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Gender-age systems and social change: A Haugaardian power analysis based on research from Northern Uganda

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For further information, please contact:
MICROCON: A Micro Level Analysis of Violent Conflict, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE
Tel: +44 (0) 01273 915706
Email: info@microconflict.eu
Web: www.microconflict.eu

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Gender-age systems and social change: A Haugaardian power analysis based on research from Northern Uganda[1]

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Colette Harris[2]

Abstract

This paper studies power through data focusing on gender-age relations gathered ethnographically among the Acholi of northern Uganda. It analyses this data through a framework combining Haugaard's notions of dispositional, episodic and discursive/tacit power, with Arendt's ideas on authority, and Bourdieu's on disposition and habitus. I suggest using ethnographically collected data makes an important contribution to studying power and propose replacing the idea of gender and power as a simple binary relationship with the concept that gender-power relations are always crossed with multiple modalities, among which, for gerontocratic settings like most in Africa and Asia, age holds particular significance. I conclude that gender analysis based on the local habitus is critical for empirical explorations of social interactions.

Keywords: Gender, gerontocracy, masculinities, power, authority, Northern Uganda

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[2] Colette Harris is a senior lecturer in development studies at the University of East Anglia, UK. She has used ethnographic data in studying gendered power relations in all three continents of the global south, particularly focusing on (post)conflict zones, where she has also carried out action research in the form of community-based education. She is the author of *Control and Subversion: gender relations in Tajikistan* (Pluto Press 2004) and *Muslim Youth: Tensions and Transitions in Tajikistan* (Westview Press 2006).
School of International Development, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, UK. Telephone: +44 1603 592336, Colette.harris@uea.ac.uk

Introduction

In all too much scholarship even today the term gender remains largely a proxy for women (Moran 2010). The field of (critical) men's studies, however, has now been combined with gender studies to shape a body of work that analyses communities as a whole from a gendered perspective (*e.g.* Cornwall 2003, Silberschmidt 1999). It also opens the door to new ways of conceptualising gender-power relations. This paper aims to make a contribution to the literature on power by analysing interpersonal relations in two villages in northern Uganda's Acholiland using a conceptual framework based on gender theory melded with Haugaard's work on power relations, Arendt on authority, and Bourdieu on dispositions and habitus. In so doing it draws on an ethnographic study of life in these villages. I suggest this contributes an important dimension of empirical research that facilitates exploring in depth nuances of inter-personal power relations otherwise impossible to capture.

The paper draws on published ethnographies as well as on field data gathered under the auspices of MICROCON, an EU-funded research programme on micro-levels of conflict, in partnership with the Refugee Law Project, Kampala/Gulu. Data collection started in 2007 with a visit to several camps in which the Acholi were incarcerated for over a decade during the civil war. It continued in 2008 with a year-long ethnographic study in the villages of Kwor Ber and Kwiri[3] in Gulu District, where from 2009 a community-education programme was implemented during a further year. This was evaluated in two sessions – the first in 2010 immediately at the end of the education project and the second a year later in 2011.[4] Most of the work was carried out by field assistants cum facilitators but some of the data was collected by me personally.

The paper starts with a conceptual framework based around intersecting gender and age power relations. Next, it provides a brief outline of the history of the Acholi gender-age system and describes the most salient issues relating to the civil war before portraying the present day socio-cultural situation. It finishes with an analysis of gender relations and identities examined through the prism of Haugaard's theories on tacit versus discursive power and his family of conceptual tools, along with Arendt's concept of authority and the Bourdieusian theories mentioned above. Finally, it claims that addressing gender from the perspective of the local habitus in which it is embedded is essential for both understanding power relations and effecting positive change.

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[3] To protect the population's privacy, all names have been changed.
[4] For more details of this project see Harris (2012).

Conceptual Framework

At the heart of this framework is gender, here used to stand for those norms or ideals that men and women are expected to live up to in order to be intelligible to and accepted in their own communities (Harris 2004, p. 14). These ideals derive from an admixture of the material, the social, and the cultural, including religion. Some of the facets that comprise the ideals are psychologically inculcated from infancy through the types of processes described by Freud (Silverman 1992), while others are relatively superficial and thus more easily permit shifts in their performance. I suggest these two categories most likely correspond to Kopytoff's distinction between those aspects of gender identities considered immanent and those viewed as flexible. The former are seen as natural and thus virtually immutable, perhaps because they are firmly embedded in the local habitus,[5] while the latter can be changed according to context (Kopytoff 1990). This may well account for some aspects of gender being clung to as if changing them would destroy an intrinsic part of one's being while others shift before different audiences or with changes in circumstances, which aspects fall into which category being culturally specific. I further suggest that gender ideals ultimately derive from the material conditions in which a cultural group was historically embedded (*cf.* Silberschmidt 1999). As these conditions change, so gender ideology shifts too but not in a simple linear manner, so that elements of the old and new overlap. Moreover, in my experience, changes tending to enhance current power structures are more easily accepted than those that encourage greater egalitarianism, thus facilitating conservative ideologies.

In gerontocratically-ordered settings, such as those of most African societies, age-related power hierarchies are as important as sex-related ones for the positionality of both men and women[6] (Amadiume 1997). Outward trappings in the form of age-demarcating dress and decorations produce distinctions akin to those arising from sex-differentiated attire (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 164-65). Such hierarchies are embedded in forms of traditional authority, including in persons unquestioningly recognised, acknowledged and respected (Arendt 1969, p. 45), as part of 'a process of interpreting power' (Sennet 1980, p. 20) and thus legitimised through the habitus of the subordinated (Bourdieu 2001, pp. 41-42, Haugaard

[5] Following Bourdieu (1977) I use this term for the way humans are socialised into taking on certain patterns of behaviour both physically and psychologically, in ways appropriate to the particular context in which they are raised. Gender is clearly an integral part of this.

[6] I would disagree with those sources that consider gerontocracy applies only to males (*e.g.* Spencer 2004). In my experience, in such societies older women also attain power, even though it may be exerted largely within the household, while men's pertains to public spaces too (See also Herbert 1993, Miescher 2007).

2008, p. 196). The result is that mothers may hold more authority in the home than their adult sons, particularly in the absence of a father, and that gender norms shift with age. Young men are expected to show a level of submission to their elders not much less than that shown by their sisters, while older[7] women hold a degree of authority second only to that of their husbands (Harris 2006). Following Herbert (1993) and Miescher (2007), I have used the term gender-age system to denote the imbrication of the two.

Masculinities and femininities

Masculinities is both the backbone of a culture and simultaneously dependent on the appropriate performance of femininities. Perhaps the feminist analysis of women's roles as central to the preservation of culture through their education of the young as well as via outward manifestations such as dress (Yuval Davis 1997), needs to go further and emphasise that the underlying norm to be preserved is that of masculinities. In other words, while what we see on the surface are efforts to ensure women maintain appropriate performances of what are often roles rather than immanent traits, hidden behind these is the crucial need to preserve the immanent characteristics of masculinities of the culture concerned. I suggest, for instance, the main reason that some minorities find it impossible to assimilate to the majority in whose society they live is a fundamental difference in habitus, especially concerning important symbols of masculine authority, relinquishing which would feel like cultural death.

Gender and power

Gender is fundamentally about power, but the simple binaries often attributed to it (Tickner 2001) conceal a much more complex set of relationships. I propose here one way to move on from these binaries, by using two sets of power relations, both derived from Haugaard. The first is that of discursive *versus* tacit norms (Haugaard 2003, p. 100ff). By this I refer to a distinction between publicly stated norms and those accepted without being articulated or acknowledged. I suggest this is the difference between the explicit power granted to men as occupiers of the superior position in the gender hierarchy and the implicit power held by (older) women, for instance in regard to the household and to family relationships, whereby

[7] The term older is obviously relational and there is no clear age at which people may be said to achieve this status. In Acholi it seemed to be applied to married heads of household, with children, and their wives. The villagers put the cut-off at roughly 35 but it depended on experience, living circumstances, and self-presentation, not on chronological age alone. Thus, William (see below) is conceptualised as an older man despite his age.

mothers in gerontocratic societies may exercise considerable power even over adult sons (Harris 2006).

For my second set of power relations I turn to Haugaard's 'cluster of concepts' that make up his 'set of conceptual tools', consisting of episodic, dispositional, systemic, and legitimate forms of power (2010, p. 427ff).[8] When applied to my gender-age system, episodic power designates the power to exercise agency. This is discursively an attribute of older men, although it may also be tacitly employed by women or youths. It should be noted that the ability to exercise agency does not open up a limitless field of action. Rather the extent to which such agency permits the wielding of *power over* or *power to* (Haugaard 2010) is constrained by the dispositional positioning of those concerned. Thus, older women may acquire a certain element of *power over* without necessarily attaining *power to* act outside the domestic sphere, which is more the purview of men, since each group is restricted to actions coherent with their dispositions (*cf.* Bourdieu 2001). Within this system, older men hold an inherently superior power status in discursive, as well as often in physical and economic terms, a position from which they are expected to exert authority over other family members, in line with their dispositions. Bourdieu suggests that gender-related dispositions are 'durably and deeply embedded in the body' and that a local system of gendered power relations 'can only be broken through a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of the dispositions that lead the dominated to take the point of view of the dominant on the dominant and on themselves' (2001, pp. 39, 41-42). In other words, gender(-age) power relations are enabled by dispositional power.

Systemic power designates the ways in which the gender system confers differential power positions on these various family members such that all are encompassed within one system, and legitimate power is that accepted consensually, as people generally accept the gender-power systems of their own social groups, which after all is integral to their habitus.

Acholi gender relations

I base the following analysis of gender in Acholi on the above complex of differential power relations. In order to clarify the situation today, before presenting evidence from the two project villages, I describe the historical context based on which contemporary claims to power may be judged.

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[8] I wish to thank Jenny Pearce for drawing this paper to my attention.

Up to independence[9]

The Acholi belong to the group of Nilotic-language speakers living in the Southern Sudan/Northern/Eastern Uganda/Western Kenya region of East Africa (Atkinson 2010). The history of the Acholi over the last few hundred years shows an ongoing process of change, the pace of which was heightened under British rule and particularly with conversion to Christianity, the introduction of formal education and proto-capitalist economic structures (Kitching 1912, Girling 1960, Pido 2000, Atkinson 2010).

The most detailed information on Acholi lifestyles is provided by two authors – Kitching, who worked as a missionary in the region in the first decade of the 20th century (1912), and Girling who carried out fieldwork there in the 1940s-1950s (1960), by which time colonialism had produced some changes in most of Acholiland. Pido's paper (2000), written around 1993, suggests that much of what Girling described survived for some decades afterwards, although Pido gives no clear time references and himself frequently draws on Girling.[10]

Kitching and Girling depict an agricultural society living in villages where most household heads were agnatically related. This society was organised in clans, with a strictly exogamous form of marriage based mainly on the patrilineage but in part also on the maternal lineage. Today Acholiland holds 52 major clans divided into a large number of sub-clans (Lumoro 2002).

The Acholi hold a belief in the supernatural, with traditional rituals essentially focusing on appeasing the 'spirits' of those who died in unfortunate circumstances, most of which are closely connected with specific places, in the form of chiefdom or lineage shrines. Intercession between the people and the spirits is carried out by diviners, who can be both male and female (p'Bitek 1971). However, as men remain on their clan lands while women marry away from theirs, the latter are unable to carry out rites requiring proximity to their clan's sacred places (Girling 1960). This supports male control of religious rituals, reinforced by conversion to a patriarchal Christianity, usually practised alongside the traditional rituals (Harris forthcoming).

The exogamous system of marital organisation also means that married women can count on few if any allies in their marital villages, unlike their husbands, which helps

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[9] This section is based on Girling (1960) except where otherwise stated.

[10] I am assuming Pido is himself Acholi and therefore has direct experience of the culture he describes.

legitimise men's invariable assumption of the role of head of household. Bride price is the defining element in contracting marriage, earlier paid to a girl's parents in the form of cattle, goats, or hoes but more recently in cash, and subsequently used to marry a brother or male cousin. It thus circulates among families and clans, linking the woman concerned with this relative and his wife, so she can count on their support if necessary.

In the past the Acholi lived a subsistence lifestyle, in which male wealth took the form of cattle, wives, children, foodstuffs, hoes, and huts, in that order (Girling 1960, p. 61). Polygyny was an ideal to which all men aspired but which only the wealthy could attain. Wives were crucial for the production of children, for their domestic labour and other contributions to family welfare, such as making pots, brewing beer and fishing. Together women and children also carried out most farming routine tasks, such as weeding, while men cleared and ploughed the land.

Wealth was thus produced through labour. The more wives a man could afford to marry, the more descendants he could have, and the more labour power he could command, the higher his status. Marriages were largely arranged but occasionally couples eloped, thereby choosing their own partners.

Male household heads spent their days supervising the work of family members, participating in local politics, herding cattle, and hunting. In pre-colonial times the most admired men were those demonstrating prowess in battle but under British rule armed clashes died out and lion hunting became the most dangerous occupation a man could indulge in, so the highest accolades were accorded to men who had personally killed one of these beasts.

Thus, Acholi manhood could be demonstrated by prowess in war or alternatively in the hunt; it was also important to have as many wives and children as possible and to control them appropriately. A successful older man was able efficiently to organise the productive activities of his household and to participate effectively in the political affairs of his village.

Kitching found that women had considerable power in the household, often bullying their husbands (1912). However, under colonialism and conversion to Christianity women's position was eroded. Nevertheless, they could still gain status as producers of wealth in the form of children and crops, and polygynous wives had considerable autonomy as each controlled her own hut and children (Girling 1960).

While women generally had less chance to participate directly in the colonial state than their menfolk, certain things did change for them. For instance, some were able to earn cash from growing cotton or from trading and in this way improve their power position

within their families. Moreover, increasing numbers of men migrated for labour purposes, often charging their wives in their absence with running the farms for them, which also raised the women's status.[11] Thus, although the discursive norms accorded the main power positions to older males, (older) women were not simply downtrodden but held a certain level of tacit power.

Independence and War[12]

After independence most Acholi continued their peasant lifestyle, but increasing numbers of men gained state positions and even participated in national politics, while the less educated formed a considerable percentage of the armed forces. Their position was largely destroyed under the rule of Idi Amin but by the mid 1980s they were dominating the national army once more and thus played a considerable role in the struggle against Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M). After Museveni took power in Kampala in 1986 the Acholi soldiers fled home, where their unwillingness to bow to traditional forms of domination created severe clashes with the elders.

Meanwhile, the NRA failed to take advantage of this split in the community, instead treating the Acholi as a whole very harshly. This precipitated several rebellions, the most protracted of which was that of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which from 1988-2006 waged war against the Ugandan government and still fights on beyond its borders. While the majority of Acholi did not support the LRA, in large part because of the atrocities it carried out against its own people, some 60,000, mainly adolescent males, were forced into the LRA through abduction (Blattman and Annan 2010).

One of the first casualties of the war was cattle, the mainstay of Acholi wealth, most of which was looted by government soldiers and neighbouring pastoralists. A few years later, in the mid 1990s, government soldiers forced the rural population of northern Uganda into 'protected villages', in effect camps for the internally displaced. While the government claimed this was to protect the Acholi people, the real reason seems to have been to prevent the population providing information to the LRA. At any rate, during LRA attacks, the soldiers from the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), in essence the national army, used the population as human shields, even targeting them directly by lobbing grenades into their

[11] Personal communication from George Openjuru of Makerere University, Kampala, himself an Acholi.

[12] This section is based on Branch (2011), Finnström (2008) and Dolan (2009). Taken together, these three authors give an excellent picture of this war.

midst during attacks on the camps (Finnström 2006, p. 13). Moreover, the soldiers treated the Acholi men as enemy aliens, forbidding them to leave the camps and even in some cases to use the latrines at night.

Soon after the camps were established, their management was taken over by the international community in the shape of the United Nation's High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), and a number of international NGOs. They used this opportunity to regulate the behaviour of the Acholi by introducing rules that attempted to force them into more egalitarian gender relations. Following current 'best practices', this included distributing food directly to women, and teaching women and children their rights.

The older men felt they had been made redundant, all their roles having been removed from them, some assumed by international organisations, the rest given to women. Many found the situation so disastrous they termed the protected villages concentration camps, seeing them as spaces of torture, and productive of what they termed cultural genocide. In their eyes, by destroying Acholi manhood, the Ugandan army, presumably on the orders of the government, was symbolically destroying the entire ethnic group (Dolan 2009). In particular, men complained about being emasculated through a lack of access to resources that removed much of their ability appropriately to control their wives and children.[13] Their feelings of powerlessness were exacerbated by the fact that they had to endure wives and daughters being forced to sell their bodies to survive, as well as to stand by while their womenfolk were being raped, mainly (it was said) by government soldiers. Some men even suffered the indignity and shame of themselves being raped by the UPDF, apparently at will and with impunity (Dolan 2002, p. 74-75). All this suggested the primary purveyor of torture was the national army, most probably to revenge alleged Acholi atrocities carried out during the fighting against the NRA (Dolan 2009).

The men also saw the manner in which the camps were run and aid was organised as the international community colluding in the torture. Women now had greater control over resources than their husbands, heightening their power position, while lessening that of the

[13] Similar claims were made by male Burundian Hutu refugees in camps in Tanzania (Turner 1999). Both in Tanzania and Uganda, this did not actually mean that (older) women came to occupy a position superior to that of men but rather that the latter experienced a rise in female status as destabilising traditional gender power hierarchies. This is of course not restricted to African refugees but has also been expressed by western men anxious about rises in women's status there (Faludi 1991).

men, giving the impression that the position of the sexes had been reversed, that the women had become 'husbands'. It was also difficult to have marital sexual relations since with all family members living in one hut, there was no privacy. As a final blow, the rights training offered to women and children gave the impression that this was all deliberate, that the international community was intentionally complicit in the destruction of Acholi manhood[14] (Finnström 2008, pp. 127, 159, 164-5, 240, Dolan 2009).

In the aftermath

Feminist research in post-conflict situations suggests this is when women typically lose most of the gains made during wartime in the shape of political power, education and/or increased opportunities for income generation (Meintjes *et al* 2001, Pankhurst 2008). Far less studied has been what happens to men and masculinities during or after wars and why, and how this affects the population as a whole.

Northern Uganda is one of the few conflict settings in which efforts have been made to study masculinities other than in their relation to facilitating violence. This occurred largely because here the emphasis has been on studying men's situation in the camps rather than on how they became involved in fighting. It was in some ways a unique situation, since the camps were established by the government, rather than as a consequence of the population spontaneously fleeing violence.

The result of older men's resentment of their treatment in the camps was that one of the main things they were looking forward to after the war was the restitution of their manhood in the shape of returning their communities to what they saw as traditional cultural norms, in particular those related to the gender-age system.[15] They were especially dreaming of restoring their rights of control over women and children, while ridding their families of

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[14] Whether or not one agrees that all this amounted to deliberate torture, the fact remains that conditions in the camps must have been appalling, judging by the extraordinary number of excess deaths occurring there, estimated at some 50,000 a year. When one considers that a high proportion of the population was incarcerated for a decade or more that represents an extremely significant 'attack' on the Acholi people (CSOPNU 2006, p. 16).

[15] Traditions are sedimented repetitions that have come to appear timeless and immutable but that in fact are constantly subject to variations, each too small to be noticed (Harris 2004, p. 15). In Acholi as I suggest above, even before the war the introduction of waged labour had disturbed traditional gender relations, raising the status of those younger men with jobs as well as of wives who assumed the running of their family farms. This produced clashes with male elders, who insisted that cultural traditions accorded them rights of domination (see note 9). It was this remembrance of how things were supposed to be that the men in particular carried with them throughout their experience in the camps.

notions of gender equality introduced by the rights training (Human Rights Focus 2007). Such appeals to tradition were backed by group memories of older men's power position bolstered by discourse. However, older women wishing to validate their own right to power found this much more difficult, since one attribute of tacit power is that it cannot be explicitly asserted.

Of course, power does not exist in a vacuum but requires material backing (Bourdieu 1977, p. 49). The problem for older Acholi men was that the external circumstances that had previously supported their superior positioning no longer existed (*cf.* Bourdieu 2001, p. 56). As stated above, Acholi wealth had been primarily dependent on cattle and other livestock with productivity largely based on women's and children's labour, making them integral elements of the local economy. Thus, cattle and human labour jointly supported the agriculture that formed the backbone of Acholi life, and this was further dependent on access to land.

Before the war, Acholiland was sparsely populated and most families could claim as much land as they could cultivate. Only a few of the wealthiest could afford to hire sufficient labourers to permit them to farm a larger area than could be worked by family members alone and this dated only from the last years of the colonial period (Girling 1960). However, in 2007, on the return from the camps, many families, especially those from areas near major roads or urban centres found themselves struggling to gain sufficient land to support their families. Indeed, since the end of the war, land has been the principal cause of conflict, largely as a result of attempts at land grabbing by outsiders, bandits, and wealthy Acholi (Human Rights Focus 2007).

Also problematic was the fact that the loss of their cattle left most Acholi families without draught animals for ploughing. This made it impossible for male householders to prepare the land on their own, forcing them to enlist the help of wives and older children. Even so, most families were unable to cultivate anything like as much land as previously. Before the war, women had mainly done lighter repetitive farming activities, such as weeding. Now, they had to carry out much harder physical labour, as well as working double the hours previously spent on agriculture, reducing their ability to be productive elsewhere. Young people, particularly young men, resented the time spent on family fields, especially if this interfered with their ability to attend school. The result was that both women and young people started to feel put upon, above all in those many cases where household heads worked fewer hours than other family members while still feeling entitled to be the sole decision-

makers regarding the disposal of crops the whole family had helped to produce (*cf.* Chiuri 2008).

This was not a general rebellion against older men's authority. Even the older women in the project villages appeared to accept the principle of older male superiority, in part legitimised through their position as the chief actors in the traditional rituals. Moreover, with everyone in the project villages claiming membership of a Christian church, the Biblical story of Eve's creation from one of Adam's ribs was frequently cited as additional evidence of female inferiority, a somewhat suspect claim since this clearly bore no relevance to Acholi traditions (Harris forthcoming). Despite all this, wives suggested that their disproportionately large farming contribution compared with the past should entitle them to some level of participation in decision-making concerning the disposal of the crops they helped farm. In other words, they felt they had a right to challenge certain aspects of older male domination.

Young men and to some extent their sisters too felt much the same way, particularly those whose parents were not paying their school fees. The result was that both older women and youths started to challenge the older men's project of restoring traditional levels of authority.

Women were peculiarly disadvantaged regarding control over resources. Their husbands said they were the ones who had married them and brought them to their homesteads, as well as paying bride price for them, while the women had arrived empty handed. Thus, all their possessions had been gained during marriage and indeed with their husbands' support even if much of the property the men themselves had acquired was owing to their wives' hard work. According to tradition, a wife could not claim ownership of goods acquired while living with her husband; she had usufruct but not ownership rights. Therefore, upon divorce a woman could not take with her anything gained in the marriage, not even her children. Her only legal possessions were her clothes and jewellery, her cooking and farming utensils; everything else belonged to the man. In fact, technically speaking, she was also her husband's property, the most expensive of his household assets.

Husbands even had the right to take control over possessions their wives bought with their personal earnings. One woman complained she had purchased a bicycle with her own money in order to take her produce to market. Using the excuse that this would give her the freedom to look for other men, her husband immediately appropriated the bicycle and never allowed his wife the use of it, forcing her to rent one when she needed to go to town. The result was not to prevent her travelling but rather to reduce her profits significantly, which

lessened the danger her earnings might exceed those of her husband. Similarly, some husbands would confiscate their wives' mobile phones, supposedly in case they used them to phone other men.

Such gender-based struggles appeared fundamentally related to older men's constant desire to claim 'authority' in their households. The word itself was bandied about a great deal in the immediate months after the return, with many older men anxious to impress upon others their ability to exert this within their own families.

One such was William, a man from Kwor Ber, 29 years of age in 2008 when our project began, and married to Jane, four years his junior. They had three children, all of whom William was determined would get an education. William was a born-again Christian, and an active member of his church. For him older male authority was of the greatest importance , one of the foundation stones of Acholi culture. This was shown by men's positioning as household heads and as the sole persons permitted to inculcate cultural norms into the children. Women could not hold the same degree of authority since they left their natal clans to join those of their husbands and of course one cannot exert authority in someone else's clan (*cf.* Atkinson 2010, p. 89). Therefore, it is men who decide on all important matters in the home, in particular on the management of resources such as agricultural produce. Furthermore, explained William, it is men who have the responsibility of clearing the compounds and erecting huts and granaries. Their authority, therefore, must be restored to its former level. Otherwise tensions will arise and the home will remain weak. There can be no happiness, no respect in such a home. This was what happened in the camps, where women considered themselves men's equals. The problem is this will not mould the children properly or teach them how to assume their responsibilities. Young people raised in egalitarian households will not grow up into good Acholi. The practice of celebrating International Women's Day started in the camps was especially damaging because it encouraged women to refuse to carry out housework on that day. They even had the temerity to order their husbands to do the work for them. 'Imagine a situation where women put on trousers to make them feel they are equal to men and go to drink in bars on Women's Day!! This shows no sign of respect', said William.[16]

Nevertheless, William admitted that women do at times have good ideas and after men have scrutinised these well to ensure they make sense and are useful, they may decide to

[16] While all discussions took place in the local language, Luo, the data were written down by the fieldworkers and facilitators in English.

adopt them. However, the credit must still go to the men, since women are considered part of men with no independent existence of their own.

William fully supported his children's schooling, putting finding the money to pay for it high on his list of priorities. He also preferred reasoning with them rather than simply ordering them about. For instance, before the last Christmas spent in the camp he gave way to his children's pleading to buy them presents that he could ill afford. The first winter in the village rather than shout at the children when they asked for presents again, he showed them his fields and explained he would have no money until the harvest was in so they would understand, he simply could not afford to buy them presents that year.

William also insisted it was bad to maltreat one's wife. A woman who is beaten may become physically unable to work. She might even return to her parents, leaving her husband to farm and care for the children on his own. To prevent this, William was careful to discuss any differences of opinion with his wife rather than fight with her. Thus, he did not treat her with the level of authoritarianism his position on older male power would suggest.

I do not know how much his religious values influenced William's approach of reasoning with his family members to bring them to obey him rather than simply ordering them about but he seemed unusual among those village men with strict ideas on authoritarianism in neither insisting on unquestioning obedience, nor using violence to quell opposition. Of course, not all older men were as insistent on restoring traditional identities as William. Some claimed to be content to continue more egalitarian relationships forged in the camps and even to support their wives by helping with domestic tasks.

In Kwiri, where there is a traditional court, cases of domestic violence were very common. Such violence was said not to be traditional among the Acholi and even to be an abomination to the spirits that watched over them, despite the fact that Girling's research suggested that men in those days had the right physically to chastise an errant spouse (1960, p. 32). Perhaps a distinction was made between the occasional wallop to remind women to pay heed to their husbands and more serious levels of violence, such as battery.

In theory men are only able to insist on their right of domination if they married according to Acholi custom through the payment of bride price. Without this a man does not actually 'own' his wife and children, who still formally belong to the woman's natal clan. The problem is those men unable to fulfil customary requirements in the shape of bride price lay themselves open to a failure to show themselves true Acholi men. A man who feels diminished by this situation may well take it out on his wife, or rather partner. This is

currently a very contentious issue owing to the high levels of poverty. In the camps almost nobody was able to pay bride price. This may become possible again in the future but at present it remains a huge struggle to find the resources to pay this in addition to meeting everyday expenses. Thus, marriage among the younger couples in the villages was in a state of flux, with a high percentage of men not having paid bride price but often acting as if they had forgotten this, claiming full rights over wives and children.

Gender and power

The long hiatus in the camps made it easier to remember the discourse around the gender-age system than its practice. This was especially true for the tacit norms, whereby, albeit silently and within fairly narrow limits, (older) women had formerly exercised a certain level of power, at least within the family circle. The result was that older men insisted that prior to incarceration in the camps, all power had been in their hands. The power of age was in this case also discursively accepted but the contradictions inherent in the imbrication of the two power systems did not come up for discussion. Thus, the fact that in some ways mothers were more powerful than even their adult sons was never spoken about, nor the fact that this placed young men in the invidious position of trying to live up to ideals of dominant masculinity while being impeded by their position in the age power system (*cf.* Harris 2006).

The long mistreatment the older men had undergone during the war seemed to have made them particularly vulnerable to accusations of a lack of manliness and the more vulnerable individuals felt, the more strongly they insisted on being treated with respect. In this context, respect implied unquestioning obedience on the part of other family members and the legitimisation of men's using whatever means they judged appropriate to exert their authority.

The population at large had been the greatest losers in the war, during which they had been deprived of virtually all material possessions. In consequence, the main entity the men saw as remaining to them was their culture, the foundation of which was masculinities, in particular those appropriate to older men. In other words, to the many Acholi men with whom this issue was discussed first in the camps and later in the villages, the most crucial element of their culture to be restored was that of traditional social relationships, centred around a family ruled by an older male household head. Thus, the years of exile seemed to have created a group memory of a past in which authority had *always* resided with older Acholi

men, irrespective of their personal attributes or circumstances, or of those of other family members, as a crucial element of their imagined community.[17]

The population had no way of reclaiming from the government the wealth that had been stolen from them with the rustling of their cattle. It was even unclear they would be able to hold on to their land in the face of ongoing attempts to grab it but the men clearly believed it should be possible to reinstate their cultural norms by reclaiming their manhood and in so doing bring their practices back into line with their habitus.

In reality, it was much harder to do this than they had envisaged. The demands they were forced to make on family labour while failing to provide adequately for their basic needs put significant obstacles in the way of older men's attempts at domination and resulted in a tendency for individual family members to pursue their own interests, frequently while paying little attention to those of others.

This demonstrated a certain level of tension between older men's insistence that their masculinity was immanently bound up with control – in other words that older men, *by nature,* deserved the unquestioning obedience of junior family members – and the contentions of others that older male superiority was only partially a natural trait, for the rest being contingent upon men's material circumstances, in particular their ability to garner and deploy resources (*cf.* Kopytoff 1990), and to provide acceptable levels of support for wives and children.

As described above, in traditional Acholi social organisation older men's claims to authority were also said to derive from both cultural and material sources. The latter consisted of their control over family resources and their situation as insiders within a system of exogamous marriage that inevitably positioned women as outsiders and thus with no legitimate claims to property or even to loyalty from their husband's clan (Girling 1960). That the men themselves did not entirely believe in the immanence of male domination can be seen from their comments that women's control of resources in the camps had made them into 'husbands'. The men seemed to be aware of the importance of their access to resources and to feel this justified their manipulation of other family members to protect their own position, for instance, by reducing their wives' earning capacity. In fact, as I stated above, nobody seemed to dispute older men's entitlement to a superior power position (*cf.* Bourdieu 2001). What was being questioned was the *level* of authority they could command compared

[17] Such notions of a golden past are common to other peoples suffering from the destabilising effects of socio-economic change (see e.g. Cornwall 2003).

with the right to participate in decision making of all family members old enough, especially regarding those issues directly affecting them, such as schooling, marriage partners, or the allocation of profits from crops farmed jointly.

I suggest using Haugaard's framework introduced above can help elucidate this situation. Acholi households exist within a hierarchical power structure in which the gender-age system places older men at the pinnacle of power, with older women and younger men in the middle, and younger women at the bottom. However, certain individuals may be unable to command respect solely on this basis. Among these are likely to be men who seriously mistreat their wives and fathers who refuse to pay their children's school fees.

Everyone holds a specific position in the social hierarchy, a situation generally accepted by even the most dominated social groups (*cf.* Bourdieu 2001). Older men's authority rests on their dispositional power position. That is to say, it is a function of their ascriptive identities rather than of personal attainment. While the gender system is usually seen as disadvantaging women, it might be said that the gender-age system disadvantages young people of both sexes but in a different way since, while women can never become men, young people can reasonably expect to become older so that Kandiyoti's patriarchal bargain whereby brides see themselves in time attaining a mother-in-law's (dispositionally) superior power position (1991) could be said to apply to men as well (Spencer 2004, p. 216).

This does not, however, change the fact that structural disadvantage in youth may well have far-reaching consequences, since it is then that people prepare for their life trajectories. Before colonialism this would have been straightforward since the Acholi led a rural, agriculturally-based lifestyle with few opportunities for personal distinction (Kitching 1912). With the penetration of outside influences, especially the capitalist economy, this has changed significantly, making education a potentially crucial path to opportunities outside the village. This is understood by young people who see their educated contemporaries gaining good jobs denied to them. They realise tertiary education can make major changes in dispositional power positions, for women as well as for men, something not allowed for in the gender-age system, based as it is on a lifestyle into which formal education and waged labour had not yet penetrated. In other words, the changes resulting from the influence of capitalist relations are not reflected in the Acholi habitus (*cf.* Bourdieu 2000).

As older men, William and his contemporaries supposedly hold a high level of dispositional power. They expect a general and respectful acknowledgement of this position as legitimate, making it unnecessary for them to use episodic power, that is, actively to assert

their authority. Such acknowledgement may occur through everyday interactions whereby family members show respect for the household head without his having to use direct pressure to achieve it. Thus, it seems to be that it is when men feel the dispositional power they are entitled to remains unacknowledged that they exploit their capacity to exercise episodic power to prove their ability to dominate (Pearce 2007, p. 19).

Since today gender is such an important element in power systems globally, masculinities tend to be a highly significant element through which men demand respect. I suggest it is when they perceive a lack of respectful acknowledgement of their dispositional power, either because of their inability to provide economic resources or as a result of other deficiencies, that they resort to episodic power, which may well be exercised in the form of (gender-based) violence. As we have seen, among the Acholi, above a certain (unstated) level, such violence is seen as illegitimate (*cf.* Haugaard 2010, pp. 434-45), thus those who exercise it are locked into a negative spiral of diminishing ability to insist on their right to dispositional power, which correspondingly tends to increase their use of (violent) episodic power.[18]

The teaching of rights to women and children in the camps caused tension since it challenged the dispositional power of older men by contradicting the gender-age system. In the return, in insisting on the critical importance of this system for preserving their culture, the older men were first and foremost reclaiming their own rights, in this case to dispositional power. In effect, the need to do this episodically - that is through specific pressure on family members to obey them - marks a failure in the reclamation process. It is only once dispositional power has been respectfully acknowledged that those who feel entitled to it are able to relax their stance on episodic power. I suggest this accounts for men such as William, who seem easily able to command such acknowledgement, collaborating with, rather than dominating, family members, while maintaining (the right to) a superior power position.

The contours of dispositional power inevitably shift over time and in response to external circumstances. However, as long as the overall shape of the power system does not change - in this case, as long as older men's superior position remains an essential component

[18] Although Arendt insists that once lost, authority cannot be reclaimed in this way (1969, p. 45). Perhaps this subconscious realisation makes these men all the more desperate in their attempts to do so. This goes some way to explain why it is men unable fully to claim dispositional power, for instance unemployed urban inhabitants, who are most likely to join gangs or participate in riots. This may be less for pecuniary benefit than to escape being 'dissed' (disrespected) by positioning themselves to (re)claim the dispositional power position they believe themselves entitled to as men.

of the local habitus, no radical transformation of the gender-age system will occur. During the education phase of our project, a prolonged and heated discussion on what it meant to be an Acholi man took place among a group of older men in Kwor Ber. In the course of the discussion, the arguments shifted from the initial insistence that it was crucial for them to retain the authoritarian positioning that supposedly existed before the war to the idea that as (older) women were now providing a much greater percentage of family resources, they should be entitled to a correspondingly higher status. After all, if women convinced they were being slighted abandoned their husbands and returned to live with their parents, this could make the men's situation quite precarious. In other words, the men were acknowledging the fact that the gender-age system was based on a bygone material situation. Now it no longer existed, it was unfair as well as economically detrimental (as we saw in the examples above) for men to try to reclaim their former level of power and control. Allowance had to be made for material changes. In effect this meant older men's acknowledging the rights of other family members to exercise hitherto unacceptable levels of episodic power or agency.

As a result, the men in this group agreed it made sense to recognise women's rights to participate in family decision-making and for their ideas and opinions to be listened to, as long as older men were still acknowledged as the heads of family. This could even enhance their economic situation. For instance, had the man in the example above not prevented his wife from using her bicycle to take her produce to market he could still have used the vehicle himself on other occasions and the family could have jointly profited from the woman's greater earnings.

It is unclear how much these changes merely restore the former system of older women's tacit power and how much they represent a small additional step towards gender equality, suggested by the fact that the men also included the need to listen more carefully to their sons and daughters. It is also impossible to state the proportion of men present who changed their practices as a result of this discussion. However, a certain visible shift did take place. What is more, this also occurred among men from outside Kwor Ber, for example, among a small group from a village several kilometres away, who happened to participate in this discussion. They facilitated a similar discussion back home, following which the men decided there too that the workings of the gender-age system needed to be adjusted to current circumstances, even if this meant men relinquishing some of their (dispositional) power.

The overall results have been greatly improved family relationships, and enhanced economic well-being, as family members make some attempt to collaborate for their mutual benefit, rather than older men simply attempting to impose their will and the rest silently resisting. Whether this will result in a change in habitus that could radically transform gender relations remains to be seen. I agree with Bourdieu (2001), however, that it is unlikely, as older male superiority is supported by so many institutions, including both state and churches, but above all because any family whose male head looks weak is laying itself open to ridicule. It is therefore to the benefit of all to preserve at least the appearance of older male superiority and thus for women and youths to prefer tacit to discursive power, always provided, of course, that they can reach an acceptable modus vivendi with the older men.

Conclusion

Acknowledging the interlocking power relationship between gender and age in gerontocratic societies and between the different levels of power I have taken from Haugaard has allowed me to tease out numerous contradictions between claims to power and the ability to exercise it. It has further enabled me to throw fresh light on what happens when people are denied the entitlements to which they believe they have a right and how they react to the frustrations of realising that claims to authority based on supposedly inherent attributes of superior power, require buttressing by personal qualities as well as by the ability to provide appropriate material resources. In other words, raising men to believe in their superiority simply by virtue of their sex may work when the underlying conditions permit the vast majority to attain this. When they no longer do so, as is increasingly the case today, the resultant thwarting brings considerable complications, which societies have no easy way of handling.

Haugaard's dual framework (2003, 2010) has thus allowed me to suggest new tools for use in gender analysis, beyond a simple binary. In relation to the gerontocratic societies that predominate in Africa and Asia, this has proved particularly appropriate for analysing the added dimension to claims of power arising from the gender-age system and thus to show its importance for understanding gender relations in such societies (Herbert 1993; Amadiume 1997; Miescher 2007). However, Haugaard's framework could also be applied in the ways I have suggested to western societies, where changes in gender-based power relations are also occurring and similarly resisted by the more powerful, often through violence, with equally serious consequences (Faludi 1991).

In other words, Haugaard's set of power tools (2010), along with Bourdieu's notions of disposition and habitus have enabled me to explain issues around power otherwise hard to conceptualise. In particular, the distinction between episodic and dispositional power helps clarify how those less able to command acknowledgement of their dispositional power often end up using episodic power instead. I have suggested in a footnote that this may consist of marginalised men using violence to reclaim this power - for instance, through gang membership or participation in riots as well as through domestic violence - but it also affects those at the top levels of power. One wonders, for instance, how much the frequent media accusations that George Herbert Bush was a wimp influenced his willingness to embark on Desert Storm. Moreover, it is clearly far easier for men than for women in high positions to exact acknowledgment of their status. I suggest this explains why some women political leaders and bosses in the work place seem to resort to episodic power (that is, to the explicit and visible exercise of power) more than men. Margaret Thatcher was a case in point.[19]

Finally, I suggest that educational work of the kind described above aimed at supporting communities to rethink gender(-age) power relations can pay high dividends in the shape of improved family and community relations, increased economic resources and a reduction in violence and conflict (Harris 2012). Thus, we continue to marginalise the study of gender relations at our peril but equally we will never understand southern settings unless we take their own ideas around gender, age and other significant modalities into consideration rather than projecting western notions on to them.

This paper is intended as a tentative initial exploration of these issues. Among the many points that need further clarification is the distinction between the structural power positions embedded in dispositions and the actual ability to wield power. Miescher's study of gendered power relations among the Asante (2007) suggests this ability traditionally depended on a combination of personal attributes and dispositional power, and not merely on the latter alone as is so often claimed by those at the top of the gender hierarchy (*cf.* Silberschmidt 1999). The same appears to have been true in Acholi, albeit now conveniently forgotten. Studying how this came to change could help us to understand how modern notions of gender have become ossified and the negative consequences, perhaps leading to ways of changing this that might support the development of more overall egalitarian societies.

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[19] For details of how this functioned see Rogers (1988).

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