

Reclaiming Narratives, Transforming Communities: *Lok Ber Bedo* research in Kitgum district



Learning Report 2026



Context & challenge

Inter-generational gatherings and storytelling at the fireplace, known as “wang oo”, have been the school of the Acholi people for centuries. A rich repertoire of characters and stories (“ododo”) has served to uphold and carry forward Acholi culture, history, and values like *ber bedo*, an Acholi concept referring broadly to well-being and a good life.

A 20-year war between rebel groups, including the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), and Uganda’s government forces in Acholi sub-region exposed children to abduction, displacement and violence and denied them opportunities to gather at the fireplace. *Ber bedo*, largely unachievable during the war, has

remained elusive for young people faced with loss of identity and belonging and high rates of poverty and incidences of violence to date.

Since the war ended, development agencies have repurposed *wang oo* for awareness campaigns and behaviour change communication to meet short-term project and donor goals, limiting the role of Acholi communities in determining the purpose and process of *wang oo*. Similarly, *ber bedo* has served mainly as a translation for foreign well-being concepts that guided recovery and repair work to focus basic needs of Acholi people [1]. Based on discipline, research considered selected aspects of *ber bedo* such as social harmony

guiding customary land ownership, justice systems, and governance [2-4]; shared strategies ensuring everyone can meet basic needs [5]; or collective responsibility organising community social work [6].

In this post-conflict context, the *Lok Ber Bedo* study set out to understand how storytelling amongst young people on their own account can provide an opportunity for them to renegotiate a process for seeking *ber bedo*. Kitgum district as an under-researched and under-resourced area in relation to conflict in northern Uganda was purposively

selected as the research site for exploring the experiences of young people in post-conflict settings.



Tam Pi Waa Youth Group during weekly savings group meeting

What did Lok Ber Bedo do?

The *Lok Ber Bedo* study exemplifies a paradigm shift in research collaboration, prioritizing equitable partnership and participatory research between youth groups and us, a research team from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and Refugee Law Project, School of Law, Makerere University and its National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre in Kitgum.

Sampling

At the start, we mapped youth groups in Kitgum District through engagement with district officials, community development officers, civil society organisations, and local leaders, among others. Of the 39 groups identified, some were scattered, outside youth age bracket, led by adults or NGOs, not interested in storytelling, or not meeting regularly, while for others we got limited information. We purposively selected 4 active, established groups with membership comprising youth (age 18-35 years), including returnees, children born of war, young people with disabilities, and young couples, who were interested in storytelling and *ber bedo* and able to give informed consent. Together, they represent 112 youth (55 young men, 57 young women) from all 4 chiefdoms within the district.



Namukora Integrated Youth Association

Namukora Integrated started in 2011 in Ladwogi Cell in Namukora town to support the growth of youth leaders in the area. The group of 28 members (17 young women, 11 young men) comes together for savings, farming and vocational skill trainings. Several young people of the group serve also as councillors and regularly raise community and youth issues in council meetings.

Ribe Aye Teko Youth Group

Ribe Aye Teko (Unity is strength) formed in 2022 as a peer support group of former LRA abductees. Later they opened membership to other youth and joined the study with 26 members (19 young men, 7 young women) from Melong and Pella villages in Omiya Nyima sub-county. They meet weekly at Pella youth centre for savings, dialogue, and organising farming and charity work.



Tam Pi Waa Youth Group

Tam Pi Waa (Think about us) was started in 2021 to provide peer support through farming and savings. The 30 members (19 young women, 11 young men) from 4 villages meet weekly in Akilok North village in Orom East sub-county. Being faced with attacks from warriors of neighbouring tribes, Tam Pi Waa are committed to social transformation and community sensitisation.



Wan Acel Youth Group

Wan Acel (Together we are one) in Pandwong division in Kitgum municipality started in 2014 under Tembo FM, running a weekly radio programme for young people. They later called themselves Wan Acel to reflect their growth conducting savings, community work, and drama. Members (14 young women, 14 young men) include many couples as youth are urged to join with their spouse.

Research Partnership

The study began with a consultative process, working with each youth group to agree the partnership and formalise through a Memorandum of Understanding. We also established a set of shared values to guide the joint research - including respect, confidentiality, and active participation. These values were not mere rhetoric; they were reflected in every aspect of the study and role modelled by the research team.

Research activities

Youth groups were actively involved in the implementation of the research project – collecting data, reflecting on learning, and sharing new knowledge.

Data collection started with a three-day workshop '**Kacoke me Ber Bedo**' (well-being gathering), in February 2025 in Kitgum where youth group representatives met for the first time. They discussed their current storytelling practice, explored the meaning of *ber bedo*, and learned how to use the *Lok Ber Bedo* storytelling guidebook, report forms, voice recorder, and ethical protocols. The study was launched with local government officials, NGOs, and community leaders at the end of the workshop.

Youth groups independently collected data through weekly **boko lok** (storytelling) sessions which formed the backbone of the study (March 2025 to February 2026). Group member took turns in storytelling, sharing life histories and personal challenges, proposing a vital topic for dialogue, or reciting a folk talk. Afterwards the group shared ideas and knowledge to explore meaning

and solutions. Groups rotated session leadership roles, like chairing, audio recording and notetaking, to ensure equal opportunities to leading and contributing. Research assistants periodically collected audio files from recorders for transcription and analysis.

Regular **reflective gatherings** complemented *boko lok* to reflect on our values, assess progress, and address challenges. These included focus group discussion with each group in May, August, and December 2025 as well as *Kacoke me Ber Bedo* with representatives from all groups in June 2025 and March 2026. Gatherings also helped identify key themes and issues in stories, draw lesson from experiences and agree next steps and action.

In the second half of the study, each youth group **addressed a pertinent issue** in their community – Tam Pi Waa focussed on school drop-out, Namukora Integrated promoted vocational skills, while Ribe Aye Teko and Wan Acel targeted gender-based violence. They **sensitised communities** through forum theatre, poems, songs, riddles, and fables. Like in *boko lok* sessions, they used dialogue to actively engage their audience and encourage collective solutions instead of imposing their ideas on communities. Football matches and hand-outs helped extend reach of community sensitisation.

Throughout the study, we provided **support and training**, promoting mutual growth and learning. Research assistants called any member of the youth groups by phone every week and visited groups frequently for check-in and support. Basic mental health



Ribe Aye Teko youth group and the Lok Ber Bedo research team.

training at *Kacoke me Ber Bedo* strengthened skills and provided knowledge to recognise and respond to emotional distress in helpful ways. Additionally, an RLP psychologist offered counselling by phone and in-person when needed. Youth groups received gender-based violence protection and forum theatre training before community sensitisation in October 2025. The study facilitated refreshments for weekly storytelling sessions and one-off tokens for community sensitisation, while individuals were refunded cost of transport and accommodation for *Kacoke me Ber Bedo* and focus groups where applicable.

Youth groups maximised their platforms and talents for **public engagement**. Wan Acel frequently invited other youth groups to join their **radio talk show** sharing lessons and recommendations from their *boko lok* and community sensitisation. All groups showcased their storytelling and knowledge at storytelling festivals with their communities and selected talented members to produce songs and poems to spread *Lok Ber Bedo* lessons and practice to a wider audience.

Lok Ber Bedo findings

The **Lok Ber Bedo** research process was designed to foster knowledge sharing and co-creation within youth groups and between young people and researchers and the wider community. Preliminary findings generated collectively suggest:

Storytelling fosters healing, connection, and learning in post-conflict settings

Lok Ber Bedo highlighted the multifaceted role of narrative in fostering resilience and social cohesion among young people in post-conflict Acholi. The study revealed that story telling is a critical site of peacebuilding and well-being, where young people’s identities are reimagined, meanings are negotiated, pathways are explored, and social realities are reconstituted.

Intergenerational Knowledge Gap: Through their storytelling, young people got to understand the gravity of the gap in knowledge and skills transfer across generations, stemming from the erosion of traditional communal storytelling spaces during and after the conflict.

Cultural Relevance and Effectiveness: Storytelling was proven to be a culturally relevant and effective research method, leveraging Acholi traditions of narrative sharing to facilitate emotional sharing, trust, and deeper insights, particularly among youth, while overcoming limitations of traditional research methods.

Emotional Connection and Healing: Storytelling fostered connection, understanding, and unity among



Lok Ber Bedo audio recorder capturing storytelling and box for locking recordings and notes.

participants. It also promoted emotional healing and relief by helping them cope with stress, anxiety, and trauma, but required psychological safety and support.

Practical Learning and Action: Guided storytelling enabled practical learning and action through group reflection, critical thinking, and problem solving. *Boko lok* helped young people gain a clearer vision and sense of purpose for themselves and their groups.

Ber bedo is shaped by interconnected personal, community, and cultural dimensions

The concept of *ber bedo* among young people in post-conflict Acholi revealed a complex interplay of factors influencing their well-being. These dimensions highlight



both the strategies and goals that shape Acholi youth's pursuit of a fulfilling life.

Ber bedo deeply rooted in community and relationships: Young people defined *ber bedo* as living a life with dignity, peace, and purpose, often tied to having supportive relationships, community connections, communal work, and a sense of belonging. Participants emphasised the importance of family, friends, and community in achieving *ber bedo*, highlighting the communal nature of well-being in Acholi culture.

Understandings of *ber bedo* shaped by cultural values and outside influences: Local contexts and cultural nuances played a crucial role in shaping understandings and experiences of *ber bedo*. Acholi values like truthfulness, fairness, spiritual connection, communal harmony, mutual care, and respect for elders influenced how young people conceptualised *ber bedo*. Tensions between cultural expectations and outside influences affected young people's searches to define and pursue well-being.

Pursuing opportunities and purpose key to *ber bedo*: Young people associated *ber bedo* with having access to education, livelihood and land opportunities as a basis for prospects, purpose and prosperity. Knowledge and skills were critical for individual growth and social commitment. Participants expressed a desire to be able to respond to challenges, care for their families, and contribute to the community.

Agency and hope as pathways to *ber bedo*: Despite challenges, young people showed resilience, drawing on personal strengths, community, and culture to negotiate pathways to *ber bedo*. Social connections and storytelling, including narrating personal challenges and advice from peers, emerged as key strategies for coping and problems solving. Shared narratives fostered agency and hope for the future.

Mental and emotional balance as experience of *ber bedo*: *Ber bedo* encompassed strategies and a state of well-being. Young people viewed *ber bedo* as including mental and emotional balance, tied to social and spiritual harmony. Participants emphasised the importance of feeling peaceful, happy, and at ease with oneself and others as experience of *ber bedo*.

Young people in post-conflict Acholi face critical barriers to well-being

Acholi youth were faced with considerable challenges impeding their attainment of *ber bedo*. An interplay of cultural, economic, social, and psychological factors shaped young people's lived experiences of their search for well-being amidst continuous cycles of disempowerment.

Trauma and Loss: Young people grappled with the loss of parents, siblings, or close relatives during the conflict and the loss of education and prospects during the

Forum theatre on gender-based violence by Wan Acel Youth Group.



COVID-19 pandemic. Ongoing struggles with trauma, grief, and economic hardship hindered young people's ability to find *ber bedo*, affecting their overall sense of purpose.

Erosion of Opportunities and Support: Restricted access to education, livelihood, and land blocked pathways to self-sufficiency and a sense of accomplishment. Weakened community networks left young people without vital support and guidance. Some young people were reported to play cards or pool and use alcohol or drugs to kill time and numb themselves.

Mental Health Struggles: Young people often expressed experiences of distress through idioms like "thinking too much" or "my heart is heavy", reflecting cultural understandings of mental health. Such challenges were normalised and poorly understood which could lead to stigma, silence and isolation and worsen the challenges young people faced.

Cultural Identity and Relationship Tensions: Conflicting cultural expectations and external influences created uncertainty in identity, relationships and values. Tensions were further compounded by pressures arising from early marriage and parenthood, and conflicts including gender-based violence and land disputes.

Youth-led participatory community sensitisation met with questions and appreciation

Young people had formed their youth groups with the aim to tackle compounded challenges through peer support. While youth-led community sensitisation stimulated motivation, joy and pride, young people's activities and leadership were also met with questions and resistance.

Community power dynamics: Communities had low expectation of young people, tended to look down upon them, and questioned youth-led initiatives. Some leaders asked what important message these 'kids' had to share when youth groups called for community

meetings or who gave them authority when they visited and gave older people basic items like soap. Others were proud of their children and supported their efforts through endorsement, encouragement, education, and community mobilisation.

Storytelling and dialogue: Forum theatre and other creative methods sparked dialogue and engagement in community meetings but required careful facilitation and debriefing. Community members appreciated the youth groups' forum theatre for bringing out issues that were normalised or silenced and for enabling dialogue on underlying causes and actionable solutions. Afterwards, groups and members were approached to provide peer counselling, mediate conflicts, and

organise future shows.

Participatory approaches: As researchers, we provided platforms and tools for youth groups to engage more purposefully in storytelling and to own, interpret and shape the narrative. Some community leaders and members perceived research activities as conventional teaching, attributing change and success more to the researchers than the youth and missing the essence of the process in which youth groups defined their realities and paths. The groups replicated participatory approaches in community sensitisation promoting empowerment through co-creation and collective ownership of knowledge and action.

Lok Ber Bedo trajectory of change

The long-term impact of the 1-year *Lok Ber Bedo* study is yet to be fully realised as some of its activities are still ongoing, and youth groups are determined to continue *boko lok* beyond the research period. Intermediate results indicate a positive trajectory of change contributing to impact in various ways.

Lok Ber Bedo strengthened young people's confidence, storytelling and leadership

Confidence: Young people reported and showed that sharing their stories, experiences and views in *boko lok* sessions increased their self-esteem, confidence and public speaking.

Skills: Youth strengthened their storytelling skills and repertoire through the study which they demonstrated during *boko lok*, reflexive gatherings and community sensitisation.

Empathy: Guided storytelling required attention. Young people felt *boko lok* sessions helped

Member of Namukora Integrated at a radio talk show discussing issues affecting youth.



them hone listening skills and empathy, as they put themselves in the shoes of the other.

Leadership: Rotational chairing of *boko lok* sessions enabled group members to develop leadership skills, especially young women who have previously been overlooked for such roles.

Lok Ber Bedo enhanced attitudes, awareness, and understanding

Storytelling: *Lok Ber Bedo* revitalised positive perceptions about storytelling among youth groups and communities not only as entertainment but for learning, connection, and healing.

Youth empowerment: The collaborative research journey shows that youth empowerment is not merely about transferring skills or resources, but about cultivating a sense of agency, dignity, and collective purpose among young people.

Ber Bedo: *Lok Ber Bedo* research revealed that *ber bedo* is both an intellectual concept and practical guide in young people's lives, setting out pathways and purpose.

Challenges: The focus on gender-based violence improved attitudes and awareness among participants and the community who reported increased understanding of different forms of violence against women and men and reduction of incidences in families.

Lok Ber Bedo demonstrated the potential of youth-led research and initiatives

Ownership and power: By positioning youth as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge, *Lok Ber Bedo* disrupted traditional power dynamics and fostered youth groups' ownership of the research and findings which they translated into songs, poems, and initiatives.

Initiatives and strategies: Youth groups designed and conducted numerous initiatives to address issues affecting young people in their communities. These initiatives can be replicated to sustain impact as well as adapted to tackle other challenges emerging in the future.

Transformation and Change: *Lok Ber Bedo* demonstrated the transformative potential of youth-led initiatives, where young people are empowered to become agents of change for well-being, peace and reconciliation.

Young people used *Lok Ber Bedo* to strengthen relationships and solidarity

Group cohesion: The storytelling approach helped youth groups to strengthen trust, cohesion and solidarity, creating a foundation for long-term sustainability of the groups and their activities, benefitting members and the wider community.

Connections with communities: Youth-led community sensitisation and charity work improved relationships between youth groups and communities. Young people reported increased visibility, trust and respect within their communities.

Relations with elders and leaders: Youth groups gained recognition among elders and leaders at local, sub-county and district levels, which may facilitate the groups' access to resources, expertise, and support, and involvement in programme, policy and decision-

making spaces.

Lok Ber Bedo as potential model for research, programme and everyday life

Potential model for research and programmes: The *Lok Ber Bedo* curriculum and tools can be leveraged to expand the model - which combines storytelling, dialogue, and critical reflection - to other topics and communities in Uganda and beyond.

Storytelling for everyday life: As a result of conducting purposeful *boko lok* sessions, appreciating its focus and effectiveness, storytelling and critical reflection have become part of young people's everyday life and approach to understand and solve problems.

Member of Tam Pi Waa youth group performing his *Lok Ber Bedo* song.



Sustainability & Recommendations

Lok Ber Bedo empowered youth groups in Kitgum district, laying a foundation for sustainable development. Youth will continue with their regular activities such as farming, savings, radio talks, storytelling, and dialogue, and using comedy and peer counselling to cope with stress and trauma. The following recommendations will help sustain ongoing activities, maximise impact, and explore the potential of *Lok Ber Bedo* beyond this study:

Families, groups, elders, cultural leaders and the wider community

- Integrate storytelling into everyday life, tapping into its transformative potential for connection, trust, empathy, learning, understanding and a shared vision and purpose.
- Promote participatory philosophy, psychological safety, and creativity to foster youth participation, leadership and well-being for collective growth.

Sub-County & District Officials

- Support youth-led initiatives through access to funds, projects, and decision-making platforms on youth empowerment, community development, peacebuilding and well-being.
- Integrate storytelling and participatory approaches into local health, peacebuilding, and well-being agendas, fostering youth-led initiatives and community ownership.

Civil Society Organisations & Non-Governmental Organisations

- Use bottom-up approaches leveraging existing concepts, expertise, networks and partnerships, enhancing ownership and sustainability.
- Provide and facilitate access to funding, mentorship, training, networking opportunities, and peer-to-peer learning among youth groups to nurture ideas, growth and hope.

Policy makers

- Recognise storytelling as an ontological practice that shapes collective understanding and action, exploring its relevance and potential for policies and programmes promoting transitional justice and community health, among others.
- Prioritise youth empowerment as a process of reclaiming narrative power, fostering critical consciousness, and building solidarity.

Development partners and Academia

- Support adapting and scaling up the *Lok Ber Bedo* approach to engage broader participant groups and communities, explore other topics, methods and technologies, and investigate rigor and flexibility in research design.
- Invest in research and capacity-strengthening for researchers and communities to facilitate adaptation and evaluation of participatory storytelling methodologies in peacebuilding, health and community development in different contexts.

Conclusion

The *Lok Ber Bedo* study showcased the potential of research partnerships with youth groups, highlighting the importance of shared values, trust, and reciprocity in storytelling, reflection and collaboration. We believe that by prioritising Acholi ways of knowing and sharing knowledge to study *ber bedo*, an Acholi concept, we were able to co-create impactful and sustainable research outcomes that reflect the realities, needs and aspirations of young people in post-conflict Acholi.



Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere gratitude to the members of Namukora Integrated Youth Association and Ribe Aye Teko, Tam Pi Waa and Wan Acel Youth Groups who participated in the Lok Ber Bedo study. We appreciate their enthusiasm, openness and time in sharing their experiences, challenges and hope with each other and us and their commitment to transforming their lives and communities.

Special thanks to the district and sub-county officials, the local, cultural and religious leaders, and the communities for welcoming the idea of Lok Ber Bedo and supporting the youth groups. We thank the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, Lacor Hospital Institutional Research Ethics Committee and Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine for review, guidance and approval of our protocol.

The Lok Ber Bedo team comprised research assistants, Aciro Betty Abolia and Oyet Geoffrey Jerry; David Stephen Ojok, Natalie Tate, Ruth Scott-Williams and Lorelei Silvester, handling project management; Okot Benard Kasozi, providing psychological counselling; Shafic Opiny and Ajok Diana for video documentation; Allan Khaija and Josephine Oniyama, managing finances; and research leads Dr Boniface Ojok and Dr Beate Ringwald.

This research is funded by the British Academy's Knowledge Frontiers: International Interdisciplinary Research Programme (Award Reference: OIIRP230088).



<https://refugeelawproject.org/>

<https://lstmed.ac.uk/>

References

- 1 Bragin M, Jennipher T. Conflict-Affected Women's Perceptions of Psychosocial Well-being in the Acholi Sub-Region of Northern Uganda. Vienna and Kampala: CARE Österreich; 2013.
- 2 Meinert L, Whyte SR, editors. This Land Is Not For Sale: Trust and Transitions in Northern Uganda: Berghahn Books; 2023.
- 3 Porter HE. Justice and rape on the periphery: the supremacy of social harmony in the space between local solutions and formal judicial systems in northern Uganda. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*. 2012;6(1):81-97. doi: 10.1080/17531055.2012.664705
- 4 Tshimba D. Beyond the Mato Oput Tradition: embedded contestations in transitional justice for post-massacre Pajong, northern Uganda. *Journal of African Conflicts and Peace Studies*. 2015;2:62-85. doi: 10.5038/2325-484X.2.2.3
- 5 Prince T. Success Stories to re-cast Gulu Uganda: Confronting Narratives of Dependency and Inability through Ethnographic Collaboration in a post-conflict region: Concordia University; 2014.
- 6 Wamara CK, Twikirize J, Bennich M, Strandberg T. Reimagining Indigenised social work in Uganda: Voices of practitioners. *International Social Work*. 2023;66(5):1396-409. doi: 10.1177/00208728221081823