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Some Gender Implications of the ‘Civilising Mission’ of the Anglican Church for the Acholi Peoples of Northern Uganda

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Abstract: Anglican missionaries arriving in Uganda’s Acholiland in 1903 saw the local peoples as in need not just of Christianisation but also of civilising. This last consisted primarily of inculcating western notions of gender identities for both men and women, with an emphasis on the wearing of gender-appropriate clothing and terminating the practices of polygyny and bride-price payment. The first missionaries considered the Acholi to have high levels of gender equality but they still believed conversion would improve women’s status through domesticating them and instilling the notion of male superiority, despite the fact that local customary rituals did not distinguish on grounds of gender. Over decades, the population gradually converted to various Christian denominations, mainly Anglicanism and Catholicism, but without abandoning their customary rituals, using them as and when required, to ward off evil or ask for rain, for instance. The most significant impact of the civilising process was arguably the institutionalisation of the notion of masculine superiority now legitimised by appeals to what happened in the Garden of Eden. The paper is based on historical documents, both published and from the missionary archives, as well as on ethnographic research into gender in the region today.

Keywords: Anglican missionaries; gender identities; masculinity; civilising mission; Acholiland; (northern) Uganda; colonialism

1. Introduction

When nineteenth- and early twentieth-century missionaries set out to ‘convert the heathen’, and the objects of their quest responded by joining the church, the meanings ascribed to these activities on either side were often very different, to the point of considerable mutual misunderstanding. One thing, however, is clear—by the early twentieth century, Christian missionaries were not simply trying to convince the populations among whom they worked of the truth of the message of the church; they were spending as much, if not more, time and energy on inculcating into them the everyday manifestations of Europeanised religious culture (Russell 1966).

In Africa, British missionaries brought with them two important concepts that underpinned their understanding of the world. One was related to the capitalist ideology of the desirability of hard work, competition, and the possession of material goods, the other to a specific model of that foundational European socio-political organisatory system now termed gender. The two were interlinked, since under industrialised capitalism, specific configurations of gender had evolved that by the end of the nineteenth century had become so ingrained in English society, that they appeared to be part of nature (Hall 1996) or rather ordained by God, since they were also supported by the Church of England (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, p. 68). Religion and gender were thus ‘symbiotically linked through normative notions of social practices’ (Harris 2012b, p. 209). Convincing their congregation members to adopt Europeanised gender norms became a cornerstone of the missionary effort, and an

important reason for getting people to join the church was to save ‘native’ women from their menfolk’s supposedly negative treatment (cf. [Mutua 2001](#)). Moreover, a truly pious and domesticated Christian woman was seen as a crucial means for drawing men into a ‘civilised’ life ([Thorne 1999](#), pp. 94–97, 106).

Together, capitalism and European notions of gender gave African missionary culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries much in common with that of the colonial state and its attempts to inculcate into local populations social, economic and political ideologies coherent with the British way of life. In fact, as Joan Vincent suggests, the state was dependent on missionary intervention and its ‘civilising process’ to enable it to function along capitalist lines ([Vincent 1982](#)), hence the general aim of the Church Missionary Society¹ (CMS) in Africa to introduce ‘Christianity, Civilization, and Commerce’ in order to support colonisation ([Peel 1995](#), p. 602). This was to a great extent reinforced by the stated belief that the conquest of African peoples was part of God’s plan and included the requirement to convert them to Christianity ([Buxton 1906](#)).

Nevertheless, while Anglican missionaries had some level of state preferment to offer their members, they were often opposed to governments’ treatment of their subjects as well as to their proclamations on religious affairs. At the same time, there were important interactions between the two, as the Anglican Church contested colonial legislation or attempted to bend law-making in British colonies to its own ends ([Hansen 1984](#)). Both were intent on contributing to the so-called civilising process that was being used to legitimise the project of colonisation to the British public and the wider world, often expressed in language that emphasised the superiority of (middle-class) white masculinity² ([Comaroff and Comaroff 1991](#)).

By the latter part of the Victorian era, gender had become a crucial element of the moral order in Britain. It is hardly surprising therefore that the gender ideology the missionaries of the time brought with them to Africa became a central feature in the civilising process and thus in their engagement with the native population who attended their churches (cf. [Bowie 1993](#); [Comaroff and Comaroff 1991](#); [Hall 1996](#); [Hastings 1993](#); [Labode 1993](#); [Prevost 2010](#)). I argue in this paper that this was certainly the case in northern Uganda’s Acholiland, which was incorporated into the British Protectorate of Uganda at the start of the twentieth century ([Branch 2011](#)). In other words, I claim that the aim of inducing them to assimilate as far as feasible to gender-appropriate European behavioural patterns was integral to the efforts to incorporate Africans into the church. That this was so is borne out by the opinion of Keith Russell, head of the Anglican Church in Acholiland in the 1960s, that it had been a mistake of the earlier missionaries to concentrate on right and wrong behaviour rather than on bringing congregations to Jesus ([Russell 1966](#)).

The paper was inspired by what I learned about the gender norms of the Acholi people I became acquainted with while working in Gulu District between 2007 and 2011, especially through a community-based education project I implemented in two villages in 2009–2010 with the help of local facilitators (cf. [Harris 2012a, 2014](#)), as well as by my understanding of the changes that had taken place as a result of Christianisation. My aim here is to contribute to knowledge about male-female relations in African societies as well as to how these were affected by the introduction of western gender ideology through colonialism and especially by missionaries.

I agree with African scholars Amadiume, Oyèwùmí and Nzegwu that prior to Christianisation and European colonialism, gender as we know it today as a fixed set of power relations did not exist in Sub-Saharan Africa and that we need much more information about social organisation there historically in order to improve our understanding of social relations prior to colonialism and exposure to missionary ideology ([Amadiume 1997](#); [Nzegwu 2006](#); [Oyèwùmí 1997](#)). Thus, claims that Christianity brought liberation to African women need to be re-examined in the light of evidence that suggests missionary advocacy of gender equality was quite limited in scope ([Peel 1968](#), p. 183; cf. [Hastings 1993](#)).

¹ This was the Anglican organisation responsible for the establishment of missions in Uganda.

² This was explicitly articulated in Nigeria, for instance, with regard to the coupling of masculinity and breadwinning ([Lindsay 2007](#)).

The historical material presented here is based on accounts of Anglican missionaries to Acholiland, particularly those of Albert Bushnell Lloyd and Arthur Leonard Kitching,³ the first two Anglican missionaries in that region, as well as on the very few writings on the topic by Acholi I have been able to find, together with discussions with older villagers about their recollections of their early years and their own reasons for joining the church. I have also drawn on ethnographic and historical sources, especially on the study by [Girling \(1960\)](#), an independent left-leaning scholar, and Mario Cisternino's detailed account of the early period of evangelisation (2004).⁴ These have been supplemented by materials from the CMS archive in Birmingham and articles from *The Uganda Journal* and *The Uganda Church Review* (years 1926–1951), although relatively few of these specifically mention the Acholi Mission and almost none relates to the issues addressed in this paper. The main relevant archival materials consist of accounts of the establishment of the Gulu Mission, letters written by missionaries, and a few ad-hoc documents. The vast majority of all of these were written by men. However, there are a few letters written by female missionaries.

One of these was Ruth Fisher, whose husband established the Gulu Mission in 1913 after years of service elsewhere.⁵ Mrs. Fisher published two books on her experiences in Uganda, both before she first visited Acholiland ([Fisher 1904, 1911](#)). I have assumed her general attitudes and approach to the peoples with whom she interacted in that country are unlikely to have changed significantly during her relatively brief period among the Acholi.⁶ I have supplemented this with relevant women's writing focusing elsewhere in Africa (e.g., [Leith-Ross 1939](#)) in the absence of evidence from Acholi women of the times.

Unfortunately, I have been able to find almost no written historical accounts by Acholi themselves relating to their experiences of the church. The best known writings by an Acholi are the poetic and critical works of Okot p'Bitek (1911–1982), whose work, despite or perhaps because of his education at Bristol, Aberystwyth, and Oxford⁷ universities, should be read through his strong opposition to the Europeanisation of his people through psychological and cultural colonialism, but who provided invaluable insights into some of the effects of Christianisation ([Imbo 2004](#)). Regrettably, he was virtually the only Acholi to write about these issues. Finally, although the Catholic Church and its missionaries played a significant role in Acholiland, where they arrived in 1911 ([p'Bitek 1971](#), p. 44), I concentrate here purely on the Anglican mission to Gulu.⁸

The paper starts with my conceptual framework, laying out what I mean by gender and religion. It continues by providing background information on the Acholi, relating the story of Anglican

³ Lloyd (c. 1869–1946) was born in Leicester and trained as a civil engineer. He became a lay missionary in Uganda in 1894, accompanied by his wife. Lloyd first visited Acholiland along with Kitching in 1903 and the following year he helped found the first mission there. He was ordained as a minister of the Anglican Church during World War I. Kitching (1875–1960) was born in London and was ordained as a minister in 1899. He first came to Uganda in 1901 and married Lloyd's sister in England in 1905, after which they all returned to Acholiland. From 1926–1936, Kitching served as the first Bishop of the Upper Nile Diocese that included Northern Uganda. Meanwhile, he had developed a system of writing for the Acholi language, using this in his translation of the Bible ([Cisternino 2004](#); [Kitching 1912, 1935](#); [Lloyd 1906, 1921](#)).

⁴ It should be noted that while there are several historical studies of the Acholi people ([Atkinson 2010](#); [Crazzolara 1950, 1951, 1954, 1951, 1954](#)), there are almost no ethnographic accounts. The only one I have been able to find that is relevant to the present topic is that of [Girling](#), who carried out his doctoral research in the late 1950s. His book mentions the influence of the church only very briefly, no doubt because he was not himself involved in church matters ([Girling 1960](#), p. 187). There are a few further descriptions of Acholi rituals in the colonial-period *Uganda Journal*. For the rest, during colonial times, the Acholi were marginalised in Uganda as indeed they still are. Together with a long-running civil war (1986–2006), this kept scholars away for many years. It has been only relatively recently that studies of this people have started focusing on topics other than the war. Studies of the CMS in Uganda mostly ignore the Upper Nile Diocese and northern Uganda (e.g., [Dimock 2017](#)).

⁵ For information on Fisher, his work in Bunyoro (Uganda) and his attempts to build the first formal Anglican Mission in Gulu, as well as his hostile stance towards the Comboni fathers and their Catholic mission there, see [Cisternino \(2004, p. 386ff\)](#).

⁶ See her letter about them to her sons in note 31, for instance.

⁷ Where his doctoral studies were guided by, among others, the renowned anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard. For more information on p'Bitek see his own writings (e.g., [p'Bitek 1963, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1986](#)) and [Imbo \(2004\)](#).

⁸ For information on the Catholic mission to Gulu, see [Cisternino \(2004\)](#) and [Whitmore \(2013\)](#).

missionaries' attempts to bring this people to the church and discussing its civilising mission. Finally, I analyse the gender effects of all this, attempting to answer the question raised by the paper's title on the influence of the mission of the Anglican Church on gender in Acholiland. The result is that I combine narrations of missionary efforts to 'civilise' the Acholi people with an attempt at providing an understanding of social relations in Acholiland prior to the influence of the church and colonialism before looking at the outcome in contemporary life there in terms of current gender norms.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Gender

I apply the term gender to normative ideals of male and female behaviour men and women are pressured into living up to within their own societies—that is, as shorthand for gender norms. While these are not fixed, some aspects appear more immanent than others (Kopytoff 1990) and thus are less likely to change, at any rate without considerable shifts in material circumstances. Although lived experience is relatively fluid, the norms, as developed in Europe in the late nineteenth century and taken with the missionaries to Africa, suggest a somewhat rigid binary opposition between the sexes, with superiority always lying with the male (Harris 2004).⁹ As mentioned above, prior to colonialism and exposure to a world religion, Sub-Saharan African societies had rather fluid power arrangements related to lineage structures, based mainly on age/seniority¹⁰ rather than, as in the West, on a biologically based and rigid understanding of the nature of sexed bodies.¹¹ In other words, gender in the sense we use this term today to describe a hierarchy in which the masculine always and inevitably occupies the superior position, did not exist (Amadiume 1997; Hall 1996; Nzegwu 2006; Oyèwùmí 1997).

2.2. Religion

There is no generally accepted definition of religion (Asad 1983, 2001; see also Turner 2011). Talal Asad has argued that it is impossible and even undesirable to seek a universal definition, insisting the endeavour to do so conceals the hegemonic power position of the West with its strong Christian bias. He recommends that rather than using a general term, scholars should concentrate on exploring specific contexts and the historical conditions that gave rise to their particular sets of power relations and discursive practices.

In the mid-twentieth century, a major point of contention arose among scholars of Africa over the question of whether something akin to religion had historically existed there at all, and if so, whether it included the concept of a supreme deity. While many Europeans tried their hardest to locate religion in the African context (Landau 1995) and some African scholars proclaimed the existence of monotheistic African religions (cf. Mbiti 1970, 1990), p'Bitek insisted this was nonsense and that the very notion of a high God was alien to African cultures. His accounts of the 'religion of the Central Luo', that is, of his own people, the Acholi, are very comprehensive; they strongly suggest that rather than taking the form of worship, Acholi relations with the supernatural focused on propitiation (p'Bitek 1970, 1971)¹² and thus came closer to shamanism than to religion (Pratt 2007). Moreover, as with other African cultural groupings (cf. Peel 2000, p. 90), the Acholi themselves saw religion as a foreign notion, using the Swahili loan word *dini* for both Islam and Christianity, while employing local terms for their

⁹ For more details of how these function see (Harris 2012a, 2012b, 2014 and especially Harris 2016 and Harris 2018).

¹⁰ These were later combined with the newly introduced notion of gender to form what I have termed a gender-age system (Harris 2012a).

¹¹ This does not mean there was no sexual division of labour in Africa but rather that it was not based on an understanding of human physiology as inherently biologically fixed and dictating social performance, as by this time had come to be the case in Europe (Harris 2016).

¹² As does Lawrance for the Iteso of eastern Uganda (Lawrance 1957).

own customary practices.¹³ For this reason, in line with the advice of Asad, in this paper I follow Russell (1966) and p'Bitek (1973) in refraining from conflating these with religion, reserving the latter term for Christianity. I do this with some trepidation, acknowledging that for many the term religion holds connotations of high (read Western) culture, while calling them customary practices suggests a deliberate attempt to devalue African cultures (Whitmore 2013), something that is not at all my aim. The need to refute this may account for the fact that some Acholi Christians have followed Mbiti's lead in suggesting that the Acholi customary practices had more in common with Christianity than p'Bitek had been willing to acknowledge. He was certainly adamant that it was impossible to separate the customs of everyday life from practices relating to the supernatural, unlike what he understood of Christianity (p'Bitek 1973; cf. Imbo 2004). Using the same term for both this last and Acholi customs would thus conflate two quite ontologically distinct (but equally valid) approaches to dealing with the supernatural. Therefore, in this paper, I shall employ the term 'customary practices' rather than the term traditional religion that is often used (p'Bitek 1970).

P'Bitek also insists the Acholi people came to religion not because it fulfilled some deep-seated need that their own customs had left unsatisfied but for the practical advantages it bestowed (p'Bitek 1986, pp. 66–67).¹⁴ He is not the only scholar who has questioned how African peoples first came to the church. Moreover, rather than a simple process in which once and for all someone moved from a state of unbelief to belief, perhaps culminating in being formally received into a religion, this more nearly resembled a series of encounters, resistances, and struggles (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, p. 249ff; Peel 1995). It was made the more complicated because, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the manner of its teaching to African peoples by European missionaries went far beyond the issue of accepting God in Christ to include what appeared almost more important—the inculcation of an ontologically distinct way of being in the world, in which gender played the primary role (Bowie 1993; Hall 1996; Peel 1995; Prevost 2010; Russell 1966).

As a result of these pressures, the gender ideology accompanying the new religion tended to be meshed with previous social norms to form hybrid sets of gender ideals, as we shall see. Moreover, formal induction into a Christian church did not mean that Africans would simply abandon their own lifestyle, but rather that conversion was a dialectical process in which the starting place was often the incorporation of the Christian deity as an additional, perhaps especially powerful, protective element into a pantheon of local spirits, rather than considering him the one and only godhead (Marshall 2009). Moreover, given the difficulty in understanding the complexities of the Trinity, it is hardly surprising that Africans found it hard to equate this with monotheism (Ellis and Haar 2004; Meyer 1992). Since they remained an integral part of the reality of those joining a church, traditional beliefs and rituals, therefore, almost always continued alongside Christian prayer and services, producing an Africanised religion.

3. The Acholi¹⁵

The Acholi are a Luo-speaking Nilotic people living in northern Uganda/southern Sudan with a historically highly democratic, patrilineal, clan/lineage-based political organisation. By the beginning of the colonial period, the population depended mainly on subsistence-based agriculture. Marriage was exogamous and formally contracted through the exchange of cattle, goats, and/or hoes for men's right to claim paternity over the children born to their wives. Polygyny was about increasing economic

¹³ The Yoruba, for instance, called theirs 'customs of the country' (Peel 2000, p. 90).

¹⁴ "The African . . . saw the church as a necessary ladder to power and material gain. Status in the new colonial regime and riches in the form of money, to supplement his other form of wealth: goats, sheep and cattle . . . Power, status and wealth were the main attractions of the Christian missionary at the height of the colonial regime. It was not salvation from sin that attracted the African to the altar" (p'Bitek 1986, pp. 66–67).

¹⁵ Where not otherwise indicated, the information in this section has been taken from Girling (1960).

capacity, since wives and children, along with cattle, were crucial for production and thus for creating wealth (cf. [Guy 1990](#); [Peel 1968](#)).

Most farming was carried out by women and children, the men doing the heavy work of clearing and preparing the land. Male youths spent most of their time in such occupations as tending herds, hunting, and fighting, while their elders ran the homestead and carried out political organising. Land was plentiful, so families would occupy as much as they could cultivate, the limiting factor being labour ([Girling 1960](#); [Kitching 1912](#), p. 147). This was a society in which age-based power relations predominated ([Harris 2012a](#)). Older men held political power, including control over access to land. Older women had considerable say within the household and polygynous wives ran their own mini-households within the larger ones managed by their husbands ([Girling 1960](#)).

Disruptions to this lifestyle started after Acholiland came under British rule and the state appointed authoritarian chiefs to suppress tendencies to revolt. The subsistence element was also disturbed as in order to find the funds to pay the poll taxes extorted by the state, some men went to serve as labourers on southern plantations, while others joined the police service or the armed forces. The introduction of Christianity was particularly challenging to local lifestyles, especially for those who attended mission schools and subsequently entered the civil service, as did quite a few Acholi men ([Branch 2011](#); [Girling 1960](#); [Mamdani 1976](#)).

Acholi relationships with the supernatural were mediated through customary rituals that played a significant role in enhancing their wellbeing by propitiating local ‘spirits’ or *jogi* (sing. *jok*) that represented “ultra-human powers” derived from “the non-material part of man or beast which is set free when death occurs” ([p’Bitek 1963](#), p. 27). P’Bitek focuses on three kinds of *jogi* he suggests were important prior to colonialism—those that functioned at the level of chiefdoms, those that represented clan ancestors, and so-called free *jogi* responsible for producing ill health and other maladies. However, with the colonial destruction of traditional chiefdoms, the first kind lost much of their importance, and since then, customary practices have mainly focused on the other two.¹⁶

Afflictions were blamed on negative reactions by *jogi*, on witches or *lujogi* (sing. *lajok*), or on spells cast by sorcerers. Rectifying matters required determining which of these had caused the problem. The intervention of an *ajwaka* or diviner could help identify the entity concerned and provide remedies to ward off the negative effects so the victim could be cured or left in peace ([p’Bitek 1971](#)).

4. Anglican Missionaries in Acholiland

4.1. First Contact

The first Anglican missionary to visit Acholiland was Albert Lloyd. He travelled there in 1903 at the invitation of Awic, an Acholi chief who supposedly said he wanted his people “to be taught about God” ([Lloyd 1906](#), p. 160). When Lloyd arrived, another chief told him,

I too have longed for teachers to be sent to my country . . . We heard long ago that the Banyoro and the Baganda had learned to worship the white man’s God, but we too want to be taught to do the same. Do you fear that we should ill-use the teachers you might send to us, that we might become wise? Does the starving man turn away from the food that is brought to him? . . . and do you think we should mind the destruction of our old and worn-out customs of religion, if you provide us with good food that shall strengthen our souls? ([Lloyd 1906](#), pp. 172–73).¹⁷

¹⁶ For more details on the rituals, see [p’Bitek \(1971\)](#) and [Whitmore \(2013\)](#).

¹⁷ Much later, Keith Russell made it clear that this must have been Lloyd’s own interpretation of what the chief said, since it could in no way have been what he actually expressed, given that he could have had no grasp of the notion of religion and thus of souls and that he would never have equated his ‘clan rituals’ with religion ([Russell 1966](#), p. 3). In other words, Lloyd is rewriting the chief’s speech so as to legitimise the conversion attempts in Acholiland for his readers. Alternatively, this wording might have arisen from the slant that the interpreter put on the chief’s words so as to bring it more into line

Lloyd's response was that,

It made one feel ashamed that for all these centuries they had been neglected and left to the mercy of their own idle superstitions and heathenism, while there evidently existed the dormant longing for something better, something that would uplift. And I knew that I held the secret, and I determined, by God's help, to unfold it to them (ibid).

After a brief stay, the British visitor left, returning the following year together with two other missionaries, one of whom was Albert Kitching. They started by establishing a school and providing medical treatment, something that greatly raised their standing with the population (Lloyd 1906).

During their early days in Acholiland, the missionaries discovered the people believed their troubles were largely due to *jogi* that manifested themselves in various ways and locations. They also learned that the dances they observed, accompanied by considerable alcohol consumption, the little huts with offerings in them near the graves of ancestors, and many other customs they observed represented efforts to propitiate these *jogi*. The Europeans were even at times begged for help to prevent *jogi* from harming the community. Their main response seems to have been to reflect on the need to increase the numbers of those joining the church, considering instilling Christian beliefs the best solution for these ills (Kitching 1912; Lloyd 1906).

In 1908, the Anglicans were forced to close their mission and leave Acholiland in some haste, apparently because of a misunderstanding that brought the population to suspect them of practising witchcraft (Russell 1966, p. 22ff). However, a couple of years later, when a group of Ugandan evangelists from just across the Nile were sent to build a church in Acholiland, they were left in peace to hold services and encourage locals to join. Once this was well established, the British returned and in 1913 the Church Missionary Society opened a major station in Gulu, the administrative heart of Ugandan Acholiland, which was later served by some twenty 'out-stations'. The expansion continued until in 1926 Acholiland became part of the newly created Anglican Diocese of the Upper Nile, with Arthur Kitching as its first bishop (Hewitt 1971, pp. 224, 231).

4.2. Becoming Anglican

When Chief Awic wished his people to be taught about God or the second chief wished to "learn . . . to worship the white man's God", what did they mean by this? Keith Russell, a British clergyman who later became Bishop of the Upper Nile Diocese, thought Lloyd was naïve in believing these words could possibly have correctly rendered the men's intentions (Russell 1966, pp. 2–3), and p'Bitek concurred (p'Bitek 1973, pp. 70–71). These men posed two important questions. The first was what the Acholi really wanted to get out of being officially accepted into the Anglican Church, and the second was what they understood by the teachings they received, given the cultural-linguistic obstacles concerned.

To make their message more intelligible, the early missionaries, Catholics as well as Anglicans, had sought appropriate Luo terms. They ran into difficulties because Luo had no word for anything even approximating God. After many frustrating attempts at clarification, both sets of clergy decided to adopt the term *Lubanga*¹⁸ for God. Unfortunately, far from being an appropriate translation, this was the name given to the so-called hunchback *jok*, a spirit that caused deformation of the spine or spinal tuberculosis (p'Bitek 1970; Russell 1966).

As the translator of the Bible into Acholi, Kitching was well aware of the serious problems in finding appropriate terms. He insisted, however, that "in spite of all drawbacks the Word of God does its work of changing men's hearts and lives. Even when translated, and that often imperfectly, it is still 'quick and powerful'" (Kitching 1935, p. 29). P'Bitek, on the other hand, suggests the mistranslations

with what he understood of the white men's thinking, given the likelihood that he was himself a Christian convert. See also Section 4.2.

¹⁸ Alternatively spelled *Rubanga*.

were too gross for any comprehension to be possible. He gives as an example a back-translation from Luo for the first verse of the St. John's Gospel that in the original English reads: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God'. The back-translation reads: "From long long ago there was News, News was with the Hunchback Spirit, News was the Hunchback Spirit" (p'Bitek 1971, p. 85).

Moreover, while the concepts of the creation and ending of the world are vital components of Christianity, the Acholi pay no attention to such issues, being primarily interested in the here-and-now. Thus, Luo had no words for creation, heaven, hell, or many other important Christian concepts (p'Bitek 1970). In p'Bitek's poem, *Song of Lawino*, originally written in Luo but later translated by him into English, Lawino puzzles over how *Lubanga* created the world—how he created himself before he even had a body he could use to do so, for instance. In the passage cited below, the word mould is employed, since it was the nearest Luo word the missionaries could find to translate create, and p'Bitek deliberately makes a literal translation:

Where did the Hunchback
Dig the clay for moulding things,
The clay for moulding Skyland
The clay for moulding Earth....?
Where is the spot
Where it was dug,
On the mouth of which River? (p'Bitek 1972, p. 87).

Whenever Lawino asked her husband, Ocol, who had largely abandoned village life as a result of becoming a Christian and subsequently gaining a university education, to explain these things to her, he would scornfully inform her that she was just a stupid village woman, incapable of grasping complex issues.¹⁹

These literal translations sound so incomprehensible that one assumes church goers must have learned to interpret the words in a different manner, allowing them to gain some notion of the intended meaning. If most Acholi were really as puzzled as Lawino about the meaning of the scriptures, it is hard to see reading the Bible or even listening to sermons being anything but totally mystifying. P'Bitek obviously had a vested interest in exaggerating the unintelligibility of his translations, so this may not accurately represent his contemporaries' understanding. However, his point about communication difficulties is clear.

Russell took a similar line, considering the use of Acholi terms for ideas completely alien to its native speakers had been a factor in sustaining the customary practices alongside Christianity and insisting it would have been preferable to introduce completely new words to match the new notions in order to make it clear that religion existed on a completely different plane from anything previously known. He also made the point that unlike polygyny, which was punishable by excommunication, the church largely took it for granted that converts had completely abandoned their customary rituals, taking no steps to discipline those who continued to participate in them. This omission facilitated their persistence after the Acholi were formally received into the church as well as demonstrating the respective importance of the two issues in missionary minds (Russell 1966). Girling, on the other hand, suggested it was precisely the ontological differences between Christianity and the customary rituals that made it possible for people to participate in both (Girling 1960, p. 188). Judging by the behaviour of the participants in my education project, the Acholi seem just as comfortable today with the idea of following Sunday church services with customary rituals, as they did in Girling's time.

Meanwhile, John Taylor, another Anglican missionary in Uganda, suggested that by presenting the gospels through reading rather than in ways that might have appealed more to the imagination,

¹⁹ Lawino and Ocol were apparently closely modelled on the author's own parents (p'Bitek 1972).

no true understanding of the glorious mystical nature of Christianity had been conveyed to Africans, so it was grasped cerebrally rather than emotionally (Taylor 1963). However, since the Bible was seen as in itself an instrument of power, written texts having acquired a kind of magic in the eyes of the Acholi (Whitmore 2013), this may have been more positive than Taylor seems to think (Marshall 2009, p. 62).

By the early 1960s, the best part of 50,000 Acholi had formally been received into the Anglican Church, so it must have offered substantial benefits. It seems the vast majority had done so as young boys sent by their fathers to study at mission schools, mainly to acquire knowledge and skills to enable them to participate in the advantages of the colonial state. As a result, in the late colonial and early independence periods, the Acholi occupied a significant percentage of civil-service positions (p'Bitek 1973). Russell suggested this emphasis on education explained why, after independence and the establishment of state schools, the number of formally registered Acholi church members dropped from 44,396 in 1958 to 32,110 in 1963, a fall of over 25 per cent²⁰ (Russell 1966, p. 18).

Although the initial pupils at Lloyd's first mission school had been sons of chiefs (1906), the majority of early church members seem to have come from poorer and more excluded social groups whose fathers grasped this chance to improve their position. Their sons formed the majority of those entering the civil service, some even being appointed chiefs by the colonial state to replace recalcitrant traditional ones (Girling 1960). This may help explain the small number of females joining the church, as women could hardly benefit in the same way, especially since there were far fewer schools for girls than for boys (Kitching 1935) and those there were tended to focus largely on domestic skills. As Lloyd wrote about Ugandan girls' schools more generally "[t]he education given to the girls is largely of a practical character, designed to make them useful wives and good mothers. All the housework, cooking, sweeping, and making of school uniforms is done by the pupils" (Lloyd 1921, pp. 55–56). In Gulu, the Catholic Church planned schools in which "boys will be taught agriculture and basic arts, whilst girls will learn home economics, so that all may live honest, dignified and independent lives"²¹ (Cisternino 2004, p. 62).

Such limited curricula in girls' schools may well help explain why by the mid-1920s, a mere two per cent of the formally registered Anglican congregation in Gulu District was female (Hewitt 1971, p. 279), although women were said to have been vehemently opposed to conversion from the earliest introduction of religion (Cisternino 2004, p. 324).²² Other missionaries considered the reason for the small number of female converts was that fathers did not wish to expose their daughters to alien influences that might destroy their adherence to family and tradition (Hewitt 1971, p. 279). A further probable cause was the colonial treatment of women as lacking in intellectual capacity, together with the reluctance of the British to employ them in formal positions so that girls did not benefit from education anything like as much as their brothers did (Bantebya and McIntosh 2006).²³ In other parts of Africa, young Christian women supposedly led much more tedious lives than their non-Christian sisters since they were not supposed to engage in any kind of premarital relations with men (Becker 2004); this may have further influenced Acholi women's reluctance to convert (cf. p'Bitek 1972). It is also unclear whether the proportion of women actually practising Christianity was this small and how far they were held back from asking to be formally received into the church by pressures from families or communities (cf. Prevost 2010, p. 99). Certainly, it appears that p'Bitek's mother was quite antagonistic to the new European ways, while his father was enamoured of the modern Christian lifestyle (p'Bitek 1972), from which he could presumably benefit far more than she. It may be indicative of the limited influence of Christianity on women that when in the mid-1960s, Anna Apoko, an Acholi

²⁰ A similar reduction was registered for the Acholi's near neighbours, the Lango over the same years.

²¹ Adapted by Cisternino from Fr. Daniel Comboni's 'Plan for the regeneration of Africa'.

²² Quoted from a 1907 CMS report by the Reverend Pleydell, now in the CMS archives.

²³ A similar situation appears to have occurred in Yorubaland, where male converts complained of being unable to find Christian women to marry (Oyèwùmí 1997, p. 128ff).

student at Makerere University, wrote an account of growing up in a village in Gulu District, she did not even mention religion, although this might also have been because she did not think it would interest her readers, who would presumably have been expecting to learn about traditional Acholi life rather than about a church familiar to them from elsewhere (Apoko 1967).

One apparent consequence of the lack of female converts was that rather than large numbers of men convincing their wives to become Christians, the latter only too often alienated their husbands from religion (Hewitt 1971, p. 279). This might help account for the fact that during Kitching's stint as bishop (1926–36), formal Acholi membership of the Anglican Church actually fell—from 9383 in 1925 to 8060 in 1935 (Russell 1966, p. 18).

Starting in the 1950s, the Anglican and Catholic Churches assumed an increasingly political role in Uganda, the two main parties being based around membership in one of these churches. They were now competing not just for souls but also for temporal power. A group of older Acholi men with whom I discussed the situation told me that in the 1960s, they and their friends had become Anglicans mainly to be eligible to join the Uganda People's Congress Party. They had had little interest in the theological side and had continued to practise their customary rituals unabated. They maintained that these were vital to the preservation of their culture as well as to their entire material and spiritual well-being. The rituals provided support, for instance, for bringing rain in times of drought and for healing the sick when western medicine failed. They also helped combat witchcraft, which was indispensable, considering the large numbers of witches in Acholiland. In other words, the rituals were far more useful for dealing with real-life problems than religion and were moreover integral to people's very being, unlike the white-men's churches—Anglicanism and Catholicism. They would never even have contemplated having anything to do with a church had it entailed abandoning their customs, they insisted.²⁴

4.3. A Civilising Mission

One of the main aims articulated by missionaries to Africa was to 'civilise the natives': to encourage them to behave in ways considered appropriate for Christians, that is, like Europeans (Bowie 1993; Hastings 1993; Labode 1993; Oyèwùmí 1997, p. 129; Prevost 2010). With this in mind, alongside religious teachings, missionaries attempted to inculcate new patterns of behaviour, mostly concentrating on a few specific issues related to morality, which turned out essentially to mean gender norms, both those linked to sexual behaviour and those that concerned (public) production versus (private) reproduction (Hall 1996, p. 72). In Acholiland, the main issues the missionaries were concerned about were public nakedness, bride price, and polygyny, although considerable stress was also placed on the notion of the male provider role.

While Lloyd's early impressions of the Acholi people were that they were courageous, independent, and had admirable self-respect, he was particularly struck by their lack of clothing—men wore only a small apron and some ornaments, and women even less, in contrast with the garments historically worn by the Bantu peoples of southern and central Uganda (Lloyd 1906). As a result, the first and most pressing change the missionaries demanded of their converts was to don sex-appropriate clothing to cover up the nakedness that clearly made the Europeans very uneasy and that they believed automatically led to immorality.²⁵

The wearing of clothing soon became a general Acholi practice not confined to Christians. However, it had its downsides. In particular, once girls started to wear clothes, boys no longer

²⁴ When in one of the villages where I worked, a local Acholi started a new Pentecostal church that banned all customary rites and rituals, this only succeeded because most of its congregation consisted of youths who had been denied the chance to learn about their own customs through having been raised in the camps and because the church provided compensatory rituals. The one custom they were unable to do away with was the payment of bride price, which the pastor had decided to integrate into their wedding ceremonies.

²⁵ This was a very common attitude among missionaries of the time wherever they worked, all appearing convinced that true Christians must wear appropriate clothing to prevent their engaging in immoral behaviour (cf. Gaitskell 2003, p. 136).

felt bound by customary notions of respect but started to treat their female peers as sex objects whom they seemed to feel entitled to molest (Kitching 1912, p. 201).²⁶ In other words, clothing draws attention to the erotic nature of the covered body parts in ways unintelligible among those for whom clothing is alien to their ontological perspective²⁷ (Davis 1991; p'Bitek 1970, p. 29). Moreover, some Acholi males seemed to have thought that wearing clothes made them too important to labour in the fields, since this had originated with the prestigious whites, and the first Acholi to put them on had been their chiefs. Kitching deplored all of this, considering the whole notion of clothing the Acholi to have been misguided. Lacking in any religious foundation, it was simply due to the “susceptibilities of Europeans” (Kitching 1912, pp. 201–2).

Since clothing had quickly become associated with prestige, it had not proved difficult to persuade the Acholi to cover their nakedness. To persuade them to abandon the payment of bride price, however, was a very different proposition since this had as important a ‘legal’ connotation for Acholi marriage as signing the register for British marriages (Hansen 1984, p. 267). Above all, it was about conferring paternity rights, since it was this that gave the lineage of the official father the right to claim the children produced by his wife.

Moreover, because it was not condemned in the scriptures, the church had no authority to do more than talk against it. Nothing effective was found to stop it, especially since no theological grounds for direct interference existed, so it was allowed to continue as a universal marker of Acholi matrimony. In the mid-1960s, Russell believed all Acholi men paid it, even those marrying in church (Russell 1966, p. 53).²⁸

Eliminating the practice of polygyny was almost as difficult a task. It was a defining element of African lifestyles far beyond Acholiland and moreover one legitimised in the Old Testament, as any Bible reader could see. Nevertheless, it was forbidden under British law, which had been exported to Uganda where it applied not to those contracting customary marriages but solely to men marrying in a civil registration office or in the church, the latter made possible by the licensing of ordained clergy as registrars as in Britain (Hansen 1984). Polygyny was also prohibited by European churches, since it directly contravened St. Paul’s proclamation that marriage was the exclusive union of one man and one woman.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Anglican Church in Britain disputed whether men in polygynous relationships should be permitted membership of colonial churches and in 1888 at the Lambeth Conference of worldwide Anglican bishops a judgment was made, strongly backed by Bishop Crowther, then the sole African bishop, comprehensively banning men in such relationships from baptism (Hewitt 1971, p. 43). A further reason for European opposition to polygyny was that it seemed both to suggest an enormous sexual capacity among African men and a denigration of African women. In fact, many missionaries and state officials viewed the entire African marriage system as one of sexual degeneration and perversion, considering material exchanges in relation to sex and marital relations as tantamount to prostitution (Jeater 1993).

Whatever the reason for the European dislike of polygyny, the issue remained contentious, especially because of the moral difficulty of dealing with existing wives and children if their husband/father were forced to abandon them and the tremendous opposition, particularly from African women, to men being obliged to do so (Hansen 1984).

During the early twentieth century, struggles over this occurred among the colonial state in Uganda, the British parliament, and the Anglican Church in both Africa and the UK, with missionaries even lobbying the CMS authorities in England to support the recognition of polygynous marriage

²⁶ The same phenomenon was noted among the Igbo of Nigeria (Leith-Ross 1939; see also Bateye 2008, pp. 113–25; Hastings 1993).

²⁷ Just as the wearing of long skirts in Victorian times made an exposed ankle appear sexy.

²⁸ Even today, no Acholi marriage is legal without it. After all, the entire clan-based land-tenure system depends on it (cf. Arnfred 2011).

by the Ugandan Church (Hansen 1984, pp. 260–79; Russell 1966, p. 52). The effect of the refusal to baptise polygamists was to keep many Acholi elites out of the church, since it did not provide sufficient recompense for relinquishing their ability to produce large families and thus increase their wealth (Girling 1960, p. 187ff), making the insistence on enforced monogamy a seriously limiting factor for bringing the Acholi to Anglicanism. Bishop Russell believed it would have been far better for Ugandan priests not to have been granted the right to act as marriage registrars and for the whole question of marriage to have been kept away from the church, thus removing an important barrier to conversion (Russell 1966).

Missionaries throughout much of Africa insisted on their converts adopting monogamy, with women as well as men finding themselves opposed to this, as also to the idea of marriage as a lifelong commitment. In the mid-1930s, for instance, when Sylvia Leith-Ross studied the Igbo women of Nigeria, she found many contradictions between the demands of religion and the realities of local lifestyles. “Christian marriage [was] a prison”, complained an elderly woman and long-time church member. One issue she raised was the years of sexual abstinence during and after pregnancy, which women used as a type of birth control, their husbands avoiding suffering from this through access to their other wives; without this, would men be able to prevent themselves from straying? Moreover, with children an absolute necessity, a man had to take a second wife if the first did not prove fertile. Third, if a Christian couple were incompatible, it was far more complicated to dissolve the union than the mere repayment of the bride price, which was all that was required to end a traditional union (Leith-Ross 1939, p. 307ff). Most of all, however, polygyny was the foundation of the entire ‘sociocultural order’ of African life and thus could not simply be abandoned (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, p. 132; see also Bowie 1993).

Indeed, polygyny had been an integral element in the pre-colonial African economy, since the more women of reproductive age and children a family had, the more land they could cultivate and the more wealth could be produced. As Jeff Guy explains (1990), this last was mainly accumulated in the form of goats, cattle and other animals, rather than, as in capitalist societies, of inanimate material possessions.

In other words, while presumably originating in the material need to provide the maximum agricultural labour power, as also to furnish those elites able to marry many wives with a large pool of allies (Peel 1968, p. 309), the gender norms that developed after contact with missionaries came to incorporate polygyny as an integral component of African masculinity. This was one of the chief ways in which even non-elite men could gain status.²⁹

As with the Igbo woman quoted above, Acholi women of the early twentieth century were apparently also opposed to monogamy. “Are there men enough to marry all the women if they only marry one each? . . . Are we always to do all the work with no one to help us?” were the main questions they posed (Kitching 1912, pp. 149–50). Moreover, polygynous women had more autonomy than monogamous ones as they ran their own mini-households (Girling 1960). Finally, the ideal of monogamy was particularly problematic for those wives whose husbands were forced to abandon them upon entering the church, thus depriving them of male support (Hansen 1984, p. 275; Hastings 1993; Prevost 2010).

Over the ensuing decades, Acholi women’s opinions started to change. For one thing, polygyny worked well when the limiting factor in a household’s capacity to prosper was labour. As land became scarcer and men began to take on non-agricultural jobs, polygyny lost its practical benefits, and large

²⁹ It is hardly surprising that even today, while many men cannot afford, and more educated urban residents may not want, more than one wife, polygyny remains an ideal everywhere I have been in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the northern Ugandan villages where I worked, most young Acholi men married a second wife as soon as they could manage it, even if they were already too poor to educate their children by their first wife. Christian men in central Uganda insisted this practice was legitimate because “we are Africans”, and a group of Christian youths I worked with in Kaduna, Nigeria insisted—“[a] man that has [only] one wife they call him a fool and he cannot help the community”.

families could become a liability rather than a useful resource. As a result, monogamy began to appeal to at least some Acholi women. In the 1960s, during Russell's time as Bishop of Northern Uganda, Christian women whose husbands wanted to marry a second wife used to demand the church stop them. However, the priests found themselves powerless to do anything about it other than to threaten excommunication, which according to Russell was rarely a deterrent (1966). One problem here was the fact that the church did not appear to treat Europeans and Africans alike. From 1963, the Profumo Affair, widely reported in the Ugandan press, was pointed to as evidence that the English did not practise true monogamy. Ugandans suggested it was outrageous to force cultural change and the abandonment of wives and children on Africans in order to compel them to behave in ways not truly accepted by Europeans (Russell 1966, p. 47).

By this time, the civilising mission had largely been abandoned. Bishop Russell was an example of the new breed of British clergy. He was convinced the church had made a mistake in putting so much emphasis on gender rather than on the spiritual side of religion. Perhaps this was because he did not go out to Uganda until the 1940s, when he was confronted with a very different reality from that encountered by Kitching and Lloyd when they first entered Acholiland and that presumably helped influence their conviction that one could only become a Christian after undergoing a 'civilising' process (cf. Oyěwùní 1997, p. 129). Moreover, Russell was one of the post-war generation of European missionaries who were more concerned to combat increasing secularisation in Europe than the 'barbarism of the East' and who saw indigenous churches in Africa and Asia as one means of doing so (Oliver 1952, pp. 232–33). All this may help explain why he was not invested in promoting European gender ideology as the earlier missionaries had been and why his take on the situation was so different.

5. Gender

5.1. Pressures to Make Change

The propensity to attend church while simultaneously refusing to abandon customary practices was integral to Acholi resistance to making the lifestyle changes the missionaries demanded, including those related to gender. When Lloyd and the other British missionaries first visited Acholiland, they reported women's status as high. Husbands "show[ed] a good deal of respect to their wives" (Lloyd 1906, p. 274), "the women being practically on an equality with the men, except occasionally when they rise to the height of henpecking their husbands" (Kitching 1912, p. 147).

Such views on the position of Acholi women seemed to make Lloyd and Kitching quite uneasy. On the one hand, they compared the Acholi favourably with other African cultural groups where they believed women were not as well treated. On the other, the idea of women having power over their husbands clearly upset their notions of the natural order. In Europe at that time, sexual equality was not regarded favourably, and strong manly leadership was a crucial mark of the true Victorian Englishman (Davidoff and Hall 2002). As a result, the missionaries taught Ugandan men that it was their duty to keep control over their wives (Bantebya and McIntosh 2006).

One sign of the importance of this to the Anglican Church was the law they managed to get passed in 1899 in Buganda in central Uganda making it illegal for women to leave home without their husbands' express permission, apparently in order to prevent their having illicit relationships with European men (Hansen 1984). As far as I am aware, no such law was ever applied in Acholiland, but the church's responsibility for its creation is strongly indicative of its position on gender ideology and the moral order at the time, including its belief in the importance of keeping women in their rightful place in faithful domesticity, where they would become appropriately dependent on men, who would thus be forced to work harder to provide for their families (Bantebya and McIntosh 2006).

Many early missionaries write about African women as if they were all treated badly by their menfolk. They discuss them as if equality were not only important in the Christian West but had already been achieved, while simultaneously refusing to admit female missionaries as equals (Bowie

1993; Hastings 1993; Prevost 2010). It is thus hardly surprising that the writings of those in Acholiland demonstrate considerable ambivalence; they seem genuinely to have wished to improve women's lot while being unclear what this might entail. Despite their observations regarding women's relatively high position, they appear to have regarded them as disadvantaged in a number of ways, first by having to work outside the home, especially in agriculture,³⁰ then by bride price, polygyny, easy divorce, and finally by not being treated as delicate creatures needing special courtesy from men, as was the ideal among middle-class Europeans of the era (Kitching 1912; Lloyd 1906).

This attitude was not confined to males. Even before her husband went to establish the Gulu mission in 1913, Ruth Fisher showed herself highly prejudiced against the Acholi, whose violent resistance to colonialism was viewed by her as the behaviour of 'cruel savages'.³¹ Mrs. Fisher clearly believed the church was the sole path through which Africans might be redeemed and insisted this was the only way to improve Ugandan women's lowly position (Fisher 1904, 1911), although this was far from what we would call gender equality today, and after all, the Anglican Church was strongly in favour of the domestication of women.³²

As p'Bitek suggested, at that point, the church had little to offer Acholi women since its tenets belonged to a distinct ontology that had minimal bearing on their daily lives (Imbo 2004). Moreover, in Acholi customary practices, far from being treated as inferior, women were as valued in the role of *ajwaka* or diviner as were men, even if fewer of them had the opportunity to take this on, since many of the rituals were place-dependent,³³ and the exogamous, patrilocal matrimonial system meant women married out of their clans and thus away from their natal villages. However, women seen as gifted in this regard were very much revered and on marriage the most respected were usually allowed to remain on their ancestral lands so as to be able to continue this profession, their husband coming to live with them rather than their moving to live with his clan as was customary (p'Bitek 1970).

Neither Mrs. Fisher nor anyone else from the time whose opinions I have read seemed to have noticed any contradictions between the observations of the early missionaries in Acholiland regarding the high level of equality between the sexes and the notion that conversion would improve women's standing, especially given the restricted notions of women's status held by Europeans at the time and their lack of formal opportunities to advance within the Anglican Church (Peel 1968). Their glory was rather to come from acting as helpmeets to their husbands.³⁴ Thus, while joining the church was vaunted as a path for women to improve their position, in reality, it effectively lowered it, since their husbands were simultaneously being taught to claim superiority over them.

As Mrs. Fisher's letter suggests,³⁵ feminine identities were not the only ones seen as needing to be changed—masculine ones did too. In Acholiland, as well as inculcating male control over women, missionaries joined with state officials in trying to alter the ways in which other aspects of manhood were conceptualised. Young men here had traditionally gained status through exhibiting prowess as hunters and warriors, older men through control over resources and the capacity for effective political

³⁰ In England at that time, such work was frowned upon for respectable women (Davidoff and Hall 2002).

³¹ In a letter to her sons at school in England written in 1913 as she and her husband were preparing to move to Gulu, Ruth Fisher writes: "King George's soldiers out here have just been out to fight some very savage people that live not very far from us. They are very cruel, they will not do any work; but when a man wants some meat he steals a goat from his neighbor's herd, and when he wants a servant he steals a little girl or boy, and when he wants to marry he waits about on the road and carries off the first woman he sees" (Cisternino 2004, p. 376). This nonsense was presumably based on rumours flying around among the British and totally disregards not only Kitching and Lloyd's favourable opinion of the Acholi whose lives they had observed in some detail but also the far more savage and cruel behaviour towards the rebels of "King George's soldiers", an invading force that caused the death of numerous African women and children as well as of men (Whitmore 2013, pp. 12–13).

³² It was in great part to facilitate this that the Mothers' Union was created to bring together Anglican women and teach them appropriate domesticity and overall gender performance (Prevost 2010, chp. 4).

³³ The limitations this last imposed may in fact have facilitated conversion to Christianity for Africans who had moved away from their places of origin and who were thus unable to benefit from their customary rituals.

³⁴ Although later women missionaries in central Uganda did try to raise the status of Christian women within the church there (Prevost 2010).

³⁵ See note 31.

organising. Nevertheless, at the time the first missionary station was established in Gulu, its chief cleric, Arthur Fisher, husband of Ruth, categorised Acholi men as “want[ing] nothing, wear[ing] nothing, and do[ing] nothing” (Stock 1916, p. 89).

The church saw such idleness and apparent lack of desire for improving their environment as detrimental to men’s characters, while the state was more concerned about the implications of this attitude for their ability to harness manpower to build critical infrastructure such as roads. Both institutions wished to enforce change—‘real men’ should display the capacity to act as breadwinners and disciplined soldiers. Although they were also employed in forced labour, the imposition in British colonies of taxes payable solely in cash was chiefly aimed at coercing men to engage in waged labour (Mamdani 1976; Silberschmidt 1999; Whitmore 2013), and the strict discipline applied to those recruited into the army had long been considered an excellent way to civilise the ‘natives’—that is, to introduce true manliness to these peoples (Baker 1874, p. 302). The missionaries were convinced both of these were good for men’s souls.

Acholi men’s main contribution to farming was clearing the land and preparing it for sowing, while women were responsible for most other agricultural tasks as well as for the majority of other productive and reproductive labour. Although the British tried to force Acholi men to grow cotton as a cash crop, imposing the requirement of a minimum area of cultivation, and encouraging them to sell it to meet their tax liabilities, many refused. In some cases it was their wives who complied. By growing this in their own right they were able to gain a personal income and so to improve their position within the family (Girling 1960) that seems to have suffered through the introduction of money when access to it was limited to men. Another way in which women were able to recapture some of their lost status was when husbands involved in seasonal migrant labour left their senior wives in charge of their households.³⁶ Through such means, some of the colonial pressures to reduce women’s status by raising that of men were counteracted.

By the 1970s when J.P. Ocitti wrote his book on indigenous education, it appeared an Acholi man was supposed “to have authority over his wife” and be “strong-willed” enough not to “be dominated by a woman” (Ocitti 1973, pp. 60, 96), suggesting it may not have been so easy for men to achieve this. In other words, it seems that while the notion of male authority over wives now existed, the women did not necessarily acquiesce to it. It is also unclear how far Ocitti’s description of masculinity represented pre-colonial ideology and how far it had been affected by pressures to assume Western-style gender norms. The latter is the more likely, since the author himself may well not have known what male-female relations had looked like before contact with Europeans.

Could it be that missionary attitudes towards women were a further reason for the latter’s strong opposition to conversion in the early days of the Anglican presence in Acholiland (Cisternino 2004, p. 324)? Combined with the emphasis on female domesticity and submission, did this contribute to limiting the numbers of women who became Christians, as well as explaining why in the 1930s, Acholi women might not have welcomed Bishop Kitching’s attempts to improve the religiosity of their home lives? Kitching put particular stress on the responsibility of the Anglican Mothers’ Union to teach wives how to keep their husbands happy and thus avoid divorce, with the overall aim of inculcating “a new heart and a new life” into the households (Kitching 1935, p. 36). However, his efforts apparently did little to increase the numbers of women formally received into the church during his bishopric.

5.2. The Influence of European Gender Norms

Contact with missionaries as well as with the colonial state certainly produced some crucial changes, in the first place by introducing the notion of European-style gender norms, even if most of them were never adopted. This included the concept of domesticity as the ideal role for women, which was and today still is irrelevant to most rural as well as to many urban African women.

³⁶ Personal communication from Professor George Openjuru of Gulu University.

As we have seen, men were also affected by the new norms. While on their first acquaintance with the Acholi, Kitching and others had considered them relatively egalitarian (1912), Ocitti (1973) and Girling (1960) suggest that by the mid twentieth century at least, male heads of household held a certain level of authority and expected all other members to obey them, despite women retaining a considerable level of autonomy (Girling 1960).

By the time I visited Acholiland, this had become a general expectation, while masculinity was also bound up with men's capacity to provide for their wives and children. Although the latter continued to carry out most productive work, this legitimised the idea that men had the right to make unilateral decisions on what to do with the crops despite their relatively small contribution to their cultivation. In the villages where my education project was carried out, this often caused considerable friction between men and their wives (Harris 2012a, 2014).

That the notion of masculine superiority arrived in Acholiland with the Europeans, and especially the missionaries, is further borne out by the fact that whenever men in the villages where I worked were asked about the issue, they would substantiate their position by citing Genesis, usually referring either to the story of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib or of Eve's responsibility for the banishment from Eden. This was not specific to these particular men. Some years before, Chris Dolan had had the same experience elsewhere in the north (Dolan 2002) and Ira Horowitz reports hearing the same story repeatedly from masculinity workshop participants in South Africa (Horowitz 2001). This contrasts with the fact that, in answer to all other questions about their lifestyle, Acholi customs would be called upon. It seems likely, therefore, that the notion of male superiority really did arrive in Acholiland through contact with Europeans.

6. Conclusions

By the time of the 1991 Ugandan census, almost all Acholi men and women counted themselves Christian—some 60 percent Catholic, most of the remainder Anglican (Ward 2001). Nevertheless, several decades later, as far as the economic situation permitted, my acquaintances among the villagers, all of whom claimed to belong to one church or other, continued to follow very much the same lifestyle as that noted by Girling and Russell.

So, what was it the Acholi were seeking when they joined the church? Was it mainly the opportunity to capture the advantages offered by the whites in terms of health care, education, and the chance to increase their power and wealth, as p'Bitek (1986) and Bishop Russell suggested (1966), or in later years to enable them to join a political party, as the old men in the villages where I worked claimed? Did they simply believe the Christian god would provide greater protection from evil powers than their customary practices could do (cf. Marshall 2009, p. 57ff) or was there really a desire for something spiritual beyond these? A yearning for the Christian lifestyle the missionaries were introducing? It seems likely the first provided the initial impetus for Chief Awic's invitation to Lloyd to come to Acholiland in 1903 but it is improbable that this could have been the reason for the mass conversions of the Acholi after independence. Christianity must have offered something more, something important that touched the lives of those who followed it, for motivations separate from their reasons for practising their customary rituals.

Was Russell right to suggest the church might have done better had they put gender issues aside and concentrated on bringing the Acholi to "find in [Jesus Christ] the only true Ground of their Being" (Russell 1966, p. 92)? Were Hastings (1967) and Kitching (1935) correct regarding the impossibility of leading a truly Christian life outside a Christian marriage—that is, about the crucial importance of adopting the gender ideals appropriate for one's religion? Or is a third position possible? Given the fact that Africans were rapidly making Christianity their own, as the small glimpse of Acholi life given here illustrates, would not the hybrid nature of their practices imply a similar adaptation of what Christian marriage might mean and with this of the kinds of gender norms that would be most suitable for it?

For most Acholi, their religious beliefs still co-exist with their customary rituals. The principle of male superiority is now deeply engrained in the population despite the stresses this has produced, particularly in the aftermath of the civil war (Harris 2012a, 2014). The Acholi continue to espouse their own style of marriage and family life; it is unclear how near these are to the “Christian marriage and family life” so dear to the hearts of the early missionaries (Hastings 1967, p. 162), but they definitely include both the institutions that were such anathema to them—polygyny and the payment of bride price—and women continue to carry out a very significant portion of all production. This suggests little has changed in the conceptualisation of women’s roles and that perhaps the main contribution of the missionaries to shifting notions of gender among the Acholi really was the institutionalisation of male superiority.

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