Researching the Ethics of Data Collection in Post-conflict Acholiland (Northern Uganda): The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Abstract
This research aims to contribute to debates on the decolonization of research in an African context with a focus on Gulu City in Northern Uganda. It seeks to investigate the key emerging contemporary ethical concerns in relation to researching post-conflict Northern Uganda, that is, before (clearance processes), during (conducting fieldwork alongside research collaborators) and after (information dissemination and data protection) research; examined with power relations as a denominator. The paper draws secondary sources, and primary data obtained through a set of qualitative research methodologies from research collaborators who have worked with foreign (Western) researchers. This study reveals the ethical issues and dilemmas that often precipitate the exploitation of research participants in the region. It also illustrates the dynamics of Uganda’s research industry and burgeoning research assistant culture and sub-economy. Finally, the research revealed the high levels of problematic data protection and storage issues in the region and the weaknesses of enforcement of data protection laws in the region and country. This points to the inconspicuous persistence of colonialism, oppression, and domination in systems of western research training and seek to include such an ethical understanding in their research practice.

Keywords
ethics, fieldwork, decolonization, research collaborators, focus group discussions, acknowledgements

Introduction
“Malakwang ka wac kiliyo”

In much of the world, researchers are addressing the coloniality of research (Chilisa, 2019; Datta, 2018). This article aims to contribute to debates on the decolonization of research in Africa with a focus on Gulu City in Northern Uganda. Decolonisation here is defined as an ongoing process of identifying and reversing coloniality in research (Battiste, 2017; Wilson, 2008). The paper asks: What are the key emerging ethical concerns in relation to researching post-conflict Northern Uganda, including before research, during research, and after research? It is crucial to examine these themes with power relations as a common denominator through an inquiry into practices of foreign researchers and their responses to reforms in ethical clearance processes, regulations, data protection laws, and collaboration with research collaborators in the region. The paper therefore elaborates how these themes play out in the context of Gulu City, which, in the post-conflict period, became an aid capital and hub for humanitarian and research activities (Laruni, 2014; Omach, 2016; Allen, & Vlassenroot, 2010; Branch, 2013; Curtis 2019 cited in Mwambari, 2019). This article is underpinned by a decolonial approach and is guided by the works of Smith (2021), Khupe (2014), Seehawer (2018), wa Thiong’o (1986), and Keikelame and Swartz (2019), Ndlouvu-Gatsheni (2018) and Mwambari (2021).

The terms “Global North” or “Western” scholars/researchers are used to refer to scholars from European, North American, and Australian institutions who are engaged in conflict research as outsiders. “Western” is representative of...
an archive of knowledge, systems, rules, and values extracted from and characteristic of Europe and the Western hemisphere (Smith, 2021).

I use “research assistants,” “knowledge brokers,” and “research brokers” interchangeably to describe research collaborators in Northern Uganda. Other terms used for this group include collaborators, cultural and linguistic translators, brokers, “fixers,” friends, and lovers (Ajwang’ & Edmondson, 2003; Hannerz, 2012).

The paper is organised thus: it first provides an introduction with a definition of key concepts and proceeds to explain the methodology, including contextualising my positionality. Second, it discusses Northern Uganda as a research hotspot, especially during the post-LRA conflict period. The paper then explores scholarship and presents findings on ethical issues that researchers encounter before, during, and after their fieldwork, unpacking local research clearance processes, data collection with research collaborators, and post-fieldwork issues around data protection and dissemination. In so doing, it advances debates in qualitative research methods particularly in conflict and post conflict contexts. It finally draws on the findings to provide recommendations. Each section begins with an Acholi saying. This is a deliberate choice given the topic I am writing about in an effort to bring indigeneity to bear on the discussion.

Methodology: Framework, Reflexivity, and My Positionality

“Te okono pe kiputo”

I draw upon my long-term fieldwork, interactions, and work with foreign researchers in the region. With over 15 years of experience spanning the conflict and post-conflict periods, I have worked with local and international aid organizations and have assisted numerous international researchers and PhD students.

My own data here was collected through a set of qualitative research methods, including fieldwork, participant observation, the use of oral tradition and indigenous approaches (including pwony me wang oo and odoo doo), focus groups discussions (FGD), and semi-structured interviews conducted in Gulu City between January 2005 and May 2020. The research therefore benefits from a long observational period that overlaps with the transition from war to peace in northern Uganda. For the most part, I cite data from research projects I participated in and from focus group discussions convened specifically to discuss ethics. In total, 47 people participated in the various research projects (32 during focus group discussions and 15 during semi-structured interviews, with 24 women and 23 men in total). All respondents gave informed consent for interviews, recordings, and photographs. Particular attention was paid to formerly abducted persons to ensure their views were reflected in the research, important because of how frequently they have been the subject of research projects in the region. Research respondents consisted of research collaborators, formerly abducted persons, NGO practitioners, community members, opinion leaders, and elders. Additional information was retrieved from workshops, conferences, and from the district archives in Gulu. The population of interest was the Acholi in Northern Uganda. This allowed data from multiple perspectives, providing several entry points into the research question. In all the studies, ethical clearance was sought from Research Ethics Committees and from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. Although I am from the Acholi in Uganda, I have spent some years studying elsewhere in Kampala and the United Kingdom, which complicates my positionality. Thus, I am insider in the in the sense that I come from the same culture and experienced the war like what many of the respondents have experienced. Yet, I have lived in the Global North and trained in Western methodologies, perhaps creating a distance between myself and other Acholi.

A colonialist cycle exists in knowledge production in which scholars primarily from the Global North, as Cusicanqui (2020) notes, appropriate the language and ideas of indigenous scholars in ways that marginalize indigenous scholars from their own debates and methodologies (Chilisa, 2019). My aim here is to highlight this dynamic and suggest ways of breaking this cycle. Additionally, I hope to explore alternatives to irrelevant, inadequate, impotent and stagnant Eurocentric and occidental approaches in research in the region (Santos, 2016).

Northern Uganda as a Research Hotspot during and after Conflict

“Adong pe ki mede ikom can”

Acholi sub-region was ravaged by civil war from 1986–2006, during which over a million people – the entire rural population of Acholi sub-region – were forcibly displaced by the Uganda government into internment camps, some for over a decade (Finnström, 2010; Dolan, 2009; Branch, 2011). War was a prominent feature in the life of the Acholi people of northern Uganda for over 20 years. Rebel groups, some with significant popular support, operated in the sub-region ever since the National Resistance Army under the leadership of Yoweri Museveni took over power from an Acholi-dominated government in 1986 (Branch, 2007). The NRA’s seizure of power effectively meant that, for the first time, socioeconomic, political and military power were all concentrated in southern Uganda (Otunnu, 2002). There are two underlying causes of the war. First, Uganda’s history of repeated power struggles following independence left a legacy of violent politics and militarism that is difficult to overcome, particularly in the north. Secondly, deep-rooted divisions between the north and south of the country have been
exacerbated by various leaders over the past 40 years and remain important issues in the minds of many Ugandans (Lomo & Hovil, 2004).

In the early 2000s, at the peak of the conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda, there were roughly 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in “protected camps” across districts in the Acholi sub-region (Atkinson, 2009; Dunovant, 2016; Pham & Vinck, 2010; Allen & Vlassenroot 2010; Anyeko et al., 2012). The civil war produced a protracted humanitarian crisis that saw the involvement of a plethora of humanitarian actors (Bozzoli et al., 2011; United Nations Development Programme, 2015). The LRA became internationally renowned for its brutal attacks and tactics, with the Acholi people bearing the brunt of the violence (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999; Baines, 2017). Further fueling this humanitarian crisis, according to some scholars, was the government’s unwillingness, or inability, to protect IDP camps, resulting in an ensuing “social torture” (Atkinson & Owor, 2013; Human Rights Focus, 2002; Dolan, 2009; Branch, 2011). The Acholi population was therefore subjected to two decades of counterinsurgency, mass forced displacement, and internal movement, as well as decades of intensive NGO intervention (Lamwaka, 1996; Omara-Otunnu, 1995; Branch, 2018).

In December 2003, the Ugandan governments referred the situation of the LRA to the International Criminal Court, which issued arrest warrants for the top five LRA commanders in 2005, resulting in wide-spread international news coverage (Mwambari, 2019). Many sources covered the LRA’s fighting tactics, the encampment of millions of the local population, the longevity of the conflict, the involvement of the international actors, and other human rights violations and abuses; such information contributed to the influx of international and national researchers to the region, often choosing Gulu as their base (Laruni, 2014; Omona, 2008; Mwambari, 2019; Mwambari & Owor, 2019).

The Juba peace talks began in 2006 but were suspended in 2008 (Pham & Vinck, 2010; Armstrong, 2014; CSOPNU, 2006; Omach, 2016). Although the LRA had been pushed out of Uganda, fighting resumed in late 2008 in neighbouring countries, taking on a regional dimension as the armed forces of South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo joined in a major offensive-operation “Lightning Thunder” – against the LRA (Schomarius & Tumutegyereize, 2009; Puijenbroek & Plooijer, 2009). Meanwhile, the security situation in northern Uganda improved, compelling the government to attend to the humanitarian situation.

Following the end of the conflict in northern Uganda, humanitarian workers continued to flood the region (Branch, 2013; Finnström, 2012, Divon & Owor, 2021), as is often the case in post-conflict situations (Bah, 2013). Consequently, academics of varying levels of seniority (including graduate students) visited, and continue to visit, Uganda either for their own research projects or as consultants for NGOs, developing their research profiles and creating new research entrepreneurs (Obbo, 2019; Schiltz & Büscher, 2018). Both researchers and research collaborators depend on accessing the war-affected community who survived, witnessed, or participated in the decades-long conflict. This context has seen the emergence of what I term the “big boys” of northern Uganda - referring to mostly white male senior researchers from the Global North whose work has come to dominate literature and texts about conflict and post-conflict Uganda. Much of their work has ended up in prestigious international journals and books edited by academics from the Global North, replete with recommendations on how to do things better in Africa (Sumathipala et al., 2004; Iyer, 2018; Chaccour, 2018).

### Locating the Debate: the Ethics of Researching in Conflict and Post-conflict Contexts

“Ryeko pe pa ngat acel?”

Decolonial scholarship has recently become commonplace in certain academic contexts (Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022; Bhambra, 2014; Santos, 2016). At the same time, the proliferation of decolonial projects has given rise to warnings about the tendency to simply jump on the “decolonial bandwagon” (Moosavi, 2020). Social scientists in both the Global North and South are renewing their demands for recognition and for the decentering of epistemologies away from largely Eurocentric knowledge (See Chakrabarti, 2000; Connell, 2007; Patel, 2010; Shilliam, 2011). Theories from the South have gained potency. These theories are seen as an endeavor to attain intellectual justice as a pre-requisite for other forms of liberation including in political, cultural, ontological, economic and social spheres (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2018). Indeed, Santos (2014) defined epistemologies of the South as ‘a set of inquiries into the construction and violation of knowledge born in struggle, of ways of knowing developed by social groups as part of their resistance against systemic injustices and oppressions caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy’ (See also Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni similarly emphasizes epistemic freedom, arguing it is important to unmask hidden Eurocentric epistemologies. A section of decolonial scholars have further argued that there exists a ‘European game’ (Fanon, 2001) that manifests in epistemic and ideological trickery - an ‘under-side’ laden with violence and violations (Ibid). Others have maintained that Eurocentric epistemology was and continues to be used effectively in the invasion of the African mental universe (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Wa Thiong’o, 1986).

Situated in the decolonial paradigm, this article interrogates current research processes in a post-conflict setting. Maldonado-Torres (2011) defines decoloniality as the dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender and geo-political hierarchies that took shape in the modern/colonial world.
Mignolo (1995) saw this as a struggle to bring into existence another interpretation that brings forward, on the one hand, a silenced view of events, and, on the other, the limits of imperial ideology which claims to be the true (total) interpretation of events in the making of the modern world.

Moreover, scholarship on insider-outsider relations in research also exists (Giwa, 2015; Basedau, 2020). The role of insiders (mainly research collaborators) in guiding, translating, and providing raw data for research projects run by outsiders has been well elaborated. Questions abound as to who benefits from these knowledge processes in a system dominated by knowledge production practices from the Global North. Discussions about who should take the lead on decolonization and how allies can engage without reproducing colonial power structures are ongoing (Land, 2015; Smith, 2021). As Smith (2021) notes, research involves power. Even with buzz words like “partnership,” “collaboration,” co- and “co-production of knowledge,” decolonial scholars have noted that too often, research still segregates ‘knowledge from the people, from its contexts and local histories’ (Battiste, 2010; Santos, 2014; Mignolo, 2009). It is against this backdrop that this article must be read.

Magwa and Magwa (2015) defined research ethics as a system governing the conduct of researchers carrying out investigations. Chikoko and Mhloyi (1995) noted that ethics has to do with respect for human rights since it involves considerations such as fairness, honesty, confidentiality, and respect for individual dignity. Many researchers now engage and recognise the importance of following ethical guidance at the university level and in the countries where they work. But what do they do when the process is set up to reject applications on sensitive topics or on topics that will embarrass the fragile government or security services in delicate contexts? This section explores ethical concerns throughout the research process, including unethical practices, such as the blatant disregard for ethical requirements, and ethical dilemmas, such as situations that present the researcher with ethical options that conflict with each other.

**Research Clearance: Registration and Approval**

“My university will not cross-check whether I ever got clearance from the Research Ethics Committee and the UNCST. I am also optimistic that there is no way the President’s Office would follow me up to monitor my study. Let us go ahead and do data collection, after all, I will not stay around long enough for me to get apprehended” (PhD Researcher, Gulu Town, 2019)

Evidence from a focus group discussion noted that some foreign researchers proceed to conduct research without relevant clearance, with one respondent saying:

“We have worked with foreign researchers, and we have noticed that they normally do not go past the level of ethical clearance from Research Ethics Committees. Many of them pointed out that the process of clearance with the UNCST was torturous and not worth it as they had limited time to spend in the field (Research Collaborator FGD Participant, Gulu Town, 2019).”

In this first extreme of the spectrum of possible research engagements, we find the foreign researcher who feels entitled to disregard ethical considerations, a position championed by Wilson (2018), who dismissively refers to such considerations as the “ethical principles of neoliberal academia.” In a controversial article titled “Sabotaging Development: Subverting the Censorship of Renegade Research,” Wilson (2018) gives his own example of being detained by the police for investigating failures of a Millennium Development Goals project in Uganda. He shows that his own thinking is consistent with “subterranean academic tradition of covert research” which does not adhere to established rules of research methods. Thus, he concludes that ethical engagement in the field relies “not on the automatic application of programmatic rules, but on examining the ethical implications of process and outcomes in the context in which the research is done” (Spicker, 2011: 127–128, quoted in Wilson, 2018:24).
Wilson is, of course, responding to genuine challenges that impede the collection of quality data. Yet his solution to these issues considers only the needs of the outsider and disregards the ethical responsibilities that researchers from the Global North have toward respondents, as well as to their local knowledge broker counterparts. Their counterparts live and will remain in conflict settings to face the consequences once the outsider leaves or is protected by their intersecting race, class or gender privileges. Wilson gives seven principles that should guide so-called “renegade” researchers: (1) Do not seek ethical approval from your university; (2) Do not apply for a research visa from the host government; (3) Do not ask for clearance from the institution being studied; (4) Do not request informed consent from research participants; (5) Tell lies whenever convenient; (6) Pay bribes whenever necessary; (7) Steal information whenever possible. This seems to be particularly so when dealing with totalitarian regulatory bodies. Wilson seems to propose a model of research that decides on its own ethics contrary to the laid down procedures in line with existing institutional and community ethics.

On the second end of the spectrum, the researcher might face a conundrum when researching sensitive issues. Due to Northern Uganda’s post-conflict status, some topics such as corruption and human rights that cast the government in bad light are deemed sensitive. The sensitivity of a matter is determined by the regulators, namely the Research Ethics Committee, UNCST and the President’s Office. I have encountered dozens of researchers whose clearance efforts were frustrated by these oversight bodies.

While researchers largely accept the rationale for ethical oversight (Klitzman, 2011; Nind et al. 2013), there is however rising concern regarding the perceived bureaucratization of ethics through Research Ethics Committees’ regulations (Hammersley, 2009). This includes the applicability of the prevailing biomedical-derived model of research ethics governance (Hoeyer et al., 2005; Rice, 2008; Dingwall, 2008; Blee & Currier, 2011; Schrag, 2011), raising particular concerns when the research involves qualitative or ethnographic methods (Burr & Reynolds, 2010; Bond, 2012; Morrell et al., 2012).

From one of the focus group discussions I conducted in Gulu with research collaborators, it emerged that there were several cases where the Office of the President had been hesitant in clearing research on so called sensitive topics. According to one respondent,

“I remember one time when the issue of corruption at the Office of the Prime Minister in the refugee settlements was exposed, a research project I was to undertake with a researcher from one of the universities in Europe was blocked. We had undertaken all the process that UNCST desired but were frustrated by the Office of the President” (Research Assistant FGD Participant, Gulu Town, 2019).

The above anecdote highlights profound ethical dilemmas that some researchers have had to navigate. It is also possible that the denial of research clearance on the grounds of the sensitivity of the topic has led to an increase in the number of researchers deliberately ignoring research clearance. In summary therefore, ethical issues may stem from unethical behavior on the part of the researchers on one hand, or from researchers having to weigh between fulfilling community and institutional ethics due to excessive control by research regulatory bodies.

**Fieldwork: The Agency of Knowledge Brokers in Researching Northern Uganda**

“Icwako ogwang iweko gwen”

Lindquist (2015) defines a broker as someone who gains something from a particular exchange or transaction, whereas the patron controls that which is exchanged. This is particularly interesting in the context of this study considering the varying ethical requirements and interests of researchers, research participants, and research collaborators (Bouka, 2018; Mwambari et al., 2021). Branch (2018) notes that the research assistant culture is still prevalent in Africa. The UNCST Research Registration and Clearance Policy Guidelines provide a national system for harnessing the benefits of research while ensuring that rights, interests, values, and welfare of research participants are protected (UNCST, 2014). However, it is silent the on the roles, obligations and qualifications of research collaborators. This section analyses the agency of research collaborators vis-à-vis academic qualifications and the silence of UNCST guidelines on their roles and involvement in academic research. It also examines how the prevailing culture between local research collaborators and researchers from Global North institutions results in unethical practices, some of which the local research collaborators may themselves be implicated in.

Regarding education level and qualifications, it emerged from the interviews that there is no general standard or consensus on the desired level of education of research collaborators. One senior research collaborator asserted:

“Research assistants possess various qualifications. The majority are graduates from universities and institutions in and out of the country, but increasingly there are fakes who are joining the practice based on the networks and connections they possess. These lack qualifications and do not possess the requisite skills for undertaking research” (Local Research Collaborator with over a decade of experience, Gulu Town, 2019).

One key respondent disclosed that nepotism by host organisations was responsible for the unstandardised recruitment processes, saying:

“There is negligence in the way research in the region is being conducted. Qualified research assistants are not sought by the agencies hosting the foreign researchers, and instead those with no
expertise are normally seconded by heads of these agencies on the grounds of nepotism. Such people do not understand the scope and methodology. They fall short of these requirements in research and as such are complicit in engendering unethical behaviours while in the field” (Key Respondent, Gulu Town, 2019).

The reason for such unscrupulous behaviour was explained by another research collaborator:

“The fakes and quacks are drawn into the profession because of its perceived lucrativeness. Collaborators are paid on an hourly, daily, weekly, monthly or contract basis. To make this even worse, the fees payable to research assistants is not even standardized” (Research Assistant FGD, Female Respondent, Gulu Town, 2018).

Schiltz and Büscher (2018) examined the role of brokers in conducting research in (post) conflict contexts, revealing how brokers, in pursuit of opportunities and in trying to meet expectations of other actors, use strategies such as concealing information rather than facilitating the research project. There is a general consensus that research becomes more difficult when it is conducted in problematic situations like war or post-conflict environments and that this requires additional and particular ethical considerations (Thomson et al., 2013; Rimando et al., 2015).

Even though UNCST guidelines emphasize the importance of a system that promotes beneficial research and guards against unethical research, the above remarks point to the silence of the regulator on practices surrounding research collaborators and host institutions. These examples expose the difficulties engendered by this grey area in legislation which can have adverse effects on research outcomes.

Research collaborators play a key mediation role which includes bridging gaps in language, through translation and even offering remedial language lessons. One respondent reiterated the importance of research collaborators in the smooth running of a research project, saying:

“You are interacting with people who are sometimes not well educated but quite knowledgeable on the subject matter. They know the local language, the culture and are therefore critical in gathering information” (Key Informant, Gulu Town, 2019).

This study revealed a huge appreciation by local communities of foreign researchers who learnt and spoke the local language during their research engagements. However, some research collaborators were of the view that they had to take on an extra role of teaching researchers the local language while at the same time facilitating interviews. This was at times seen as disruptive to the flow of interviews, leaving the participants flustered, as explained below,

“They (foreign researchers) often interrupt the flow of information during the interview with back-and-forth questions to the research participants and to the research collaborator. This diverts the attention of the research respondents and complicates the research process. I have to do double work to restore the flow of the interview. As a research assistant, you sometimes want to ensure the researcher learns the language on job, and so you find yourself in a dilemma.” (Key Informant Interview, Gulu, 2019).

Language carries culture and therefore its importance in research cannot be underestimated. However, we seem to be moving in the direction that wa Thiong’o (1986) implies, of the colonizers who are using language as the means by which the ‘mental universe of the colonized’ is dominated. According to wa Thiong’o, the vast majority of researchers come speaking the language of the colonizers and the fact that people still answer them relates to wa Thiong’o’s point. Regional and national research ethics committees have, however, set the condition that research tools be translated into local languages for the benefit of respondents. Therefore, the consideration of culture in all phases of the research process and the promotion of the ethical sensitivity of cultural research enhances its validity and explanatory force (Goyal et al., 2017).

The other aspect of culture that research collaborators grapple with is linked to the subtleties of the ‘do no harm principle’. It is common for researchers to follow national regulations and guidelines in relation to institutional ethical requirements, but they are not as meticulous when it comes to community ethics. One area where problems sometimes arise is that of attire. Acholi culture values modest dress, and researchers’ choice of clothes can influence the way their participants respond to their research participants. Acholi culture chastises indecent and overly revealing dressing and as one research collaborator noted,

“In most cases, the research collaborator would be held responsible for failing to orient the researcher with appropriate dressing code for fieldwork. There is a gender dimension to it. Women are treated in harsher terms as the Acholi culture is still highly patriarchal” (Research Collaborator, Gulu Town, 2019).

This raises an important and complex point about the relationship of class, patriarchy, and power which can be seen in the context of coloniality. Research collaborators are left to navigate and juggle a complicated mix of community and institutional ethics.

There are also concerns about culturally inappropriate questions being posed to research participants in post-conflict situations (Key Informant, Gulu Town, 2018). This concern also raises ethical considerations, as culturally inappropriate questions can potentially cause psychological harm to research participants. One of the participants from a meeting with civil society actors stated,

“They keep asking problematic questions like, “How many wives do you have?”, “Would you marry your husband if he returned from captivity?”, “How many did you kill while in captivity?” and
“Would you be happy to return to the bush?” (NGO Practitioner, Gulu Town, 2018).

Another research assistant who has conducted research on culture, added that,

“Research assistants themselves are sometimes not sensitive to culture and lack a sense of judgement to determine the extent of information that should be given by respondents, especially elders. In most cases, they push respondents to open up beyond limits. (Research Collaborator, Gulu Town, 2019).

Research collaborators have to contend with the pressure ‘to get the answers’ that foreign researchers want in this competitive marketplace of knowledge production. As such, although research participants have a right to protection against research-related harm (UNCST 2014), culturally inappropriate and unethical questions continue to be posed to them.

Lastly, research fatigue is a pertinent concern in fieldwork. The region has been, many argue, overresearched, which is especially a concern in this conflict and post-conflict context where children were abducted and respondents have been interviewed in numerous research projects (Clark, 2008; Koen et al., 2017). In part, research collaborators were held responsible, especially when they repeatedly led researchers to the same research participants on virtually the same research topics. On the other hand, research fatigue was also blamed on research funding agencies from the West for setting their agendas on the same research topics, in this case, conflict. Numerous western calls for funding have specifically targeted war-affected respondents. One respondent from a focus group discussion said,

“So many researchers come through NGOs and research assistants. These keep referring foreign researchers to the same respondents. They come from the US and European countries” (FGD Respondent, Gulu Town, 2018).

Another respondent lamented,

“Most of us who were Kony’s wives have returned, and we are many, why am I the only one being looked for all the time? You people will cause me death, and who will look after the children I returned with?” (Key Informant, Gulu Town, 2019).

Meanwhile a community respondent on a 2019 study on ex-combatants lamented,

“What do you want from this home? You are only working for the money and do not care about us. What other information do you still need from us? May our children’s blood money work against you.” (Community Respondent, Gulu Town, 2019).

As has been observed by researchers in the region, for instance Mwambari (2019), community members bemoaned over-research and held the perception that research collaborators and researchers are profiteering from the pain of war-affected families. In the final analysis, research collaborators face challenges, pressures, and ethical dilemmas in the course of their work. The pressures for them are two-fold: from both the community and from the western researchers they work with. The communities feel that if research collaborators are being paid, shouldn’t communities be paid too for participating in a research project? These expectations are normally associated with respondents’ participation, which not only shapes informed consent but also creates its own dilemmas, such as whether people should be compensated for the time that they give to a project.

At the same time, pressure is exerted by researchers to meet targets, even in situations where the methods being used could be unethical. Examples include conducting research in bars and without informed consent of the respondents, which may at times lead research collaborators to act unethically.

According to Kaomea (2004, 43), research done in indigenous settings should contribute to healing and empowerment. It should involve the return of dignity and the restoration of sovereignty, and it should ultimately bring formerly colonized communities one step further along the path of self-determination. Moreover, decolonising research requires that research be carried out in sensitive and culturally appropriate ways (Swadener & Mutua, 2008, 31). Datta (2018) argues that decolonising research training is culturally appropriate and effective for both the participant community and the researcher when conducting research with indigenous communities.

Data Protection, Ownership, Sharing and Storage: a Case of Data Imperialism?

“Aweno pe kilaro ki won tol12”

The UNCST (2014) guidelines state that data ownership shall be negotiated by collaborating partners and used in accordance with the host organisation’s data use and ownership policies. It further states that ownership of data shall be clearly stated in the research protocol or collaborative research agreements reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee and registered with UNCST. The guidelines additionally and explicitly indicate that researchers shall ensure that research records from which the data has been obtained are available at the research site for at least 5 years after the completion of the research project.

That notwithstanding, Northern Uganda continues to be a goldmine where valuable data is extracted and exported at the expense of vulnerable and expectant respondents in the region. The manner in which data has been protected and stored should therefore be seen in the context of power, privilege, and (dis)respect. In many cases, entire data sets and records are not only stealthily but blatantly exported to the Global North much to the disadvantage of the host organisation and
respondents. This is a violation of not only National Guidelines for Research involving Humans as Research Participants (UNCST 2014), but also the Data Protection and Privacy Act 2019. Data protection and storage involves safeguarding important and sensitive information from loss, compromise, or corruption, which includes recognizing the importance of the operational backup of data.

There was compelling evidence from one of the community-based organisations that hosts foreign researchers who confessed to being ignorant of prevailing data protection and privacy laws in Uganda. The respondent said,

“We are not well versed with data protection policies and laws in Uganda. In most cases, we leave the responsibility with the foreign researchers and research assistants. We assume they know all this” (NGO Staff Respondent, Gulu District, 2018).

Also related to data protection and storage is the question of participants’ confidentiality. In many post-conflict contexts, the right to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality becomes of utmost importance, which requires the data processor to ensure data is protected and not misused in-country or abroad. In one of the interviews with research collaborators, one noted that

“We always surrender all the information and documents to the researcher after the research project has come to an end. This is normally after payments for services rendered to them by us have been concluded” (Research Collaborator, Gulu Town, 2018).

This is suggestive of the fact that many research collaborators end their engagement with research data after payment has been made. They may not be mindful of what happens thereafter.

Another major concern related to data protection has been how domestic data legislation supplements or conflicts with existing foreign laws. In the words of a key research collaborator,

“Foreign researchers impress it upon us that their European Union data laws are superior to ours and that they would rather adhere to their laws as opposed to host countries’ data protection laws. As such, they always bypass our national data protection laws, and this creates a problem.” (Research Collaborator Interview, Gulu Town, 2019).

The response captures the general sentiments expressed by several interlocutors about data protection and storage:

“Power relations in knowledge production favoured foreign researchers. It is as though we, the research participants, seem not to have a right to keep information and data about our communities that are frequently being researched by foreign researchers. If we are to take stock of that information and data, we would actually be astonished at how much data has been actually stolen from the region and exported in unethical ways” (Research Collaborator, FGD, Gulu Town, 2019).

Further evidence of the lack of data protection and unethical research emerged especially pertaining to researching formerly abducted persons. The profiles and photographs of these study participants were being handled and showcased in questionable ways by foreign researchers. One interviewee noted,

“Some Community-Based and Non-Governmental Organisations mortgage important profiles and files of formerly abducted children with expectations that this would translate into project or donor funding for their organizations the in post-conflict situation. This puts the lives of these people formerly abducted children in jeopardy. This is sometimes being done without the knowledge of relevant authorities and the UN CST which is responsible for issuing research permits” (Key Informant Interview, Gulu Town, 2019).

Indeed, in one of the informal conversations with youth, they termed this the business of selling and buying research data in Acholiland, through which researchers are enriching themselves from tragedies of the everyday people and victims of the LRA insurgency, which constitutes an offence under the Data Protection and Privacy Act.

The ‘white saviour syndrome’, historically linked to colonialism and the ways in which colonialism is still understood within Uganda (Key Informant Interview, Gulu Town, 2018) was also singled out as an enabler for data extraction. There is a section of the Acholi society who have been aid beneficiaries during and after the conflict and therefore do not fault foreign researchers (Interview, Gulu Town, 2017). This is because research respondents have expectations of money, good living, and exposure, which if not met, leaves them with deep disappointment. The dependency syndrome is deeply entrenched by distress from the conflict. The extracted information is used to develop new project proposals, fueling this vicious cycle.

As much as the UN CST requires dissemination of research findings, a typical dilemma occurs when the researcher needs to share findings that are critical of the government, or those that go against societal beliefs, for example on gender dynamics and power relations between men and women as a human rights concern. In the words of one research collaborator from a focus group discussion:

“Here in Acholi, researchers cannot even begin to disseminate findings for example on LGBTQI rights or even on issues like the involvement of government soldiers in massacres during the conflict” (Research Collaborator, FGD, Gulu Town, 2018).

In another instance, one research collaborator faulted technicalities and economic barriers in the dissemination of foreigners’ research outputs, noting,
“They often publish their work in high-level journals and books, which are never accessible by research participants. The books and articles are sold exorbitantly, costing several dollars and pounds. Moreover, you have to find the books on Amazon and on other sites and overseas libraries. There is a lot of exploitation in knowledge production in the region. This is the new form of capitalism” (Research Collaborator, Gulu Town, 2018).

Indeed, it is often difficult to translate technical jargon and academic terms to the communities where research has been conducted; nevertheless, researchers could use their discretion to determine what information will be of value to a community. UNCST could make it a requirement for researchers to produce an output that can be understandable and available and physically reachable to research communities.

Technically, access may be limited by language, academic jargon, and power dynamics. Even in cases where articles are open access, they may often be inaccessible to the research respondents due to lack of internet access. This is a subtle expression of coloniality (Smith, 2008, 126), whereby, due to persisting colonial dynamics, “something gets lost”. The “something lost” in this case includes indigenous knowledge and culture, which Chow (1993) terms as “endangered authenticities.”

**Recommendations**

Following the challenges highlighted in the preceding sections, I recommend the following:

i. UNCST should review its guidelines for conducting research with a view to undertake necessary reforms to provide a conducive ethical framework for conducting research in Uganda. Further, in line with decolonisation agenda of knowledge production, research collaborators and host organizations should be trained on the provisions of the policies of the UNCST. In asserting their agency, research collaborators should transition from merely data collectors to researchers and begin to interrogate and report the exploitative and extractive nature of research in the region (Owor, 2020).

ii. Relevant authorities and agencies as well as communities should ensure compliance with existing institutional and community ethics not only by researchers but also by research respondents. In particular, protection for formerly abducted persons should be ensured.

iii. A union for research collaborators is proposed to strengthen their bargaining powers.

iv. Mechanisms through which research collaborators can voice concerns and lodge complaints about the projects they are involved with should be created.

v. A change in culture towards recognizing that research collaborators are peers and sometimes more knowledgeable than researchers. They therefore should be complimentary rather than subordinate to foreign researchers.

vi. The UNCST should become more autonomous. A “one stop point” must be seen in practice.

vii. Research outputs should be disseminated to the locals and respondents. Efforts should be made by researchers to ensure this requirement is fulfilled.

viii. Researchers and research collaborators should desist from conducting research among over-researched and fatigued communities. Efforts should be made to reach respondents who have not been reached.

ix. Researchers and research collaborators should embrace arts-based methods that take into consideration the active and full participation of respondents.

**Conclusion**

“Dwon odiyo Pilato”

This study has highlighted the ethical concerns and dilemmas that arise from unethical research practices in the region. It has also pointed to the fact that many senior and junior researchers in full knowledge of requirements for conducting research in the country unabashedly choose to ignore national/regional regulations and guidelines. It was evident that the research industry and research assistant culture is prevalent. As the community emerges from the ravages of conflict, many research collaborators are still vulnerable and are easily compromised by promises of financial gains. Finally, the research revealed the high levels of problematic data protection and storage practices in the region and the weaknesses of enforcement of data protection laws in the country. It exposed the vulnerability of local development organisations and their underhanded practices in the search for funding. It also highlighted the behind-the-scenes acts of continued exploitation, extraction, and exportation of data from unsuspecting research participants in the region, thereby raising questions of how the relevant public authorities should be awakened to these realities: the political economies of knowledge and data production in northern Uganda. This points to the insidious persistence of coloniality, oppression, and domination in systems of western research training and seeks to include a more decolonized ethical understanding in their research practice. Finally, the paper has advanced debates in quality research methods by highlighting key emerging ethical concerns in relation to researching post conflict Northern Uganda before, during and after research through an inquiry of practices of foreign researchers and their responses to reforms in ethical clearance process, regulations, data protection laws and in collaborating with research collaborators in the region.
Probable Areas for Future Research

i. Further research should be conducted to ascertain whether regulating activities and qualifications of research collaborators creates gate-keeping that excludes knowledgeable and talented research collaborators without formal qualifications from engaging in research. Questions as to what is a fair standard and how standards can be created without imposing unfair gatekeeping can be realized.

ii. Unionization for research collaborators and researchers and how this affects knowledge production process is also another area for future research that is proposed by this study.

iii. The tension of the UNCST-responsible for protecting the (study) population but often protecting the government interests is proposed for future study.

iv. Finally, the study proposes that the re-westernization of research through re-invention of buzzwords like co-production and co-creation should be studied further. This is to explore how robust these buzz words are in practice when research findings and questions continue to be formulated and analyzed from the global North.

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Notes

1. When vegetable soup (malakwang) is too sour, it must be distilled with a view to make the vegetable palatable—meaning that something bad should be fixed. In this regard, when research is being conducted wrongly, it, too, should be fixed.

2. The stump of a pumpkin plant in an old homestead should not be uprooted. This helps to draw attention to the importance of one’s roots and heritage with regard to positionality in conducting research.

3. Fireside teaching with elders, necessary for bringing originality of Acholi traditional customs through heritage.

4. Stories were useful as a means of triangulating Eurocentric methods that undermine local knowledge and experiences of marginalized populations.

5. An impoverished person should not be assaulted. The saying is used in Acholi to mean do not make for somebody’s troubles. In this context, the region coming out of war should not be subjected to more troubles (harm from unethical research practices).

6. Please see Sverker Finnstrom, Living with Bad Surroundings: War and Existential Uncertainty in Acholiland, Northern Uganda (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University Press, 2003); and Adam Branch, “Neither Peace nor Justice: Political Violence and the Peasantry in Northern Uganda, 1986–1998,” African Studies Quarterly 8, no. 2 (Spring 2005) for more on the causes of the war.

7. This is a proverb from Okot P’Bitek implying nobody has a monopoly on knowledge and that it is always important to listen to the opinions of others. The saying justifies the need for researchers to carry out literature review.

8. This translates to one wearing a shoe when one has thorns in the feet. It is deployed in this context to refer to a torturous and lengthy process in pursuit of registration and approval of research with the Research Ethics Committees and the UNCST. This may be adding pain to the already existing injury in the pursuit for ethical clearance.

9. For a discussion of similar issues in the context of Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, see the Bukavu Series (2019).

10. Research Ethics Boards were mainly created to protect ethics in the sciences and not in the social sciences.

11. This translated to means do not support the bad element which is the fox and condemn the chicken. In this context, there is always a risk of supporting research collaborators who in some may be the ones responsible for some unethical practices.

12. No one should dispute the ownership of a guinea fowl with the owner of the snare in which it has been caught (in reference to data theft in the Acholi region). The indigenous and native Acholi as well as research respondents own the data from research.

13. Proverb with roots in the Bible used here to mean from the Romans compelled Pontius Pilate to convict Jesus Christ. It is used in this context implying unethical practices are numerous and abound in Acholiland. There is need to reform these unethical practices.

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