

COMMENTARY: Disabled People of Eastern Uganda: The Case of the Jopadhola Lwo Indigenous People

Abstract

There is need for the study of disability among Indigenous people. Indigenous knowledge is not whole without the study of disability within. Too much emphasis only on what the Indigenous people know or what they do differently may further subjugate knowledge about how disabled people resist their marginality. Societal discrimination of disabled people among the Indigenous African people can only be addressed when their voices are heard or when they make themselves visible as it is in this paper.

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The plight of disabled people has been overlooked due to their marginalization in the society. This paper prefers the use of “disabled” rather than “people with disabilities” in an attempt to give the real picture of marginality through disability. It is not easy or almost impossible to give solutions to a problem called by a “softer name” or a more academically correct name. My interest in Indigenous African knowledge particularly among the Jopadhola people of eastern Uganda as a focus group has led to this knowledge on disabled people. For the purpose of this paper, I am using an Indigenous theoretical framework. Disability and how it is managed among Indigenous people is knowledge that should not remain hidden, but rather be examined critically in trying to find how marginalized people’s knowledge can be accessed in to fight disabled people’s marginalization itself. As we are keen on documenting or promoting Indigenous knowledge as an alternative to colonial education, it is also necessary that in the course of the study of the marginality of this body of knowledge, other aspects of marginality from within must also be examined or tackled. It is this marginality of the disabled people within an indigenous group of people that must be critically examined, in order to present the “full” knowledge by resisting marginality from within that will encourage change of attitude and practices globally. Disabled people from Indigenous communities have counter knowledge on how they resist marginality which can be learned and shared globally. Moreover, intellectual unawareness of discrimination towards disabled Indigenous people, is itself a negative societal discrimination, which is reinforced through mutations or lack of interest in this area. The method of collection for data is through oral interviews that uses pseudonyms to protect the identities of participants.

This topic about disabled people among indigenous African people is unique because without talking about their marginality, we are in danger of losing out on alternative knowledge and thereby promoting only the Euro-colonial knowledge or

solutions for diversities. For example, we may fail to learn from the efforts of Indigenous people where they use Indigenous medicine and other ways of to bring about the whole healing and acceptance among the disabled people (see also Smith, 1999). This short study is informed by five interviewees as willing participants who answer questions in their local Lwo language which is then translated into English to give a more accurate picture of a non-western society and the challenges that disabled people face in such a society (see Odonga in *Lwo dictionary*, 2007; Abdi, 2010).

The interviewees are people who live in a typical Ugandan African society who consider themselves Indigenous, thanks to some positive aspects of technological innovations in the expansion of knowledge production and research. The interviewees are members of African extended families primarily with Indigenous education. All the people interviewed also have high school education; at least two of them have post-secondary education and have served in professional fields. There is a former business woman and other mainly retired people. Overall, they are elders in an African context and now live in the rural areas with homes there. In the Jopadhola Indigenous society, when people retire from their professions in urban centres, they return "home" in the village. Urban centres are not considered "home." Assurance has been given to them to the effect that what they have shared will not be used against them and their individual identities will not be revealed except that they are members of the Jopadhola Indigenous society. The names used are pseudonyms only for ethical purposes. This is despite the fact that almost all of them do not object to being identified or published (see Battiste, 2008).

Background of the Jopadhola People

The Jopadhola people generally face marginality in Uganda because of their smaller numbers in the geographical area dominated by the Bantu speaking people. On the other hand, the minoritized status of the Jopadhola makes them a very distinct group settled among the Bantu ethnic groups with whom they share no linguistic relations. Hence their Bantu neighbours

are part of the dominant linguistic groups of Uganda. The Jopadhola, on the other hand, are a branch of the Luo linguistic groups that are scattered in Ethiopia, the Congo, the Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, northern Uganda and Chad. The Jopadhola, therefore, live in eastern Uganda and are detached from their fellow Lwo linguistic relatives. The Jopadhola realize that they have survived in linguistic isolation and consider this linguistic self-isolation a point of strength as they have retained their Lwo culture, customs and language in the midst of "strangers." Previously, the Jopadhola Lwo speaking people have succeeded in assimilating some of their neighbours at the boundaries because of their constant desire to expand following times of wars and epidemics. (See Ogot, 1967.)

Scholars studying the Lwo speaking people attest to the fact that the Jopadhola Lwo speaking people have lived in eastern Uganda since 1500s (Crazzolara, 1951; Evans-Pritchard, 1966; p'Bitek, 1971; Ogot, 1967; Oboth Ofumbi, 1960). History, linguistics evidence and oral knowledge clearly tell us that the Jopadhola regard the areas of their settlement as "the Promised Land" and are descendants of the ancient Luo and Koch kingdom, also known as the Cush kingdom in English, that was situated between Upper Egypt and Northern Sudan. Together with other Luo groups, the migration of Jopadhola southwards was along the Nile River. They are also among ethnic groups sometimes classified as the Nilotics. Various reasons or theories are given for the Luo migration and the disintegration, but some of the main reasons were to preserve their identity and be able to practice their culture without interference into their belief systems. Some of the triggers for migration, recorded orally in the Luo songs, were the invasion and the destruction of the Koch or Cush kingdom and the encounter with brown coloured people, who might have been Arabs (see Evans-Pritchard, 1951; Crazzolara, 1951; Diop, 1974).

Social Organization of the Jopadhola and How the Disabled Live

The Jopadhola are organized in exogamous clans, for example, the Sule clan, Oruwa, Koi, Koch, Nyapolo, Nyirenja, among various other original thirty-two clans (Oboth Ofumbi, 1960;

Ogot, 1967). [A clan is a group of families or extended families considered close blood relatives.] According to the elders, the Nyapolo clan are originally the priestly clan. *Polo* means heaven or sky. The clans continue to co-exist peacefully and have never fought each other. This Jopadhola peaceful co-existence is in contrast with the Kenyan Luo whose clans have uneasy relations with one another especially over land rights (Ogot, 1967). On the other hand, amidst the harmonious co-existence of equality and mutual respect among this Indigenous people, are the disabled people who are sometimes treated differently and have to struggle to be a part of the mainstream society.

For example, participant Odoi contends that the disabled people are usually not desired among the Jopadhola. The general well-being of a disabled child rests with the clan where religious beliefs are very strong. The unity of the Jopadhola is informed by their belief system whereby there is a monotheist religion with people worshipping one God called *Were*. The people also strongly believe that God is in heaven or the sky (*polo*). But God is sometimes worshipped through *Bura* houses or *Odi Bura* (see Ogot, 1967). However, the negative side of this belief system is that a severely disabled person is believed to be “a punishment from God.”

With the belief that a disabled child in the extended family is a “punishment from God,” a child that was severely disabled was to be thrown away as “a bad omen” or a monster. The belief system has not changed, but disabled people themselves have to fight for a place in the society and sometimes prove themselves that they are relevant.

According to two interviewees, Odoi and Owere, such a child, in the past, was likely to be put in a clay pot and abandoned in a swampy area or *saa* and left to die. Such a practice fulfilled the requirement for the necessary ritual cleansing to try to put away disability from the clan and to avoid stigmatization. This however, does not happen anymore, but general attitudes towards severely disabled people may not have changed, because sometimes they are still likely to be abandoned.

Moreover, the fact that there is more than one interviewee who mentions the throwing away of severely disabled children, depicts a general

societal attitude towards disabled people, that they are not “desired” as there are people who still fear social stigmatization and consider it a shame or a bother to care for a disabled person. On the other hand, the fear of stigmatization has not stopped the birth of disabled children in the community. And rather than fear stigmatization, the people need to educate themselves on how to live with and care for disabled members of their families.

Whereas the Jopadhola still maintain a strong monotheist *Were ma diedipo* religion in their society, participants have not indicated that this kind of ritual cleansing still thrives any longer. Worth noting is that previously this “cleansing” targeted the severely disabled child and it was the clan’s responsibility to cleanse itself to avoid a whole clan’s stigmatization by other clans. Such stigmatization still leads to the shunning of the members of a particular clan for generations and also affects future marriage partners should such a clan be regarded as an outcast to be ostracized. The Jopadhola live in clan systems that regulate and scrutinize their choices of partners for marriage. If someone knows something negative about a clan into which his or her relative is marrying, they usually bring out the information so that such a person might be discouraged from marrying into such a clan. The Jopadhola call it *achune* whereby something negative about the future partner’s clan when revealed will likely have profound effects (see Oboth Ofumbi, 1960).

A Successful Disabled Person, Simeo

On the other hand, and on a positive note, with regard to disabled people among the Jopadhola, one participant Alowo admits to having had a successful disabled person in their extended family in the 1940s. According to Alowo, Simeo, the disabled person in her family was a gifted and experienced weaver of cloth. Simeo, Alowo says, practiced cloth making using his hands, even though his legs were severely disabled. Simeo stitched by hand, manufactured cotton clothes for the whole extended family and others in Padhola community. An extended family among the Jopadhola meant a very large family because of the practice of polygyny where families lived in one big homestead. [*Polygyny* is the state or practice of having more than one wife

or female mate at one time.] There are usually very many cousins who are as close as or even closer than brothers or sisters. Polygyny is still in existence in the Jopadhola community, just like in many Indigenous African communities.

In the extended family, because of his trade Simeo, was well respected so that his disability was overlooked because he was gifted in the art of making clothes. He was paid monetarily in addition to being honoured. Simeo was so successful so that even though he “crawled” on the ground, both limbs being severely disabled, he was wealthier than most people in the community, many of who were farmers or pastoralists. According to participant Alowo, much earlier even before Uganda’s independence from Britain, Simeo already had acquired a sewing machine and expanded his trade in the cotton growing community. The significance of the cotton growing community was that after the sale of cotton by farmers to the ginnery, everybody wanted new clothes for the festive seasons of Christmas and the New Year. In addition, there were other occasions that the Jopadhola people celebrate, like the birth of a new born child, a marriage, ceremonies for welcoming twins, the bumper harvest festival or the last funeral rites for their dead. All people participating in such ceremonies, required Simeo’s services in sewing for them new clothes, thus giving him honour despite his physical disability.

Moreover, Alowo reports that Simeo made white tunics for the better off members of the extended family. Some family patriarchs who were wealthy traditional chiefs were Simeo’s clients and made use of his products. For example there was a wealthy man owning more than two hundred heads of cattle. Such were the customers of Simeo. There is an argument that Simeo could only have been saved from the more extreme challenges of other disabled people because he came from a strong family that believed in him and encouraged him to develop his talents rather than marginalize him or discriminate against him. The resilience of Simeo can also be attributed in part to his own determined efforts in refusing to live a life constructed for him, against his will.

As the first interviewee, Odoi also notes, the good or bad treatment of a disabled person depends on his family. For the case of Simeo,

the family loved him and recognized his talents that they all benefitted from. On the other hand, among the Jopadhola, disabled people from poorer families or smaller families, according to Odoi, are sometimes thought of as “useless, not productive and troublesome.” They are branded as “cursers” who pray for others to become like them. They were originally, according to Odoi, ostracized, isolated in a separate house. For example, those disabled by leprosy were and still are thought of as a curse. Leprosy is also considered contagious through a leprosy person’s saliva. No one wants to go near the leprosy person or share the same plates with them. [Leprosy is not regarded as that contagious Participant Odoi contends that another person can only contract leprosy if he or she comes into close and repeated contact with fluid droplets from someone who has had no treatment.]

The Disabled Resist Marginality Through Songs

Interviewee Odoi, moreover, notes that children with leg disability were at first most often not taken to school or hospital, with some of their relatives going to the extent of “praying for them to die” to rid or relieve themselves of a burden. However, in the midst of all the marginalization of the disabled, there are people who have accepted the disabled people and actually care for them. According to Odoi, some few people take interest in disabled people. Owere, an elder, notes that currently, the disabled people are aware of their mistreatment, so that they, especially the disabled children among the Jopadhola, have coined a song whose theme is resistance to this ill treatment. Their song goes like this in Dhopadhola language: [“Dhopadhola” is the language of the Jopadhola people.]

A Song About Resisting Ill Treatment

*Wan bende waji
Onywole wan be pa ji
Waki chali nyithindho man
To wamito kony*

*Wafwoyo jonywole
Ma miyo wa kony
Kada wakeneni
To wanyalo kisoma*

Translation

*We are also people
Born as people
Though we are not like other children
We need help*

*We thank the parents
Who give us opportunity and help?
To help ourselves
Even if we are blind
We can still read*

Participant Owere says that things are now changing and the blind can read and the deaf and dumb can speak and communicate and express themselves when taken to schools where sign language is taught. The blind are now given walking aids and the “cripples” can move when given wheelchairs, crutches and they are being facilitated in doing what they must do to better their lives. In the Padhola community, disabled people are sometimes referred to as “cripples” rather than use their names. A mother can refer to a child as “*angolo parani*.” [Translation: “*my child is beloved though disabled.*”]

Another interviewee, Opio, admits that there are negative attitudes among the Jopadhola towards disabled people. Opio says that the community initially did not medically treat the disabled as “people.” They were stigmatized as “wasted.” Opio agrees that disabled children used to be thrown away as a burden. Sometimes, disabled children were given away to sympathetic relatives to take care of them. They were overtly disliked. Opio goes further and gives a song in the Jopadhola society, about the disabled people. He says that they are traumatizing songs that are spiritual and have certain spiritual impacts. The meaning, if captured by the hearers in the society, gives an opportunity for the emotional healing of the singers who are disabled. Most songs of the Jopadhola are satires and have deep meanings and are powerful tools of communication (see Oboth-Ofumbi, 1960, Ocholla-Ayayo, 1980). The area itself where the Jopadhola reside was named after a war song, *Widoma*, meaning “you are in trouble.” Just as the war song was directed at their neighbours who are not their linguistic relatives, even so, there is a song that the society directs at the disabled people. However, the disabled people also have a song through which they mock the society’s stigma toward them. (See Crazzolara, 1951; Oboth-Ofumbi, 1960; Ogot, 1967.)

A Song to Mock Society’s Stigma of Disability

*Jangolo jambusa
Jangolo jambusa
Bedi ikingoli
Di bedo nedi*

*Otundi ri bende, Nyamera
Otundi ri bende, Nyamera
Were ber Nyamera
Were ber Nyamera
Ber ma atundo reye mwaka
Joma ber, majolama amatho
Ani mangoli
Achowo reye mwaka*

Translation

*A disabled person is proud (complicated)
A disabled person is proud
If you were not disabled
What would you be like?*

Disabled Person’s Reply

*Disability could come to you too
My sister/brother
Disability could come to you too
My sister/brother
God is good, my sister/brother
God is good, my sister/brother
It is good that I have reached the year end
Able-bodied people are the ones who die
Me who am disabled I have reached the year end
God is good, my sister/brother*

Indigenous Efforts to Treat, Manage Disability

Despite the stigmatization that the disabled people have faced among the Jopadhola community, according to participant Opio, there are now more efforts in using Indigenous medicine to treat many conditions of the disabled people to help them. For example, there are medicines roasted, put in leaves or herbs and used to massage the disabled people; when applied consistently these are said to cure the cause of the disability. This means the Jopadhola have alternative knowledge and medicines or mechanisms to accept and manage disability. There are is also

actual love for the disabled in the community. Sometimes this alternative treatment is used to reduce pain and manage other conditions of disability. Knowledge about medicines to treat disability is shared freely in the community. If one person knows someone who knows the herbal medicine he or she tells it to another. For example, Opio says that there is medicine pounded using a pestle and mortar, put in warm water and used to massage the disabled child or person, often with good results realized and the condition is stopped from developing further.

According to participant Opio, for the blind, there is medicine in herbs; liquid medicine is put in the eye as eye drops that leads to the eye seeing again. Again this is knowledge shared freely among the Jopadhola community. Another indigenous medicine known to help the disabled, according to Opio, is that one for treating humps on the back. These herbs are put into warm water, and the person with the hump on the back is massaged until the back becomes flat or "normal." There is also a known Indigenous medicine for treating polio in early and later stages, that the disabled people are massaged with some good results, according to Opio. Furthermore, while on treatment, the affected persons are given walking sticks for support until they walk about by themselves unaided.

In summary, participant Odoi points out that the blind are especially badly treated within the Jopadhola community. But there is also medicine for clearing the eye sight, which Opio says are native eye drops. Even though the blind are sometimes robbed of their money and are probably more disadvantaged than the deaf among the Jopadhola people, there are those willing to help them, with the changing attitudes. According to Odoi, the situation of the blind also depends on the family. If they are from a rich family they are taken care of. There is now also help from the government, but accessed mainly by organized groups, but not on an individual level. When disabled people are made aware of these organized groups, they too benefit. At present, there are schools for the blind and deaf. Odoi stresses that the disabled people are traumatized and face discrimination in the kind of food they are given in the community. Asked how, Odoi replies that, even a wife can mistreat a disabled spouse, "as people get tired of disabled people." The wife can give him food that is not of his choice because he does not see.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the disabled people among the Jopadhola people in eastern Uganda have come a long way and still have a long way to go in fighting their marginality. The practice of throwing away disabled children has been stopped. But the community needs total change in their attitudes towards disabled people whom they must accept. The monotheist religion that the Jopadhola practice has united the clans for harmony and their peaceful co-existence. However, the same belief system can sustain the stigmatization of the disabled people, especially when it is believed that the birth of a disabled person is "a bad omen." It is also within the community that the disabled people have started active resistance to their marginalization. Moreover, despite the situation of the disabled people among the Jopadhola people not being particularly addressable, there are structures in Padhola that stipulate that disabled people must be looked after by relatives who must accept them. The Indigenous medicine for treating conditions of disability must be examined more and promoted since knowledge about it has always been in the community. Disabled people must be accepted in their communities and encouraged. One positive aspect is that the disabled people constantly resist marginality as the songs indicate and are fighting for recognition and access to services. They are also organizing to access government programs to aid their daily living and survival.

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