

**Nonviolence Resistance in Africa:**  
**Case Study of Reintegration and Healing in Uganda**  
**By Charles Bongomin**

**Key Question:**

To what extent can non-violence approach bring sustainable peace in societies?

**Background:**

The African country of Uganda has experienced numerous conflicts since negotiating its independence from the British in 1962. The conflicts and violence have political, military, and socio-economic causes. The current conflict has affected the country for almost two decades in the North and has claimed innumerable lives and displaced approximately 1.8 million people. Tragically, over 30,000 children have been abducted by Lords Resistance Army (LRA) since 1986<sup>1</sup>.

The roots of the Northern Ugandan conflict can be traced back to the colonial legacy, unequal social and economic development between the different regions in the country that has led to violent conflict, and to the marginalization of minority groups. When the current President assumed power in 1986, there was widespread fear in the North, especially among the dominant ethnic Acholi group that reprisal killings would ensue due to atrocities committed when Northerners dominated the army. As a result, many Northerners joined existing rebels groups to fight the National Resistant Army (NRA) government.

The war in the North has persisted due to the government's military option to fight the LRA, but force has proved futile. It's important for government and others to learn and explore from the Acholi peoples' cultural ways of achieving peace non-violently.

The dominant ethnic group in the North is the Acholi. In Acholi society non-violence resistance is a peculiar notion; the Acholi view nonviolent resistance from the conciliatory stance that is, building resistance or violation into a more positive reconciliation mechanism for peace and tranquility in society.

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<sup>1</sup> 2004 UNICEF Report on Northern Uganda

Reconciliation is the best practical option for sustainable peace as reiterated by Dr. S. P. Kagoda, he stated that “we need to build an everlasting peace, but this will only happen if we are reconciled with one another.”<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Acholi people believe strongly in non-violent conflict resolution through different cultural and traditional approaches. According to Acholi, non-violence is search for truth through acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. For this educational purpose, its worth mentioning two traditional non-violent approaches to conflict: “mato oput” and “gurtong”. (See attached details in the handouts)

**Age Range:** Secondary school students

**Subject:** Social Studies

**Materials:** Handouts

**Duration:** 2 Days

**Objectives:** Students will be able to:

1. To understand the concept of nonviolence from diverse perspective
2. To understand the practice of nonviolent action as a socio/political phenomenon
3. Discuss different approaches to nonviolence at all levels
4. Explain the principle of “mato oput” and “gurtong”
5. Analyze the extent to which “mato oput” or “gurtong” reinforces peace building processes
6. Explore the application of “mato oput” or “gurtong” to other regions in peace building attempts and non-violence resistance options

**Introductory Activity:**

1. Ask students to describe elements of nonviolence
2. Ask students for their knowledge of nonviolence activists

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. S.P. Kagoda, PS, Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2004. Reconciliation and Nonviolence Approach to Peace in Northern Uganda  
[http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/IdpProjectDb/idpSurvey.nsf/wViewCountries/3815C01DF8CD2927C1256FA90039C3DD/\\$file/RECONCILIATION+conference+report+16-12-04.doc](http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/IdpProjectDb/idpSurvey.nsf/wViewCountries/3815C01DF8CD2927C1256FA90039C3DD/$file/RECONCILIATION+conference+report+16-12-04.doc)

3. Share their individual experiences of nonviolence approach to conflict
4. Ask students to name nations or regions experiencing conflicts. Brainstorm on the causes and alternative ways to resolve the conflict.

**Focus:**

Looking at the Acholi non-violence conflict resolution and reconciliation, students should explore and examine the strength of bottom-up approach in conflict resolution and peace building using the nonviolent approach, and considering how it can be replicated in other parts of the world.

**Development:**

Distribute handouts about “mato oput” and “gurtong” (see handout for basic information on this traditional value system.) Discuss student responses to questions.

Students will role-play “mato oput” and “gurtong” non-violence reconciliation and peace processes.

**Assessment:**

Assign to groups of students current and recent areas of conflict (e.g. Uganda, Sudan, Iraq, Colombia, Guatemala, Nepal, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Bosnia, Afghanistan, etc), and have them apply the principle of “mato oput” or “gurtong” to the peace processes in these areas. Students should:

1. Identify the groups to be brought together
2. Identify the perpetrators and victims
3. Identify the crimes that need to be forgiven
4. Discuss the applicability of “mato oput” or “gurtong” to the areas researched
5. Present findings to class

**Source:**

1. Gurtong <http://www.gurtong.org/gurtongname.asp>
2. Nonviolence Action Handbook <http://www.san.beck.org/NAH1-Nonviolence.html#1>

3. Reconciliation and Nonviolence Approach to Peace in Northern Uganda

[http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/IdpProjectDb/idpSurvey.nsf/wViewCountries/3815C01DF8CD2927C1256FA90039C3DD/\\$file/RECONCILIATION+conference+report+16-12-04.doc](http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/IdpProjectDb/idpSurvey.nsf/wViewCountries/3815C01DF8CD2927C1256FA90039C3DD/$file/RECONCILIATION+conference+report+16-12-04.doc)

4. Indigenous conflict resolution in Africa

<http://africavenir.com/publications/occasional-papers/BrockUtneTradConflictResolution.pdf>

**Charles Bongomin:**

Charles Bongomin is presently a Peace Fellow at The American University, Washington DC, under the U.S. State Department's Fulbright Scholarship Program. He has extensive experience in serving children and women affected by war in Northern Uganda. Charles was abducted from his village by the Ugandan Peoples' Democratic Army (UPDA) in 1986 when he was thirteen years old and forced into servitude for their armed struggle against the Ugandan government. Charles has dedicated his life to peacebuilding and reconciliation, included psychosocial support programs for tracing and reintegrating former child soldiers abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Southern Sudan and Northern Uganda. Charles has done capacity-building for community-based organizations, peace initiative programs, and empowerment of communities in Kitgum, Gulu and Pader. Some of his professional experiences include work with the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI), ACORD, and Plan International. Charles received his undergraduate degree in Social Sciences from Makerere University, and will complete a Master's in Peace and Conflict Studies, May 2006 at AU.

**Barbara Wien (editor)**

Barbara Wien is Co-Director of Peace Brigades International. She was formerly at the US Institute for Peace and serves on the board of several foundations and international peace education groups. She has taught at Georgetown and Columbia Universities.

**Handout: “Mato oput” and “Gurtong” process of nonviolent resolution in Northern Uganda.**

“Mato oput” is the traditional reconciliation ritual carried out by traditional Acholi leaders to subdue the bitter relationship between the warring parties; the essence of the process is nonviolent reconciliation. “Mato oput involves the man or woman accepting responsibility for their actions and repenting for their crimes against their brothers and sisters,” as asserted by Baker Ochola, Bishop Emeritus of the Anglican diocese of Kitgum<sup>3</sup>.

The process of the ritual is symbolic to the parties involved in conflict and society as a whole. For instance, in Northern Uganda LRA rebels have abducted over 30,000 children, killed hundreds of people, maimed, raped and caused further atrocities that are beyond description, but through the “mato oput” or reconciliation process, community members forgives them for their atrocious acts committed against the people. It important to note that “mato oput” process is carried out by traditional leaders. For ex-combatants and former abducted children (FAC), community members gather as witnesses of the process and also demonstrate signs of forgiveness and welcoming them back to the communities. Key symbols during the procession are raw eggs, hyssop leaves, water and the “oput” herbs. “Oput” is a tree with bitter roots and leaves; the roots are squashed to produce bitter liquid that is taken by warring parties. An egg is placed at the entrance of the homestead for ex-combatants and FAC to step on as they walk to enter the home. The eggs signifies cleansing the person from all the atrocities committed while in captivity, or the bush; the hyssop leaves are symbols for welcoming back FAC or persons who have committed crime against humanity in the region, the water is sprinkled to forgive and reconcile, and lastly, the bitter “oput” herbs which stresses the psychosocial bitterness that prevailed in the minds of the parties in conflict situation. The whole process involves the guilty acknowledging responsibility, repenting, and asking for forgivingness. The “mato oput” covers offenses across the board.

Additionally, “gurtong” is another ritual that is carried out to non-violently bring to an end conflict among people. ‘Gurtong’ is a phrase, not a word. It consists of two words: “Gurtong”

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<sup>3</sup> UGANDA: Traditional ritual heals communities torn apart by war

[http://www.irinnews.org/S\\_report.asp?ReportID=47574](http://www.irinnews.org/S_report.asp?ReportID=47574)

therefore means “to blunt the spear” or simply 'blunt the spear' by grinding the sharp edges of the spear against something hard until it is blunt. The words and the phrase have their origins in most Nilotic languages: Acholi, Jieng, Nath, Chollo, Pari and Anyuak<sup>4</sup>. “Gur-tong” means to perform a ritual in which a spear is unsharpened by moving its sharp edges against a stone until they are blunt. It is the name of a ceremony where two parties to a conflict settle a dispute, in which lives have been lost, through non violent deliberations. The unsharpening of a spear symbolizes forgiveness and reconciliation. It follows a code in which there is acceptance of guilt (killing of a fellow human being), cleansing, compensation (paying of “blood price”), forgiveness and therefore reconciliation. Accept never to return to assaults, verbal or physical of the opponent. (The term “opponent” is borrowed from Gandhi and is meant to indicate one with whom we are in opposition but whom we do not consider an enemy.)

In the whole process of non violence conflict resolution and reconciliation, people refrain from insults and swearing, and try to protect opponents from insults or attack.

**Exercise/brainstorming:**

1. What are the key principles of “mato oput” or “gurtong”?
2. What traditional values are embedded in the above mentioned approaches to conflict resolution?
3. What are the similarities and differences about “mato oput” and “gurtong”?
4. In your experiences, have you come across approaches similar to the Acholi tradition non-violent resolution of conflict?
5. If so, give examples of other similar approaches and explain precisely.
6. Can “mato oput” or “gurtong” be replicated in other parts of the world?
7. If so, why? If not, please, give reasons.
8. What are the strength and weaknesses that you have identified in Acholi non-violent approach to peace and co-existence?

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<sup>4</sup> Gurtong Project <http://www.gurtong.org/gurtongname.asp>