

## **Research Collaboration and Co-Production with Indigenous Knowledge: Debating Deforestation, Drought, and Development in Uganda**

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There is today a new valorization of indigenous and traditional knowledge in political theory, in sustainable development practice, in climate change adaptation and resilience, and in collaborative international research agendas. Globally, it seems that much of this new interest emerges from the conviction that indigenous peoples' thought and practice can present solutions to the unprecedented threats that humanity and the planet face today with the Anthropocene. This is partly based upon the view that the fine-grained local knowledge and sustainable ways of life of indigenous peoples, including relational understandings of the natural and social worlds, represent solutions and alternatives to the ravages of modernity and global capitalism. Thus, there are calls for engagement with indigenous thought and practice by climate scientists, disaster preparation and development practitioners, and others committed to human survival and development today.

Within British developmental discourses on Africa specifically, the turn to an interest in indigenous thought and a commitment to research and practical collaboration between British academic and development professionals and African indigenous peoples appears to be relatively new. It can be situated within a broader emerging emphasis on international research collaboration and co-production of knowledge between British and African universities and researchers, which has been given particular emphasis with new funding streams such as the GCRF, but is widely found in Research Council funding calls and in many UK universities' growing attempts at intellectual and institutional engagement with African university and research partners. Having been part of these conversations during Branch's tenure at Cambridge and in his previous tenure at Makerere, and Ocen's career as a PhD student at Makerere and now as an independent researcher involved in international networks and collaborations, we have seen that the reasons for this turn are many, as are the ways it is being carried out. Within this broader emerging emphasis on UK-Africa research collaboration and co-production, indigenous knowledge specifically may be becoming more prominent, as this workshop and some existing GCRF grants are testament to.

However, what the expanding interest in research collaboration and co-production of knowledge with indigenous peoples in Africa will mean in practice is not self-evident; nor is it to be taken for granted that this interest will necessarily represent a productive and progressive step forward in advancing equitable, just international knowledge production. Indeed, there are existing histories of European interest in and engagement with indigenous thought and practice in Africa, histories that are entwined with colonialism as well as with neoliberalism. It is therefore crucial to interrogate the meaning of the expansion of indigenous knowledge interventions into African contexts through an exploration of the history and theory of the discourses on indigenous knowledge in the continent. This essay seeks to contribute to this historicization and critical theorization of the question of

indigenous knowledge for research towards sustainable development in Africa, based upon an engagement with different literatures and upon our own research on climate change in northern Uganda, begun in 2017 and continuing to the present.

First, a note on the term “indigenous” itself in African contexts, since its history in this region is distinct from its histories in other regions and there is a danger of imposing visions of indigeneity developed elsewhere in the world despite their very different resonance and implications in Africa. A systematic account is needed, but at first glance, it appears that the term “indigenous” is used in two ways in the international discourses on indigeneity<sup>1</sup>: first, to refer to marginalized groups such as the Tepeth, the Twa, the Ik, or the Khoisan, who depend for their livelihoods on pastoralism, hunting-gathering, foraging, or basic subsistence farming, whom identify themselves as indigenous, and to whom are attributed claims of inhabiting certain areas before the arrival of other dominant ethnically-defined groups – for instance, in the case of the Twa, the arrival of the Hutu and the Tutsi – the latter identified with the repressive imposition of power and political and economic modernity. Second, it is used to refer more broadly to all African peoples subject to European colonialism, and thus is largely coterminous with the colonial category “native.” In this latter usage, indigenous as “native” is often equated with “traditional”, as all of pre-colonial Africa is imagined as being “traditional” and thus resistant to European modernity and possessing distinct forms of thought and ways of life that colonial modernity has disrupted and sought to repress. This view sees contemporary Africa as still defined largely by the continuation of this “traditional” realm in the midst of colonial and post-colonial modernity. Thus, many of the debates with resonance for the question of indigeneity in Africa have been carried out around the question of “tradition”, as the “traditional” has been understood to define what is inherently, indigenously, African. In addition to these two articulations of “indigenous” in Africa, there is another, post-colonial, history of the category of indigeneity in Africa – or autochthony, in much of the Francophone debates – as we address below. We see this post-colonial discourse in Rwanda, for instance, where claims of Hutu indigeneity, and claims that Tutsi were dangerous non-indigenous settlers in Rwanda, enabled Hutu power to build its authority and to motivate the genocide. Indigenous is always a relative term, and a highly charged political term, and the relations of power and violence it will be mobilized to support cannot always be assumed to be progressive or emancipatory. Therefore, given the risk that today’s valuation of indigenous and traditional knowledge in Africa could continue legacies of colonial knowledge production or reproduce neoliberal structures of international knowledge injustice, we seek to ask how the idea of collaboration with indigenous or traditional knowledge might provide a footing for emancipatory, just knowledge production and practice today.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, “Indigenous Peoples in Africa: The Forgotten Peoples?”, 2006, [http://www.achpr.org/files/special-mechanisms/indigenous-populations/achpr\\_wgip\\_report\\_summary\\_version\\_eng.pdf](http://www.achpr.org/files/special-mechanisms/indigenous-populations/achpr_wgip_report_summary_version_eng.pdf). *Cultural Survival*, “Being Indigenous in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/being-indigenous-21st-century>

## I. Colonial Indirect Rule and the Politics of Indigeneity in Africa

Today's engagement with indigenous and traditional thought by mainstream Western development and governance thinking is not new. It was the late 1980s when indigenous thought was first valorized by some international development practitioners as an instrument for locally grounded development, based upon a dichotomy between "indigenous" and "traditional" thought versus "Western" or "scientific" thought. The development program based upon that dichotomy was already subject to critique by the mid-1990s (Agrawal 1995). The World Bank itself launched its "Indigenous Knowledge for Development Program" in 1998 to "help learn from community-based knowledge systems and development practices, and to incorporate them into Bank-supported programs" (World Bank 2004, vii). It, too, was based upon an effort at the instrumentalization of indigenous or traditional knowledge to promote development; in its words, it was searching for "local pathways to global development".

In many African contexts, the extraction, specification, and utilization of putatively indigenous or traditional thought for the sake of development and progress has an even longer history, beginning in the colonial period. Then, indirect rule colonialism, especially as practiced by the British, was founded upon the claim that Africans should be governed under traditional, "native" institutions and law. Thus, British indirect rule mounted a massive project of extracting, systematizing, formalizing, and then imposing what they deemed to be traditional "native" systems of law, government, land tenure, and custom (Mamdani 1996; Chanock 1985). Indirect rule colonialism was based upon the racist idea that Africans were not ready for a rapid entry into modernity, which would leave them unmoored, vulnerable, and prone to conflict and social and cultural breakdown as traditional forms of knowledge and culture were dissolved or marginalized by the sudden incursion of the market and formal legal systems, European-style education, and representative political institutions.

To "protect" Africans from modernity, British colonial anthropology was enlisted to undertake a massive enterprise of discerning the supposedly traditional institutions, laws, and customs of what they designated as different "native" African "tribes", so that Africans could better understand their own customs and be effectively ruled by them. This is an early instance of European researchers claiming to be engaged in the co-production of knowledge with "native" or indigenous peoples for the sake of their development; supposedly traditional institutions and customary forms of law were to be extracted and then supported by European social scientists to render indigenous communities "resilient" before the onslaught of global modernity within colonial rule. Adaptation to the modern, scientific world and knowledge was to be gradual, as small bits of European knowledge would be introduced to African communities, enabling their gradual "civilization" and adaptation to the modern world – but by building upon their own traditional knowledge, an early form of "local pathways to global development". This makes clear the importance of recognizing that an agenda of valorizing and systematizing indigenous knowledge in Africa through co-production, towards promoting "indigenous" resilience in the face of destructive modern global forces, will not necessarily be emancipatory, since this was the guise that colonial rule itself took in many contexts. This again highlights the importance of placing the concept and practice of indigenous knowledge in its political, economic, and social contexts.

Other dimensions of the particular history of the concept and practice of “indigenous” and “traditional” thought in Africa should give us pause before deploying it in our neoliberal era. Sociologically, there is an extensive literature on the “invention” of “tribes” and the invention of “tradition” in Africa – indeed, in the area of northern Uganda where we work, many historians and anthropologists believe that the group that today goes generally under the name “Acholi” was created as a tribe by British colonialists at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Indeed, the designation and institutionalization of a massive number of distinct tribes was at the heart of colonial rule, as it was intended to fracture one potentially threatening political identity – the colonized, who constituted an overwhelming majority – into a countless number of different, mutually opposed, minority tribes, each with their own supposedly “traditional” knowledge system, laws, institutions, language, and economic and cultural practices (Mamdani 1996). The indigenous tribe under indirect rule, and its knowledge, institutions, and customs, were said to be timeless, without history, unable to change from within – what has been called the Hegelian vision of Africa.

African history over the last 300 years has been deeply shaped by migrations in and out of the continent, both the forced enslavement of millions of people and their deportation to the Americas as well as the forced immigration and settlement of Europeans and Asians during colonialism. But Africa, of course, is also a continent with long histories of internal migrations, with constant mixings of different communities over time. This long history of often hospitable and sometimes violent internal migration was then overlaid by the more recent history of forced imposition of European rule. This complex migratory history thus complicates the very idea of indigeneity in Africa. It is true that indigeneity could serve as the basis for anti-colonial struggle when the oppressor was an obvious recent arrival, clearly demarcated spatially, racially, politically, and culturally. The category “native” could provide the basis for demands against settler colonialism for a return of land to the dispossessed, as was seen, for instance, in Kenya. A clearly racially defined settler and ruling class, which based its power upon the right to rule over racially-demarcated “native” tribes, found the discourse of indigeneity turned into a weapon for collective resistance and basis for claims of self-determination, as Fanon and others have described.

With the end of colonialism, however, the politics of indigeneity became more complicated and potentially dangerous. The idea of land belonging to the original, native, inhabitants of that land, which had provided a basis for anti-colonial revolt when used against recent European immigrants, then was sometimes turned inward against those demarcated as unwanted internal foreigners. Ethnically-defined groups, often along the tribal lines entrenched or invented by colonialism, turned claims of indigeneity against each other, often with access to land at stake. Claims of indigeneity have thus been the basis of waves of ethnic violence, expulsions, and even genocide. They have been used to expel South Asians from Uganda in the 1970s, to disqualify presidential candidates from elections, to justify authoritarian rule in the name of African tradition in Zaire, or to subjugate certain members of communities marked as different but who had long been assimilated or enjoyed relations of negotiated co-existence. The dangerous politics of nativism imposed during colonialism have led to indigeneity and autochthony being used as a language of power, claiming for itself the mantle of justice. This is not universal, for in some cases, claims of indigeneity still can provide a language of resistance against overbearing power, as

in the cases of the Khoisan or Twa, facing a history of colonial and post-colonial marginalization and oppression. But even in these cases, the idea that they are somehow the “original” inhabitants is subject to historical and political debate. Thus, there is the question of to what extent “indigenous” is analytically or politically useful in a continent defined by centuries of migrations, of palimpsests of peoples brought together by consent and by force, who have little option but to live together in the future.

## II. From Ethnophilosophy to Traditions of Knowledge

Colonialism defined the “native”, indigenous African through the idea of the “traditional”. Therefore, there are significant lessons for the contemporary valuation of African indigenous knowledge and practice to be found in the long-standing debates in African Studies, specifically in African philosophy, over African “traditional” thought. These debates were launched by the critique by Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji and his deconstruction of what he disparagingly termed “ethnophilosophy.” In his seminal work of the 1970s, Hountondji interrogated the 1945 *Bantu Philosophy* by the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels. Hountondji identified this text as representing ethnophilosophy, which he termed an approach that “aimed to reconstruct a particular *Weltanschauung*, a specific world-view commonly attributed to all Africans, abstracted from history and change and, moreover, philosophical, through an interpretation of the customs and traditions, proverbs and institutions—in short, various data—concerning the cultural life of African peoples” (*African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 34). Ethnophilosophy, according to Hountondji, was based on the idea that non-literate, oral societies needed the systematization of their knowledge into a proper philosophical system, which could only be done by someone from outside the system, who had tools of Western scientific reason and philosophy. Ethnophilosophy thus claimed to be a kind of co-production of systematized indigenous knowledge taking place between European philosophers/ethnographers and “native” Africans.

However, Hountondji argued, this claim to co-production, to a genuine engagement with African modes of thought, is actually premised upon an unequal determination of the ethnophilosophical text, such that “The white scholar’s discourse is based here on the black man’s silence, and this, in turn, is the outcome of a long historical process that remains unquestioned.” Hountondji makes clear the entwinement of power and knowledge in the textual production of putatively traditional African thought, the entwinement of politics and epistemology. At the heart of ethnophilosophy is the idea of “unanimism,” which posits an “immutable, ahistorical and inert” African tradition and social order that all in that society adhere to (77). A belief in the unanimism of traditional thought is based on the “refusal to accept that a non-Western society could contain a plurality of opinions that might conceivably diverge” (78), he writes; ethnophilosophy thus employs “the ideological conception that non-Western cultures are dead, petrified, reified, eternally self-replicating and lacking any internal capacity for negation or transcendence” (165). As a result, the ethnophilosopher believes that “in a ‘primitive’ society thought never has any real subversive effect” (80), and that there is universal, consensual, spontaneous conformity to a singular social order. There are no revolts or resistances from within; this leads to “the same

pervasive ideological assumption: in a non-Western culture, change can only come from outside” (164). To the ethnophilosopher, such change is usually identified with Westernization, and thus a harmful falling away from pure “tradition,” based on “the exclusive valorization of a simplified, superficial and imaginary blueprint of cultural tradition” (162). The resonances with indirect rule are clear.

Hountondji dismisses this ethnophilosophical myth and the way in which “traditional African civilization . . . is used to mean ‘pre-colonial African civilization.’” This equation of “traditional” with “pre-colonial” implies an absolute disjuncture between traditional and modern. On the one hand, there is a precolonial, supposedly pure and un-changing African “tradition”, which is valorized as representing a truth of specific “native” peoples, the truth of their organic relationship to the land, to nature, and to the cosmos. On the other, there is colonial and postcolonial, supposedly Western, modern, non-“traditional” forms of culture and thought, which are not attuned to nature, cosmos, and being. Legitimacy in the present is thus granted by the ethnophilosopher to those assumed to be the contemporary representatives of this “tradition,” those supposedly uncorrupted by modern ways of life and thinking, who are typically older men. But, Hountondji concludes, the ethnophilosopher is only, if anything, identifying a dominant practical ideology of a given society, which is then projected as the universal worldview for that society.

Hountondji’s response is to reject the putative singularity and unconscious character of African traditional thought and the epistemological and political valorization based upon it. He calls on philosophers to, “instead of ‘African traditional thought,’ consider ‘African traditions of thought’” (xxiv), where those traditions are themselves plural, contrasting, and conflictual, and not identified with a singular world-view based on a pure, unchanging precolonial essence. He bases this call upon the fact that all societies have internal contestation, new ways of thinking arising, and both dominant and emergent sets of beliefs and values. He also points out that today, after centuries of migration, of the interchange of ideas and practices within and beyond Africa, and of decades or more of intensive transformations introduced by colonial rule, in particular a colonial rule that itself created, transformed, and institutionalized what it deemed to be “traditional thought,” the idea that there is something that can be demarcated as African traditional thought is always a political and ideological project.

We can take this line of critique to also problematize the frequent and almost instinctual appendage of the adjective “local” to indigenous or traditional thought (as per the World Bank’s report). The idea of “local” reproduces ethnophilosophy’s idea of a bounded, unanimous set of ideas that all adhere to; it merges this with indirect rule’s equation of a specific, demarcated system of traditional (legal, political, cultural, economic) thought with specific demarcated tribes, specific demarcated languages, and specific limited geographical areas. But in historical fact, it was not some inherent localist limitation to African thought (which is then revalued as deep and granular local knowledge) that kept some rural inhabitants from engaging conceptually with, say, global market economies and Western-style science found in urban universities; rather, it was the pass-laws, the regime of police violence against African immigrants to urban areas, the “clenched fist” of the native authority, the explicit colonial refusal to provide access to higher education, and the

regimes of forced labor, that did so. The “local” was an effect of a particular regime of violent colonial and post-colonial power.

Hountondji insists that we drop any grand dichotomy between indigenous traditional thought and Western scientific thought. Instead, we should recognize the existence of many different traditions of thought, an internal pluralism, within all African communities, as well as the fact that the bounds of those communities are themselves open to constant negotiation as communities and ideas move and enter into conversation and confrontation. Thus, all traditions of thought are both embedded in specific communities and practices, while all traditions of thought co-exist with other traditions of thought and are informed and interpenetrated by them, so that all thought is always already thinking with other people.

This idea of a pluralism of embedded traditions of thought is explored in another context by the literature on Science and Technology Studies (STS). This literature makes clear the specific material foundations and grounded provenance of self-purportedly universal Western scientific thought. Western traditions of scientific thought are embedded and entwined with specific laboratories, instruments, material practices, funding bodies, universities, and culturally-embedded and politically inflected standards of judging authoritative knowledge and claiming general applicability. Thus, we might think of both African traditions and Western traditions of thought as traveling, being de-localized and re-localized, translated and mistranslated, reinterpreted and mutually transforming, as having multiple resonances and points of conversation. Indeed, we need to question the degree to which such designations as African or Western are applicable at all to many of these open sets of practices and traditions.

What Hountondji and STS arrive at from different directions is the idea that all traditions of thinking about the world, what we might generally call scientific thought, whatever their provenance, have specific material foundations and infrastructures, whether in libraries of printed texts, technological laboratories, or, as we discuss later, in natural libraries, in forests or within the homestead, in histories deposited in archives of trees, rocks, and land shaped materially and symbolically (Mavhunga 2017). In addition to this material infrastructure, all traditions of scientific thought are produced and reproduced through certain material and symbolic practices carried out upon and among those archives and laboratories. All traditions of thought also have specialized communities with specialized training who work on them, teach them, and reproduce them. These communities speak specialized languages to communicate their knowledge, whether the abstract language of mathematics, or the dominant techno-scientific language of English, or knowledge of a certain set of concepts and terminology in Acholi, or other specialized vocabularies and grammars for speaking about the world. All traditions of knowledge about the world, therefore, are local in some ways, in that they are entwined with and reproduced through these specific material infrastructures and archives, practices, communities, and languages. But they are also open, as all of these dimensions can be extended in networks, and traditions of thought can bring in new thinkers and knowledge producers, can be broken into pieces that can be adopted and repurposed elsewhere, or can be translated by multilingual members of communities.

This has implications for thinking about traditional or indigenous thought in Africa. While these knowledge networks are theoretically open, the practical and intellectual obstacles to their expansion need to be fully recognized. For one thing, the expansion of traditions of knowledge also requires the expansion of their material infrastructures. To spread a set of concepts or ideas without the accompanying material infrastructure – whether libraries, laboratories, or archives – leads those ideas to become inert, unable to be challenged from within and thus lacking in critical potential. The ideas are spread, but the critique remains at home, and so those learning the ideas find themselves able to only apply those ideas developed elsewhere. Challenges of translation should also not be downplayed: for instance, the technological infrastructure of Western disciplinary scientific knowledge makes it hard for it to enter into conversation with those outside its narrow disciplinary bounds; this of course is not an issue of Western knowledge versus non-Western traditional knowledge, but rather a disjuncture that is equally present within Western societies between those belonging to specialized, technical scientific traditions and those who do not share in that specialized training. As these specific disciplinary, techno-scientific traditions and disciplines have been established in universities and laboratories and research institutes globally, these divides can occur within non-Western societies as well.

The expansion of knowledge networks is always possible, and practices, infrastructures, and individuals can break away from their initial contexts, be re-embedded, institutionalized anew, translated, borrowed, into new hybrid assemblages, creating new traditions of knowledge. But, again, neither expansion nor hybrid co-production is a frictionless process. We need to take seriously the problems of expanding material infrastructures, inclusion in communities, specialized training for a facility in languages, and translation practices. Again, to introduce scientific knowledge without the laboratories, or social science without the libraries, without translating the knowledge into other languages, without fully allowing others into communities of knowledge – exclusions that occur across lines of race, geography, gender, and class, for instance – is to refuse to allow others to do critical work, only to apply theories developed elsewhere. In the same way, the uncritical extraction and adoption of “African” traditional ideas by Western scholars as presenting paths out of Western conundrums equally renders these ideas inert. It is to remove these ideas from the material and social infrastructures that they need to have meaning and critical capacity and to open them to new instrumental interpretations and deployments.

The implication is that we seek in this paper, on the one hand, to avoid the grand indigenous-Western, local-universal, traditional-scientific dichotomies, while, on the other hand, foregrounding the blockages – again, often along lines of race, geography, class, and gender – to communication, hybridization, inclusion, and co-production across different traditions and communities of knowledge. We seek to avoid a romantic picture of co-production that may only mask continued relations of inequality and injustice, while also looking to the ways that the needed material and symbolic foundations can be established for collaboration.

### III. Colonial Social Sciences and the Limits of Disciplinary Co-Production

These difficult questions of co-production are present in collaborations between any researchers across lines of race, class, gender, or geography, where those lines are part of histories of inequality and injustice. In this section, we chart the obstacles that arose to such co-production between British disciplinary, university-based social science researchers and African disciplinary, university-based social science researchers during a specific moment in the past. This can help us identify some of the challenges that will be faced by efforts at co-production between British university-based researchers and “indigenous” African collaborators, since we expect the latter challenges to be even more significant than the former. We again begin in the colonial period and projects of co-production of disciplinary social science research that were present then in order to identify questions that we can carry into our neoliberal present. We start with the practice of late-colonial social scientists, specifically those sociologists and anthropologists who replaced the anthropologists of “tribe” and their focus on “tribal institutions” in service of indirect rule.

This later generation of colonial social scientists, mostly from Britain, the US, Australia, and South Africa, led by figures such as Max Gluckmann and Audrey Richards, and based in social science research institutes in Africa – the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in today’s Zambia and the East African Institute for Social Research in Uganda – sought to get away from the exclusive focus on the tribe as an unchanging, timeless reality. Instead, they sought to understand social change in Africa under the pressures of modernization, change which they saw as representing progressive forms of development, which they pursued through interdisciplinary, impact-oriented research. In pursuing this project, these social scientists explicitly engaged in co-productive research with African researchers and research assistants. We can look at this collaboration to see what its resonances might be for today’s era of co-production of research between African and European scholars in the name of addressing dramatic social change and ensuring sustainable development.

These late-colonial social scientists embarked on a vast project of mapping the processes and consequences of social change in rural and urban Africa. This required conducting extensive surveys, interviews, and bouts of ethnographic fieldwork. In order to facilitate their research – and to convince their African research subjects that they were not government agents seeking taxes or labor – the colonial researchers depended upon the intermediary work of African researchers, termed research assistants. These assistants carried out surveys and interviews, translated, took field notes, helped with travel and logistics, and went places where white researchers would have had trouble alone. Many of them had hopes to rise in the disciplinary academic ranks, and while a small number did become university-based researchers or lecturers, the vast majority remained stuck as research assistants.

Some contemporary commentators have directed attention to the agency of research assistants and the “co-production” of knowledge among these African assistants and white researchers. But the firm limits to this “co-production” were clear, as the institutes abided by the racialized lines of other colonial institutions. At the RLI, the researchers were all white, mostly British, South African or American, and it was not until very late in its existence that research assistants succeeded in changing their title from ‘African Research

Assistant' to 'Research Assistant'. At EAISR, there were two Ugandan researchers in the 1950s, but all the other researchers were white. Anthropologist Lyn Schumaker downplays the failure of the research institutes to allow African research assistants to become researchers (despite their hopes to do so), and focuses instead on how African research assistants in fact shaped, interpreted, and produced the knowledge that the researchers obtained. She asserts that African anthropology was thus "co-produced". What this fails to address is how Africans' contributions were systematically not recognized by the institutes' white researchers and were largely erased from academic production. Authoritative knowledge was claimed as the property of colonial researchers, regardless of how much labour Africans contributed. Furthermore, the power to define the topics of study and decide the purposes of research was in the hands of colonial academics. Africans could collect data and contribute to internal discussions around tools and methods, but analysis and theory was the preserve of whites, the most definitive of which increasingly took place in British universities. Finally, in broadest terms, research was extractive: unpaid labour by Africans, in answering surveys, talking to interviewers and providing observations for participant observants, produced data that were processed by colonial researchers to develop theories and publications that they claimed as their own and used to advance their careers.

Recognition of the de facto co-production of knowledge is important, but not to absolve the institutes of their adherence to racialized colonialism. Rather, this recognition is important in showing how the colonial structure erased that de-facto co-production of knowledge in favour of those with racialized authority. We need to keep this experience in mind when examining the terms in which today's efforts at the co-production of knowledge are taking place.

#### **IV. Co-Production among Neoliberal Universities**

As with the colonial research institutes, today's research collaborations between British and African researchers are typically presented as being beneficial to Africa in the name of both sustainable development and in terms of 'capacity building' and 'developing' African researchers and institutions. If the context for understanding the previous generation of collaborations was a colonial one, today's context is two-fold, defined both by continued legacies of racialized colonialism as well as by the common onslaught on both African and UK universities by neoliberalism.

The neoliberalization of African universities has its own history, starting with the massive funding cuts effected by structural adjustment policies of the 1980s, followed by the privatization and massification of the 1990s and 2000s. Makerere, for instance, still enjoys a highly distinguished reputation, largely because of the central role it played in the great intellectual ferment of the post-independence era. But twenty years of state violence in the 70s and 80s, combined with the devastating "reform" forced upon Makerere by the World Bank under neoliberal structural adjustment, combined with a massive expansion of the student body and contraction of faculty, has led to a university where lecturers and professors have to spend their time trying to make a living by endless teaching, by doing

consultancies, or taking other jobs, where research culture is struggling to survive, and graduate education is tenuous. Libraries have been under assault, and access to journals crippled by extortionate charges demanded by the cartel of prominent international academic journal publishers. Because of the drying up of national funding sources, autonomous research has also suffered greatly, as Makerere researchers find themselves reliant upon collaborations with Western universities or donors for research funding. And so researchers based at African universities often face a familiar scenario of having to join in research “collaborations”, the questions of which have often been defined in advance by the Western “partners” and in which funding is always controlled and distributed entirely by the Western “partners”.

So the first question, on an intellectual level, is to ask to what degree today’s research collaborations remain defined by racialized, colonial structures of knowledge production. Just as Africans were research assistants, data collectors and translators in the colonial institutes, to what degree do today’s African ‘partners’ remain largely assigned to the empirical side of research by collaborations, while analysis and theorization is considered to occur in the West, the preserve of mostly white researchers? To what degree are research collaborations steered by or accountable to African researchers, when funding is entirely in the hands of and accountable to UK institutions?

There are certain principles that need to guide collaborations in order to start to address the intellectual dimensions of these international inequalities and the often extractivist research that can result from it. Western researchers should start by attending to and joining, if invited, academic debates and agendas happening in African universities and research institutes. Starting with organizations like CODESRIA and ASA-Africa is one such route. Research projects should come out of long-term relationships between researchers from different regions – indeed, the authors feel that the research we are undertaking would not have been possible if it had not been for Branch’s several years of work at Makerere, where Ocen was a PhD student and then post-doc.

Research collaborations should involve a non-negotiable commitment to provide the same access to academic literature to all the partners, so that Western-based researchers do not have a monopoly on access to authoritative knowledge. This means the expansion of the material infrastructure of disciplinary knowledge, which is essential if collaborations are not going to represent the application in Africa of ideas developed elsewhere. Furthermore, Africa-based researchers need access to the *entire* body of academic literature, not simply the literature about the specific area they work on. This is because that narrow literature is embedded in wider debates and conversations across time and regions, both empirical and theoretical. Providing only “locally relevant” academic literature further condemns intellectuals in the global south to the position of “local” intellectuals or experts, who might be able to apply locally-relevant disciplinary social science while theorization and critique are left in the hands of Northern scholars. It prevents access by Africa-based scholars to the sources needed to question the paradigms that those Northern scholars insist on using in the research collaborations. This non-negotiable demand for Africa-based researchers to have full access to the entire library and archive that UK-based researchers have access to – in other words, a radical policy of open-access – is one that will require major investment and creative solutions to fight the monopoly of the academic publishing cartels and to

expand library collections. However, without it, collaboration can end up a mask for further entrenchment of inequality and injustice.

This also requires that any texts produced from the research should join a global commons, equally accessible in African or Western universities. Total, universal open access is a *sine qua non* of collaborative research. Furthermore, all research produced on Africa should be primarily presented in African forums, thus making Western-based research and researchers at least somewhat accountable to those they are writing about. Again, establishing equal access to the material infrastructure of disciplinary knowledge is crucial for any kind of co-production and will require major funding, commitment, and struggle.

Equally important is addressing the material conditions of Africa-based researchers themselves. The Africa-based disciplinary researcher is assigned a specific class position within an international division of academic labor. This political-economic context, again, is an African university where research funding and time primarily come only from external donors; where salaries are so low that people have to take second jobs; where writing time is often a luxury that many are not afforded. All this means that participation in research *has to be paid*. This payment is not in exchange for a release from university duties, as it often is for UK-based researchers, who earn enough salary to live on; it also cannot be limited to research expenses. Instead, it should be a payment that the researcher receives not tied to either official release from university duties nor incurred expenses. And it has to be paid on time and adequately. If this does not happen, then any research collaboration will just represent further economic and intellectual exploitation and extraction. We have faced serious challenges on all of these fronts in our own research project.

Paying researchers also needs to be accompanied by a broader engagement between UK and African universities. If not, the scramble for individual African ‘partners’ can end up undermining the very universities that such partnerships claim to be supporting, creating a cadre of globally connected researchers with little connection or presence at their own institutions, while the neoliberal African university exploits further those who are left to teach and administer. Thus, payment to African researchers also needs to include support to African universities for institutional and teaching needs, for PhD student training, and for university-wide access to disciplinary literature.

The neoliberalization of UK universities has only made this situation worse. There are many aspects to this, but one of particular note is the increasing reliance of UK universities upon government funding that is tied to performance assessed according to specific metrics under the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The REF has established an intense pressure on UK researchers to publish in high impact-factor academic journals; in my department, we have been told explicitly that book chapters will not “be counted,” and journal articles that are not in top-tier journals are also largely dismissed. UK-based researchers need to show these kinds of “excellent” “research outputs” also in order to secure research funding and to show return on investments by funders. Of course, “top-tier” journals are almost never open-access; the schemes put into place for buying open access rights for articles coming out of international collaborations are inadequate. Edited books, which can often be made available in African markets through co-publication agreements, local distribution, or electronically, are systematically denigrated by the REF

regime. We have experienced these problems in our project and are happy to discuss them further in hopes of finding more just arrangements for the co-production of knowledge to have meaning.

## **V. Indigenous Collaboration in a Neoliberal, Post-Colonial Order**

From what we have presented, we can derive some lessons about areas where today's new emphasis on collaboration between UK researchers and "indigenous" African communities towards problem-solving for sustainable development requires scrutiny.

One common approach to indigenous or traditional knowledge in Africa is to frame it as "local" knowledge that can enrich, inform, improve the accuracy and applicability of Western scientific thought for development, environmental management, or adaptation and resilience. This approach can risk reintroducing the insidious dichotomy discussed above between supposedly local thought, which those in the Global South engage in, and universal thought, which is the preserve of Northern thinkers, which is to be enriched but not fundamentally challenged by local, traditional thought. Instead, again, it is important to recognize the material foundations of all traditions of thought and the political and economic inequalities that allow some traditions of thought to claim universal relevance and that prevent knowledge justice.

Another possibility is that a turn to indigenous or traditional thought in research collaborations with Africa may become a way of avoiding the political, economic, ethical, and intellectual challenges of carrying out genuine collaborations with African universities that we detailed above. Indigenous collaborators are sometimes presented as having a specific class image – a hunter-gatherer, or subsistence farmer, or pastoralist, with time on their hands within the original affluent society. Their livelihoods are thought to be divorced from the global knowledge economy, and so addressing its inequalities does not need to be taken into account. Whereas collaborations with African university-based researchers cannot avoid being faced with difficult questions of massively unequal salary structures, of the need to work with African universities, and of engagement and accountability to university researchers with certain professional expectations, collaborations with indigenous researchers might more easily ignore these challenges. For instance, this workshop made no offer of compensation to the non-British participants, who seem to have been expected to give up a week of their time – while also paying for flights out of their pocket – without hesitation.

Intellectually, there is the danger that the slogan of indigenous/traditional knowledge in Africa might be used as an alibi to not address global information inequalities or demands by African university-based researchers for equal access to academic literature and archives. Because of the pernicious idea that supposedly locally-oriented indigenous people with totally distinct cosmological understandings of the world would not have use for Western social scientific knowledge, there seems little imperative to make the social scientific literature available, as there is with university collaborations. Thus, the valuation of indigenous knowledge by global northern researchers can run the risk of becoming an

excuse for not insisting upon equal access to all information and literature produced by disciplinary traditions of social scientific and natural scientific thought. It runs the risk of becoming an alibi for not demanding that all publications coming out of research about the global south be made universally accessible. The idea of an absolute epistemological or even ontological disjuncture between Western and African indigenous/traditional thought can allow the Western researcher to claim local authenticity and ethical collaboration without addressing many of the really difficult questions, questions that require major financial investment to begin to solve.

The focus on indigenous/traditional knowledge in Africa can also lead to a downgrading of African university-based social scientists in favour of indigenous collaborators; it allows the Western researcher to claim a solidarity with African indigenous peoples against their own national traditions of social scientific thought and intellectual production, which are cast as part of the repressive post-colonial state apparatus, imposing modernity on marginalized peoples. Ironically, the African state can be presented as the agent of the racialized colonial legacy, while the UK researcher claims to be in solidarity with those African indigenous peoples resisting that legacy. Peers in African universities have the tools and position to challenge the Western university-based researcher on their own terrain, to demand a substantive equality that Western funding agencies are unwilling to enable, to ask the Western researcher what right they have to claim to be “solving” “African problems” or to be doing research in Africa in the first place. Indigenous collaboration runs the risk of bypassing these professional intellectuals and their contexts and going straight to highly marginalized, often vulnerable, indigenous communities in the name of redeeming them from the marginalization and disparagement visited upon them by African universities and other national institutions.

This allows the Western researcher to remain safe in their ability to return to their own disciplinary boundaries and expertise: the indigenous are constructed as subjects who can present empirical detail to Western paradigms of knowledge production, or present total alternatives to those paradigms, but not as those who can question those paradigms from within, whether on the intellectual or institutional level. The Western researcher can also always return back to the Western university where they cannot be challenged. Since, if an indigenous collaboration goes wrong or the funding dries up, there is little risk that the Western researcher will run into their erstwhile indigenous “collaborators” at academic conferences or in their own British universities, or that there will be any official complaint that a UK university will take seriously, which is a possibility when working with African university-based academics. In short, indigenous collaboration presents the possibility for the further expansion of the already glaring accountability deficit that can characterize Western research in Africa.

A way to address these risks can start from the recognition, again, that there is no fundamental epistemological or ontological disjuncture between supposedly universal Western scientific thought and local indigenous/traditional thought; but rather, there are many traditions of knowledge that have different material infrastructures, which have been in conversation and exchange for decades or centuries. There is thus always the possibility for collaboration among different traditions of thought, but the challenges must be met head-on. We need to focus on the very real economic, political, and practical disjunctures

between these different traditions of thought, which imply significant responsibility, and not supposedly ontological disjunctures, which can absolve Western researchers of responsibility. This approach allows us to see that the material challenges of genuine co-production between Western and African university-based researchers are not avoided but are *intensified* with efforts at co-production between Western researchers and marginalized rural communities in Africa. And then, the same imperatives that should guide collaboration between university researchers need to be pushed even further for collaboration with marginalized rural communities and their thinkers – it is even more demanding economically, politically, and institutionally, not less, since those shared material foundations are even less available and translation is even more complicated. Questions around payment, open access, specialized training, linguistic skills, African universities – all these need to be dealt with by indigenous collaborations. Only in this way might there develop networks of knowledge production stretching among Western university-based researchers, African university-based researchers, and African communities that have been largely excluded from those institutional locations of disciplinary knowledge production.

## **VI. Debates over Lightning and Death in Northern Uganda**

The complex terrain comprised by multiple traditions of thought, upon which any kind of knowledge is to be produced or co-produced, is clearly visible in northern Uganda, where we have been working and researching since the early 2000s and where Ocen is from. Many of the most marginalized peoples in Africa – in some cases, especially the most marginalized peoples – have been subject to at least a century of highly intrusive and often devastating and wrenching colonial and post-colonial interventions around conservation, agriculture, education, public health, and development. In Northern Uganda, the population was subject also to two decades of counterinsurgency and mass forced displacement and internment, as well as decades of intensive NGO interventions, spreading ideas through community meetings, through local government, via radio, and otherwise. The Christian church has had a major impact over the last hundred years; and there have been exchanges and transformations in what is conceived of as “traditional”, which has been shaped and re-shaped not only by Christianity but also by ritual practice and medicine from other nearby regions. Finally, in northern Uganda, there are many centers of learning, of producing and reproducing knowledge, whether in schools and the university, in churches, or in forests, fields, sacred sites and homesteads. There are many members of the community who have gained tertiary education or PhDs, who are disciplinary researchers and professors in Uganda and abroad. The point is that within northern Uganda, there are many traditions of knowledge, with many interlocutors and influences, each with its own history, and thus with endless possibilities for translation and mutual comprehension – as long as the material infrastructure of those traditions is taken seriously.

The historicity and plurality of traditions of knowledge in northern Uganda can be clearly seen in debates about the natural environment, where different traditions entail different sets of claims, factual and normative, about the world, with different archives and laboratories for production and reproduction, and different people identified with them. One of these traditions of knowledge is explicitly designated as “traditional knowledge” by

its intellectuals and by others reflecting on it. That is, people talk openly about something called “traditional knowledge”, as associated with a certain empirical body of knowledge, with a certain material infrastructure, certain pedagogies, certain experts and producers. It is framed explicitly as one form of knowledge alongside others, which include traditions associated with the church, government, or scientific authority. Traditional knowledge is thus a discourse about the world that is in debate with other traditions, not a body of knowledge that is unknowingly adhered to and discernable by the researcher on the ethnophilosophy model.

Traditional knowledge is part of a larger discourse of tradition itself in northern Uganda, associated with an entire social-natural order and way of life. This discourse of tradition is today framed through nostalgia, mourning, and loss. This loss is tied most significantly to the twenty-year war from 1986-2006, which devastated the region and saw millions of people living in internment camps, removed from their lands for up to ten years. The massive and rapid pseudo-urbanization and emergence of new practices and beliefs, especially on the part of youth and women, is often blamed for the loss of tradition today. Since the end of the war, this loss is associated with the ongoing destruction of the natural environment, in particular the massive cutting of trees for charcoal and timber, which has been transforming the northern Ugandan landscape. It is associated with a loss of communal land tenure and its replacement by individualized tenure; with the loss of communal well-being and the rise of individual self-interest around money; with the loss of the material infrastructure, whether land, trees, rocks, or streams, and of scientific and historical traditional knowledge. It is framed as the loss of a supposedly prior era of traditional authority of older men over women and youth, as the undermining of a patriarchal and genontocratic social order that entailed a certain moral-political set of communal values, respectfully relational with the natural surroundings, and leading to an overall social harmony. Thus, the discourse of traditional knowledge is bound up with nostalgia and mourning over this supposedly lost world of the past. But what is important is that, as Hountondji argued, this is not the only tradition of thought present; instead it is a dominant discourse primarily associated with older men who have seen their authority and wealth wane in the post-war period, and whose vision is contested from many directions. How to ensure a future of justice is thus a debate among these different visions, and also the purview of new visions that are emerging today around different relations with the natural world.

We begin with a specific debate over the natural environment that happened late last year in northern Uganda, in which Ocen was involved. In June, 2018, Joshua Atubo (all names have been changed), a third-year university student in Ndeje University, one of the church-owned private universities in Uganda, visited his home in Akalo sub county, Kole District in northern Uganda. Atubo, the son of Okello Apak, was not sick when he visited his parents on the fateful day. He arrived home in sound health and visited a number of his relatives before going back home at dusk. Before everybody went to bed, Atubo had an engaging conversation with his parents and siblings, since everybody was happy to see him around and he was to spend a couple days there before going back to the University. At about 11.00 pm, everybody went to sleep. The following morning, when others were already out, Atubo’s hut remained locked. At first, no one paid serious attention to his late rising because they assumed he was still fatigued the previous day. When at midday his hut was

still locked, his parents became worried. They broke open the door, only to find him dead, his face planted in the pillow. He was lying on his belly, and congealed blood was on the sheets, having oozed from his mouth. Atubo's death shocked most parts of the Lango sub-region, as the death was widely publicized in the electronic and print media.

Six months later, in December 2018, another tragedy struck the same family. Two brothers to the late Atubo decided to take advantage of a falling rain to make mud for brick laying, which would save them the task of traveling a long distance to fetch water. As they were busy making the clay, a frightening, soul-wracking explosion occurred. Lightning had struck Okello Apak's compound. One of the boys died instantly, but the other survived narrowly with terrible burns. The questions immediately started. What caused the thunderbolt? Why should Okello Apak lose two boys in a period of six months? Was some diabolic person behind this tragedy? Was it a case of *lwidi* – the spirits of malevolent charms left behind by Okello Apak's late mother? Or was it a natural case of lightning? These questions occupied the minds of mourners and villagers who came from near and far to commiserate with the family or to bear witness to these mysterious misfortunes.

Several explanations from different perspectives were given to account for these strange deaths, as theologians, those identified as environmentalists, and traditionalists each presented their own explanations, each of which convinced a sizeable number of people. These three views all came up in a community meeting called by the clan leader of Okarowok Wibye Acel to look into the deaths. First, Deo Kumar, Atubo's father's uncle, and his two wives were accused of engaging in powerful witchcraft that caused the deaths of the young men. Some people argued that Atubo's rising status in his father's household was loathed by Kumar, who had two wives but only one female child. Kumar and Obala, Atubo's grandfather, were blood brothers, and so this was seen as a case of a brother sending witchcraft to kill the grandchild of a brother. These traditionalists argued that the deaths were a case of witchcraft and gave a history of sorcery in the region that dated back to the 1950s, when the same tragedy-stricken family had lost several people in very unclear circumstances, starting with a woman who lost twins in the year 1955, when Okello Apak lost newly born twins on the same day. Five years later, two people had also died on the same day in the same family. That tragic recurrence of the number two was not a coincidence. Thus, these traditionalists pointed to Kumar and his two wives as the culprits. They gave an authoritative analysis of how witchcraft happens, how malevolent powers of *lwidi* manifest and kill, how they can be *deums* (zombies) that drink blood. They can also manifest as *kifaro*, swift and powerful demons dispatched by witches to wreak havoc on an enemy. This particular one was manifesting in the form of a black billy goat. Kifaros can manifest in the form of lightning as well. They gave a difference between natural lightning and witchcraft-related lightning. When lightning is generated by natural circumstances, it comes in the form of a big rain cock. Usually it hits its target and, while on its flight to the swamp, scrapes or hits another target. Also, its footprints would be traceable near any of the targets that it had hit. None of these signs of the rain cock were visible in this case. When lightning is unnatural and manipulated by sorcery, it hits only one target and its marks are not traceable.

Others also framed their argument as adhering to traditional knowledge, but drew on other sources. Specifically, rain priests gave an ecological dimension to the argument, venting

their fury at those who had been cutting down huge numbers of *ewilakot* trees for firewood or construction. In the past, they explained, the *ewilakot* tree had been a sacred rain tree. It was believed that whomever cut down this tree would be struck by instant thunderbolt. This belief, in their opinion, required safeguarding the ritual tree. And so they denounced the present assembly which had been steered away from these old ways through religion and modernization, losing trust in traditional spirits and abusing the sacred tree. That is why the gods of rain were angry, they declared. Moreover, they continued, the clay soil in question that the boys were excavating was historically the abode of rain gods.

This argument was received with approval by other traditionalists, but with scorn by born-again Christians and other anti-traditionalist factions. The Anglican priests and Pentecostal Christian “prayer warriors” also saw witchcraft and sorcery as the cause, the solution to which was a powerful prayer of exorcism or the identification and spiritual redemption of the witches. Theologians and born-again resorted to prayers, exorcism, and *agat*. *Agat* is the type of prayer that curses the wayward member of the community to death should he or she fail to confess a crime he has committed. In this case church men usually dress in black and pronounce a series of chants and incantations that are meant to generate the most lethal, malevolent avalanche of disaster on the witch. After a number of deliberations, *agat* prayer was not done for fear that it could cause too many deaths, since an *agat* curse would affect anybody who is even remotely guilty of the offense. Surprisingly, Kumar and his wives had readily agreed that the *agat* prayer should be performed with all its rituals, denying having a hand in the deaths that had occurred.

For their part, the environmentalists’ view was that the first death was probably natural and that the second death was caused by the same lightning that had been striking other locations. The environmentalists included some of the more educated members of the village, who argued that climate change had become a “scientific witch” of sorts. They reminded the meeting that in 2013-2016, lightning had hit several districts in Lango, Acholi, and Bunyoro. They referred to the warnings that had been given in the media as to how people could safeguard themselves from lightning—including not talking on phones or walking in the open when it is raining and not taking shelter under tall trees. Their view was partly accepted by people who contended that Atubo, the first son who died, had a record of epilepsy. This view, however, received the least support at the meeting and even provoked anger from close relatives of the deceased. One student who was trying to encourage the meeting to think about the tragedy from different viewpoints was almost roughed up by dissenting groups, mainly those who thought that the tragedy was a clear consequence of witchcraft.

The debate explicitly and openly pitted different ideas of truth, gnosis and empiricism, history and myth, and the material and immaterial universe of communal experiences against each other. These disputes embodied epistemological tensions among the discourses of climate change, nature, the supernatural, history, and traditionalism—all vying to produce a certain authority of knowledge that should settle the feud between the extended families. But these positions were not hermetically closed against each other – those espousing the traditionalist position agreed that people should not take shelter under tall objects during the rain, for instance. Again, these are different open traditions of knowledge in debate with each other, each with its set of experts, whether rain priests,

witchdoctors, ritual readers, born-again pastors, or school-trained interpreters. The case is today still before the clan leader of Okarowok Wibye Acel.

## **VII. The Loss of the Forest as Archive, Laboratory, and Interlocutor**

Today, massive deforestation is destroying northern Uganda's forests and leading to significant disruptions in rain. This destruction is being driven by unregulated charcoal production, controlled by business elites and powerful figures within the state and military. Massive environmental violence is being meted out against the population of northern Uganda, largely through this influx of international capital and extractive activities – a form of post-war disaster capitalism. Land grabbing for commercial farming has also taken a dramatic toll. Many in the community see themselves as victims of a new war against the trees, which is destroying their livelihoods and culture. With changing rainfall, the commons that all depended upon for firewood, medicinal plants, grazing lands, and building materials are being destroyed. One local leader remarked that no one could find poles or grass for huts, and many communities reported a loss of access to firewood. People described how the loss of trees was also destroying the foundation for communal solidarity, as the physical reference points for traditional authority within the community were being erased. A spiritual devastation followed, as the homes for spirits and trees with significant historical resonance were being cut and shipped off. Here, we chart a specific discourse of justice – specifically, one of loss and harm done to a way of life and a social order through the destruction of forests.

The discourse of mourning over the loss of the forests and, with it, a way of life, is widespread, as is nostalgia over that lost world. We want to trace how this particular vision of the world is being lost as knowledge entwined with and embedded in the forests is lost. We also ask how the archive of knowledge that is the forest can still provide resources in the struggle for justice today. In this section, we will explore some of the ways in which the forest represents an archive, a laboratory, and a school for a certain tradition of thought – framed by many in the community as “traditional knowledge” – to set the foundation for thinking differently about collaborations and co-production of knowledge among disciplinary social scientific researchers and marginalized communities. We show how the forest represents both an archive and site of material knowledge practices for thinking about environmental devastation as well as resisting and contesting it; but as the destruction proceeds, the possibilities for the forests to be “thought with” and “acted with” recede. Here, we show ways in which what is conceived of as traditional knowledge is produced, discharged, kept, retrieved, and circulated, asking about the agency of this knowledge in the face of massive environmental violence.

### **Forests and Social Life**

There are important co-relations between culture, ecology, environment, and knowledge practices in northern Uganda. Interviews showed how communities derived their ceremonial, social, and religious vitality from resources provided by the environment, including vegetation, rocks, and water bodies. Acholi traditional thought projects its influence through rites, rituals, and social codes embedded in ecological and environmental

materiality. There is a multiplicity of ways in which people refer to the environment, with different inflections and interpretations. These include *piny*, which refers to the climate or surroundings; *woko*, being the world, including the world of humans and other animate beings; *wilobo*, a world of inanimate rocks, waters, soil and sand; or *kamurumuwa*, literally translated as “the places surrounding us”, which seems to be a more recent introduction by NGOs and environmental governance discourses, and which was identified with trees, hills, mountains, lands, lagoons, swamps, forests, wilderness, hunting grounds, settlement areas, crops, and animals. The world outside the homestead includes hunting grounds (*tim*), ceremonial grounds (*bar kwer*), prayer shrines (*abila*), or pastoral fields (*olet*), all of which are sources of communal histories, since these are the places where major encounters like fights, battles, and settlements occurred. To destroy these places is also to annihilate such histories. Important and esoteric forms of knowledge, such as about the gods and spirits that controlled these places, the knowledge of things like clay salts that animals licked, cultural and ritualistic performances such as rainmaking, were kept within the variegated corpus of ecological diversity. For instance, it was well known that Pageya clan were experts in rainmaking, whose rainmakers would perform rites in Kilak, Kilegaber, Lagoro, Pajule, Lakayawinya hills and in Atto (Paicho). These hills were sites of performance, enactment, retrieval, and storage of societal values and time honoured customs to be deployed in times of drought or for thanksgiving in times of plenty.

The forests also helped provide specialized vocations and skills. They enabled carvers, moulders, carpenters, sculptors and other artisans and artists to produce art and artefacts that did not only provide means of livelihood but also created goods for robust markets. The *kworo* tree, for instance, was used for making ropes, which were used for purposes ranging from building, tethering of livestock, to sporting activities. Timber from the *tido* tree was used for making canoes or small boats or, cured for making bridges across swamps. The leaves of *pwoyo* tree were plucked and glued together become a burial shawl, and from its bark, a liquid was squeezed and from it glue was extracted to trap birds. Workshops for making things like canoes were sites for disseminating vocational knowledge in an education system based on apprenticeship. Makers of canoes, ropes, drums, and flutes used trees as raw materials and found consumers both from local and trans-local communities. These markets further enabled broader forms of negotiation and co-existence among different communities. By systematizing and passing on knowledge, trees were presented as the locations of environmental learning for children about wellbeing, history, and morality.

Trees also mediated humans’ co-existence with animals. Big trees on compounds or those close to human settlements were habitats for animals and different species of birds. One man we spoke to in Ogom Raa was not happy with a *kworo* tree on his compound because he said it was a habitat for dangerous snakes, mongoose, and monitor lizards. He insisted on cutting it down, but was not allowed to because of its monumental value as a boundary marker and teller of time. People used it for showing directions and for measuring distance from one location to the other. Its bark has harvested and used for making ropes, and its shade has provided meeting grounds for villagers for years.

These traditions of knowledge were reproduced in the symbolic realm as well, especially as clan chiefs, priests and elders passed on and administered clan or social laws and norms. For instance, women were not allowed to cut soft brooms from around hills believed to be the

sacred abode of *ayweya*, spirits. For fear of angering the rain gods, people were not supposed to fight during rainy season. Violation of such norms would make the rain gods withhold rain, thus causing drought. Acholi also did not do sand mining unless the activity was approved by the gods, and chiefs prohibited bush burning in order to preserve grass for thatching. Different Acholi gods thus had ordinances regarding ways in which the environment was to be used, and penalties were clearly prescribed, ranging from illness to crop failure or lunacy.

There are other traditions of knowledge in the communities that did not deal directly with the spiritual world; indeed, there is no reason why these different traditions cannot overlap and co-exist, even if they come into heated debate at times. The community clearly made links between forest loss and wind erosion, reduction in rainfall, and human health generally. There was ongoing questioning and study of the environment and how trees and vegetation regulated or influenced conditions of the atmosphere. Farmers explained clearly how the destruction of forests and vegetation cover had a severe impact on rainfall, connecting atmospheric heat to changes in the environment brought about by bush burning or uncontrolled cutting of trees. Many farmers we talked to project that if nothing is done to curtail deforestation in the next five to ten years, there will be desertification leading to loss of soil fertility, extinction of certain tree species, poverty, erosion, and disease and perhaps even the death of the Acholi as a people.

### **Trees, Medicine, and Wellbeing**

This section shows how forests provide the material infrastructure for traditions of thought about medicine and human wellbeing among Acholi health practitioners and patients. Trees, from their leaves to their and roots, are used in diagnostic, curative, and preventive human health sciences. Thus, to destroy the forests is to destroy important libraries and archives, the tools and laboratories of medicine and health practices. These medicinal values have also made forest products highly sought after by merchants for distant markets. Many of these practices and uses of the forest are still present and relied upon today; others are presented as things of the past, practices that have been lost with the war and environmental destruction.

People explain how particular trees and shrubs were and are used for treating ailments and illnesses. The bark of the *oriang* tree, for instance, was used for treating malaria, known as *two abarwic* (headache fever) or *two lyeto* (heat fever). The bark of the *tido* (mahogany) tree was used for treating fungal infections by being peeled, crushed and mixed with water and boiled. A disease called *abola-abola* was also cured using *tido* by tying small pieces of the bark around the waist of the patient. The bark of *tido* was also dried and used to massage paralyzed body parts. For broken body parts, *oboke okeco* was used: "In the past, you would be buried in a pit, with the body covered in soil and a fire lit on it. After sweating you are dug out and covered with *oboke okeco*." Among other fruits, *olemo* fruits were recommended for treating skin rashes, and *oywelo* was recommended for ulcers. *Cumwu* can be eaten dry or fresh to nourish smooth skin. The flowers of the *Beyo* tree were cut and squeezed and the juice was used to treat malaria. The roots of *roka* tree were also dug and cooked to make malarial medicine, which was said to be as bitter as quinine. *Obwolo* roots are crushed and mixed with water to treat snake bites.

Among other uses, the *olwedo* leaves were plucked and used to administer rituals of blessing to hunters, warriors, marriage candidates, or those going on major expeditions or long journeys. *Okano* trees were used by clan priests to link humans with ancestral spirits, as its stems were cut and used for the construction of *abila*, traditional shrines. Also, people who gave birth to twins would plant down *okano* stems, make a shade and sleep under it. Beside *okano*, *udugu* tree was also used in the twin ceremony. The sheep for the ceremony was tied to the *udugu* tree before it was slaughtered.

Some trees were so valuable that they were protected; people explained how before the wars – that is, in the past times of which they nostalgically speak today – *yaa* (shea trees) were not cut because of their nutritional and ceremonial values. From the shea tree *moo yaa* is extracted for oiling skin and embellishing traditional foods. In addition, the oil was used to anoint lineage-based clan leaders. Branches and twigs of the *beyo* tree were cut and burnt, and from the ashes people made *kado atwona*, a kind of liquid salt used for making specific dishes like mashed peas. *Kado atwona* was also used for treating septic wounds. For wound treatment, Acholi also used the fruits of the *odugu*, the pill-like berries of which are picked, peeled, ground, and applied. Alternatively, it can be swallowed as tablets. Finally, for wound treatment there is *okutu lango*, the leaves of which are plucked, chewed and put on any kind of wound. There were thus multiple alternatives for therapy and treatment depending on specific conditions and availability of medicine.

The roots of the *orono*, a vine, are used as a stimulant for sexual health; today, they are often harvested and turned into a powder by merchants from other parts of the country for sale in Kampala or even in neighbouring countries. Being a vine, *orono* cannot exist where forests are decimated. And so, with the current deforestation, the few *orono* roots found are becoming more sought after by the external market. This raises questions around knowledge production, transfer, and circulation. Fragments of traditional knowledge from northern Uganda accompany these powdered forest products, extracted and their value exploited by foreign businesspeople. This is representative of broader processes of the extraction of traditional knowledge from marginalized communities and its exploitation by outsiders seeking to profit from their commodification. It raises questions of the protection of traditional knowledge as well as the material infrastructure it is bound up with, because it is not just extracting knowledge from the community as a whole, but also from the particular people who had and guarded that knowledge. There was a specialized, protected aspect to the knowledge, in that not everybody knew which trees, leaves or roots healed particular conditions. There were experts, connoisseurs and specialists for particular ailments or conditions, extracting fees for their specialized knowledge. Such healers would transmit their knowledge to their children or preferred heirs to create a lineage in the vocation of medical practices by tightly guarding the secrets of ingredients and concoctions.

The entwining of the forests with health and healing lent a very physical dimension to the discourses of nostalgia and mourning over the loss of tradition. In Oling Labala Pabo, people explained how in the past, they did not suffer as many diseases and ailments as they do today. They said that they did not have to regulate births, that people produced as many children as they wanted, and that there were few complications during birth. Traditional birth attendants did excellent work, found in every village, educated or apprenticed to handle things like delayed delivery. Safe delivery was connected to modes of

nutrition, lifestyles and social beliefs. Women, including pregnant ones, ate good food and worked hard in the gardens, preparing them for childbirth. The fecundity of the environment made it easier for traditional communities to keep large numbers of livestock, and plants with known medicinal values were kept and preserved close to the house. Thus, the loss of forests and traditional knowledge today are presented as leading to health catastrophes and new diseases, never known previously in the region, a general physical wasting away of the community.

### **Trees as History**

Trees are also presented as embodying historical knowledge. “Buga” and “Gimmo”, Olya’s people, have used the *cwaa* tree to keep and articulate the history of their migration into their present location. Olya came from Sudan and put up a camp under the *cwaa* tree in Nimule. He was then made the Rwoth of Attiak. So, the history of Attiak chiefdom is partly located around the preponderance of the *cwaa* tree. To cut such a tree is to kill that monumental knowledge, erasing a history of migration and the political genealogy of a chiefdom and its people.

Heritage trees are memory sites for major exploits and struggles among community members and also for battles against external aggressors. Many of the trees with long histories are at risk of being cut down. One specific tree referred to as “Lalworo Odong” (the coward stays behind) is well remembered because of its monumental significance in Ogom Raa. When a wild beast like a *nguu* (wolf) was terrorizing Ogom Raa, elders would gather under the tree and announce a hunting party against the animal, warning that only cowards would remain behind. It was a ceremonial rendezvous for hunters and warriors superintended by elders, helping to build solidarity among the community. Lalworo Odong was a massive *kworo* tree, also serving as a habitat for birds and smaller animals, a site where children learn the feeding, nestling, and breeding habits of birds and small animals like *oceke*, *okwateng*, *lulwit*, *ocuu*, and *luga*. Thus, knowledge about zoology and botany were embodied in trees as parts of ecological libraries. This tree makes clear the strong links between language, social philosophy, history, and the environment, where nature and culture come together to forge social solidarity.

Trees also are used to define and interpret generational lineages. In Ogom Raa, Okidi, a mango tree that has stood there for more than a hundred years represents important memories about the lineage and genealogy. One person explained that his father had found it there, inherited from his own father. These trees are used to mark spaces and demarcate boundaries or burial sites. “Trees help us know a particular area. When you get to a place and see a certain tree species you will automatically know that you are in a particular place.” Another person observed: “trees remind me of the time we used to pray and play. We would pray and play under particular trees. When we cut down a tree I will not be able to tell others how we played and prayed under a tree that no longer exists.” They enable intergenerational activities, as elders pull down *kworo* branches and put up *akelekele*, a kind of swing to train children not to be afraid of heights. In this sense, trees mediated the relation of authority between elders with knowledge and young people as apprentices.

*Kituba* trees were site markers, could be sign of graves (tombs) or historical sites of important events and occurrences such as great fights. Every such tree would have a

memorial, kept in the folk medium of songs, tales, proverbs and other wise sayings. *Obee* tree was believed to be a habitat for the dead. Knowledge of the trees was taught and transmitted through rites, rituals, chants, songs, sayings, and other oral performances, and ceremonial grounds were the classrooms. Its pedagogy systems included performance, observances, imitation, and ritualistic transfers. If we take it that trees or rocks were monuments because they constructed historical narratives, we can assert that indigenous knowledge constructed synergies between object and narrative, or between artefact and story, or place and knowledge. That was its way of constructing interdisciplinarity in which both objects and narratives were genres or sources of knowledge, as trees or rocks could tell stories also narrated in tales or songs.

In Olinga Labala Pabo, respondents observed that big trees were cultural sites for rituals and engagement with *ayweya*, spirits. In the events of drought and crop failure, people performed rites and rituals of appeasement, repentance, invocation and supplication to seek the intervention of benevolent spirits, for prosperity, rain, and fertility. Whenever they performed such rituals, they used shea oil, millet, and a black goat, and the gods would bring forth rains or respond according to the prayers of the community. For ceremonial purposes, shea trees were not cut in reverence for their ceremonial values. Shea oil was used at the coronation of chiefs and for rituals of blessings performed on children and family members. *Beyo* trees would not be cut because these trees were believed to be habitats for ancestral spirits. Under these trees, important prayers, supplications, rites and rituals were performed for the protection of those going for battle, hunting, or any expedition.

To protect the particularly important trees, it was said that if anyone cut down a big tree of historical or ceremonial significance, the *ayweya* would possess the transgressor and banish him to live among the rocks. Those intending to cut a tree for a specific purpose would have to approach elders who would perform a ritual on their behalf. The elders would “*vuku yat eno ni avuka*,” slaughter a hen to prevent a curse falling on the tree cutter. When the tree was being cut the cutter prayed to the tree: “I am sorry for cutting you. I want to use you to take care of an important need. Kindly allow me to use you. You have been protecting us and now we are going to cut you down.” Then the tree cutter would slaughter a hen and say: “*ayweya* who is present in this tree, please use the hen as food, and please don’t avenge the cutting of this tree. I am sure you will find other trees to dwell on”. When this was done, the tree would be cut. This would ensure that the tree cutter was not afflicted by vengeful spirits, especially important since such spirits would sometimes harm the entire community that allowed a tree to be cut by withholding rain or causing hailstorms or ferocious winds. Thus, the trees were a commons that were guarded by the spirits, spirits who could be convinced to allow certain trees to be cut by the intercession of the elders and clan leaders through rituals of appeasement and atonement.

### **Justice for Forests Today**

Since trees are represented as part of an entire social order, as representing a moral way of life of health and flourishing of the community, it is not a surprise that there is significant resistance to ongoing deforestation, drawing on this discourse of tradition. Sometimes, the forests themselves would resist their destruction. There are many stories of trees that refuse to be cut down; of rocks that are blasted and then cannot be loaded onto trucks to

be transported elsewhere. There is talk of a charcoal curse, as trucks carrying the huge piles of sacks of charcoal overturn on the road, their drivers injured or killed. This was one mode of environmental resistance and justice.

At present, the dominant discourse drawing on the forests and offering a moral condemnation of the destruction of the forests is the one that is represented as “traditional.” As discussed, these traditional discourses imply an entire social order, and rely on a dichotomy between, on the one hand, a communal, respectfully relational to surroundings, patriarchal, gerontocratic order of the past, versus a new individualist, extractivist, developmentalist paradigm that also involves the illegitimate empowerment of youth and women.

But this particular traditionalist discourse about the moral worth of the forest, about environmental violence, about justice and visions for the future, is not the only one present today. There are also new forms of ecological thought emerging from this matrix. Some members of the community adhered to the state- and NGO-sponsored vision of development, based around the extraction of “natural resources,” individualization of land tenure, the expansion of commercial farming and wage labor on plantations. Practices such as re-planting are key sites of inquiry around justice and the future: as indigenous tree species have been depleted through the activities of timber entrepreneurs, some farmers are adopting the planting of pines and eucalyptus. What to make of this combination of cloning or grafting science with ideas entwined with certain materialities of forests, how to think about the possibilities here, given pressures from global capital for “green” forest products and new enclosures it could lead to? Other people opted for different routes to environmental justice, such as by burning down trucks ferrying the charcoal or attacking work crews; some decided that it was hopeless and so sold their trees in desperation of getting some benefit from the forests before they were all gone.

The forest is a resource for thinking differently about the world and the future that is open to all. Thinking with the forest can offer different ways of thinking about and contesting the plunder, extraction, state violence, and resource looting occurring under multinational capital and local and national elites, and enabled by war-related precarity. The recognition of these different ways of thinking with the forest and presenting visions of justice and the future can open the way for collaborations between these afflicted communities and northern-based researchers and academics, as well as professional researchers and academics in Uganda.

We can together look at new ways that emancipatory thought about people’s worlds is being re-entwined materially with forests. For instance, there are new environmental movements afoot in Acholi. These are seeking alternatives and hybridities to the way that those espousing “traditional” thought and ways of life frame the relationship to the forest. New environmental discourses make clear that to value the forests does not need to bring with it the entire “traditionalist” discourse, and that the dichotomy the traditionalist discourse is based upon can be broken down. These diverse people resisting extractivist development are asserting the authority of the commons, without it being backwards-looking and nostalgic, associated with the power of older men. They are thinking about how the commons can be realized in the future, not just as mourning at a futile attempt to regain

a fictional lost golden age. New engagements are emerging that think with the forests as archives and laboratories, as commons, but that offer other visions of the future and justice.

Today, the greatest threat is that the material infrastructure for all these forms of thinking are being lost as the commons are destroyed. And so all have a stake in stopping the wanton destruction of the forests so that the material foundation is retained for the possibility of reimagining communal futures of justice. For the UK-based researcher, this would begin with a non-instrumental engagement with traditions of knowledge, and an attention to the material infrastructure represented by the forest and the material infrastructures of our own disciplinary traditions. This leads to a call for environmental justice beyond resilience; it is not a resilience of timeless ways of life among indigenous peoples that is demanded, but rather a future of justice that involves a regeneration and a struggle against the structures of wealth and power that are destroying the land and our ability to think with each other and with the world.