The Fluidity of Patriarchy: Kinship, Tradition and the Prevention of Gendered Violence in Lugbaraland, Uganda

Jeroen Lorista, Mercy T. Mbabazi and Eileen Moyera

ABSTRACT
In a context of rapid social change in post-conflict West Nile, Uganda, internationally funded non-governmental organisations and the state have joined efforts to reduce gender-based violence (GBV) amongst Lugbara people. That women rarely report GBV is often interpreted as an indicator that such interventions are failing because of flawed design or cultural recalcitrance. Seeking to understand women’s infrequent reporting of GBV, our research explored the relationship between a GBV intervention and local patriarchal modes of power. Focusing on ‘traditional’ modes of handling domestic violence cases, we argue that this biopolitical sphere provides a site for the reassertion of patriarchy in unexpected ways. To circumvent GBV interventions that threaten patriarchal norms male clan leaders reinvent kinship traditions. Using this case, we build upon Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s influential ‘invention of tradition’ frame to advance theoretical understandings of the fluidity of patriarchy. The men and women who participated in our research understood domestic violence as best handled through male-controlled kinship structures that centred on bride price and land rights. Our findings provide grounds for rethinking theories of patriarchy and offer insights for anti-GBV programmes that generally privilege police and legal involvement, envisage patriarchy as fixed, and focus on the nuclear household.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 April 2021
Accepted 12 July 2022

KEYWORDS
Uganda; patriarchy; masculinities; gender based violence; kinship; tradition; domestic violence

Introducing ‘aruba’ as a gendered kinship practice

It is hot outside the health clinic, where a shade has been erected to provide some relief to those seated in the plastic chairs arranged underneath. A boda-boda (motorbike taxi) pulls up, conveying a grey-haired septuagenarian. He and his fellow cultural leaders have been invited by UGH (pseudonym for a local non-governmental organisation (NGO)) to attend a meeting in the rural Ugandan town of Arua. Also present are about fifteen other stakeholders, including representatives from the police, to discuss the involvement of men and
boys in a programme to prevent gender-based violence (GBV). UGH is spearheading the intervention with financial and expert support from international organisations based in the Netherlands and South Africa. The Dutch organisation being the funder and the South African NGO providing training, capacity building and oversight. The Dutch lead author, Jeroen, and his Ugandan research assistant and collaborator, Mercy, are also there, as part of Jeroen’s ethnographic PhD research and to represent the Dutch organisation.

Following formalities and introductions, and having asked some general questions about GBV, the septuagenarian declared:

*Aruba means to tie your husband to prison. Translated from Lugbara, ‘aru’ means prison, and ‘ba’ means rope. So, you tie your spouse to prison.*

Because he is pointedly speaking in English, the authors presume the statement is meant for Jeroen, the only non-Ugandan present. He continues at a slow pace, despite the other leaders and government representatives becoming visibly impatient, perhaps because his statement might challenge the funding organisation’s ideas about the best way to respond to GBV:

*This is when you get a misunderstanding and when you report your husband to police. Then the children get sick or the wife gets sick. The aruba was not there when I was young. It was only there when I was older.*

Eventually, we came to understand the practice of *aruba* as a relatively new kinship practice intended to regulate violence between married men and women. Most likely, the cultural leader sought to help us, as researchers, understand why many Lugbara women were not reporting domestic violence to the Ugandan police or its Child and Family Protection Unit, which had been strengthened and promoted by UGH with support from the Dutch-funded development programme for which Jeroen works. A range of Lugbara interlocutors, including women, men, elders, and a Lugbara translator, similarly explained, over the course of our fieldwork, that *aruba* invokes the ghost or spirit of the deceased father of the male clan leader. When a wife reports domestic violence to the police, it is often seen as a transgression of an implicit but widely shared kinship norm, opening the woman’s children up to sickness or even death. To lift the curse, the wife’s clan must respond with an offering to appease the male ancestor spirit of the husband’s patrilineal clan.

Here it is important to understand that after marriage a woman is no longer considered the financial responsibility of her birth clan because she joins her husband’s extended family once dowry (cattle or money) has been paid. When a woman reports domestic violence to the police or an NGO, it threatens not only harmony and social cohesion but also patriarchal hierarchies, although the latter is rarely explicitly mentioned. To mend this situation, the wife’s birth clan can offer a sheep or goat for sacrifice at the husband’s patrilineal clan’s ancestral shrine, thereby appeasing the male ancestor spirit, lifting the curse, and restoring inter-clan harmony. The presumption is that the families of the married couple will also counsel them with the aim of bringing an end to domestic violence. However, in many cases, women are counselled to endure their husbands’ beatings and to pray that the men will change, or to be obedient so as not to incite further anger. Although men are normally counselled by male elders to not seriously harm their wives, some degree of violence is often considered acceptable.

Following Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), whose theory we elaborate below, we conceptualise *aruba* as a recent kinship tradition, primarily instigated by older
men, that was ‘invented’ in the last couple of decades, in order to maintain patriarchal authority and counter state and NGO efforts to promote gender equality and land rights for women and girls. While states and NGOs often envisage patriarchy as a static and fixed structure to be battled, our case shows that patriarchal structures respond fluidly and dynamically in the face of external threats.

Like many in the world of international development and beyond, we started out asking why women were not reporting GBV\textsuperscript{1} to state authorities despite intensive efforts by state and NGO sectors to transform gender norms and diminish domestic violence. After our initial inquiries, we reframed our questions to investigate the entwinement of existing kinship and gender norms, as well as the fluid ways patriarchy is reasserted through these processes to counter state and NGO efforts to change gender norms and practices.

Drawing on the work of Janet Carsten (2004), we seek to shed light on how gender norms and practices relate to kinship practices, and to consider kin networks as a possible avenue for future work on gender. Using a practice theory framework, Carsten (2004, 82) attempts to bridge the structure/agency divide within post-structuralist approaches in anthropology, in order to see kinship as relatedness, or how ‘people create similarity or difference between themselves and others.’ She reminds us that both kinship and gender are social constructs and thus intersectional with other vectors of inequality like class and race, all within salient historical contexts.

Much of the work to understand patriarchy and gender-based violence in the social sciences (Brown 2006; Bryson 2007; Walby 1989) and within the international development domain (MenEngage 2014, 2019) operates under the assumption that patriarchy exists and must be challenged. This is the case in the intervention analysed here, a collaboration of a Dutch funding NGO, a South African regional coordinating NGO, and a Ugandan implementing NGO, all of which are active members of the MenEngage Alliance, made up of more than six hundred member NGOs around the world. Such understandings of patriarchy presume a certain degree of fixity, that patriarchy is one thing, undergirded by structures, systems, laws, and traditions. Our ethnographic evidence, however, demonstrates that traditions are rarely static, especially when confronted by intensive social change.

**Theoretical framework: Gender, kinship and patriarchal violence in the household**

Kinship is intricately interwoven with gender norms and practices. What it means to be a mother or a father, daughter or son, sister or brother, parent or in-law is largely worked out within extended family and clan arrangements in Lugbaraland, as it is in much of the world. The enactment of these roles, following gendered scripts and patriarchal power relations, helps to (re)produce both gender norms and kinship relations. Prior to the 1980s, social theorists had predominantly conceptualised patriarchy as universal, transhistorical, and transcultural. In the 1980s, scholars like Sylvia Walby (1986, 1989) and Malcolm Waters (1989) used dual-systems theory to make sense of patriarchy, that is, by envisaging and analysing the two semi-autonomous structures of patriarchy and capitalism. Building on post-structuralist scholarship, feminist theorists including Raewyn Connell (1987) and Joan Acker (1989) convincingly challenged this static view of masculinity and patriarchy, critiquing it as essentialising and male centred. They argued that gender and class intersect, resulting in diverse, plural, and relational
masculinities and patriarchies, a position that echoed critical race theorists who were advancing the concept of intersectionality to account for the interplay of gender, class, and race in shaping positionalities (Crenshaw 1989).

More recently, David Buchbinder (2013) has utilised a material-semiotic approach to circumvent dualistic theoretical frames. Working to revitalise the concept of patriarchy, Buchbinder (2013, 105) writes:

The patriarchal order and [political] economy, then, do not always take the same shape, employ the same strategies, or (besides ensuring the ascendancy of men over women) serve the same functions. By adapting to changing historical and social conditions, patriarchy seeks to guarantee its own survival.

Interestingly, this formulation reifies patriarchy as if it has agency itself, instead of it being constructed through the practices of powerful men. Following Buchbinder, our case study provides an empirical example of how patriarchy adapts to a particular historical context. Informed by Africanist theories on the plasticity of tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), we offer the concept of fluid patriarchy as a lens for exploring social practices that contribute to the submission of women in Lugbaraland. Fluid patriarchy helps us to understand how particular historical, geographic, and social contexts incite and allow powerful men to (re)invent traditions within dynamic gendered kinship processes to maintain male dominance within emerging governance structures.

Carsten similarly argues that static conceptions of kinship, as have been employed in both the social sciences and NGO and state interventions, are insufficient to account for complexity, fluidity, and flux (Carsten 2004, 189). Invented tradition, a concept that pits the dynamism of invention against the presumed stability of tradition, offers a frame for understanding interactions between patriarchy and kinship (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Drawing on historical and ethnographic research in Europe and Africa, Hobsbawm and Ranger argue that social institutions presented as timeless and unchangeable are in fact more dynamic than cultural narratives usually allow for. ‘Invented’ for them does not imply that a tradition is false, but refers to the socially constructed quality of all cultural practices, including those presented as rooted in the past even when there is ample evidence to the contrary. This theoretical framework recognises the enormous normative, ideological, and political power entwined in traditionalist narratives, as well as what is gained through dehistoricisation.

Ranger’s work (1983) was inspired by Clyde Mitchell’s (1956) colonial-era research in what is now Zambia. Mitchell documented the emergence of performative dance styles in colonial towns where African laborers of diverse ethnic backgrounds often gathered in their free time. His work highlights how significant social change, such as colonial rule, may lead to anxieties about shifting identities and power hierarchies that challenge social cohesion. In such contexts, powerful men may rely on traditionalist claims, adapting or (re)inventing traditions, to reinforce their power.

Combining these theoretical premises helps us to see that aruba and ancestor invocation in Lugbaraland use traditionalist narratives to simultaneously justify and conceal gender, generational, and kinship norms. In the name of promoting social order, patriarchal clan leaders solidify their social control. Invocation practices produce patriarchal power because they rely on male elders to interpret ambiguous rules. Male elders give invocation its social legitimacy, and in so doing reinforce their own legitimacy. Aruba and attendant practices of invocation reinforce power relations and hierarchies within
the clan, leading to the internalisation of fluid kinship rules and the creation of contemporary Lugbara identities. The aim is to maintain social cohesion and restore kinship harmony to counter the threat of women filing domestic violence claims with state and NGO authorities, sidestepping clan-based power structures.

**Methods**

In this study, we examined how gender norms and practices were shaped by donor-funded GBV-prevention programmes developed in the Netherlands and implemented in Uganda, funded by a Dutch NGO focused on gender-related interventions in the Global South. We conducted ethnographic research at three field sites: the headquarters of the Dutch NGO, at one of its NGO partners’ offices in Kampala, and at the NGO partner’s clinic in Arua, in the West Nile subregion. Jeroen was working for the Dutch NGO at the time of research and had permission from the organisation to collect ethnographic material for his PhD while doing site visits. This meant that Jeroen was often wearing two hats while conducting research, a complicated positionality that offered both disadvantages and advantages and required constant critical reflection on which social markers were salient and how it might affect analysis. Kirin Narayan described this more succinctly when she writes:

> every anthropologist exhibits [...] a ‘multiplex subjectivity.’ [...] Which facet of our subjectivity we choose or are forced to accept as a defining identity can change, depending on the context and the prevailing vectors of power (Narayan 1993, 676).

As such, within this multi-sited ethnography the authors continuously reflected on the influence of possible biases and whether observations were ‘personal or culture specific’ (Cerroni-Long 1995, 11).

In addition we also conducted a content analysis of training tools, programmes, and policy documents primarily developed by the Dutch NGO, albeit with some input from its Global South partners. These documents, which contain (Dutch) normative ideas about gendered violence, masculinity, and patriarchy, were used to guide GBV interventions and workshops in Uganda, including those discussed in this article.

In February to March 2018, Jeroen and Mercy conducted six focus group discussions (FGDs) with different target groups of the GBV prevention programme. The first two focus group discussions were held with a group of women and a group of men (leaders) of the Chunga Meno support group. The third FGD focussed was held with a group of men who participated in the GBV programme. The fourth and fifth FGDs were conducted with women peer educators and a group of male peer educators. The final FGD was held with the Lugbara elders mentioned at the start of this article. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three NGO staff members, two peer educators, community leaders, a teacher, health workers and a police officer. Four follow-up interviews were conducted online in May and June 2020 with clinic staff and volunteers. Jeroen collected ethnographic data at the three field sites; organised, coded, and analysed the data; and drafted the article. Eileen Moyer, third author, and Mercy provided feedback on content and theory to Jeroen in an iterative process of revision. Eileen helped to solidify theoretical arguments and brought out contextual details that were unclear. Mercy and the Lugbara translator with whom we worked were also consulted to clarify contextual details and to contribute to the interpretative analysis.
Interviews and FGDs were recorded with the participants’ written consent and were transcribed. Interviews and responses were translated by Ejua (a pseudonym), a Lugbara speaker who assisted with data collection in Arua while also serving as a project officer within the GBV programme we were studying. Similar to Jeroen, Ejua’s positionality was made complex by his dual role. Transcripts were coded for analysis in NVivo 12. We received ethical clearance from the Makerere School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology to conduct the research in Uganda.

As relative outsiders in Lugbaraland, we relied on our interlocutors to explain Lugbara symbolic and kinship systems to us. Ejua, being fluent in Lugbara and a native of the region, helped to clarify many concepts. As is common in ethnographic practice, we began with questioning how the basic concepts of our research might be translated to fit the local context and, conversely, how local understandings might help us to refine our approach. Such iterative endeavours are always complicated by defining ‘the local’, but in our case, this was made even more difficult by the interesting mix of NGO, government, Lugbara, and Mukiga (Mercy’s ethnic group) ideations and practices we encountered. All seemed to have different understandings of ‘violence’, ‘the family unit’ and how ‘justice’ should be meted out, as well as how social order might be restored. Ejua was best able to navigate the competing epistemic and justice systems involved, most likely because he also worked as a project officer for UGH’s GBV-prevention programme and had some understanding of what was at stake for the Dutch researcher.

Attempts at governing Lugbaraland

Lugbaraland is situated in what is today known as the West Nile subdistrict of Uganda, bordered by the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. Lugbara group identity is thought to have been first conceptualised around 1850, with the arrival of Arab slavers and white ivory hunters (Leopold 2005, 129). Arab traders, white hunters, and Belgian colonialists moving through the area grouped together a variety of dispersed family units that shared the geographic region currently occupying the borderlands of Democratic Republic of Congo, the West Nile subdistrict of Uganda, and parts of what is now South Sudan. This diverse group of loosely affiliated peoples did not have a central form of governance recognisable to outsiders (Middleton 2002, 99). The absence of chiefs or any other centralised authority made it difficult for colonialists or traders to strike deals or establish indirect rule.

After a short period of Belgian rule, the British attempted to govern the region as part of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudanese Condominium, which began in 1899. In 1914, the British took over officially from the Belgians, but their attempt to incorporate West Nile into the Uganda Protectorate was resisted through the so-called Yakan or Allah Water Cult uprising. Following several turbulent years, the British gradually appointed county chiefs and subchiefs. Initially, uneducated Lugbaraland elders were appointed, but in the 1950s–60s these became educated, paid administrators without Lugbara kinship ties, supported by often unpaid, lower-ranking Lugbara parish chiefs and headmen (Middleton 1999). These appointed administrators generally came from southern Uganda, specifically the hegemonic Nyoro and Ganda ethnic groups, who were responsible for taxes and extractive male labour to be employed in the south.
In the postcolonial period, the Lugbara came to be seen as ‘Amin’s people’ because the mother of Idi Amin, the head of the military who would lead a coup in 1971, was Lugbara. This association led to the persecution of Lugbara during the Tanzania-Uganda war by the joint Uganda National Liberation Army and Tanzania People’s Defence Force. The subsequent armed conflict, which started around 1986, between the Ugandan state’s National Resistance Army and various defence groups ended in 2002, when a peace treaty was eventually signed. The treaty marked the first time in the history of West Nile that the formal administrative and juridical ‘machines’ of the state were able to access the remote parts of the region beyond Arua town (Bogner & Neubert 2013, 67–68).

As one of the largest military powers in this volatile region, the Ugandan state is seen by international NGOs and UN agencies as a key player in maintaining stability and protecting geopolitical and economic interests. Although fluctuating, financial aid from international agencies, mainly US and European, has equalled about half of Uganda’s national budget since the conflicts in the North ended (Glennie 2008, 99). With so much at stake, it is in the Ugandan state’s interest to position themselves as regional peacekeepers and allies in the so-called Global War on Terror.

Since 2000, a wide array of international and bilateral donors and NGOs has been involved in governance efforts focused on ‘disarmament, demobilisation, reinsertion and reintegration’ activities in West Nile (Finnegan & Flew 2008, 1). These include the World Bank, the US, the European Commission, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom (Finnegan & Flew 2008, 1). More recent conflicts in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan have reversed the flow of refugees, with Uganda receiving refugees in camps in the north. Fuelled by reports of sexual abuse and gender-based violence in these refugee camps, NGOs such as Care International and TPO Uganda, coordinated by the UN, started interventions to tackle such violence and improve sexual and reproductive health (UNHCR 2018).

Mark Leopold (2005, 39), writing about how development agencies have shaped the region, explains that ‘the impact of the agencies, of which they seem largely unaware, affected every aspect of the local economy and society. From basic infrastructure to the formal and informal economy of the town market.’ Attempts to govern the region through development – whether by NGOs or the Ugandan state – make even more sense given that the Lugbara have, since colonial times, been constructed and imagined by outsiders, colonial powers, and the dominant ethnic groups of Uganda as inherently violent, good only for soldiering or as labour reserve (Leopold 2005). This enduring stereotype partially explains Lugbara’s peripheral status in Ugandan national politics.

Findings

As mentioned above, Ejua was key in helping us to understand the tradition of ancestor invocation and its entanglement with patriarchy, and how these practices shaped local responses to government/NGO interventions to address domestic violence. Our findings are a result of our iterative interactions with him and those who participated in focus group discussions, including members of a women’s empowerment group and three groups of men that were the ‘target’ of the GBV interventions. We first detail our
observations and findings collected during GBV trainings and then describe the discussions held with the different programme beneficiaries.

**Gender-based violence prevention training**

In July 2017, 50 government employed service providers (ten police officers, five prison officers, 23 health workers and twelve community development officers) attended a violence prevention training. The first day started off sunny, and everyone seemed energised and happy to be invited by the NGO to attend the ‘GBV prevention and service integration training’ at one of the more upmarket hotels in Arua town. Mercy, who also acted as rapporteur and co-facilitator for the NGO, noticed a gender divide among attendees: most attending police officers were men, and most health and community workers were women. The NGO had done its best to be ‘gender sensitive’ by aiming for an equal amount of male and female participants, but in the end more women (29) than men (21) participated. Each was reimbursed for travel expenses and received a per diem. Participants expressed that they were happy to eat something besides posho, a maize-based porridge that is Uganda’s staple food. The training started on a joyful note, as for most it was a kind of reunion with old friends, extended family, and other acquaintances within the close-knit community of Arua.

The training was designed to counteract ‘traditional’ modes of thinking that participants were assumed by the NGO to have internalised regarding gender and sexuality, parenting, the law, family planning, life skills, and GBV management. Pre- and post-questionnaires conducted to assess participants’ change in attitudes towards gender equality posed statements like ‘a partner must be of the opposite sex’, to which participants could strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Such questions could be perceived as either progressive or a threat to patriarchal powers and kinship relations, depending on the audience and perspective. For example, the survey statement ‘the head of the family is both parents – as a team’ was met with cynical jokes and laughter, especially by the male police and prison officers. The statement ‘a woman is more of a woman when she has had children’ initiated a heated argument over whether women who are thought to be infertile should be chased away from marriages, as has been the norm. Senior men argued that men should have the authority to marry a second (or third) wife to ensure children, and expressed a strong preference for boys, as they inherit land and their future position within the clan. When the facilitator tried to argue that infertility may not be a woman’s fault, but the result of a man’s sperm quality, the majority of participants, women and men alike, seemed unconvinced.

At the start of the five-day training, the concepts of gender and sexuality were shared (gender is social and sex biological) and the mood was still relatively light, but attention dropped drastically when the government’s anti-GBV laws were shared. Later on in the week, when acts of violence were recounted, the group’s mood became serious. A mix of responses were apparent during the so-called Father’s Legacy exercise that asked participants to reflect on their history and relationship with their fathers, which opened up emotional wounds of violence, abandonment, alcoholism, and (emotional) neglect, as well as memories of joy, care, and moral guidance. Most of the women visibly empathised in frustration with the common experience that fathers often did not want their daughters to attend school. The NGO’s aim with this exercise was to ‘sensitise’ the men present into
becoming more involved fathers and more caring and less violent partners. Mercy observed that, overall, it seemed harder for men to share personal experiences than for women, but all agreed in the evaluation of the training that they most enjoyed the Father’s Legacy exercise because they liked learning the personal stories of the ‘opposite sex.’

At the end of the training, the non-Lugbara-speaking NGO trainers shared strategies to prevent and end GBV. Participants were urged to make use of local councillors (LC1s), who are the lowest level (unpaid) local government officials in the community. Participants, all government employees themselves, seemed largely in agreement that LC1s, predominantly older men, are the first to ‘learn about these crimes, because they are within the area’, as one person put it, and thus closest to the community. LC1s, participants were told, are expected to ‘refer cases to police for prosecution.’

In what international GBV lingo calls a ‘bystander approach’, participants were then told that witnesses should be urged to keep or preserve evidence and ‘rush to the nearest police station to report the case.’ Health workers were conflicted when the trainer stressed that bystanders should assist the victim to get a medical examination and treatment, as well as refer the victim to any place where ‘she or he can get legal aid.’ Some participants felt uncomfortable about collecting legal evidence in sexual violence cases and reporting them to the police. During a tea break, a woman health worker explained: ‘I am scared to go to the police [because] they ask too many questions in court. In the end perpetrators bribe the police, they go free, there is no justice, or even revenge.’

As a training based on ideas about human rights, the non-Lugbara facilitators also stressed land rights for women and girls. Women’s formal right to land was enshrined in the 1995 constitution and further reinforced through the 1998 Land Act, which dictates automatic co-ownership of spousal land including agricultural land (Night 2016, 33). Despite this principle being reiterated in the 2013 Land Policy, in practice an estimated 75 percent of Ugandan land is still held under customary law, meaning that it is held by men (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2020).

Reflecting on her role as a co-facilitator of the training, Mercy said that she thought that many of the hand-outs and copies of the training material would only be used to light charcoal stoves. She cynically explained, ‘The post-test always shows that attitudes have transformed, but I think they do it to impress us, the facilitators. I doubt that when they go home, they practice gender equality. Of course, it may not be all of them, but some.’

The women beneficiaries

Our focus group discussion with the women’s empowerment group, organised by the NGO, was received with dancing and clapping, and started with a formal reception by the group’s woman chairperson and residential quarter’s LC1 chairman. During the informal discussions we learnt something that we should probably already have known: in the patrilineal kinship system of the Lugbara, children belong to the father’s family system. The first reason many women gave for enduring violence or abuse was the fear of losing their children in the event of a failed marriage, expressed in statements like this one: ‘the children are [our] priority, and we don’t want to lose them.’
The women’s empowerment group called itself ‘Chunga Meno’, which our interlocutors said means ‘to protect our teeth’ in Swahili (literally, to clean our teeth). We later learnt from a UGH employee that, even though Swahili is spoken in the region, it is disfavoured because the Tanzanian soldiers who came to oust Amin from power, and committed war crimes, spoke Swahili. Perhaps this partially explains why the women’s group ascribed a meaning to these words that differed from standard Swahili: to protect, rather than to clean. Their interpretation seemed fitting though, if sadly ironic, because several of the participating women had lost teeth as a consequence of domestic violence.

Chunga Meno was founded in 2013 as a women’s empowerment group; during our fieldwork, it comprised around thirty women and a smaller, varying number of mostly senior men, like the government-appointed LC1. Men had first joined the group in 2015, after the NGO had encouraged the group to engage men in achieving gender equality and ending violence in the household. Most women were or had been married with children and most had experienced some form of domestic violence. Though diverse in age, the majority of women were older than 35, and the elder women were more vocal. What they all had in common was their relative poverty and low level of formal educational, though the leader of the group had worked as a teacher.

As we were interested in understanding gender dynamics within Lugbara kinship arrangements, we started the discussion by asking what it meant to be a ‘good wife.’ In the discussion that ensued common themes emerged: tilling the land for agricultural production, everyday caring for young children, and cooking and cleaning. A younger woman summarised this responsibility for the domestic sphere and how this norm is policed, when she stated: ‘In Lugbara, to earn respect as a woman you should be having a home with a husband and children, so once you leave [your husband’s home in a quarrel] society never gives you any respect.’

As the discussion gradually moved to the topic of violence, the research assistant and the first author, mediated by Ejua, asked if the group could explain aruba to us. The chairperson began: ‘In Lugbara culture, it is believed that once a couple gets into a misunderstanding, their conflicts should be resolved on a family or clan level, and not reported to police.’ This was followed by a narrative we had by then become familiar with, that when someone ‘reports to the police they are likely to experience bad luck or misfortune, for instance their children can get sick or die; so it is considered a curse [aruba] to report your husband or wife to the police.’ When asked how women who experience intimate partner violence might go about ending a marriage, the most vocal member explained: ‘When a woman runs away, men usually follow us to our homes [the wives’ father’s family unit] for reconciliation, when we leave after a misunderstanding. Our parents, however, encourage us to be strong and carry our burden, called itisiko, which is like a load on the head, so after resolving the conflicts we usually go back to our husbands. To avoid shame from society you cannot leave your marriage.’ We later learnt from the men engagement group that women most often return after the husband’s family has paid a cow as a penalty for his violence, after mediation by male elders.

Other reasons why women preferred to deal with violence within kinship relations included fear of additional violence, as well as the shame and stigma attached to violence. One woman who had experienced violence offered, ‘He would rather kill me than let me leave my home.’ The elderly chairperson of the group further elaborated that when a woman wants a divorce, in addition to being shamed, she will be ostracised socially
and economically. A younger woman added, ‘Even your own parents do not value when you leave a marriage because they feel insecure that your husband’s family might come to demand their dowry back.’ In Lugbara customary practice, after divorce both the bride price (on average seven cows less one for every child born) and the children remain with the patrilineal clan. Bride wealth is often circulated within the family unit of the wife to enable the marriage of her brothers, increasing social pressure on women to stay in abusive marriages.

The engaged men

During our interactions with the Chunga Meno women, we also interviewed several men who had joined the group. The international NGOs’ strategy to engage male community leaders in addressing GBV was to urge UGH to invite senior community leaders to join the women’s empowerment group. The participation of five senior men during the focus group seemed staged, and during what felt like a round of introductions at a formal meeting, the men only hesitantly shared their roles in the community, including LC1, parish chief, and subcounty council chairperson. Two of the men who attended introduced themselves simply as community leaders. After a while the men, aided by Ejua, who clearly knew the men well, felt more at ease and the discussion gradually flowed into a dialogue on men’s responsibilities as head of household, which all five agreed included being the breadwinner, landowner, and intermediary and guardian of kinship harmony and ancestral authority. When we asked the men about aruba, the LC1 responded:

_Culturally, when you beat your wife, if she lost a tooth in a fight, then the family [of the husband] pays a cow [to the wife’s family]. This was the way to stop violence in the household. At that time [before government/NGO intervention], aruba did not exist._

The parish chief, possibly sensing some incomprehension in Jeroen tried to clarify the link to bride price payment and inter-clan relations:

_In case of a beating, first the family sits. The brothers [male clan leaders of the husband’s side of the family] discuss and counsel the man. If violence continues at the second stage, they talk to the other family. His side pays goats; if he continues, then relatives of the woman will take the woman and demand that the family of the man pays a cow, then the woman returns and there is harmony. In case of a divorce, then the animals [bride price] are returned, if you [the wife] have produced offspring only a few cows are returned._

The other two groups of men we interacted with (the programme participants and the peer educators) further explained that certain degrees of violence were socially acceptable. The most senior man and leader of the peer educators’ group stated that if a wife goes to a bar, gossips, refuses sex, or drinks alcohol, a limited amount of violence is socially accepted. ‘When a woman cheats on you, you pick a stick, actually. The violence is acceptable, when a woman is cheating on you, you can give her a slap. But it ends there!’

When we asked the group when people consider the violence to be too much and at what point they might involve the male clan leaders, his response was: ‘If you beat [a woman] until her teeth come out, or you break a bone, maybe you damage an eye, if it is very serious, that violence is not accepted. Then you are taken to the elders, then you also have to pay something.’ One of his junior peers elaborated, ‘When the
damage was too much, when there was bleeding, then you paid, to compensate the blood. They call it “harerama.” If blood comes, then they [the family of the husband] pay a goat, but when you break a bone or you remove the teeth, now you pay a cow. The animal is not slaughtered [as is done when an ancestral curse needs lifting, like with aruba]. The family of the man has to give to the family of the wife. From there the husband and wife will be counselled very much, and the violence will end.’

When Ejua asked what happens if the violence continues after such ‘payment’ between the clans, the most senior peer educator continued: ‘If violence happens, they take it to the elders because if you take it to the police, that would be aruba. So what they will do, they will take it to the elders’. Perhaps sensing that aruba is something the violence prevention programme would want to address he added: ‘That is the reason aruba is still there, because the elders are there.’ We then asked at what stage both families become involved, and the peer educators explained that the male elders were first consulted. One told us, ‘If you see that you can manage that violence, you keep it inside, you discuss how you handle this situation [by including the male elders of your own family]. But when it is beyond, you engage both families, the family of the man, the family of the women, you bring them together. To see how to solve this.’

Trying to better grasp the concept and practice of aruba we had an online follow-up interview with Ejua in which he further explained the entanglement of tradition with kinship and patriarchy in the face of attempts by the state and NGOs to reduce GBV:

The LC1 and police can be bribed, but for these aruba issues, bribing is not an issue [a bribe has no effect]. The women don’t have confidence that “if I run to the LC1 I will be helped.” The LC1 also pays homage to their culture and also is an implementer of aruba. So again the best advice she will get from the LC1 is “Did you talk to your [the husband’s] brothers? Have you talked to the elders? Have you addressed this?” So there cannot be any disciplinary action if she did not talk to the brothers of the husband. This prevents the woman from reporting the issue, it makes her very afraid and she feels that “On this side I am not helped: if I go to police, they will ask me the same question.” If he [the husband] comes out of a cell after he has been arrested, it is really bad, they will have a lot of fights inside. And also the society does not support her, and will blame her for taking her husband to the cells.

More on land rights and bride price

Before our visit to the Chunga Meno group, where we also met with the men that had joined the group, we had learnt from Ejua that many disputes and instances of intimate partner violence that the NGO dealt with were related to money and land ownership. He told us that ‘when a man dies and the brothers want to chase the wife and children off the land, the NGO calls this land grabbing.’ When our discussion with the five male cultural leaders who had joined the women’s empowerment group shifted to the contentious topic of land ownership, the LC1 declared, ‘I am the chairman, so people cannot sell a piece of land without me knowing it.’ Presumably saying what Jeroen, the white interviewer and NGO and donor representative, would want to hear, he continued, ‘So, of late, I have noticed that more men discuss with their wives before they sell the land. Before, men would make decisions by themselves, like when [a man] decides to sell off land, he would not include the woman because [it is men who own the land].’

As an unpaid government representative, and one who was trained by the GBV prevention programme to be one of the ‘engaged men’ on gender equality and land rights, the
LC1 seemed aware of the land tenure laws that granted girls and women property rights. However, he interpreted these new land rights to mean that men still had the final decision on selling land, and that is was up to men to decide whether or not to discuss it with their wives. When Jeroen asked him if issues around selling land were a legal or a customary matter, the LC1 described the double bind he found himself in, clarifying that ‘the brothers first must seek family consent, [but] by law the wife must sign’, but added jokingly that ‘men often actually negotiate this [between themselves] at a drinking joint.’ The men present responded with laughter. Later, Ejua further explained that in the customary land tenure system, which is still dominant, the male elder owns the land and family compound and his son or brother is expected to inherit the property.

The discussion moved towards the topic of violence and the LC1 chairperson explained, ‘Men believe that after paying bride price, they have bought the women. So he treats the women as property, because of having paid bride price. Any time he comes at home at night and he wants to have sex, he can have it; the women must say “yes.” Sometimes it causes marital rape. Now empowerment groups like Chunga Meno have created some respect in men for women.’ He seemed to sense the conflict between the expectations of the anti-GBV programme and the socially accepted norms of intimate partner violence. Again this discussion was met with laughter and some difficult-to-situate discomfort, perhaps caused by discussing the sensitive topics of gender, tradition, and kinship with outsiders.

Discussion

In this case study we started off asking why Lugbara women were not reporting domestic violence to the police. We gradually came to understand that this NGO or public health perspective has ignored the complex situated histories, social dynamics, and the kinship practices of the Lugbara people. Lugbara, as a socially constructed group of dispersed clans in a marginalised post-conflict borderland, historically never had chiefs or forms of governance recognisable to ‘outsiders.’ Encountering the newly devised gendered kinship practice of aruba, we came to ask how gender and kinship, both social constructs themselves, are intertwined in the patriarchal control of female bodies, reproduction, and material resources, in a context of rapid social change and impinging governance. With an applied anthropological lens, and having worked towards gender equality and sexual reproductive health and rights ourselves, we now reflect on the role of civil society in these biopolitical processes, and what the concept of fluid patriarchy might imply for development thinking and practice.

Patriarchy, bride price, and domestic violence

Discussions of domestic violence and patriarchy in Eastern and Southern Africa have often centred on the practice of bride price. Among the Lugbara, bride price in the form of cattle or money is exchanged, and the wife and her children become part of the husband’s family. The resilience of patriarchy and its relation to bride price has been described amongst pastoralists like the Karamojong of north-western Uganda, who in the face of disarmament and poverty, due to loss of their practice of cattle raiding (Hopwood, Porter & Saum 2018), continue to value bride price and reproduce patriarchal
power. From an African feminist perspective, the practice of bride price, or *lobola*, has been reframed within the Southern African context; for example, Glynis Parker (2015), in contrast to individualistic ‘western’ analyses, discusses the communality of *ubuntu* to foreground the potentially positive lived experience and valuing of tradition. With this lens, *lobola*, which she simultaneously recognises for its relation to domestic violence, can also be seen as an ‘instrument by means of which harmony can be achieved in society through mutual respect amongst its members’ (Parker 2015, 187). Though such an approach recognises resilience in the face of social change and illuminates previously undervalued or silenced epistemologies, it does not clarify the processes involved in the (re)assertion of patriarchal powers, or in other words the ‘how’ of fluid patriarchy.

The invisible powers of GBV interventions: What can NGOs learn from fluid kinship and tradition?

James Ferguson (1990) argues that internationally funded, state-led development projects, such as the ones in Lugbaraland, have often been captured by local ‘big men’ for political gain under the guise of development. Ferguson’s influential work on development as an ‘anti-politics machine’ reveals that its antipolitical veil tends to elide its underlying and unintended political effects. Lugbaraland, being perceived as a hostile but also regionally strategic borderland, has local leaders who have not been powerful enough to exert influence on the development agendas or directly benefit from them. Rather, the big men from the south have embraced internationally funded development efforts to govern a previously ungovernable area, inhabited by people that have been, and continue to be difficult to capture as governable subjects. Unable to employ state power, Lugbara male clan leaders resort to traditional fluid forms of kinship and ancestral power and its intersection with gender and reproduction to maintain a sense of political and social control.

Leopold (2005), describing the ambiguous attitude Lugbara have towards big men like the LCs and appointed government chiefs, points out that it is the behaviour of these powerful men that determines if they are tolerated or resisted, not their formal status as government representatives. Traditionally Lugbara recognised ‘*barukuza*’, or men whose names were known, who did not have patrilineal powers or the power of inheritance or invocation, but had wealth and therefore influence. John Middleton quoted in Leopold (Leopold 2005, 150) suggests that the ambiguous status of big men gave:

> a certain degree of flexibility in responding to the incursions of the state. Government chiefs, if they ruled fairly and brought benefits to their clients, could be understood as a kind of “*barukuza*”. Through this, the state could be understood as at least potentially a source of legitimacy.

This is despite the fact that any collaboration with ‘outsiders’ had previously been cursed by Lugbara clan leaders.

In his meticulous work *Inside West Nile*, Leopold (2005, 148) astutely summarises the different perspectives and political powers at play in what is called post-conflict reconstruction:

> For the state’s men, the political agenda is foremost; ‘reconstruction’ involves mainly the ending of rebel activity in the area and its integration into the Ugandan polity […] For the
world of the market, the economic issues of jobs and trading opportunities predominate. For the [male] elders, the representatives of the land, reconstruction involves above all a return to what they consider to be traditional norms and way of life. For the people of the [NGO and UN] agencies, it is a question of moving along a continuum from relief to development, where the latter is understood as a miscellaneous bundle that includes economic improvements and social changes, such as greater power for women.

Given the insights above, perhaps NGOs should not only reflect on their complicity with dominant state powers in governing what is to be perceived as an ungovernable rebel land, but also ask to what extent their engagement of big men and traditional leaders differs from previous governmental attempts. NGOs were not the first to enrol male cultural leaders and big men; they follow a long line of others since the late 1800s, including the Belgians, the British, and the dominant Ugandan tribes that have appointed local chiefs in efforts to capture Lugbaraland for their own (geo)political and economic interests.

**On land issues and domestic violence**

While some development discourse around gender, customary law, and land rights, such as is found in World Bank reports on land reform (see, for example, World Bank 2010), has ignored gender altogether (Chu 2011), other development literature recognises the frictions between informal and formal land tenure systems (Izumi 2007). They recognise property grabbing as a form of gendered violence against women, affecting women economically and psychologically across Southern and East Africa. Widows are considered particularly vulnerable, a problem that has been linked to weakened customary practice and the negative influence of HIV and AIDS. Especially rural women depend largely on customary law and practice for their inheritance and property allocations. When (mostly urban) women do manage to claim property rights, they ‘are often considered by men to be a threat to social stability. Along with control of women’s sexuality and economic activities, control over women’s right to own property is an important aspect of male dominance over women in this context’ (Izumi 2007, 14). This literature on land tenure and (domestic) violence also recognises that legal reform does not necessarily improve women’s rights when there is lack of accountability and a functioning legal system (Englert & Daley 2008). Whilst this literature on land rights acknowledges the role of gender and customary law in upholding patriarchy, it largely ignores processes in which patriarchy employs kinship and tradition to retain control over women’s bodies and land.

**Conclusion**

Lugbaraland has a complex history, particularly when it comes to governance. The area has long been marginalised despite, or perhaps because of, its location at the crossroads of competing traders, empires, and states. Conceivably this has contributed to the built-in flexibility of traditional practices in Lugbaraland, which Middleton (1999, 2002) first noted over seventy years ago. It may also help to situate, if not explain, why NGOs working to change gender norms embedded in kinship practices have found it difficult to make headway.
Our research takes seriously ethnographic evidence that traditions are not static. People constantly (re)order cultural traditions, especially when the status quo is threatened by ‘outside’ change. Our research shows that challenging patriarchy is not simply about education, sensitisation, or shoring up existing systems. Those who benefit from patriarchal dividends, usually older, established men and clan leaders (Sikweyiya, Addo-Lartey, Alangea, Dako-Gyeke, Coker-Appiah, Adanu & Jewkes 2020; Silberschmidt 2001), will work to reassert their power using whatever means they have available. The invoking of tradition, kinship, and ancestral spirits shows the extent to which they are willing to go to control women, holding them responsible for the well-being of their children, their natal families, and their ancestors.

Note

1. According to UN Women’s Global Database on Violence Against Women an estimated 50 percent of women in Uganda experience physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence within their lifetime (UN Women 2022).

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a European Research Council Consolidator Grant (647314).

Disclosure statement

No conflict of interest has been reported by the authors.

Note on contributors

Jeroen Lorist is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on gender within development, with a focus on ‘responsible masculinities’. He also works as senior gender advisor with an international NGO.

Mercy T. Mbabazi is an independent researcher and NGO worker. She holds a degree in social sciences from Makerere University, Uganda.

Eileen Moyer is a professor in the anthropology of ecology, health and climate change, Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. She has been conducting research in the field of HIV/AIDS for more than twenty years. She is a co-founder and co-editor of the open-access journal Medicine Anthropology Theory.

References


---

**Overview Interviews and Focus Group Discussions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modality</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Interviewer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Leaders Chunga Meno group (men)</td>
<td>18 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Ejua, Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Chunga Meno group (women)</td>
<td>18 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Ejua, Mercy, Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Participants (men)</td>
<td>20 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Ejua, Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Peer educators (women)</td>
<td>22 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Mercy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Peer educators (men)</td>
<td>22 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Ejua, Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Lugbara elders</td>
<td>23 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Mercy, Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured interview</td>
<td>NGO staff member 1 (man)</td>
<td>18 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured interview</td>
<td>NGO staff member 2 (man)</td>
<td>20 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured interview</td>
<td>NGO staff member 3 (man)</td>
<td>27 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured interview</td>
<td>Peer educator (woman)</td>
<td>26 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured interview</td>
<td>Peer educator (woman)</td>
<td>27 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured interview</td>
<td>Community leaders</td>
<td>28 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Mercy, Jeroen, Ejua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured interview</td>
<td>Health worker (woman)</td>
<td>26 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Mercy, Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured interview</td>
<td>Teacher (man)</td>
<td>27 Feb 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Mercy, Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi structured interview</td>
<td>Senior police officer (man)</td>
<td>1 March 2018</td>
<td>Arua</td>
<td>Mercy, Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up interview</td>
<td>Volunteer (woman)</td>
<td>12 May 2020</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up interview</td>
<td>Volunteer (woman)</td>
<td>21 May 2020</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up interview</td>
<td>Volunteer (man)</td>
<td>20 June 2020</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Jeroen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up interview</td>
<td>Ejua</td>
<td>24 June 2020</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Jeroen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>