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WOMEN'S LITERACY, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE
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WOMEN'S LITERACY, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE
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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this writing to two of my female teachers who have gone to be with God, (RIP). To Mama Sabina Otiti, who was my first Professor of storytelling from whose wisdom I learned a lot of lessons of life before joining any formal school. She once told me that my constant request was always, “Buku, Bongo,” meaning Books and Clothes. This was enough to explain to her that I love reading and having new clothes as a sign of being tidy. Afoyo Mama for going above the culture to support the education of all your children. In the middle of my writing, I turned around and saw my second female teacher, Martha Ozinga, my eldest sister who was like my second mama, lying unconscious from a bad stroke. In a lifeless body I saw the first symbol of light and education in my village going dim and, eventually, it died out. I had to take courage to hold her hands as she always held mine, teaching me so many lessons which have made me who I am today, starting with baby care. Thank you so much and may you continue resting in the peace of the Lord.

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to explore how adult literacy education for women in Northern Uganda affected their identity as learners and women as well as how culture facilitated learning. Specifically, these questions were explored: How do women who participate in adult literacy talk about themselves as women, literate people, learners, and community members? Does their cultural knowledge help or hinder how they see themselves in the society? How or why? After the conflict, women lost their chance for formal education due to experiences in captivity. It was vital to explore the type of education needs these women required to become advocates for themselves in the society. The theoretical framework used was developed from indigenous ways of knowing. Six participants volunteered from the Basic School of Learning for women in St. Monica. Data were collected in the local language through interviews and focus group discussions and transcribed into English. The women freely shared personal stories, proverbs, songs, and artifacts. The main themes that answered the research questions included that patriarchy and gender stereotype mentality impacted self-esteem and identity of participants, hindering their journey of learning. Indigenous knowledge was demonstrated in the lived experiences of daily life.

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Why I Am Doing This Research: Importance and Background

It took me so long to imagine I would be running a school like St. Monica Girls' Tailoring Center. This school was started to train women to become professional Seamstresses by Italian Comboni Missionary Sisters. I had no knowledge of dress making and cutting, but as a religious woman who took the vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, I had to put Obedience to practice when my superiors posted me to run this particular school with no prior preparation along the same discipline beyond having just completed my University degree in Development Studies and Ethics. The fear of being sent to a war zone area and worries of not knowing where to start gave me a lot of trauma before accepting my new assignment, but I recalled my vow of Obedience again and it motivated me to accept the new job. At the same time, I knew I needed to become a visionary and innovative leader, while giving a sense of direction to address the prevailing signs of the times in post-conflict situations. At this time, the sign of the times involved working with young women who returned from captivity after abduction by the Lord's Resistance Army Rebels. Most of these young women were abducted from lower primary schools and after the all the bad treatment like rape, torture, and forced marriage by rebel army commanders, some had children. They were either killed or became pregnant as a result of sexual assault and became mothers. Some young girls were able to escape death and managed to return home with one or more children from different rebel commanders. The real challenge I faced was to find how and what to teach these young women who were semi-literate. I went back and forth through all the things I had learned informally and formally. This was the time to pull everything together and forge a way forward. The feeling of helplessness was very intense because I could see the students I met were deeply traumatized and needed love, compassion, and care more than education, after their painful experience in captivity or in Internally Displaced People Camps (IDP). The inspiration I came up with was to offer practical skills in

dress making and cutting together with adult literacy where they could learn to read and write.

St. Monica School in Gulu-Uganda was built for women who were seriously affected by the war waged by the Lord's Resistance Army. The school has a capacity of 300 women, but when I came, I found only 30 young women. I was not new to this war, because it had temporarily interrupted my journey of learning, too. This was the second time I was sent to the same situation of armed conflict, but this time the war was more complex. A good number of people were forced to live in Internally Displaced People's Camps (IDP) because of insecurity from rebels and government soldiers who were supposed to protect civilians. Young mothers who were deeply traumatized found integration in society more problematic because they were carrying the scars and memories of captivity with the children who had no fathers, and some had children of well-known and notorious rebel commanders. This fact alone made it difficult for these young women to find a way of identifying again with their community, who were also scared of accepting them after being brainwashed by the rebels who had even forced some of the children to commit atrocities in their own families. Some children were forced to kill their parents and siblings as an initiation ritual to become rebel soldiers. Girls had to become sex slaves, cooks, and eventually mothers. To date, it is estimated that the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda abducted over 25,000 children (UNICEF, 2004). McKay estimated (in Coulter, C., Persson, M., & Utas, M, 2008) that out of the 80% of Ugandan children abducted by the LRA, 30% were girls. Just as a good number of countries in the world went through some experience of armed conflict, in African countries these conflicts were mostly aimed at unarmed civilians, especially children, who were forcefully conscripted to participate in multiple roles as fighters.

I found the use of a needle and sewing machine to be very powerful tools, which could practically explain how I would start the process of sewing back the broken lives of

these girls and their children before teaching them how to sew clothes. I had to go straight to the practical aspects of this. Eventually, I went on to introduce other practical and marketable skills, like basic cookery and hairdressing. I personally had learned all these skills by observing and following in the footsteps of my mother and siblings, and that helped me to teach these young women what would become their source of sustainability. Later, I introduced catering as a subject by teaching the girls practical catering as basic cookery of simple African foods. And now, most of these girls who went through this training are employed in hotels and some of them have even started their own businesses.

I strongly felt the girls needed to learn how to use the sewing machines as a symbolic tool for fighting back at the war. It is very symbolic to think that the rebels used machine guns to destroy the lives of these girls; I decided to demonstrate that learning to use sewing machines would be a way of restoring the broken lives of these girls. In this way, education became a tool for recovery and restoration of dignity. My focus was to let the young women understand education as a tool that can set them free in the society. I also became aware of the fear these girls go through daily as a result of the traumatic experiences they went through as something that would live with them and their children forever. As such, I had to introduce a mother and child education that would allow these young women to study with their children in the vicinity as there was no option for leaving the children behind. They preferred to remain with their children to prevent anyone taking revenge on innocent children. The solution to this problem was to invite these girls to bring their children with them to school. This became the only school in the region that could accommodate both mother and child. I started looking at it in a more positive way, as a way of encouraging women to succeed in learning. I looked at this way of learning similar to traditional ways of learning, which is passed on from generation to generation.

Along this line of thought, I started a daycare and kindergarten to accommodate the

children, where my aim was to address the present needs of education for adults and the future education needs for the next generation. I was not a specialist in any of these things, but I had to become innovative and proactive. I imagined that the children who were cared for and who came through this kindergarten were not going to think about violence, and my main aim was to keep pointing to a future of hope through education.

For a long time, I have continued to address the need for education, which has always been around skills and a kind of emergency situation where these young women had just escaped from the rebels abduction and came back home with their babies. My focus was on accepting them and giving them that opportunity to rebuild their lives with the hope of moving on with some hands-on skills education that could let them become supporting members of their community, but most of all for their own children. These young women were totally deprived of their rights to life and education. This deprivation of rights was strengthened by the stereotype mentality that gives opportunities to boys to move ahead with education, but girls are supposed to stay home and get married and become a source of wealth because of the dowry that comes to her family when she marries. In my own life, my mother protested and said to my father, “If you don't want to send these girls to school, I will continue doing it myself and will sell even the last clothes, I [would] rather walk naked but use the money to send my children to school.” She said this because education in Uganda must be paid for, so we struggled and managed to go to school, but my father was not able to go against my mother for that. In my community mine is the only family where everybody got educated, no matter how far they went with the education, everybody was able to see the classroom just because my mother thought education was their right.

Following the example of my own mother, who saw the importance of education for all her children but especially for us girls, I also saw how vital education was for women who would change the mindset of our society. I was planting a seed, which would grow and

continue to take care of the next generation, as far as education is concerned. I would have never thought my dream would be realized, because my challenge was that I am not a professional teacher and did not know where to start. Also, the word teaching was a great challenge in my life. I was carried away by a very narrow definition of the word “teaching” as a religious in the congregation of the of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we are known as “Teaching Sisters” and that confused me as I had not thought of becoming a teacher. I spent time digging into the meaning of the word and I realized that I actually am a teacher without a certificate. Being a teacher became clearer and clearer as an ongoing process in life, and I also realized being a teacher did not limit me to only sitting in a classroom. It meant teaching myself and learning from other people by listening, by observing and asking questions, and sometimes, it meant sitting in a corner, hiding myself and copying what someone else has been doing.

What actually pushed me to find a way to start the adult literacy program was the situation of these young women who are faced with all the challenges in society, especially learning how they can stand on their feet and become self-supporting and self-reliant. I really got deeply disturbed with the lack of education which limited them in participating adequately in society, because they were not able to read and write and were not able to communicate with people. But most of all, I began to see how education would liberate these women from mental slavery. I knew education would make them feel they were human beings and would make them feel they had dignity and identity. Education would give them a voice to speak to the world, as Paulo Freire (1985) expressed, they would “learn to not only read the word, but learn to read the world.”

I got lucky when I came in contact with the University of Oklahoma, especially the Faculty of Education. In humility, I directly responded to Dr. Sally Beach, who asked, “What can we do to help you?” My response was another question, “Can you come and start for me

a school?" One great thing that the faculty of education did was to move to Uganda to see exactly what they could do, and then answered the question posed by Dr. Beach. My limitation of not being a teacher was a hindrance to describing exactly what I wanted to be done in the field of education, but I decided to rely on experts of education to overcome my problem. All I was emphasizing was the promotion of these women in an attempt to liberate and empower them to become contributing factors in the economy of their society. This thought went a long way with the faculty of education, who took it up and began planning for its implementation. They developed a curriculum which was [culturally] appropriate in Uganda after some consultation with the stakeholders. This was a unique approach as the program was using a downward-up approach as opposed to the upward-down approach. The involvement of student teachers and professors from OU in Uganda has been a huge support in promoting our own teachers and giving them confidence in the school structure for these women. In a way, while they were developing curriculum for young adults, they were also mentoring our teachers to run the whole program.

Therefore, I recognize my study as a great need to empower and give back to women to the best of my capability. This understanding has helped me to find some paths to promote women who lost their prospect of integration because of conflict and other reasons, where they can find an opportunity to learn to read and write. I spent a lot of time working to restore the lost dignity of women victims of conflict who were abducted by rebels when they were young after all the experience of trauma in captivity. I felt the need to promote skills training to awaken in them the desire for further learning. In my study program I have encountered a convenient space to discuss issues related to colonial systems of education which do not give room for local languages as the media of learning, and relate this to my own experiences starting to learn subjects in English only. I stand a better chance in life because I have attained a good level of education in comparison to most women in my culture and tribe. This

is why I feel the obligation of promoting literacy for these women.

Background of the Conflict

Uganda is divided into four regions, Northern, Western, Eastern and Central. The northern region comprises 11 districts, Yumbe, Arua, Moyo, Adjumani, Gulu, Nebbi, Apac, Lira, Pader, Lango, and Kitgum. The conflict, which went on in Acholi (Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, and Lango) regions for a long time, was part of the tribal and ethnic clashes for various reasons. Starting from the time of colonialism in Uganda, the northern part was marginalized, and the impact continued even after the independence of the Country where a lot of people from Northern Uganda were trained as military with little education. One example was Idi Amin, who eventually became a military president through a military coup in 1971. The colonialists who were the first governors of the country created an economic and physical divide between the North and Central regions by establishing the capital city, Kampala, in the central region, which gave rise to the economic development of the South and central regions because of industries and the marginalization of the northern part of the country. The people of the north were employed as laborers on sugar and tea plantations and the people of the south and central were prepared educationally for white collar jobs. Collier and Hoeffler (2001) acknowledged that revolution can come as a result of disgruntlement of the people, which can be seen through marginalization and a huge divide in ethnic and religious variations. This explains why there has been a huge rift between the north and the south and all the different wars that have been inflicted by different regimes that came to power since the independence of the Country in 1962.

Violent conflict was waged between the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and government forces that lasted for almost two decades in Northern

Uganda. There were already some tribal conflicts that existed between the Karimojong tribe, who are pastoralists who raided cattle and terrorized the bordering districts, especially in Northern Uganda and eastern parts of the country. With this history of violence, these regions remained generally poor with undeveloped infrastructures and educational facilities. Uganda went through different tribal and ethnic wars from the time of colonialists till independence in 1962. This common phenomenon highlights the rise of different rebel groups, like the Lord's Resistance Army in 1986, who terrorized the people in Northern Uganda.

The two decades of civil war by the Lord's Resistance Army imposed a lot of violence on women in Northern Uganda, ranging from sexual, physical, and domestic. The different forms of violence are linked to gender inequality and discrimination, which are rooted in the social norms related to the stereotype mentality that gives preference to men over women. Men were always recognized as home builders and women were considered people who left home to go and marry somewhere else. This mentality gave way to societal construct of gender roles and it extended power to men to control and impose violence on women, often with impunity.

In most cases, women who have been victims of armed conflict are only reflected as being victims and the multiple roles they played as child soldiers; roles as wives, peace makers, peace negotiators, and leaders are all ignored in the mainstream of planning and decision making in post conflict. The level of illiteracy in women in Northern Uganda has remained high due to the aforementioned reasons. In this case of Northern Uganda, a good number of women remained doubly disadvantaged because of armed conflict and gender stereotype mentality. Their priorities and experiences of violence were totally different from other countries, though a good number of countries in the world went through some similar experience of armed conflict.

A lot of the violence carried out as a result of inequality and subordination are multifaceted in nature, ranging from physical, psychological, sexual, reproductive, health, and economic, leaving visible marks that can be seen in everyday life of women in the community and more so on their bodies. The multiple roles women play during and after war can easily be overlooked if gender dynamics have not been thoroughly explored. This can be coupled with the feeling of insecurity women go through and the loss of identity during and in post-conflict war.

Enloe (2010) gave a good account of the violence experienced not only by women soldiers, but also families left under the care of women (Card, 1996; Hansen, 2001). She combined this with assaults male soldiers impose on their wives after their experience of war. This view points to some hidden issues of conflict, which remain unknown and considered as less important and private, especially those that are condoned by culture that supports the gender inequality which does not give women a voice in the society.

The Introduction of the Adult Literacy Program in St. Monica

One of the reasons I dreamt of starting an adult literacy program was to help the women who were forced to drop out of education due to the long conflict to move to the next level of integration in the society. The word literacy has a lot of meanings for different people, depending on which perspective is used. In this study, literacy will refer to a holistic development of a person in a given context, (Forbes, 2003). This development includes the growth and environment of a person. The common definition puts literacy as the ability to read and write. This definition is generic and does not include the aim of learning and the quality and contexts of what people read and write. In many situations during and after armed conflicts, literacy becomes a vital need in the society. In an attempt to move a step ahead in the definition of literacy, I would like to point out that the popular definition of the ability to read and write raises some problems in relation to my study, as the definition puts emphasis

on the binary discourse of the use of these words “literate” and “illiterate.” But, my study attempts to deconstruct the definition by validating the indigenous ways of knowing which are contrary to the view held about literacy in terms of reading and writing only. I would prefer the definition that takes in the holistic aspects of growth of a person from childhood in the society where the person acquires different skills needed to function as a citizen.

UNESCO advanced a fair definition of literacy that better fits this study as the “ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts” (2004, 2017). Literacy becomes very important for women who were forced to drop out of education in post-conflict situations, because it occupies a great role in defining one’s identity while in the process of integrating into the society as members who can participate in analyzing, recognizing, and understanding development issues connected to the dynamic and current nature of events. In this way, a person becomes part of the events with the ability to fully and effectively contribute through their relationships with other members of the society.

While some attempts to assess the different levels of tension posed by armed conflict, especially on education systems, have been highlighted by several writers, Walker (2007) advanced an argument in defining education in armed conflict as “a basic capability that affects development as it prepares people to meet their needs” (p. 2). This emphasizes that education acts as a tool for people to be more resourceful and creative, even after some difficult experiences.

The U.N. Secretary General in 2009 highlighted the fact that in conflict-affected situations, education is more than service delivery, as it becomes a means by which people can recover their social way of life and lost culture and identity. As different post-conflict situations were being studied, I saw a great need for careful research which goes deeper to

investigate the identity of people, especially women, as it could become a motivating factor that pushes them to seek education in order to develop a new identity in their society.

Literacy, in my view, remains one of the strategies to combat gender-based violence in society. But, the question that needs further exploration is what type of education would be right and fitting. The reason I value this study is because it addresses what is needed for people not only in Uganda but in the world.

Currently, the majority of women who experience gender-based and domestic violence [in Uganda] are women who were victims of armed conflict and whose education was interrupted and, eventually, resulted in early marriages or polygamous marriages. Literacy is a great tool for advocacy as it gives women a voice to tell their own stories in their voices and in their own feminine language.

There is a need for alternative schooling for those who had no formal education at all or had to drop out of school before completing primary education due to abductions, discrimination, early pregnancy, and marriage, in order to get adequate knowledge and skills to become self-reliant.

The connection and impact of adult literacy and identity was highlighted by Kendric (2004), who studied the importance of identity through letter writing and reading in diverse cultural contexts. Her study emphasized the fact that cultural context of literacy is least examined, especially with its meaning connected to the desire of literacy in women. Aikman (2009) suggested the idea of getting schools to accommodate indigenous people's desire for learning and attach it to the main field of education. This could be one of the ways to include cultural ways of knowing in formal schooling to improve the level of understanding of learners while linking to their context and daily activities.

Perry and Homan (2014) set out to investigate two important questions around literacy for adults and what practices were revealed about participants who were considered

illiterate. They found that personal fulfillment could be closely linked to adult literacy. They called for more studies to be carried out analyzing the connection between the social activity domain, identity, and purpose of studying. It was increasingly clear that participants across the world wrote for several purposes. This view rightly protested the current judgment imposed on those people considered “illiterate” and how they practice and get into the habit of learning, which calls for a reconsideration of functional literacy for adult learners.

This study will also analyze how women view their need for education and how some cultural factors can be considered relevant in promoting education. Considering cultural ways of knowing could have some impact on their perspectives of adult literacy and identity in their current challenging situations in society. There may be some systemic challenges of incorporating cultural ways of knowing in education curriculum, because the attempt may have limited literature which supports this study and yet, it would be one of the ways of responding to the needs of people who want literacy for specific reasons.

The need to explore the linkage between adult literacy and identity of women in post-conflict Northern Uganda remains huge. Women who dropped out of school as a result of war and violent conflicts feel their time to go back to learn has been lost and, as a result, they become insecure in society. This kind of feeling sometimes is imposed by a society that prefers education of boys to that of girls and also ignores the traumatic experiences which give women a different outlook on the world during the process of integration. In this way women find themselves doubly disadvantaged with little or low self-esteem.

In most cases women get more insecure with sociocultural perspectives that do not promote adult women’s education, since the colonial system of education applied an age limit. Both these situations increase vulnerability and deprive them of their dignity and courage to try an adult form of learning which could give them a voice to effectively participate in society.

In Northern Uganda, many women dropped out of formal schooling because of armed conflict and other reasons. Today, these factors in society alter their mindset in the post-conflict situation as they attempt to situate themselves in the community after many years without schooling. Additionally, some elements in the culture affect and influence the views of these adult women about education. The reason I am doing this study is to explore how to utilize cultural knowledge that helps people pass knowledge from one generation to another which will reveal some cultural ways of knowing that could promote adult learning. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) looked at Western thoughts on education as a duplication of the Greek culture, and pointed to gaps found in the research on non-Western ways of learning. It also highlighted the value and the practical linkage in different views on learning or methods of passing on knowledge in different cultures.

With all the roles imposed on these young children, especially girls, while in captivity, little attention has been paid to the adverse impact of abduction that affected them in several ways and robbed them of their education. Smith and Vaux (2003) looked at education as a crucial mechanism for the development of humanity in the process of eradicating poverty. They remarked that when the chance of education is lost during conflict, it not only affects an individual but the whole society through the loss of capital and human capacity to fully participate in development activities. The role education plays in empowering women to participate in the reconstruction of society needs to be studied further as most writers fall short of addressing the impact of participation in education and how this plays a crucial role in linking them to the overall development of their views and cultural identity as women, learners, and participants in their community.

According to Nyerere (2006), education must bring people to the understanding of other courses of action and give the ability to decide and make these decisions into tangible activities. He continued to advance that adult literacy's primary objective is to push people to

the desired change of action while believing this development is achievable. Nyerere disagreed that poverty and education are the “will of God”. This strong disagreement is that dissatisfaction with what is not right needs to bring about some confidence that wrong things can be changed because people should eventually come to understand that living in misery, sickness, or exploitation can be changed by their own commitment and action. These actions can be taken by groups or individuals in the community. Nyerere, when he was the Tanzanian President, took a bold step to consider as a matter of priority the education of adults in the Five Years Plan for Economic and Social Development, arguing “... the quickest way to increase production is to train the adults who are already on the jobs” (Nyerere, 2006).

I would like to agree with Nyerere to some extent because in our society it is the adults who pass on knowledge from one generation to another. In other words, the adults are the bearers of knowledge, especially women who prepare children to face the future and also pass the same knowledge to others. This does not mean children should be left behind, it would be fair enough to promote mother and child literacy, where a mother can at some point learn together with her children. I relate this to my own life where I learned a lot of things by following what my mother was doing and by listening to stories she told.

Regrettably, Nyerere’s and other proponents of adult literacy with great ideas point mostly to men and women’s voices and opinion have not come out clearly. The participation of women and how it impacts on themselves as women, learners, and community members has been ignored.

I felt the need to explore the linkage between adult literacy and identity of women in post-conflict Northern Uganda, which has remained huge. Women who dropped out of school as a result of war and violent conflicts felt their time to go back to learn had been lost and, as a result, they become insecure in society.

Before starting the literacy program in St. Monica, women were asked several times

about what they wanted to study. A good number expressed that they needed some form of learning which would allow them to participate in their communities effectively. They needed a form of learning that could help them communicate and add their voices to the development of the country. This is clear because women in traditional societies are enriched with a lot of intelligence and knowledge which propels different activities of the society. But, oftentimes, they remained grounded in domestic work with no consideration about their contribution to the overall development of their community. They have knowledge about different things like herbal medicines, knowledge of different seasons of planting crops, food production and preparation, knowledge of midwifery and child-bearing, with lots of skills useful for the health and development of the society, yet this prudence and wisdom have not been given attention. In Northern Uganda, women use indigenous knowledge to extract cooking oil from palm, shea trees, sesame, and peanuts. This knowledge is always passed by mothers to their daughters. The different oils act as herbal medicines, are used for cooking, and on the skin for beauty and medication. The oil is also used in ritual performance, like when a baby is newly born and must be introduced to the society.

Northern Uganda, as a patrilineal society, gives very little value to women's ways of knowing. I consider the desire and courage to carry out research using indigenous epistemologies which aim at validating the knowledge of people, who are forced to believe their indigenous knowledge does not count, as one of the important rationales for this research. Chilisa (2020) ratified my rationale of choosing indigenous methodology based on the relational context of the knowledge, reality, and the state of being with the idea that everything and everybody in traditional cultural ways of living are related and connected to something or somebody.

My exposure to some classes during my studies with different people with diverse experiences of literacy encouraged me to dive into an educational program in order to find

some solutions to the problem imposed by the system of education in my country which continues to promote English language as the only medium of learning. I also envisioned a challenge in this approach of a premature mindset that this research may only benefit a few people, [however], a lot of women go through difficulties returning to school because they must take up some responsibilities in their families and [figure out] how to send their children to school instead. I understand my strong urge to empower women to learn to read and write, but I also see the importance of reflecting and gaining some better understanding of how people affected by this system of education think about that same system, and what other systems in the society could be affecting them. My hope is that this study would point to some path or to the solution to the problem by validating their cultural way of knowing and encouraging women to study literacy and numeracy in the local language first. This makes me describe myself as an educator, trainer, and promoter of education for marginalized people in various ways.

Learning from the Personal Story of My Upbringing through Storytelling

This writing will explore the importance of indigenous ways of knowing through storytelling and it will also confirm how indigenous ways of knowing can pave the way for formal learning.

Education has been considered the center of basic endeavors of humanity, yet its understanding is subject to change as various writers continue to explore the concept of adult learning beyond the statistical data of the adult population in order to develop an argument about regular learning concepts or approaches. These approaches are then more centered on children, while considering the different rationale along behaviorism, social cognitivism, and humanism concepts. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baugmantner (2007) employed these ideologies in order to build a theory that could best explain education evolution in the adult population.

As I look back over the years of my childhood, I realized that my learning experience was a gradual process and it started from the age of five years old, when I would listen to traditional stories and proverbs told by my mother, either when she was cooking in the kitchen or when we got a moment to relax around the fireplace. The stories told came naturally and I did not know they were lessons of life, because some of these stories were told several times, and they would always end with songs which carried lessons to be learned by the listener as a way of passing knowledge, teaching moral values, or for fun and relaxation. The whole idea behind storytelling was to let listeners learn and eventually pass it on to others as well. One would be encouraged to retell a story because it was a way of carrying on the traditional knowledge.

This process of learning was un-interrupted, and it followed a pattern of time. In most cases, stories were told in the evening when there was enough time to listen and digest the message passed. In this way there was a lot of time to widen one's experience as well. The

origin of knowledge given to a child is from a mother who teaches a child up to the age of five as the child is closely followed. The father's role at this age is so limited, until teen age when a boy gets closer to the father and begins to learn some life skills, while a girl continues to learn from the mother and whatever she learns will always be attributed to the mother. When she fails to fulfill certain roles the society expects from her in adulthood, blame goes to the mother. But above all, whatever a girl learns from the mother brings glory to the whole tribe and the household she comes from.

In my conviction, learning remains a continuous undertaking and it goes on as long as one lives. It is also true that education in many cultures starts even before one goes to school. A lot of things which a child learns at home are eventually discarded, as that knowledge is considered inferior because the child must enter into another form of learning in a new and "superior" and foreign language which becomes the media of learning and communication. In other words, lifelong learning leads one to handle life, as it prepares people to reach a sense of purpose. Learning and knowing are inseparable because a person gains knowledge by receiving some information that can be absorbed and can be passed on. Thus, learning as a process of acquiring knowledge which can be put into practice in our daily life is vital and eventually leads to a change in one's attitude.

When I was in Primary one, my teachers used to remind us that one can be schooled but may not be learned. This means, one can gain education, but it does not always reflect the action of the person to develop some constructive attitude in the society. Anybody can acquire knowledge of something, but may not have the experience of going about it. "Practice makes perfect" describes this experience of learning very well. One may be taught how to dance, but there is a great need to practice actual dancing with other dancers to gain a better experience of dancing well.

The ongoing development of one's mind and level of knowledge is confirmed by

Merriam, Caffarella, and Baugmatner (2007, p. 5), where a clear definition of lifelong learning stands out as self-driven; yet the confines where this happens include an environment where the learner lives, thus, the environment where I grew up became part of my lifelong learning. I began to widen my knowledge and understanding from listening to stories and proverbs that helped me to understand the lessons they carried in my traditional setting.

Hill (2002, p. 10) pointed out in his writing that what is learned, need not be “correct” or “adaptive.” In learning, the idea of change of attitude played a bigger part in its definition. It becomes increasingly important to realize the mind is capable of taking in any new information, which may not always be correct, or wrong either.

Fully aware that the environment where I grew up in Northern Uganda does not offer a positive process of learning for girls and women, I remained focused on some important sayings my mother used to remind me about the importance of learning from every situation and from everyone I meet. My parents planted in me the fact that the knowledge I get will always open up the way for me to go anywhere and be accomplished. There was a constant reminder about the values of morals in one’s private home and public places, too.

Similarly, Gamurorwa (2000) acknowledged the use of storytelling as a way of enriching indigenous knowledge and she affirmed it can be used to advocate for holistic development of children, morally, spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally. A lot of attention is put on those aspects through which stories are told, like songs and dances, as part of the meaningful ways of expressing and telling a story about an individual or society. Kaya (2013) confirmed that indigenous institutions of knowledge through storytelling, dances, songs, and artifacts are still the support and foundation of indigenous ways of knowing.

Kaya (2013) further encouraged African researchers to seek the abundance of knowledge which can still be traced from senior members of their society, who are also

holders of knowledge, as a sign of active wisdom. This view has been supported through several proverbs in African cultures, such as these ones, “An elephant can never fail to carry its tusks,” which means when one takes up a responsibility in the society, he/she must accept the weight of that responsibility and live up to it. One is a call to be responsible and accountable to the society in whatever is entrusted to them. “Where one takes a bath must not become a place for drying oneself” (Ugandan proverb), I learned from my mother, which means we must always keep moving and not side-tracked and remain in one place. This may be a way of running away from danger as well. But it is an indication that we need to remain always alert and keep on moving ahead in life. It clearly suggests that we have to avoid an overuse or exploitation of our environment. “If you have climbed up a tree, you must climb down the same tree” (Ugandan proverb). This proverb means the path that leads one forward should be able to lead backwards as well. It can teach a person some ways of solving a difficult problem by remaining attentive to the beginning and end of the problem. Running away from a problem or taking a shortcut does not respond to a complex problem. “Women have no chiefs” (Ugandan proverb). This proverb has a beautiful meaning of equality as far as women’s roles and emancipation are concerned. In other words, there is nobody who can claim to be above a woman in traditional African culture.

It also brings me back to my own background where I grew up in a household with inadequate learning material, but my mother was a great storyteller who taught me many things through her stories. One of the stories I will never forget is about “The Luo Migration.” All the stories I learned taught me what I cannot forget in my life. When I started formal schooling, I found some of the stories were being taught in school and it was so easy for me to follow based on what I had learned from my mother’s oral history. I have found the need to value basic knowledge of reading and writing in my local language even before learning to read and write in another language. For this reason, I wish someone told

me earlier that whatever I learn would be building on the knowledge I received before coming to a formal school. However, I still appreciate that I am able to combine lessons from my informal and formal learning.

The conviction of sending me to a formal school was to go and learn something new and foreign and in a new language as well. There were some challenges with this new form of learning, especially in a foreign language, which would be overcome later on. First, there was a real disconnect from the home environment and style of learning around the fireplace or through storytelling. Second, the system of education put a clear divide where there were schools for girls and boys only. I found that hard as I grew up in a family of four brothers and three sisters, living and learning together from our parents and from different situations in real life.

My long journey of learning went back and forth, and I need to be even more attentive in tracing it because I learned so many lessons along the way. After completing Primary seven, I took another path of learning by following a religious vocation. I joined the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in my early teen age years and I with other young girls were given a chance of doing a home school, which allowed us to learn what we would be taught in Senior one and two. At the same time, I went through a thorough training of religious discipline for four years and I was accepted to take three evangelical vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience in the same order of Sisters at the end of the fourth year. The religious training was unique because it was a training for life and lessons taught varied from moral to social and religious ways of living. Again, this was a little confusing and demanding, especially for me as a young teenage girl. I did not understand the fact that I had to learn to wake up very early to go to church to learn to pray and do some meditation and reflection, which was totally new to me. This was a foreign thought too, because I was brought up listening to stories told by my elders. There was no way I could express my

thoughts about my academic education, which seemed to have been interrupted at this time. Later on, I was sent to a Midwifery School and at this point I was learning what was above my academic experience. But this did not scare me because I strongly believed anything could be learned as I was able to learn how to wake up every day at the dawn of day to go to church. I focused a lot of attention because I was studying with girls whose standard of education was above mine. After one year in Midwifery School, I started excelling in class and it gave me confidence that my background knowledge was adequate to help me navigate and learn something new in life. After three years of training and hard work in Midwifery, I passed my examination with distinction.

Baby care came naturally to me as I grew up with my nieces and nephews and eventually became their babysitter until I left home to follow my religious vocation. In the course of time, babysitting nurtured in me the vocation, which led to giving hope and healing to children and women during conflict in Northern Uganda. In this way Midwifery was just perfect for me because it put me in touch with new babies again, while awakening in me the lessons my mother taught about different plants and roots that were preserved for their medicinal nature. Having learned nursing and nurturing skills, I remind myself about how to combine nursing skills I acquired from a classroom and nurturing skills I learned from my culture. I have lived with both [sets of] skills complementing each other and helping me to accomplish the tasks ahead of me. My curious mind encouraged me to learn more and I began to think about why people fall sick and if there was a different way of managing sickness other than medicinal treatment. The women I interacted with during my Midwifery training in Northern Uganda gave me a picture that literacy remained a huge gap which needed some attention, yet I did not know what to do about it. Meeting women who could not write their names and did not know their dates of conception and expected dates of delivery was always a painful challenge. I had to guess and try to come up with

some expected dates of delivery because these women expected their husbands who went to school to know the dates of any event.

Over the years, I have come to understand the importance of the type of education needed in a given environment where there is a sharp difference between indigenous ways of knowing and the colonial system of education. This is where I think the need for basic education is very vital because it helps learners connect with past stories and different experiences which I learned from childhood. I see the value of oral tradition in developing indigenous knowledge, drawing from my own experience of learning and observing from cultural knowledge, which I hold in high respect because it has an extent of knowledge with no boundaries. This means one can be a long-term learner through different activities in the society, which extends up to care and respect for the environment, plants, and animals, including which confirm the aspect of relationality of indigenous knowledge (Cajete, 2015).

Traditional African education was always practiced and passed on through an oral tradition where people were treated according to their capabilities, age regiments, and skills. This form of education follows the pattern of cultural initiation that introduces young members of the society into an adult world as they are taught how to manage life in the society through a variety of skills. Storytelling, proverbs, songs, and dances were all part of the traditional education. Traditional process of education are meant to provide a holistic education to a person. It has no boundary of time which confines one in a profession or professionalism. Crotty's (1998) theory of constructionism explains how human beings construct meanings for the world they interact with in different ways, and this further brings the view that one can recreate a different approach to knowing and understanding of the world. Moreover, meaning cannot be discovered but it has to be framed or constructed. (Crotty 1998).

The colonial system of education introduced another set up for gender oppression

where women remained the minority as boys outnumbered girls in schools. The process of oppression was technically introduced and one example of this came as a girl was made to sit in between two boys. In some cases, seating arrangement in class exposed girls to humiliation and intimidation because girls were asked to sit in front of the class while boys sat at the back as a sign of control and intimidation (Dunne & Leach, 2003). In this way the colonial classrooms became another place for gender oppression and intimidation for women/girls in the process of learning. Seating places revealed a marked difference between boys and girls, and this was the same even in places of worship where one side of the church is marked for men while the other is for women.

Smith (2002) advanced that application of Eurocentric perspectives in Africa favored the powerful groups of the society while marginalizing and ignoring the perspectives of the minority groups. In Uganda, the language featured in the academic world was Luganda, which is from the dominant tribe in the country. Later on, some languages like Acholi and others were considered in the national curriculum as well. But the number of languages considered are very few compared to the many traditional languages and cultures in Uganda.

Battiste (2002), on the other hand, believed the interaction of African indigenous knowledge with higher education was a great opportunity for learning some relevant perspectives and codes of conduct for a better way of living in society. This points to the fact that indigenous knowledge structures promote a smooth flow of communication with one another in a way of living and learning together through sharing experiences and knowledge.

Chilisa (2012) also recognized that some of the traditions were discontinued by colonial and missionary entry to the African continent, where new languages like English, French, and Portuguese were introduced as media of learning. The colonial education was introduced with the aim of strengthening the colonial authority. Mulenga (1999, as cited in Chilisa, 2012) stated that some men in the society were given a specific type of education that

could make them fit in the society and promote societal balance and cohesion of colonial rule. Women, on the other hand, were given the type of education that would make them fit for domestic work which increased their dependence on men. Raymond (2011), however, raised a concern that African children are torn between two ideologies of either remaining and growing in modern or colonial school while missing out on the traditional perspectives, or they are completely caught up in their traditional homes and miss out on the modern perspectives of learning that could help them appreciate the combination of both knowledge structures.

When I completed my Midwifery training, I was sent to work as a midwife and a general nurse while caring for an orphanage with babies. I gladly worked for six years until a question popped up in my mind. How long would it take me to give medicine for curing diseases without knowing the causes and how to prevent them? To respond to this question, I decided to go back to a formal classroom to complete my secondary education as a requirement of the system of education in Uganda where one cannot move to another level of education without getting a certificate to confirm completion. I was supposed to have taken four years of secondary school in order to move forward to either studying medicine or something else. This process was interrupted by the Lord's Resistance Army war in 1986, which pushed me out of school after only two years of studies.

I did not give up on learning, but I embarked on home schooling and completed the remaining two years. I sat for exams and got promoted to "A" level, which prepares a person to go to a University. After two years of "A" level study in Senior five and six, I got more determined to continue learning, and I still had the question of why people get sick and what could be done to overcome the causes of sicknesses. When I passed and was admitted to the Uganda Martyrs University, I decided to take up Development Studies and Ethics, which answered some of my questions about why people fall sick.

After completing three years at the University with a bachelor's degree, I came home and was assigned to work in St. Monica Girls Tailoring school. I worked for seven years as the Director of the school for the underprivileged women who escaped from captivity of the Lord's Resistance army rebels. In this school I learned the importance of lifelong and indigenous knowledge combined with formal education. As I did not learn tailoring in any level of my education, I took it up as a challenge for me to continue teaching myself how to sew. Though my main job has been more of supervision and quality assurance, I needed to learn the skill of tailoring and broaden my knowledge. In this way tailoring became for me an umbrella word because I learned to be more innovative and be more specific and to develop practical skills which could restore confidence in people who dropped out of formal schooling because of conflict in Northern Uganda.

My journey of learning has gone through a series of changes as I continued to grow into adulthood. It would have been very easy to get satisfied or give up the journey of lifelong learning. I found myself clearly curious and ready to ask questions and also to participate in looking for answers to these questions. My endeavor to learning made me value my experience as an inspiration do this writing. Much as it does not sway me from thinking that my own thoughts are not exactly valuable in the world of Western academia. It points to a crucial back-and-forth journey of learning, from informal to formal learning, which is connected with my involvement and experiences in life within my society and culture. The start of this journey of learning can be traced from a small village, which may not be easily traced on the map of Uganda, called Paidha.

I was taught about life itself and how to have a sense of belonging by my parents and elders in the community at large. I was taught about how to trace my root from where my umbilical was buried four days after my birth as an important cultural and clan identity. These lessons are usually taught by a female to young girls and by adults to young children

around the fireplace, especially in the kitchen, where more lessons of practical aspects in life are taught at different times. I learned to be who I am and how to belong in the community. This journey of learning gave me a new insight into what ongoing learning means through formal and informal education as well. This also gave me an experience of using my cultural lenses to see another world beyond my own world. Bangura (2005) firmly admitted that “ubuntu” becomes the positive and driving force that makes people open up to other people in order to get to know their perspectives of humanity and in this way develop and enrich personal knowledge. Nafukho (2006) endorsed the view that following this direction of thoughts on humanity points to enthusiasm and readiness to develop our own insight.

My experience along this journey was richly blessed because it became an eye opener to learning new things and entering into the world of other peoples’ cultures from Africa to Europe, and the United States of America. My exposure to different cultures singled me out from my small village as the first woman to pursue a higher form of learning through different experiences I lived through, and this has led me to embark on this writing as a result.

The journey into formal learning has been a long quest and has taken a lot of painful effort from me and I did not ever imagine that my informal lived experience would turn into an academic work. Finding an institution that has made me value my informal learning, leading me to formal learning, makes me realize the dream of sharing my own background which is largely due to informal learning.

The Story of My Research Methodology

One of the main purposes of this research was to explore the process of adult literacy in a post-colonial conflict situation and to find some responses for these research questions: How do women who participate in adult literacy talk about themselves as women, literate people, learners, and community members? Does their cultural knowledge help or hinder how they see themselves in the society? How or why?

Methodology

In the attempt to find my way through this research which I intentionally planned to carry forward, I anxiously looked for what paradigms would work as a guide on which I could start. Reading through the work of Tuhiwai Smith (1999), I was inspired by the description that recognized the importance and necessity of bringing in indigenous peoples' results which uncover the colonization of research generally. More convincing and uplifting still was Garorotte's (2003) view that advanced an argument for research that emanates from the indigenous peoples' resources and principles. This view threw some light which gave me courage to come up with indigenous research paradigms that could work as a background on which to craft my research. A paradigm described by Schwandt (2001) became a universal worldview that serves as the conviction in values and disciplines which guide the process of problem solving. While Cree scholar Wilson (2001) came up with a definition of paradigm on which I started building my views, "a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that goes together to guide peoples' actions as to how they are going to go about their research" (p. 175). He went on to emphasize some principles of rationality which form part of research paradigms which characterize indigenous research. The methodological framework that I adopted in this research was based on the post-colonial indigenous research paradigm. Post-colonial indigenous research has been examined by Chilisa (2005) as a world view that emphasizes the common ontologies that build on those aspects of everyday life.

This view is a social construct of reality where everybody in the society is involved as part of a circle of relationship that embraces humans, both living and nonliving, and which includes the environment while epistemologically focusing on community as the knowers of socially constructed knowledge, informed by various networks of knowledge which includes other beings and the environment. It has axiological perspectives where knowledge is constructed in accordance with self-determined definitions of what to know in how to know and how it can be considered as truth. She continued to advance that the methodologies have some commonalities with a transformative research paradigm which comes with the ideas that lead to emancipation. In embracing the methods that decolonize and indigenize, Chilisa (2011) argued that the goal of postcolonial indigenous research methodologies is to focus on revolutionizing the regular fashion in which it is composed through the involvement of various knowledge structures. Yet, decolonized and indigenized research methodologies do not obtain concepts from recorded ideas, “but they can be inferred by the researcher from oral traditions, stories, common legends, language, and artifacts” (Chilisa, 2011, p. 79).

Indigenous worldviews have been part of my upbringing from childhood when I was introduced to so many lines of relations who all form a big linkage for my family root and background. As such, I see my research being part of critically exploring the realities connected to indigenous knowledge by recognizing the multiple truths and realities. Kovach (2009) and Dezin and Giaradin (2007) argued for an indigenous research methodology framework that allows participants to bring out accepted moral values in the society. The common values which are emphasized are rooted in respect and care for one another (Dazin & Giaradin, 2007).

A family tie is like a tree, it can bend but it cannot break”.

(African Proverb.)

This proverb describes the relational linkage that exists in indigenous ontologies and this aspect of respect has been put at the center of this methodology while working with indigenous women in Northern Uganda, exploring their cultural knowledge and how it can be validated. I had to be unassuming, because I know these women well and I needed the attitude of a learner and a listener with deep respect. Kovach (2009) confirmed that indigenous methodology has an “inside/outside relationship” (p. 30). This clearly describes the extended relationship that exists in indigenous methodology. These relationships also confirm the various knowledge systems that people use to connect to their environment. The center of the data analysis was the cultural context, which was the focus while analyzing data (La Veaux & Christopher, 2009).

The methods utilized were ones that value the ways communities develop knowledge using cultural ways of knowing through storytelling and proverbs, which are expressed in various ways that remain unique to the Acholi tribe as one of the Luo ethnic groups. As there are so many cultures and languages in Africa, every tribe has a unique way of passing knowledge to the next generation. Considering the fireplace as the venue where storytelling naturally takes place was very vital. Evening time is very significant because it is the time when people relax and recount what happened during the day. The fireplace, known as “wang oo” in the Acholi language, is considered an informal classroom where a lot of lessons are developed and taught to the younger generation. It also serves as an informal classroom that brings people together during a specific time of the year which is convenient for all. People come from different families with their in-kind contributions of food to be shared with one another, and after the meals, folk stories are told, or new ones are developed.

This methodology continued to present some challenging issues because it called for a lot of attention that needed to be paid to some hidden values that connect people in the process while following protocols. It also demanded some humility and respect of the people

in order to gain their trust (Wilson, 2001). As such, indigenous research has to come from the indigenous perspectives of the world view. The indigenous perspectives become the lenses to understand the world. I liked the idea of using indigenous pairs of glasses to see the world, because it brought a clear direction that I followed. While Chilisa (2020) looked at this as another form of confronting the blind Euro-Western application of methodologies across all cultures, she encouraged writing from different world views as she advised researchers to look into activities and habits that do not morally undermine or compromise their research.

Focus was put on some of those aspects through which stories are told, like songs and dances, as part of the meaningful ways of expressing and telling a story about an individual or society. These songs can be composed by the society either as a lesson, praise, or as a way of ridiculing some unwanted mentalities in the society. Kaya (2013) confirmed that indigenous institutions of knowledge through storytelling, dances, songs, and artifacts are still the foundation of indigenous ways of knowing. The same writer further encouraged African researchers to seek the abundance of knowledge which can still be traced from senior members of the society, who are also holders of knowledge, as a sign of active wisdom. Senior members are considered the sources of all knowledge and are highly respected, and this view has been confirmed by some proverbs in African cultures, such as *“When an old man dies, a library burns down to the ground”* (African proverb).

Rationale for Choosing This Methodology

In choosing the use of storytelling as the method for my study, I started with a reflection on who I am in my own society. This gave me an insight into my own journey of learning, which was a complex journey because it took different paths that led to who I am today. I was brought up with the oral tradition background that values storytelling as the basis of the informal way of passing knowledge.

I observed this methodology as appropriately fitting for this study because it stimulated participants to feel their ways of knowing were being valued. In this way they could share the lived experiences and indigenous knowledge in their own local languages. They followed the procedures and protocols they normally used traditionally to tell stories while passing knowledge to the younger generation. I deliberately chose to use the indigenous methodology to let participants feel their knowledge is valued and that it is vital. Indigenous research methodologies are unique because they focus on common perspectives which are found in relational ontology, epistemology, and axiology viewpoints. This focus became a very strong mark that guided my study as I followed the relationship building that becomes the vein that connects African perspectives of being and existence of a person as a whole. This strong relationship of “I am because we are” as opposed to “I am alone” (Ubuntu concept) cannot easily be explained in a different language, as acknowledged by Mokogoro (1998). It is a concept that can only be defined by seeing it in action, reflected in their personhood in relation to the community. It can be better understood that a person's existence is defined in relation to other humans and every living creature, including the environment one lives in. It is important to know one is born in a community that exists and is where the person gets his/her identity from.

Participants

A criterion sampling procedure was employed to get participants who could share their experiences. Purposeful sampling was used to select a specific group of women from Northern Uganda who met the criteria. Women who went through the experience of civil conflict that had impacted negatively on their education and life in the society. Initially, I had planned to have 10 women from Gulu and five from the school in Atiak. The variation in selecting was due to the school in Gulu being started three years before starting the one in Atiak. However, due to the widespread covid-19 infection and the persistent lockdown

country wide, coupled with restriction of transportation and movement from one place to another, the only women who could travel were 6 in number, all from the Gulu District. They were able to walk back and forth as most of them lived near the interview location at St. Monica Basic School of Learning. The women all identified themselves as Acholi women and could communicate very well in their local Acholi language, however, their level of literacy was low. I contacted women who had participated before the pandemic, following the registration list in the school where they were invited to St. Monica to hear about the research. I visited the school which was still in session. When I planned a date to start the interviews, I called all the women using the mobile phone numbers they provided. As I visited the school, I read the requirements script and asked for volunteers.

Data Sources

The data sources for this research were individual interviews and focus group interviews, artifacts, and cultural knowledge brought by the women to the interview. It started with individual interviews with the hope of getting stories of women's lives, education, feelings about one-self, experiences during their time of learning, perception of place in the community, and the role of learning in those perceptions. Before the interview started, I asked women to bring something from school or outside of the school that shows who they are as learners and as a person who can read and write to the interview. This was a way of encouraging them to positively take pride in what they do daily in life. Throughout the interview process their relational way of knowing was followed, which meant the process which was followed created more connection between participants and researcher. The purpose of asking them to bring something they did from school or outside school was to show they are creative and able to read and write.

All interview questions were asked in their mother tongue, Acholi, and audio recorded which was later transcribed and translated to English. The first step I took as the

convener of the gathering was to ask them to relax as I welcome them. The process of both group and individual interviews needed to be in the form of a celebration of coming together to share and learn from one another. I introduced myself to them and moved on to ask them to tell their names and introduce themselves as they talked.

I had planned to start individual interviews just as in an African traditional society where whenever two people meet for the first time, they would start by exchanging greetings with a handshake. This time I started by offering masks to my participants as I noticed none of them had masks on. I explained to them why we would not shake each other's hands due to covid-19 infection transmission. They were shown where to sit in the open air while observing social distance and all the standard operating procedures where there was beautiful shade from the trees of St. Monica school. They were offered tea and sodas with samosas before and after the interview as a sign of welcome.

The purpose of the focus group discussions was to find out about cultural knowledge, how it helps, hinders, or impacts how women look at themselves and how they think others perceive them. I requested them to bring along stories, proverbs, and other kinds of things like songs and handmade costumes for dances from their culture to share that would help demonstrate who they are as Acholi women within their community. The focus group interview was done using a storytelling cycle with the hope of getting some information about their cultural knowledge and how they positively think this cultural knowledge could help them acquire more knowledge. This was a way of finding out if it helps or impacts how they look at themselves.

Before starting the group discussion, the selected participants with the same background of dropping out of school for different reasons in Northern Uganda comfortably came together on an agreed date. All the women were recruited from our Basic School of Learning in St. Monica. This made them familiar with one another. My presence as a

researcher among them did not intimidate them as I speak their language and also had a lot to share with them culturally.

It was interesting that both group and individual discussions followed some great expression from the women in their local language, either through telling stories, proverbs, or singing. But to build up the stories told by different women as a group and as individuals, I had to turn the whole process of data collection into a discussion, because in traditional society it is common practice to involve some respectable opinion leaders who have good reputation in the community to plan and solve problems that affect the society. This sitting became more of a discussion or dialogue as opposed to what would be purely interviews where questions are asked, which sounds very much like an interrogation for doing something wrong. In the case of dialogue or discussion, everybody's voice and opinion were valued as they felt involved in the process of constructing knowledge. Discussions from different women were more of a positive interaction in which participants freely supplemented what their friends discussed, and this gave a more rich and meaningful dialogue.

The storytelling cycle started just as in any African traditional society where, whenever people meet for the first time, they also start by exchanging greetings. This time it was not possible due to the spread of the COVID-19 infection. Guests were shown where to sit as a welcome gesture. Some light refreshment was given just as we did with the interviews. I provided a small stipend as transport money for a ride by Bodaboda back home. This was very important, and it was a way of appreciating the women for their participation in the interview. I started by explaining the reasons for the invitation. Participants sat and formed a talking circle, which gives a chance for everybody to talk without interruption. Anybody was allowed to start while others listened and when the next person wanted to talk, she asked permission from the group.

Data Analysis

Data analysis used a narrative approach all through the study. The narrative approach was chosen because participants of the study are women from oral tradition and are used to constructing stories as a way of passing knowledge, which they can recount easily. It allowed them to freely articulate and narrate their life experiences, which represent the experiences of other women learners.

At the start of transcription, I listened to the women's discussion and interactions over and over, and later, I followed with the transcription line by line in both English and Acholi to make sure I did not miss some important and seemingly insignificant data. I wrote down these important points in a notebook and later transcribed it using computer software. Some of the information that came out were put under themes and categories as headings, which then brought the thematic analysis to any embedded data.

As one seeking and gathering knowledge from people, I had to take it upon myself that whatever data collected must reflect the views of participants accurately and with a lot of respect and recognition of their wisdom as well. Sinclair (2003) contended that a researcher must not take credit alone for the study, but acknowledge that any knowledge acquired during the study must be beneficial to the people involved in the study.

Themes were developed from stories told by participants as they shared and interacted with one another according to their cultural ways of knowing and being in the community. I found that stories with the same patterns could be combined under one category in this study. I started analyzing data collected from focus groups and individual discussions. I carefully listened and relistened over and over again to the recorded transcripts of the discussions of women. I had taken some rough notes when each woman was speaking, though I did not want to distract the women by dwelling too much on writing. Listening attentively helped me to look for similarities in concepts among the different participants' stories. I put them under

different categories. Together with a research assistant who also listened to audio recorded data, we came up with a version of transcription with a translation and interpretation of the data in both languages, Acholi and English. After data analysis, the two of us met and shared our points and created summaries of stories that were presented. The summaries fall under different themes, following some quotes and the interpretation of stories.

In order to make this study more credible, I have to acknowledge the multiple realities and truth found in indigenous studies and these multiple realities need to be accurately presented as views from participants. This is why it will be important at the end of this data analysis to allow women to access and review the transcription which was interpreted from English to their local language for accuracy, being aware that participants' responses could also be in line with what they imagine a researcher wants to hear and could give false information.

Stories analyzed in a reflective manner brought out some hidden knowledge and meaning behind the story told, which formed a combination of indigenous knowledge base, post-colonial, and feminist theories. A lot of focus in this study was put on the cultural context, which became the center of this data analysis, making indigenous ways of knowing stand out as an important part of the study. Being deeply rooted in relational methods of participating in indigenous knowledge construction puts emphasis on the importance of integration and interaction of participants' voices and knowledge that derives insights from the cultural wisdom which promotes indigenous ways of knowing and being. Employing flexibility in order to reach to a proper analysis that benefits the indigenous community in an attempt to look for coherence was vital.

The Women's Stories and My Interpretation

In this section I would like to draw attention to the importance of indigenous knowledge from the discussions held by participants of this study who were willing to explain what their cultural knowledge meant to them as women in their society, and what it meant for the future generation as well. It is vital to know how much value is put on the different ways of passing knowledge, using songs, symbols, proverbs, storytelling, and artifacts belonging to a particular culture. The women will introduce us to how cultural knowledge can encourage and promote one's identity and how it can also hinder it. The women displayed a good amount of their cultural knowledge, generally, and how it was important to know the kind of knowledge which can be introduced in the overall picture of ongoing learning.

On this sunny afternoon, all the chosen participants came together in St. Monica Basic School of Learning as the chosen and familiar site of their discussions. We all took advantage of the cool breeze in the Ugandan sunset as we sat in the shades of trees. We greeted each other as we had already known each other. The women were reminded that we had come together to interact and discuss about indigenous ways of knowing. With some questions put forward to guide the conversation, at some point I found during the group discussion that women were responding to the questions put to them very freely and in a conversational manner. Others felt free to join the discussion, either laughing or asking some questions to gain a better understanding.

The individual interactions were easy to observe and follow one participant at a time in detail with whatever was being asked, especially about how the person was doing and how she felt about her own self. I found some respondents had a great sense of self-esteem as a result of having been in the Basic School of Learning and following the school for a while. They appeared to me to be more prepared to even talk and to discuss the questions asked. It

looked like their identity was getting clearer because of the skills they were getting from the school.

In constructing the stories of these women, I observed the confidence and positive familiarity the women had with one another as they talked. I found that sometimes when a woman was holding the discussion, another person would join her in a joyful way and offer a good supplement to what somebody was saying. This was quite good, and it made it more of a dialogue. I gave them enough time and I noticed they were also laughing and enjoying themselves in their discussion. At the same time, I observed that the basis of the talk was around what they learned from their culture.

Women spoke with confidence and eloquence that gave a clear picture that the participants were in the process of discovering their true identity in the society as Acholi women, as described by Stensenko (2009) as *Continual Becoming*. This reveals the learning process that is helpful for the reconstruction of their identity and knowledge. The gestures and posture the women adopted was contrary to what they would do in any discussion in a cultural setting where one would see a woman speaking with her head bent forward with a lot of shyness. Some of them were still shy, but the majority of them spoke very clearly, even when talking about their culture, like culture of courtship and marriage. Their talk revealed that they still know and value their culture, but that did not necessarily mean it must remain the same for the next generation. It could be observed that they want something different for the future generation.

The six women who participated in this study were (all names are pseudonyms that I chose for them) Regina, Angela, Celina, Nancy, Elena, and Alma. It was a sunny afternoon when all six participants of this study joyfully came together. The shade of trees in St. Monica Basic School of Learning offered a convenient and safe space for these women to freely respond to the questions they received, but in a very interactive discussion.

As we sat down and started our talk, Regina began by introducing herself to the group with her name and telling who she was and where she came from. This introduction was very important because it told everybody about the clan one came from, which can make others understand why one behaves the way she does. It appeared that Regina was courageous in speaking and she volunteered to start the conversation as a leader of the group. I observed that the seven years she spent in formal schooling gave her an advantage to stand out as a leader and the other women looked up to her.

Regina went on to say she grew up as an orphan because her father died during the insurgency of the Lord's Resistance Army rebels, and she went on with her Primary education up to Primary 7, but could not sit for the Primary Leaving Examination as her mother, too, died before she could sit for the final examinations. She said her elder brothers and sisters supported her education until she completed her Primary 7, and then enrolled in a Tailoring course. After completing the course, "I got married and gave birth to one child, but got separated with my husband and now I live alone."

The second participant joined the conversation by introducing herself as Angela from a suburban town, but born and raised in a village. She said as she was growing up, she was a disciplined child. She went on to say she learned a lot of things as a child, like garden work and cooking all traditional dishes. She also learned pottery from her grandmother. At this point, it was evident that the group took a lot of interest in what Angela was telling them about the knowledge she received from her grandmother. This was because there are few people in the society who still bring out this important knowledge of pottery, which is very important in this society. Pots have so many uses, ranging from cooking to ritual performances. She also explained the importance of pots which are used traditionally as plates, drinking water reservoir, and their various uses in traditional ceremonies, like the initiation process of twins in the society. In some traditional societies like among the Alur,

when twin babies die, they place them in a pot and bury them with it.

Angela continued to say she dropped out of school in the second term of Primary 7 because of family conflict between her mother and stepdad. She acknowledged that her previous education level allowed her to hold positions like secretary and Treasurer of their women's savings group. The little knowledge she received many years ago in Primary School helped her "to participate in Church songs, even in English." This explained what the women and the society consider as knowledge. It all pointed to formal education, which is the mentality introduced by the colonial system of education in our society. For a person who spent seven years in formal schooling, the knowledge gotten should have been adequate as far as reading and writing is concerned. But all these depend on the quality of teaching and teachers as well. Some teachers were also the products of the same conflict that forced a good number of women to drop out of education. Paying for studies brought in more conflict for her mom in the new marriage and, as such, she was forced to drop out of school and decided to get married to avoid more conflicts.

The next participant introduced herself as Nancy. She said her father died during the war of LRA when she was small and, being the last born in her family, she spent most of her time as a babysitter. Her mother remained a widow with many children. Jennifer was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army Rebels when she started Primary 2 and was trained as a child soldier. She disclosed that she managed to escape home one day after spending some years in captivity. When she came home, she felt very uneasy to return to Primary 2 as she had outgrown that level of education. Apart from this reason, her mother could not afford to pay tuition for many children to continue with education. Nancy's story highlights what most young women in Northern Uganda went through after the conflict. Most of them felt they could not continue with formal education after the experience of conflict.

The participant who followed introduced herself as Celina. She narrated that she

learned what any Acholi girl would learn, like gardening, cooking, and she learned sewing too, all of which she learned without knowing how to read and write. She explained that she had been earning a living from sewing clothes for the last nine years.

Celina was very dramatic and articulate in what she shared with the group about her knowledge. She even put on one of the stylish dresses she made as a demonstration of what a person can do by building knowledge and learning from observation based on prior knowledge.



Elena picked up after the last participant and she began by mentioning her name and where she came from, which is a village in Gulu. She went straight into explaining that she was married and her reason for dropping out of school was because of the war of the Lord's Resistance Army. Rebels "attacked our home and took away all the money my father had." She explained that her father was about to be killed but by "the grace of God he escaped and took refuge in another district called Masindi." She said she learned how to cook pancakes for sale to support her family. She went on to say life became a huge challenge as the head of the family was not there and that is what forced her to drop out of education from Primary 3. "When I wanted to go back to school, I had already grown up and became a big girl." The belief that formal schooling is only for little girls dominates the mentality in the society and it is often applied to women.

The next participant introduced herself as Alma. She started by thanking God for the adult literacy program in St. Monica and went on to explain that her father was an intelligent man who loved education. She confirmed that all her brothers and sisters were educated, and some even attained University level. She, being the last born, and two of her siblings, a boy and a girl, were not given the opportunity to go ahead with education. “I became unfortunate. We were three who became unfortunate since we were young.”

She admitted that she and her mother had to work very hard making bricks to raise money for her tuition as the last born. “But this effort could not go far as our mother became incapacitated. I missed going to school regularly and this became more of a challenge for a single mother as our father eventually died, as I think he would have eventually educated all of us if he remained alive.” She explained further that she got married as felt she was getting bigger and ready for marriage. Alma said she was very happy to hear about the literacy program in St. Monica because she was facing a challenge where in the society she is looked at as a leader, but her huge challenge was the inability to read and write. “Whenever I would go for any meetings in the community, people look at my natural talents and the leadership skills in me and appoint me to be either a leader or secretary. But this work needs someone who can read and write.” What a powerful conclusion from this woman who has actually missed the point of seeing her own given talents by measuring only against formal education.



The Story of Women in a Focus Group Discussion

The same six women were asked to come as a group to talk about some activities in Acholi culture which were used for passing knowledge from one generation to another. The group agreed that storytelling, singing folk songs, proverbs, and riddles were shared around the fireplace (wang oo). The Acholi traditional dances (larakaraka), daily cooking sessions, digging and planting crops, cleansing ceremonies (reconciliation), naming of children, marriages, and burial ceremonies were some of the ways they discussed that people used for passing knowledge. Stories and riddles and songs were all means of passing knowledge. For example, certain sounds carry a special meaning which young people could learn to identify. When a horn was blown, it was for a specific reason and it carried a special message. Whistling and hand blowing was a special way of passing information and knowledge that could save a person from forthcoming danger. It was also confirmed that some people were responsible for passing knowledge in the society and they comprised elderly women and men. Fathers and mothers were also responsible for conveying knowledge to their children at home. Signs and symbols, according to the women, were very important and they carried different meanings as well. For example, when an elephant grass was tied and thrown at the beginning of a road, it meant someone was brewing beer in the home along that road.

The group went on to discuss stories, songs, or dances that taught them who they were as Acholi women. The famous story, for example, about the friendship between an awl (Tula) is greatly valued because it helped women to be self-reliant and avoid moving around aimlessly.

There are proverbs used as a way of passing knowledge as well. “What you do not know will cost you much.” This means, one who refuses to listen to teachings ends up in trouble in the future. “Languna woto ki bad dano I kume,” which is a proverb that prohibits people from telling lies. “Latong pa latek, Ladit aye gamo.” This means one with a tough

character can only be confronted by an elderly person.

Attention was put by the women on some proverbs that carry negative meanings that would discourage women from learning. These are mostly in the form of songs, like the Aguma song that goes, “Ogek turu koraa carama.” This song is meant to ridicule and discourages girls who have reached adolescent age from continuing with education. The terms “Carama” or “orura” refer to girls who are considered too old for schooling but ready for marriage. Another discouraging proverb is “Gweno ma pee koki ki okok ki neko,” meaning a female hen must not crow, and if it does, it must be killed. This is a total denial of a female’s voice in the society: A woman who can stand up to speak in the community must be silenced. “Twong gweno pe kok pa ya” means a woman has no right of making any decision on her own. There was no time set for a girl to get married. The earlier the marriage the better, because it would ensure early childbearing to have many children in the family line. There are also songs like “John Oryema,” which describes an educated girl as a prostitute because she put on a short skirt and the one who is not educated wears a long skirt to indicate she is not a prostitute. The majority of these descriptions are gender derogatory and discriminating to women.

All these proverbs and riddles were used to explain that girls were a source of wealth for the family and sending them to school was not important because they were not permanent members of the family. They eventually marry and take their achievements to other families. Girls were also considered inferior to boys and education priorities were given to boys, and girls have no rights in making decisions.

The group discussion went on to analyze some cultural practices which could be dropped. Witchcraft practices, cleansing ceremonies called “tumu kii,” a twin celebration called “laputa,” and many others were described.

In order for the women to show that they identify as Acholi women and learners, they

also brought along some artifacts. One woman brought the calabash which she made into a plate called “Akwaya,” which is used for serving traditional food. At this point, it could be observed that other participants took a lot of interest in this artifact and they had more questions to ask about how to make it. The woman who made it turned out to be a learner and a teacher to her friends, because this artifact is highly valued in the society but there are few people who can make it. Another woman demonstrated how to make a mortar and pestle “pany,” making a charcoal stove, and pots and plates made from clay.



The next participant was very ready engage others in traditional storytelling as a way of demonstrating how knowledge is passed in Acholi traditional culture. She told the following story:

A hunter had four daughters and a cock. He went hunting one day and one of his daughters killed the only cock. On returning, he realized his cock was missing and he asked his daughters if anybody killed it and the four girls all denied. He then decided to make all four girls take an oath by the stream of a river to prove their innocence, but the one who was guilty was drowned in the stream of the river.

This story was discussed with a lot of excitement because it called for sincerity and truthfulness of women at all times. While I could see the importance of the story, the hidden fact behind it was not pointed out by the women. The harsh punishment imposed on women in a patrilineal society would be one of the things to be discussed further. I wanted to ask the

women the following questions: Would the punishment be the same if it was a male who killed the cock? And would it be the same if the cock killed was a hen? Among the Luo, women were prohibited from eating chickens as it was preserved for men only. Among the Alur tribe this was a widespread mentality. Would the killing of that cock be one way for women seeking their liberation from some cultural bondage?

When it came to making traditional costumes for dances, one of the participants shared and demonstrated how she made the traditional costumes and went on to teach other young women in the community to do the same. This, too, brought a lot of joy and excitement in the group and I had to come in to remind them that we had a time limit.



I told them that I would bring them back if there was a need and they were very happy and felt fully involved in this study, which brings out nothing more than their voices in their own language and expressions, which I tried to translate in English but does not bring out the rich meanings. This group discussion brought out some striking and emerging common themes which were analyzed.

Analyzing Findings

The most important themes that emerged throughout the focus and individual group discussions have been used to bring a better understanding and meaning of this study throughout the process of analysis. Each theme will be discussed with my description of my interpretation.

Patriarchy and Gender Stereotype Mentality: Social Construct of Roles

According to the responses and discussions held by women, it was clear that the images of women in the society were not really valued and that they were treated as goods and sources of wealth in traditional society. The voices of women in the discussion revealed they would want to work hard for their voices to be heard in this patrilineal society. This is often seen through the stories, proverbs, and riddles.

Women's identity in sociocultural settings is always portrayed through riddles and proverbs or songs and a good number of them are positively used to pass on knowledge to the next generation. But a huge portion of these proverbs, songs, and riddles do not promote women's identity, but rather point to male chauvinism and control in the society. Some of them are used to silence women. One example of this is "a hen must not crow, and if she does, she must be killed." This is so symbolic of the lack of recognition given to female voices and their role in the society as equal human beings who can do what men do in their own style. A good number of these proverbs, songs, and riddles do not promote women's identity within their culture. The lack of recognition highlights the fact that women were looked at as dependent on males and were less productive in the society. The increase in the dependency syndrome imposed on women by societal stereotype mentality has always left women powerless and poor, even economically. The strong belief in this mentality is carried forward through storytelling, proverbs, and riddles. The traditional society needs to promote gender equality, which does not mean sameness. This mentality needs to be introduced in all forms of learning so that women who have a lot of responsibility for passing knowledge to children could become advocates for these lessons. It would take women themselves to stand up and begin to bring these thoughts of equality to their young children. This requires the understanding of one's culture and the hidden meaning behind the different sayings and activities.

Women's identity has been put in all the chosen proverbs and riddles as people who cannot or are not allowed to make any decisions of their own but must always depend on their male counterparts. Some of the descriptions of women through proverbs and songs disrespect women's identity in the society by imposing some negative traits.

Drawing from responses of participants, gender roles were clearly defined and the women demonstrated their knowledge of their societal-constructed roles around the house. Most activities which the women talked about pointed to their roles as mothers and home keepers of traditional knowledge. The community still has to come to terms to validate the important roles women play and give them that recognition as contributors to the development of the society.

Basic Needs for Learning: Self-Esteem, Literacy, and Identity of Women

From the group and individual discussions, there were some clear indications that the women have a great desire to get some basic form of learning which can help them to read and write in their language and English. This is one way of finding their position and place in the society, while building their identity as well.

Self-esteem and identity reconstruction in the society are very vital. It follows that literacy for women can be used as a tool to overcome the gender stereotype mentality in the marginalization of women, especially where the society continues to deny women the opportunity of embracing leadership positions. While women's identity in sociocultural settings is always constructed according to a stereotype mentality, it becomes exacerbated because of limited or lack of education. This denial is often deliberate, even for educated women, as they are given a second-class position, especially in patriarchal society. As women put a lot of value on their identity reconstruction through literacy, it could be seen that they also made that connection between their personal values and self-identity in the process of learning. They also revealed that they had some hope to participate more in their

society after acquiring more knowledge through literacy.

Reasons that Forced Women to Drop Out of School:

Early marriage and family conflicts were highlighted by most participants as reasons for dropping out of school. According to the discussions held in both groups, if parents had a choice to make as to who must drop out of school for any reason, but especially poverty, girls would be the choice. Girls were considered a source of wealth for families because of dowry that would be paid to parents for their marriage. Family conflict was also a reason for dropping out of school and is very common, especially in the post-conflict situation of Northern Uganda.

The most common reason for dropping out of school that came from almost all respondents was the war of the Lord's Resistance Army, which displaced people and a good number of children were abducted from their early childhood education. One of the reasons for loss of education for women, even after return from captivity, was aggravated by the societal mentality that sets age limits for women's education. This came out clearly in some songs, proverbs, and riddles used to discourage girls to continue with education. At the same time, a lot of emphasis was put on the different signs and symbols which were used to pass knowledge. It was also confirmed that some people in the society had greater responsibilities of passing knowledge to the younger generation.

Trusting in God

In all, participants of this study displayed their learning as continuous and transcendental. They all expressed their trust in God, and, at some point, their faith played a big role in giving them the strength to be who they are as Acholi women. The expression "by God's grace I was able to learn or do something positive" was used often in the conversation of participants. This means knowledge for these women is not static, but transformational and ongoing as well. It starts outside the classroom and goes beyond as one continues to learn

from different activities in life. Following the interaction of the women, it was clear that women, for the most part, have a bigger responsibility of passing knowledge to the younger generation.

Summary

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge that the women who participated in this study recognize themselves as people who are in the process of constructing their identity as a result of the literacy program they have been following. It could be easily observed that they had a good amount of determination and a positive familiarity in their communication with one another as they responded to questions put to them. They eloquently discussed what their culture does to promote or hide women's identities, especially in a patrilineal society. This could only be done because they felt assured that they can become agents of change in their society. The Basic School of Learning also became a safe and free place where these women could discuss issues related to women as Acholi women and literate members of the community.

The positivity of these women revealed that the literacy program, to a large extent, is putting them in the process of becoming, which means they are on the journey of preparing themselves to reconstruct their own identity through the knowledge they are acquiring. They also presented themselves as people and women who know and value their culture by pointing out what needs to be changed for the next generation. However, the songs, proverbs, riddles, and storytelling that they referenced seem to hinder their identity-building as productive members of their society because of the focus put on socially constructed gender roles in a patrilineal background. This responds to the question that cultural knowledge plays a bigger role in hindering how these women see themselves in the society. The knowledge of culture they displayed needs to be supplemented by any form of literacy which can empower them to dissect what is good for themselves and for the future generation by making them

become advocates of a positive change in their society through their positive participation and contribution in different activities.

My Story of What This Research Means for Women's Education

This story will set out to discuss what I learned about women's indigenous knowledge and how what I learned could make some contributions to the existing literature on adult education and its impact on women. The study gave me a clear picture of who these women are, and I will discuss the impact of culture on women's identity. I will also talk about what that means for those people who are planning for education for women, especially after conflict, and what other research needs to be done to study indigenous knowledge, starting with decolonization of one's mind.

I envisage this study as an important piece for me because it starts by reminding me about the use of my own life's journey to trace the importance of lifelong learning, which started from my childhood, and how I used this journey to promote women's literacy in post-conflict situations. Adding my own voice to this study made me understand the importance of being present in any given situation. Having grown up in Northern Uganda in a patrilineal society with a stereotype mentality which gives preference to boys in everything and leaves women behind, I witnessed the low level of education of women, especially after they were forced to drop out of school because of the war of the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda. Realizing how cultural views also alter the mindset of women about education, it has been my passion to start an adult literacy program for women who remained disadvantaged in the community because they are unable to effectively participate in community-development activities.

What I also learned about the women's indigenous knowledge will hopefully be a guide for designing literacy programs for women because of its importance to the empowerment of women, especially in post-conflicts. Not forgetting the impacts of culture on women's education, I have learned that more attention needs to be drawn to those positive means in patrilineal societies, through some proverbs, songs, and other cultural practices, that

can encourage women to embrace education.

It will be necessary to advance the understanding of women's education and its role in the society by putting more emphasis on the form of education for women in post-conflict situations like in Northern Uganda. I learned the impact of an adult literacy program is that women can be empowered to influence decision making in public through their positive participation and they can continue to reconstruct their own identity by amplifying the positive aspects of cultural ways that can promote them.

Women's Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Before starting on my Ph.D. studies, I came with the perspective from Africa and I understood my origin is from Paidha very near the Congo border, my clan is called Jo'Pandika clan which means my great father was called Andika, by tribe I am an Alur, and by ethnicity I belong to the Luo ethnic group in Northern Uganda. There are Luo ethnic groups in Southern Sudan as well, which is the origin of Acholi and Alur tribes. I would be identified as one who belongs to a specific clan, following the knowledge of the place where my umbilical cord was buried after my birth. This knowledge is vital to me because it would provide a ready response whenever I am asked to talk about my origin. If I have no knowledge about my origin, I will always have a problem in the society because a sense of belonging is very vital. This being said, the principle of endogeneity had always been clear to me, until I started my Ph.D. Surprisingly enough, as I read in different classes I came across a good number of articles on indigenous people, but to my disappointment they all discuss indigenous people with the focus on the Aboriginal people of Australia, the Māori of New Zealand, and Indigenous people from the United States and Canada. This view of indigenous people assumes that indigenous people all over the world are a homogeneous group who experience similar situations. A limited amount of literature has been written about African indigenous knowledge, so far, that gives a clear meaning, except for the association and

description of primitivity. Kincheloe (2006) described indigenous knowledge as a complex body and perspective, while acknowledging that “for indigenous people from America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, Asia, Oceania and Europe,” indigenous knowledge remains a lived experience through the day-to-day life’s activities. He went on to confirm that indigenous knowledge is seen as lived. For this reason, when I talk about indigenous ways of knowing, I mean to point at a cultural way of constructing knowledge of people according to the way they live. This view helps me to see the world from where I am standing as a different platform which has another context and background. Attempts to analyze or format indigenous perspectives and epistemologies to fit Western academic discourse risk losing, distorting, misrepresenting, or even the appropriating original insider meaning. Such attempts may also, inadvertently, further validate and reproduce the very paradigms they seek to complicate or disrupt. At the very minimum, these risks need to be named and acknowledged. I would like to invite you to come to this level of understanding about my indigenous way of knowing and belonging, where we have different groups, tribes, clans, and ethnic groups with diverse ways of knowing and languages as well. I will focus my thoughts on the Acholi women with whom I have worked for a good number of years, during and after conflict.

Women’s indigenous ways of knowing go beyond knowledge construction through proverbs, storytelling, and songs. Bab Fafunwa (1982), as I cited in my previous story of learning, stated that learning includes social and cooperate responsibility because it is considered a process of continuous “doing.” It follows a path of learning through cultural initiation for young ones to the adult world. Yet, Kaya (2013) continued to encourage African researchers to seek from the abundance of knowledge through senior members of the society who remain custodians of knowledge.

Women underscored the value of indigenous knowledge, using proverbs, songs, and storytelling in Acholi, their local language, shared and imparted from generation to

generation, by making use of important and informal classrooms like the fireplace (wang oo). This is a special place where people meet for various activities, especially for storytelling, proverbs, songs, and riddles. However, they could not highlight the hidden meanings that hinder women's identity and portray them as less important through these stories, songs, and proverbs.

Impact of Adult Literacy Program

Having grown up in the same stereotype mentality, I have come to understand how culture advances and promotes the stereotypical way of thinking that lifelong learning is only limited to a certain age. This mentality could be changed gradually if women are encouraged to take up any form of learning at any age in their life, and adult literacy would be a solution as a starting point. Thinking through what women have been discussing about their indigenous knowledge and how these stories, proverbs, and songs could be of help to them, as far as literacy is concerned, generated a great interest for me to begin with. Adult literacy as a way forward for women who lost their chance for education became a priority as it occupies a great role in defining women's identity, as portrayed in this study. Perry and Homan (2015) and Kaiper (2018) clarified that literacy practices have some positive impacts on women's identity in the community they imagine belonging to.

For these reasons, therefore, I have put a lot of emphasis on the importance of adult education for women, especially for those who missed the opportunity of continuing with education either because of culture or conflict which did not give them a second chance after they escaped from the rebels. More practical still are the implications for women involved in an adult literacy program that makes them feel their voices can be heard and gives them the feeling of epistemic justice as noted by Collins (2017). This helps them overcome that realistic feeling of being less considered in any conversation in the society.

Smith and Vax (2003) viewed education as a central structure for the advancement of

humanity in the process of eliminating poverty. From what the women brought out in their discussion, I would back this line of thought while weighing in on my own experience of working for a good number of years with women who dropped out of school, that the chance of education which they lost during conflict has some negative impact not only on individuals but on the whole society through the loss of capital and human capacity within the society.

The general picture of this study is that women, especially in post-conflict situations, need to have literacy which can give them a second chance of reconstructing their identity in the society and in the world. Some eminent problems seen as social issues which are currently affecting women in the society, especially in post-conflict situations, need to be addressed, such as issues to do with low self-esteem of women, broken marriages, and the loss of community values and traditional knowledge due to the inability to read and write. The majority of women and girls who lost their chances for formal schooling for any of the above reasons are much more affected compared to their male counterparts. Walker (2007) gave a positive picture about the role of education in post-conflict as he termed it as a basic means which impacts on development as it plays the role of empowering people to become more resourceful and creative, even after some difficult experiences. The U.N. Secretary General (2009) viewed education in pos-conflict situations as a service delivery because it also helps people recover their lost culture and identity through their social activities.

According to what the women reiterated in their discussion in the focus group and individual interviews, there is a great need for adult literacy which is an alternative way of getting more knowledge, especially in reading and writing in both their mother tongue and basic English. This will be the only way of rebuilding women's identities, especially for those who unfortunately lost their chances of going back to school or for those who never attained formal education because they were forced to drop out of school before completing primary education due to conflicts or early marriage. After the experience of abduction, most

women who were abducted ended up with the option of early marriages. This group needs some form of literacy to give them a voice with the skills to become self-reliant in the society.

Based on the critical problems of literacy highlighted throughout this study, there are important skills that vulnerable groups require. The most needed form of education for these women could be an alternative and contextual education that can respond to the needs of vulnerable women and girls in the society. There is a need for an education that focuses on what they outlined in their discussions as a way forward to prepare them to become more innovative and contributing members of the society.

The components of learning the women emphasized most have been education related to everyday life in the community, like a basic form of literacy which gives that ability to read and write in the local language and basic English for communication. Women highlighted the need for skills which could be included in curriculum of adult literacy that could support an individual to function in a constructive way and make a visible contribution in the society.

Viewing the linkage between adult literacy and identity of women in post-conflict situations, especially Northern Uganda, there remains a huge concern in the overall education plan. Women feel their time for going back to school has passed and the society readily supports that through the stereotype mentality about women where the society puts an age limit on education. Both situations increase the vulnerability of women as far as education is concerned.

One of the reasons behind this study was a modest attempt to help women get involved in working to deconstruct the binary discourse created to describe the words *literate* for those who can read and write and *illiterate* for those who cannot read and write. This study confirms that literacy also considers the acquisition of appropriate knowledge which

was developed by previous generations. The study is also meant to encourage women to use their cultural knowledge to help them use learn how to read and write. The curriculum to be used for adult literacy must focus around their daily activities in the society. Meriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2007) recognized that other ways of learning which are non-western need to be given a lot of attention and study based on the fact that education is actually a duplication from Greek culture. Merriam et. al. (2007) continued to highlight the importance of learning for a purpose including teaching a person to have more responsibilities towards the society and neighbors.

To be considered literate, one must demonstrate how existing knowledge can be used and how one can become creative in knowledge production. In the case of participants of this study, the women wanted to learn to read and write in order to reconstruct their identity in the society through their daily activities. There are a lot of non-western perspectives of learning which highlight the purpose of learning as opposed to learning to get knowledge only. The common theme that runs in non-western views of learning is that learning is for a purpose of keeping order and morality in the society as it focuses more on acquiring wisdom that passes from one generation to another. More important still is that at any one point a person can act as a teacher and student throughout life.

Impact of Culture on Identity

Through discussion of the participants, it was eminent that they paid a lot of attention to the way culture influenced them by giving more space and time to proverbs, storytelling, and riddles which do not give them a positive identity in the society. This was a clear indication that culture has a huge impact on their overall identity in the society. This affects how they look at themselves using the indigenous lenses constructed and imposed by a patrilineal society.

The participants did not forget the important roles played by women in their expected

roles and responsibilities of the society. The roles of mothers, aunties, and grandmothers are of paramount importance insofar as passing indigenous knowledge is concerned, especially through singing, dance, drama, and other activities which contribute to the growth of a young person in the society. The discussions of women pointed to their great desire to get some basic and additional knowledge in agriculture, cookery and catering, tailoring, hair dressing, handicraft basket weaving, and pots making. Strengthening programs of adult literacy by bringing in some components of cultural ways of knowing would be vital to help women continue to find a solution to their problems in the society and as a way of validating their indigenous knowledge as well.

Above all, the responses from participants provided a good reflection on reasons that forced them to drop out of education and they did acknowledge some problems with their identity in the society that makes them feel “illiterate,” because of the inability to function effectively in the society as far as reading and writing is concerned with limited communication in a society which has different tribes speaking diverse languages. The only common language still remains English, which is only taught in formal schools. But they did acknowledge the importance of learning to read and write in their local language, then move to basic English.

Implications

To move forward toward a solution, I would suggest that the plan to be put in place has to combine some aspects of indigenous ways of knowing into the curriculum plan for adult literacy. While there has been a lot of emphasis on the different ways indigenous knowledge is passed through proverbs, songs, storytelling, and riddles, most of these means portray women as less significant in the society. There are some proverbs, storytelling, and songs which positively promote women. Unfortunately, they are not easily brought out.

From my own knowledge of Luo culture, I know some proverbs, like “Gwok ma dako

bene mako lee.” This means a female dog can also catch animals. This clearly conveys a message that a woman can perform a task just as a man does. This stress is all about gender equality and not sameness. This same proverb and meaning are echoed by another Luo tribe, the Alur, as “Lavor ma dhako bende mako.” These proverbs that convey positive messages could be used for women in traditional society to positively take part in community affairs. Ojo (2004) advanced a good argument that highlighted the roles women play in the society which are not inferior to that of men. She went on to confirm the strength of women and the sacrifice they make to see their children succeed in education must not be ignored. My own sister made this her political slogan, and it took her to a top political position in the Parliament of Uganda as a legislator. There are a good number of women in Uganda who hold some prominent positions of leadership in the country.

Through the responses from the participants of this study, it was evident that the majority of women who dropped out of school have not been able to go back and enroll for adult literacy classes as education in Uganda is paid for. The women do not have any source of income, but engage in petty income-generating activities which may earn an equivalent of \$2 per day. They preferred to pay tuition for their children to go to school and make sure the family is taken care of. This is a problem which needs some interventions from education planners in order to support women’s education, particularly in post-conflict situations.

Some practical suggestions I would like to make as a pilot project would be to develop a chain of activities to support women to learn and earn while improving on the livelihoods of their families and the society. This suggestion may not be practical country-wide, but it could be a modest attempt in this given context and population of this study in Northern Uganda’s post-conflict situations. They need to be encouraged to bring some in-kind contributions like food stuff and vegetables and fruits from their gardens that could be given some monetary value.

This can be done in dialogue with the women following the bottom-up approach in order to include their voices in the design of the adult literacy program. This will allow them to continue learning without interruptions due to lack of money to pay tuition for themselves. More attractive still, it will give them some income to take home after their work is sold. Another way could be by developing an expansion of the idea of the literacy program by offering a learner an opportunity to engage in income-generating activities as part of literacy. In this way they will be introduced to basic entrepreneurship, account management, business budgeting, and saving skills through sewing of uniforms, basket weaving, hair dressing, and making purses. They can also be taught about leadership roles and confidence building in a patriarchal society. Acknowledging that skills training that helps people become self-reliant needs to be included in the program of literacy, while providing time and a convenient space for mothers with children to drop off their children as they learn. All these suggestions are aimed at breaking the vicious cycle of poverty brought about by “illiteracy,” gender-based violence, and stereotype mentality.

Women’s status in traditional society needs to be given a lot of attention and consideration because the society takes a woman and places her in a socially constructed and disadvantaged position. The roles women play using their indigenous knowledge and wisdom in the society need to be validated and their identity needs to be given a more positive outlook as contributors to the development of humanity. Women need to be given an alternative education that includes tracing the connection between adult literacy and identity of women in the society. This calls for a critical examination of those factors that negatively impact the life of women.

Cultural factors should be closely explored while considering those components that may have some positive impacts on lifelong learning and identity of women, especially looking at some specific reasons for which women would want to learn to read and write.

Kendrick (2004) pointed out the value of identity through letter writing and reading, which pointed to one rationale of women wanting to independently read and write because they must depend on someone to read the content of their personal and private correspondences. This article is a great example of some unexamined reasons connected to personal identity of individuals in their desire to learn to read and write. Most women want to read and write to improve their sense of belonging to their society. To find some solution to this problem, Aikman (2009) suggested the idea of schools accommodating indigenous people's desire of learning and attach it to the main field of education. Critically looking at some of these reasons, it becomes clear that personal fulfillment can be closely linked to adult literacy which calls for more studies to be done to explore the connection as a good number of people learn to read and write for several reasons.

From the overall picture of this study, the majority of women represented by these participants had some very basic experience in formal schooling. They capitalized on that experience as a way forward to participate in activities in the society, but their challenges come when they cannot read and write. It is also clear that the learners want to transform their identity in the society by gaining more knowledge that can support their day-to-day activities, including their petty business, through an adult literacy program. According to Perry and Homan (2014), there were several reasons including personal fulfillment connected to adult literacy, which is also linked to the social activities as some main reasons for studies. This means some of the reasons for wanting to engage in adult literacy could also be personal purposes and identity reconstruction in the society, and this calls for inclusion of learners' goals and interests while planning adult literacy. Friere (1990) supported and emphasized the importance of designing literacy programs to suit the backgrounds, needs, interests, and the contexts where the learning takes place. Whereas Mauruatona and Cervero (2004) in their arguments in finding a link between livelihood and learning, advanced the argument that

learners could be impacted by optimism and pessimism from the society, which came out from some participants as they viewed learning in connection to their daily activities, and this paved the way for planning literacy programs according to the needs of learners.

Promotion of literacy with the components of reading and writing in local language and basic English as an alternative and innovative education program needs to be encouraged for women. The literacy program needs to be specific and contextual in order to address the needs and priorities of women who dropped out of education. In order to accommodate the indigenous people's desires for learning, it will be critical to include cultural ways of knowing in formal school programs. It calls for a constant review while making regular assessment for new aspirations that could emerge from learners resulting from their participation in the literacy program.

Future Research

This study also revealed that learning of adults depends a lot on past experiences and that the chance to learn to read and write contributes greatly to the reconstruction of identity and image of learners in the society. All the responses and reflections call for further research in this area of literacy over time, especially in unique situations of women in post-conflict situations like Northern Uganda. It would be advisable to suggest some studies in the areas of gender-based violence and advocacy, while emphasizing the important roles of women in peace building and security in the society. The experience of women in this area could be different from other women in other parts of the world and this is why contextual adult literacy curriculum would be a possible solution. Afghanistan and Myanmar gave some evidence of the role of women in peace building, though it remained minimal. Corner (2005) highlighted the inclusion of women in peace building, which helped to reduce poverty in the society and revealed the contribution women can make with their indigenous ways of knowing and experiences. As a way forward, there is a great need for education for both

genders about women and women's voices that need to be promoted to empower them to continue seeking gender equality, which will also bridge the gap between policies and practical realities on the ground.

Limitations

This study posed some limitations which I had not predicted. The situation with covid-19 was a threat to continuing with the study because of the multiple lockdowns over a period of time. I had planned to have 15 participants comprised of women in both Gulu and Atiak Basic Schools for Learning. When the government gave a mandate to stop all forms of gatherings and means of transport as way of preventing the spread of covid-19, I clearly knew I could not accomplish as much as I had planned. Luckily enough, I was able to reach out by phone to six women who all reside around the main town of Gulu and very near St. Monica School. I invited them to come, and they readily walked back and forth for the interviews which were always conducted in open air in the shade of trees while strictly wearing masks as a requirement. I realized the number of participants was small and that gave limited participation as well. As most of these women came from Gulu, I could not get the alternative view from the women who would come from rural villages.

Another limitation to this study came about as I found little related literature which are mostly from Euro-American background and are less inclusive of other cultural ways of knowing and backgrounds, especially from African oral indigenous knowledge.

The greatest limitation, however, was conducting interviews in the local language, even though the language was not foreign to me. Thinking and reasoning always in foreign English did not help me very much as I realized when some expressions were translated in English from the local language I could not bring out as clear and attractive of a meaning. At this point I discovered my mind was not fully decolonized as I spent several years in the same system which uses the language of power for education and as a media of communication.

This explains the dynamics between the cultural ways of knowing and the type of education which was brought by the colonialists as the only valid knowledge, which does not match the meanings that come from local languages. Transcribing in English was even more taxing because I tried to make sense from translating interviews from the local language and it took a lot of time. Apart from this I struggled to let this translation be accessible and understandable to a bigger audience, but it does not remove the fact that I personally reasoned and wrote with the background of the local language still, as English is not my mother tongue. I knew this would create some problems with the accuracy of the interviews. But I courageously think part of my study is to be able to invite the world to put on new lenses that can allow them to understand the diversity of culture and the different ways of knowing.

In conclusion, this study was very important to me personally because it responds to what I hope can be done by many women in Northern Uganda and in the world. I still feel something can be done to encourage ongoing learning, especially for women. Through this study I have been able to see a lot of obstacles that can get in the way of education for women because of their gender roles, and as I went through the journey of my own learning, I learned that lifelong learning is a process which has no beginning or end.

More important still. I personally learned to value the knowledge every learner brings along, to prove that they do not come empty but loaded with knowledge which needs to be given recognition as a starting point of learning any new thing. This lesson can be useful for any educational planner. With all this in mind, I plan to encourage my adult learners to read the world as they learn to read the word, because this will give them the clarity of lifelong learning at any stage in life. My next plan is to work closely with those partners that are willing to continue to design and evaluate the literacy program already started to tailor it to meet the needs, wants and desire of learners.

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Appendix A

Individual Interviews

PENY PI NGAT ACEL-ACEL (Individuals)

1. Can you tell me your name and talk about your life as a woman and your education level before joining the literacy program?

Itwero nyuta nyingi, ka i lok i kum kwo meri calo dako (Acoli), rwom me kwanni ma pud pe I donyo ka kwano kwan me ngeyo piny man?

In kinyomi?

Possible prompts: Are you married? Tell me about your children?

Tit ira lok i kum lutino-ni?

2. Talk about your education level and your life experiences before and after joining the literacy program? I will encourage her to continue talking.

Wacaa lok ma cegu-cegu i kum rwom me kwanni ki ngec me kwo-ni ma pud pe I donyo i kwan me ngeyo piny man ki ingeye. (Abitego cwinye me mede ki lok.)

3. How do you feel about yourself generally as a woman in your community? What are some of your experiences during the time of learning? What is your perception of your place in the community and the role of learning in this perception? How do you think people in the society perceive you?

I winyo nining ma calo in dako i bedo man ma i kwo iye-ni? Ngecci mukene I kum kwo-ni I kare me kwan man tye nining? Neno-ni kono tye ningoni kum kabedo ma I itye ka kwo inye-ni,ki ber pa kwan-ni man I kabedo man? I tamo ni dano Waco-ni ngo I kumi?

4. Talk about the artefact you have brought from school. If she does not come up with how she feels I'll give a prompting question.

**Lok kong ma nok-nok I kum jami man ma I kelo ki I gang kwan-ni(k ape en
twerro tito kit ma ewinyo kwede,ci abimiye lapeny mogo me konye:**

5. How does that make you feel about yourself?

Jami magi konyi nining I kit ma inenne kwedde keni-keni?

At the end of the interview, I will offer her several items from which she can choose to participate, including focus group, storytelling, circle discussions, and ask her to tell me which one is best. I will also ask her to think about cultural stories and proverbs or songs and dances that help her be an Acholi woman.

**I agikki me peny man abimiye kare ma lac me yero I dul mo acel me book lok
ma mako kwo-gi ki nyamo tam iye, abilege bene me tito ira odo-do mene ma ber
loyo mukenne-ni. A bipenye bene me miyo tam I kum lok me tekwaro mene ki
carol ok mene nyo wer ki myel mene ma konye bedo dako Acoli.**

She could also bring cultural artifacts.

Itwerro kelo bene gin acweya mo me tekwaro.

Focus Group Interviews

1. Tell me about some activities in your culture which were used for passing knowledge from one generation to another. Who was responsible for passing knowledge? How did they do that?

Tit ira jami mogo ma kitiyo kwede me pwonyo dano. Angaa-gi ma tic-gi aye me kobo ngec i tekero Acoli? Gin onongo gitimo nining?

2. Think about the stories or songs or dances or proverbs that you learned while growing up in your culture. Which ones taught you to be who you are as an Acholi woman and can be helpful to other women?

Tam I kum odo-odo,wer,myel onyo carolok ma ipwonyo I kare ma I tye ka donyo I kit me tekwaro, mene ma dong opwonyi me doko ngat ma in tin-nii ma calo dako Acoli, ma bene kwo-ne twero konyo mon mukenne?

3. Do you know any proverb or songs that would discourage women from learning?

Ingeyo carolok onyo wer mogo ma twero miyo nyal kum I kwan bot mon?

Why?

Pingo?

4. Are there stories or proverbs in Acholi culture that may not be helpful for women or may hinder/discourage your learning process?

What are they?

Gin mene?

5. What cultural activities would you want to be included in a literacy program to help women learn?

Kit tic tekwaro mene ma imito ni kiket i yub me pwonye me konyo mon?

6. What aspects of your culture could we put aside either get in the way of perceiving things?

Kit tic tekwaro(Acoli) mene ma omyero waket cen wek waniang lok maber?

7. Did anyone bring anything else to share? How does it demonstrate who you are as an Acholi woman and learner?

Ngat mo gwok okelo gin mo me ariba ki luwote? Gin meno dong nyutu in nining ma calo nya acoli ki lakwan?

I may call you again for another meeting to listen to the recording and compare with the translation from Acholi to English. In this way you will be given the chance to make some corrections as well.

Aromo lwongo wu doki me bino ii ka winyo kit ma kwed man woto kwede I leb

Acoli kadong giloko odoko I leb munu. Ka iwinyo gin mo ma pe rwate ki tami kuno nyo tam pa ngati mo keken, iromo tingo kare man mi loko wek onyag dhano weng.

Thank you for sharing your stories, proverbs, and all the cultural practices. Does anyone in the group have anything else to share or to say?

Apwoyo wun weng pi tingo kare man me rwate kweda dok me loko pi kwo ma meg, dok me loko pi ododo tekwaro Acoli.