based on his father’s clan, so the father is the basis for that identity. Participants felt that if a boy-child was illegitimate or lacked a father, he was likely to be mocked at puberty, as he had no family

history. Also a male who failed to conform to what was expected of him would lose the respect of others, become an object of fun, and in extreme circumstances have to leave the village. None of the participants mentioned any disadvantages for boys who grew up in traditional ways.

Childhood experiences of violence

The second day of the workshop focused specifically on participants' experiences of violence, both as children and adults. Some of the interview questions designed to collect testimony from other men in Gulu also concentrated on the role of violence in traditional Acholi society, and the impact of the ongoing conflict in Uganda.

Initial discussion confirmed what has been found in all cultures: that Acholi boys and girls play very differently. Participants described Acholi girls' play as primarily domestic and cooperative in nature, whereas boys' play involved strength, physical prowess, and "harassing" girls. Participants thought that boys needed to prove themselves in front of other boys, and to maintain their pride in front of girls. However, it was also asserted that, while boys were naturally more aggressive, they could be "guided" and disciplined, and their need to compete against each other could be expressed in non-violent ways.

Almost all of the women had grown up frightened of men and boys. As children, most had direct experiences of both physical and verbal abuse from the opposite sex. They had witnessed direct acts of violence by their father against their mother, and been frightened of domestic arguments. Many said they had come to "hate" their father because of what they had seen; their childhood experiences had taught them to fear all men.

Men also described witnessing and participating in violence during their childhood. They described how older boys had encouraged violence at school, and said that violence-as-revenge

in inter-clan fighting had once been common. All described being encouraged to fight, if necessary, when looking after cattle; they felt they would be mocked if they failed to retaliate, or lost the cattle to another clan. It was also recognized that not all boys wished to be violent, and that violence was abhorred by some men. But peer pressure made deviation from the norm difficult.

The fundamental place of violence in the boys' traditional socialization was a theme of the testimonies. In past times, Acholi boys had been trained for inter-tribal warfare (mostly disputes over cattle), and for hunting. "*Acholi in the past had pride, they did not accept defeat or surrender.*" Some described socialization into violence as having intensified during the colonial era, when the British specifically recruited Acholi men for the army, based on their reputation as warriors. But all recognized that the current conflict in Uganda was different from anything that had occurred in the past.

Social disintegration, violence, and poverty

There are elements common to both social disintegration and boys' marginalization in present-day Acholi society. These include population movements due to political instability; poverty; the weakening of traditional authority structures; the global growth of "youth culture," and society's failure to provide educational and socioeconomic opportunities. Both workshop participants and interview respondents drew links between poverty, the dissolution of families, and the likelihood that boys would join military units to survive. With property and wealth destroyed, there was "*no alternative but to fight for survival,*" as one man said. Others commented: "*Without a home, life becomes impossible.*" "*What one looks for is life, just to see one's self the next day.*" "*Poverty can lead to frustration and can make a person do what he or*

she is not meant to do.” “People are cruel now, not because it is in their culture or nature, but because of their poverty.” “A poor man is an angry man.”

The breakdown of agriculture, loss of cattle, and the ensuing poverty has meant that, even if schools were still functioning, parents could not afford to send their children to them. These factors, in conjunction with the absence of the informal education once provided by elders (who now have been killed or lost their authority), and combined with the undermining of cultural values make boys far more susceptible to antisocial influences.

Both workshop participants and interview respondents thought that young people had suffered more than any other group from violence and the breakdown of Acholi society. Comments included: *“The war was not started by the youth, they were misled and have been forced to commit violent acts to survive.” “The children are not actually bad, but when their parents are killed, there is no one to take care of them.”* Joining military units was a means of survival, and violence could become a means of empowering men when socially-acceptable ways of proving themselves were absent.

Workshop participants made clear distinctions between boys brought up in the town and those raised in the villages. Boys from town generally had much less knowledge of traditional culture. The absence of fireplaces in urban dwellings was considered highly significant, as it meant there was little time or opportunity for boys to learn traditional ways. Participants felt that greater knowledge of western culture had made boys despise their own traditions: there was now a much greater gap between older and younger generations. Some methods of traditional socialization still remained in towns: for example, men still hunted, albeit for smaller animals, and, even in towns, it was also still considered essential for a man to be able to build his own hut. Some of those interviewed commented that not being able to build a hut in protected villages and

camps had a profoundly negative effect on men's self esteem, reducing men to "*the status of dogs.*"

Men interviewed in Gulu despaired at their powerlessness to end the conflict without government or international intervention. They were grief-stricken by the fact that, because of societal breakdown and the long duration of the conflict, a generation of boys was growing up with little knowledge of cultural traditions, and having witnessed – sometimes perpetrated – violent acts. Comments included: "*When other means of survival have gone, violence has become a way of life.*" "*What can a person without a gun do to rescue himself?*" "*To me this war is not going to end soon, because it looks like it has become a song; whenever [a man] listens to such a song, he is reminded of the past, and finds it difficult to forgive.*"

By implication, respondents felt gloomy about the possibility of finding other means to define manhood except through bearing arms and inflicting violence. When certain ways of being a man are valued by others, boys and men cannot simply abandon them without the provision of alternative narratives that enable them to conceptualize manhood in more positive and constructive ways.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider the complex political situation in Northern Uganda, and how it might be brought to an end.² Thousands of people have died, and the way of life of tens of thousands of others has been obliterated. People grieve not only for the deaths of loved ones, but for the loss of traditional customs, traditions, and ways of life – which in the past had included the traditional socialization of Acholi boys.

Normal psychological reactions to catastrophic loss include anxiety, despair, and anger. These are all evident in the comments of participants and respondents. The ability to find

² For more on this subject, see Stella Nyanzi's contribution on pp. ---.

meaning in life in the same ways as before has been fundamentally disrupted. Adaptation to loss requires psychological reintegration at both individual and societal levels. If the stability and predictability of life has been invalidated by catastrophic loss, new frames of meaning have to be created, and threads of continuity between past, present and future have to be found.

What components of boys' traditional socialization still make sense, and can be used to construct positive role models? What new visions of Acholi manhood can be generated? What positive and life-affirming stories about boys becoming men can be told to the next generation? Confronting these questions means engaging not just with the absence of traditional socialization patterns, but with the global impact of western cultural models. Any "development" work needs to address these fundamental issues. Men's voices, experiences and knowledge must be heard; their contribution as culture-bearers for the next generation must be explicitly valued and actively supported.