Western theological scholarship on suffering abounds, and some scholars have conducted interviews with survivors of the Lord’s Resistance Army about the militia's heterodox indoctrination with Scripture: yet no one has researched how former LRA child soldiers make sense of God and their suffering. I draw on six months of my ethnographic fieldwork among formerly abducted women in Northern Uganda, including two focus groups and extensive participant observation at a Christian community-based organization employing formerly abducted women. I explored how these women discuss God’s role in their suffering in an attempt to bring their voices into the conversation, and found that their response differs from binary Western theodicies with roots in the Enlightenment, and that through their faith in the face of suffering, these women offer another way of approaching this theological discussion not as a problem to logically solve apart from God, but a practical reality to undergo with reverence (wot) for God.

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If it takes a village to raise a child, it also took a village to write this paper. I wrote this in my best attempt to honor the courageous women who shared their lives with me for six months and taught me about faithfulness in the little things. Thank you especially to Acora Agness Plan, Aciro Agnesa, Apiyo Alice, Amono Lilly, Atek Lilly, Adong Florence, and Adok Florence for taking the time to lead and participate in the focus groups at Amani. Your words will always go with me. Apwoyo matek pi konya. Thank you to Acayo Simprosa, and all the staff of Amani Kenya, for making my internship and this research possible and for putting up with many questions and mistakes. Thank you to Amito Olive, who taught me what Acholi I learned, and for helping me to decode a language and a world that was once strange and has become dear. Thank you to Aber Prossy, for walking with me on the journey and sharing your wisdom. Thank you to Momo, for sharing your home and your heart. Thank you to Gladys and Kevin for much laughter. I would especially like to thank each of my friends who helped me to translate the focus group recordings, for your patience and wisdom: Anena Gladys, Alice Sukisa, and Akello Mecca. I could not have done it without each and every one of you and many more. To each of the Amani women with whom I worked, I pray that God’s heartbeat in you is the heartbeat that people will encounter in this paper.

Stateside, I would like to thank Dr. Jeske for helping me to conceptualize, write, and refine this paper, and weathering my rants along the way. Thank you for keeping me from saying too many crazy things. Thank you for teaching me and journeying with me towards God’s truth and His heart.

We sit under a table because there was no room elsewhere. Pauline’s face creased as she listed the many evils committed against women in society, her voice measured but heavy. She lamented that many still believe women should not own property. As we spoke, we tied paper tags onto the purses which she had sewn. Her voice swelled with passion, and her eyes began to sparkle as she seemed ready to launch into a sermon: “Ento Lubanga—” “But God—” a charcoal vendor interrupted her mid-sentence, and she had to leave to help workmates deliver their charcoal. I was left sitting on the concrete floor with the feeling that here among these tenacious women, God was up to something.

When undergoing profound suffering, people of faith often ask, “Where is God?” This question begets a broad array of answers, all of which claim something about God’s nature and his role in tragedy. This study investigates how survivors of incomprehensible trauma navigate this question.

From my time at a small community-based organization in Northern Uganda which employs women formerly held captive by the Lord’s Resistance Army, I heard three narratives about God’s role in their suffering from them. First, that God has no positioning at all: indifferent or entirely absent, he plays no role in their suffering. Secondly, God causes their agony, either testing their faith or punishing them for sin. Finally, others hold that God stands with and for them, promising them victory over the adversity they endure. The women described believing multiple narratives at different times in their lives and healing journeys, and some employed multiple frameworks to cope with their experiences. Yet one conclusion unites their
responses: they affirm that through all the sufferings and joys of life God remains supreme and deserves devotion. This response differs from binary Western theodicies with roots in the Enlightenment. Through their faith in the face of suffering, these women offer another way of approaching this theological discussion not as a problem to logically solve, but a painful reality to undergo and overcome with reverence (wot) for God.

I begin by providing a brief background of the LRA. Then, I will summarize the current theological and philosophical conversation on suffering to provide a context for the study. Following, I dive into my ethnographic research with the women at Amani, Uganda, drawing heavily from focus group text interspersed with vignettes and my own analysis. From here, I will suggest ways in which these survivors can teach others how to think about and respond to suffering.

I. BACKGROUND

The Lord’s Resistance Army

The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) terrorized Northern Uganda from the militia’s nascent in 1987 through the mid-2000s. The stated goals of its leader, Joseph Kony, included overthrowing president Yoweri Museveni and establishing a new government based on the ten commandments (Berntsen, 2010, 41). The LRA employed some of the most gruesome and fear-inducing tactics known to guerrilla warfare, wreaking havoc on the northern half of the country. One of these tactics involved kidnapping children, indoctrinating them into LRA teaching, and training them to fight as soldiers. The rebel group also forced young girls into “marriages” with older commanders, holding them as sex slaves and using them to carry the militia’s food and gear.

The LRA has deeply spiritual roots. Former members of the group have testified to spiritual powers which directed Kony’s actions, such as a “Holy Spirit” who gave him directions and orders for the militia (Vermeij, 2011, 180). Certain recorded testimonials allege that “In the early years, Kony was reported to be guided by a ‘spirit general staff’ of about 14 spirits,” each of which played different roles in directing the LRA (Nkabala, 2010, 182). In addition to these diabolical elements, Kony used selective Bible passages to justify the killings, claiming that his army did not truly kill, only execute God’s will. Like the fire in Sodom and Gomorrah, the LRA exercised God’s divine judgement by destroying “unbelievers”: those who did not support Kony. (Nkabala, 2010, 183, 186). Nearly all abducted children received initiation by “caning and several spiritual rituals” (Vermeij, 2011,180). Commanders enforced adherence to the LRA by severe punishment, including machete beatings or public executions (Vermeij, 2011, 181). All of this indoctrination, no matter how heterodox, took place in the name of “the Lord.”

Egregious numbers of child soldiers died in the bush; yet some escaped, were rescued by the Ugandan army, or recovered after being wounded and left for dead. Kony and his army have been disempowered and pushed into remote areas of Central African Republic, leaving Uganda at peace. Yet for former girl soldiers, now grown women, the hardships did not end with the war. Many face discrimination or rejection by their families and communities (Derluyn, Ilse, Vindevogel, & DeHeine, 2013, 879). All of these women missed opportunities for education while in captivity, and most returned with children. These women face tremendous financial pressures with few skills marketable in an urbanizing economy. This social and economic vulnerability often pushes formerly abducted women into forced or hasty marriages (Kerig & Wainryb, 2014, 184). This can lead to the “continued victimization” of returning abducted girls long after their escape (Shanahan, Veale, 2010, 126). The continuing trauma of abduction often plays out for years after their return. While many dedicated Ugandans pour their time and energy into reconstructing post-war Northern Uganda, the volume of need leaves most existing structures for economic and psychological assistance stretched thin.

Specific Context: Amani Ya Juu

Enter Amani Ya Juu, Uganda: a small community-based organization founded in Kenya during the 1990’s and planted in Gulu, Uganda in 2012. The Swahili name means Peace From Above, referring to the peace which comes from God. Amani Uganda works with formerly abducted women to make high-quality fabric items for export, thus providing skills and a liveable wage with which these women can support their families. The members of this Christian organization also pray, read Scripture, and worship together daily.

Thus the experiences of these women with Scripture have been manifold: both warlords and peacemakers preach Bible passages. 90% of Northern Ugandans practice some form of Christianity, and the church has consistently stood at the forefront of efforts to reintegrate former child

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“"The bush” is the term most Africans give to the wilderness. In nearly all my interviews with formerly abducted women, they refer to their time in captivity as when they were “in the bush.” From here forward in my paper, I will also use this term.
soldiers into society (Ndossi, 2010). How have these varying uses of scripture affected how these women see God? Do they see the Lord of Kony, a God who wreaks judgement and destruction? Or do they see a God of redemption and healing? Little to no research exists detailing former girl soldiers’ perspectives on God. The LRA may teach one thing, and the church another, but what do these women have to say? My research explores the perceptions of God among the formerly abducted women at Amani, Uganda: specifically God’s role in suffering.

**Discourse on Suffering**

The existing theological discourse on suffering falls short of capturing the complexity in these women’s experiences. While I do not wish to denigrate the brilliance of those who produce theologies of suffering, nor what helpful insights they offer, I do wish to highlight the banality of the conversation at large. Most theodicy literature comes from Western academics with post-enlightenment worldviews. The conversation must open to other voices and perspectives. People’s life experiences and cultural background greatly influence the ways in which they think about God and interpret the Bible, especially on a topic as personal as suffering. Doing theological work from the perspective of a certain group of people is known as contextual theology. Xavier Massingue, a Mozambiquan church planter and development worker, quotes Yazon describing contextual theology as follows: “Contextual theology is a way of understanding the Christian faith not only on the basis of Scripture and tradition… but also on the basis of concrete culturally conditioned human experience” (Massingue, 2013, 1-2). Reading theology about suffering from another context can expose the shortcomings of a mainly Western theodicy. Without a doubt, the most vital voices to consider are the voices of those who have endured profound suffering. Kenneth Surin, who is himself a North American scholar, asserts that theodicy should always come first from the victims (Surin, 1985, 52). How do they think and speak about God and suffering? Those who engage in theodicy must listen to their voices. Todd Whitmore, a theologian who did anthropological work among the Acholi, has developed the concept of anthropological theology: a discipline in which anthropologists learn from those they study. He writes, “One area in which anthropological theology goes beyond much anthropology is to move from attention and thick description of the other to discernment of whether the other can inform us how to live” (Whitmore, 2019, 30). The women of Amani have wrestled with these questions of suffering, and their struggle has much to teach us all. The way in which these women approach the problem of suffering, and how they find their answers, is of utmost importance.

First, allow me to describe where the theological and philosophical conversation currently stands. In his analysis of modern theodicy, Surin writes, “virtually every contemporary discussion of the theodicy-question is premised, implicitly or explicitly, on an understanding of ‘God’ overwhelmingly constrained by the principles of seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophical theism” (Surin, 1985, 4). He argues that the rational principles of the enlightenment have dictated modern Western discussions on suffering. One philosopher in particular seems to have set the terms for the debate: Epicurus, whose question the 18th-century Scotsman David Hume re- phrased: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” (Hume, 1935). Many Christian works on suffering include Hume’s potent words in an attempt to disprove them. Surin argues that these theodicies have unconsciously assumed the principles of enlightenment deism, in which the mystical is minimized and God treated as a monolithic object which can be explained in a set of propositions (Surin, 1986, 7). These theistic explanations ignore the ambiguity and tension which the Bible holds regarding suffering. The Bible never displays interest in resolving the tension between human will and divine sovereignty, but many modern theodicies do. The Bible seems more concerned with who God is and how we should respond in the face of suffering, as Surin, Gustavo Gutierrez, and the women of Amani assert. The obsession with erasing ambiguity and "taking sides" between "predestination" and free will (commonly referred to as "Calvinism" and "Arminianism") seems to be a product of Western enlightenment principles rather than orthodox faith.

Orthodox theodicies tend to fall somewhere on a spectrum between two poles: first, that God directly or indirectly causes suffering, and on the opposite end, that God opposes and seeks to eradicate suffering caused by non-God agents. Those such as John Piper, a Calvinist, argue that while we cannot have answers to micro-level suffering, God allows macro-level suffering for his purposes and works through it for the good of his children (Piper, 1/31/19). While he will ultimately overcome it, he has designed individual instances of suffering. Catholic doctrine, too, asserts that while suffering is a mystery, and comes from evil, God can use suffering as punishment, test, or discipline for the sufferer, as well as a tool to draw people...
closer to Jesus. An edict by Pope John Paul II refers to suffering as “the Gospel of Suffering” because of suffering’s ability to sanctify the believer (Pope John Paul II, 1985). Other theologians, such as Jurgen Moltmann, locate God within suffering by arguing that God shares in our suffering through Jesus. He posits that God can suffer, and does suffer in the form of Jesus, or God would not be love (Moltmann, 1973, 237). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, too, emphasizes the suffering of God (Bonhoeffer, 1944, 370, quoted in Katongo). Still others attempt to wash God’s hands entirely of suffering, saying that God only works to oppose it. One such author, David Bentley Hart, writes:

If it is from Christ that we are to learn how God relates himself to sin, suffering, evil, and death, it would seem that he provides us little evidence of anything other than a regal, relentless, and miraculous enmity… absolutely nowhere does Christ act as if any of these things are part of the eternal work or purposes of God (Bentley-Hart, 2005, 87).

He and many others see suffering as purely evil, which God can redeem and overcome, but never causes. Thus the conversation on God’s role in suffering stands divided, but the way in which Western academics go about the conversation remains in large part dictated by a desire to resolve tension and logically explain suffering resulting from the above mentioned enlightenment ideals of philosophical theism. Some scholars such as Hart push back on this tendency, but the conversation still largely exists in debate form. Some of the Amani women offer another perspective on the problem.

II. METHODS
This project began when I received the opportunity to intern at Amani Uganda. After a brief orientation in Nairobi, I lived in Gulu, Uganda for five and a half months with local hosts. My internship at Amani included visiting the homes of members, creating weekly schedules for Bible reading, and working to implement an oral trauma healing program. I spent between 30 and 50 hours a week at Amani in a house crammed with clacking sewing machines, chattering women, and a few of their young children. I took classes in the Acholi language so that we could communicate without a translator. While much of the data for this study came through planned research tools like focus groups, much also came from participant observation and friendships with these women and their families. Some anthropologists believe that the researcher must maintain a “critical distance” from informants, so that informants’ perspectives do not cloud her judgement. I reject critical distance as an objectifying tool of colonialism. We learn the most from those with whom we have the deepest relationships. Ruth Behar critiques the idea of detached anthropology, pointing out that as fieldwork exists in the context of human relationships, “Not only is the observer vulnerable, but so too, more profoundly, are those we observe (Behar, 1996, 24).” In order to protect against exploiting the participants of my research, I sought to enter into their lives as much as possible for a young white American woman and make myself open to their critique, feedback, and opinions.

I conducted two focus groups in which women at Amani volunteered to participate during the workday. One of the participating women from each focus group led discussion from a list of questions based off of select passages from the book of Job. I recorded these focus groups and later had Acholi speakers translate them into English. I also obtained consent to record answers to questions during trauma healing workshops. My participants requested that I keep their names, so while I have anglicized some spellings, these are their true names. I obtained written consent for use of all focus groups and trauma healing workshops, and verbal consent for any other stories included.

III. WHAT THEY SAID, AND DISCUSSION

Multiple Narratives Part I: “God Is Not There.”
In the section that follows, I will illustrate how several of the women at Amani expressed feeling that “God is not there” at various points throughout their lives. This statement is less a judgement on God’s existence than it is a statement about his presence in their individual lives. For them, God’s nonexistence seems less at stake than his proximity. At church or other Christian gatherings in Gulu, I never heard others admit to doubting God. Especially compared to this lack of doubtful discourse, the level of candidness with which these women expressed doubt astonished me. The conversation began with Job’s expression of lament in chapters 30-31:

I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me. You snatch me up and drive me before the wind; you toss me about in the storm. I know you will bring me down to death, to the place appointed for all the living… when I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness. The churning inside me never stops; days of suffering confront me. I go about blackened, but not by the sun; I stand up in the
assembly and cry for help. I have become a brother of jackals, a companion of owls. My skin grows black and peels; my body burns with fever. My harp is tuned to mourning, and my flute to the sound of wailing (Job 30:20-23, 26-31, NIV).

"Unburdening your heart"
The practice of lament evidenced in the above passage occurs both in local tradition and the Judeo-Christian tradition. One scholar describes the practice of lament in some East African traditions: “When a reply to his prayers does not occur, the worshipper does not hesitate to scold God for this” (Kyewalyanga, 1976, 270). This practice also permeates two thirds of the Psalms. Lament both releases the lamenters’ grief and anger, and espouses faith in God as the lamenters await an answer to her complaint. Emmanuel Katongole describes lament as “turning toward and around God in suffering” (Katongole, 2017, 261). Many Christian pastors and psychologists argue that lament helps those who have undergone suffering to move forward in their relationships with God. Tammy Schultz writes, “If we don’t wrestle through the anguish over the evil that happened, we will …ultimately never move beyond in our relationship with God” (Schultz & Estabrook, 2012, 181). Thus lament does not represent rejection of God, but an invitation to dialogue with him, such as in Job’s case.

One could also analyze lament through the lense of post-traumatic growth. One study found that those who wrestled more with traumatic events immediately in their aftermath experienced more cognitive growth in the long term. “Growth does not occur as a direct result of trauma. Rather, it is the individual’s struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining whether post-traumatic growth occurs” (Poindexter, 2017). If an individual does not struggle significantly with traumatic events, he or she will also likely experience less growth. Perhaps the same is true of one’s relationship with God. When trauma shatters a believer’s world and that believer confronts hard questions like “where is God?”, then long term that believer can develop a stronger faith.

This idea of lament emerged during the focus groups. In both focus groups of three to five women, the answers to the question “Was there ever a time when you felt like Job did about God?”, were nearly unanimous. Almost every woman expressed feeling at some point in her life that God was absent. Amono recounted an experience in captivity which caused her to spiral into despair:

I just made up my mind and said, “God is not there,” because it was so painful to me…I even had to think why God had to bring me there—to do what? Because before I was abducted I was okay… Whom was I brought like to the bush? And what for? I should have been in school, and doing schoolwork, but I was brought to the bush to do what? Why was I created? That means God is not there (Amono Lilly, Focus Group 1, 8/29/18).

For Amono, her experiences in the bush caused her to question why God would create her only for suffering. Her life should have played out like that of other children studying in school; but her childhood had been stolen. Her hopelessness for her own life caused her to doubt God’s existence.

However, Amono has now come to believe that not only does God exist, but that he loves her and helps her. She describes that the process of “unburdening her heart” to God had helped her regain the ability to see that he stood with her. “I had completely resolved that God does not exist. I thought that if God was really there, I would not have experienced such a… situation in my life….When… you unburden your heart you finally accept that God is there” (Amono Lilly, focus group 1, 8/29/18). Through turning towards God and unburdening her heart, Amono came to once again accept God’s presence in her life.

Doubt and Hope
Alice also spoke of questioning God while in captivity. When asked if there was ever a time when she felt like Job in the story, she replied “now, today, and tomorrow, the thought still comes into my head” (Apiyo Alice, Focus Group 2, 8/28/18). Achora, the group leader, looked at me pointedly and asked, “Sarah, iniang?”—“Sarah, do you understand?”. In my limited Acholi, I replied that I understood “small.” Achora repeated what Alice had said slowly for my benefit. The thing which caused Alice to begin questioning God was the death of both her parents and her baby.

I think most of the times that God is not there in my life. I went to the bush, and when I came out of the bush… my parents [were dead]. I came back with a child, and this child was shot by gunfire, and then the child first died and then came back to life. I kept this baby…then eventually when I reached home the baby passed on. So, because of this, I actually thought that God wasn’t there, because if God was present I wouldn’t undergo these trying moments…so sometimes I really think a lot… (Apiyo Alice, Focus Group 2, 8/29/18). The sound of a passing motorcycle drowned out her last few
words. For Alice, her questioning God’s presence seemed to come from having every hope dashed. In the bush, bullets wounded her baby, but she resuscitated the child. After surviving the bush with hope of return, she came home with the ailing baby to find her parents dead. Homeless, with no family, she once again watched her baby die, this time forever. These traumatic events caused her to begin questioning whether God could truly “have an important place” for her, or really be in her life.

Yet she expressed fear to criticize God later, saying “Even if God says something bad is going to happen to you, you cannot say ‘God I hate you’... and then you’re going to have to ask Him to forgive you so that something wrong doesn’t happen to you” (Apiyo Alice, Focus Group 1, 8/29/18).

Alice’s doubts permeated but did not encompass her relationship with God. At other points throughout my internship Alice told me about how she loved Jesus and loved to pray: yet this love seemed more an action born of obedience than a feeling of emotional intimacy or even understanding that God loved her. In particular she loved to sing Acholi gospel songs: every day as we gathered together to sing, her strong voice swelled to fill the room and her clapping hands guided our singing with steady yet ever-changing rhythms. While she struggled with continual doubt, she had not left the faith and seemed to have no plans of doing so. She expressed in the focus group that she likes going to church, and it makes her heart happy to teach her children about God so that they may know him. Alice’s belonging to a community of believers seems to have created what Bourdieu would call a habitus. Although she felt no personal connection to God, through choosing to participate in both a church and a Christian organization, and enculturation in a predominantly Christian society, she still had an internalized sense of reverence and duty to worship.

Her choice to teach her children about God seems to express a sense of hope for their future. Stanley Hauerwas writes about this in his book Resident Aliens: “We have children as as witness that the future is not left up to us and that life, even in a threatening world, is worth living” (Hauerwas, 2014, 60). Alice seems to embody Hauerwas’s claim. Many mothers abort their babies or abandon them in pit latrines each year; but Alice, at great personal cost, chose to continue having children and raising them in love, displayed in compassion I witnessed daily. God may have seemed distant to her, but she asserted that she wanted to teach her children about God, perhaps because for them, life is worth living. She had witnessed the unthinkable, but worked tirelessly so that her children could lead a better life. Jon Sobrino writes about those across the world like Alice who make daily decisions to persevere in the face of immense pain, that “Something like a primordial saintliness makes its presence known in the primary decision to live and give life” (Sobrino, 2004, 72). Alice may never see herself as a saint, or that God could see her as such, but her decision to keep living and loving in the midst of doubt and grief has a heroic nature to it.

**Multiple Narratives Part 2: God Causes Suffering**

While the women of Amani did at various times attribute their suffering to the sins of others, they frequently attributed the ultimate cause of their tribulations to God. I should note that in this way, the Amani women did not differ substantially from the majority of Acholi believers I spoke with outside of Amani. They seem far more comfortable talking about God causing harm than American Christians. A popular Acholi gospel song, one Alice frequently led at Amani, translates to “I will stand all by myself before the judge Jesus,” warning of an impending judgement day. Watoto church, the church to which I belonged in Gulu, hosts an annual event screening the film “Heaven’s Gates and Hell’s Flames” in order to lead Gulu residents to repentance. One difference I noticed between women at Amani and those I spoke with outside of the organization is that on the whole, those outside Amani spoke of God judging others, while those at Amani, most of whom attended other local churches, felt that God judged them.

**God Causes Suffering as a Test**

Some of the women expressed the opinion that God causes suffering to test their faith or draw them closer to Himself. This surfaced both in their analysis of the Job narrative, as well as their own experiences. Adok, when speaking of Job (Acholi Yubu), speaks as if God orchestrates these tragedies in Job’s life: “Yubu was still continuing the same way and then God started taking everything… God brought some strange illness with a lot of pain, but Yubu was still trusting in him with all that pain because Yubu knew very well that God gives and takes” (Adok Florence, Focus group 1, 8/29/18). Adong, too, did not discuss Satan’s agency, but attributed the ills to God’s test of Job’s devotion.

Yubu knew God is there and God really exists. He thought that in it all, God is just putting him in that trying moment knowing “I am going to test if this child of mine still loves me.” Yubu really knew that God was testing him and God was there for him, and that temptation is going to be for a short time (Adong Florence, Focus group 1, 8/29/18).
So Adok and Adong put full responsibility for the test and for the suffering on God’s shoulders as opposed to Satan’s. The reason? To prove that Job has true love for God. Several of the women in the focus groups then applied this same principle to their own lives: that God directly caused their suffering in order to either test their love for Him, or cause them to draw near to Him. Atek spoke of this as a way God expresses love and care, that he may cause trials, but will not give anyone more than she can handle. She related a story about the trials she endured: escaping life in the bush, returning home to find that her family had already performed her funeral rite, becoming trapped in a severely abusive marriage to a man who beat her so badly she lost the will to live, someone even attempting to poison her children. She told us about the dialogue she had with God throughout this time. Her voice started out softly as she told her story, almost inaudibly, and soon swelled to the volume and passion of a street preacher.

I just asked God, “...You should have just taken my life from the bush, because I came home and I am undergoing a lot.” So from there again another thought came that, “No, I think this is temptation, because if God really does not love me… I would have died from the bush...I think God is trying to test me to see if I love him and have faith in him.” From there I stood firm, I said, “God, I will never leave you, I know you are there for me, however much I am passing through, I know I will not leave you, I will continue to call your name again and again and again and again.” ... So up to now I am still alive, God kept me, and I know God created me for a purpose and... God does not give you what you cannot take. ... So I praise God... all I know is, everything happens, and it happens for a reason (Atek Lilly, Focus Group 1 8/28/19).

Atek actually expressed finding comfort in the idea that God caused the trials she endured. This belief not only gave her confidence, but also a sense of purpose. Confidence, because she knew that if God put her through trials, he would only give her what she could handle. She drew strength from this idea. It also gave her a sense of purpose because she believed that the all-knowing and loving God causes everything that happens. This means that everything which happened to her, and will happen to her, has its purpose. None of her suffering has been meaningless: instead, God sees the reason even when she cannot. He helps her to overcome each trial, and in the end she loves God more.

Adong, too, expressed that she felt God caused her suffering to draw her nearer to himself. “Now onwards I believe that God is there, and all this that is happening is to draw me near to God. Maybe sometimes God has seen that I have distanced myself from him, so he is letting me go through this in order to come nearer to him” (Adong Florence, Focus Group 1, 8/29/19). Here, Florence’s narrative differs slightly from Lilly’s, as she sees her own actions drawing God’s attention, thus blurring the line between test and punishment.

**God Causes Suffering as Punishment**

Some of the other women involved in the focus groups felt that God caused their suffering not to present them with a test, but in order to punish them for their sins. Adok expressed the idea that God could punish her in order to draw her nearer to Him.

I know that God takes me like his child. I think God punishes me through what I’ve been through because he wants me to draw nearer to him. So I look at all this from the time he formed me in my mother’s womb up to when he formed me as a person, so this just clarifies that God loves me. I should draw nearer to him and believe God is there—it doesn’t matter if I’ve seen Him or not, but I have to believe that God is there (Adok Florence, Focus Group 1, 8/29/18).

Intriguingly, Adok tied the idea of punishment into the idea of fatherly love. She reasoned that like a good father would discipline his children, so God must discipline his children by causing suffering in their lives. This logic also seems to imply that God does this to draw his children nearer to himself, not because he sees some other benefit of the discipline.

Achiro, too, echoed the idea that she felt God caused her suffering as a punishment, often in response to sins she did not know she had committed. In response to the question “What do you think God thinks of you?” she replied, I think, when I’m going through a trying moment, what God thinks about me is that God thinks I’m the biggest sinner. There are also certain things that happen and I cannot guess that God is available. Because even when I pray and pray and pray, I don’t get answers. So this makes me think I’m the biggest sinner, and then I normally pray to God—maybe there are certain sins I’ve committed without my knowing, so I just pray that God forgives me (Achiro Agness, Focus Group 2, 8/29/18).

Adong, too, felt that perhaps she could not know what she had done to warrant testing or punishment, but she expanded the ability of God to punish, suggesting that perhaps God caused her children to fall sick in order to punish her for her sin.
So for example when God tests you in a way that your child falls so sick...God is testing you, maybe because you’ve sinned. So this comes to you as punishment because of the wrongs you had committed. According to me, most of the times we think we are doing something right, but in front of God it’s not really right. So instead of God punishing you, God channels the punishment maybe on your child. That’s how God repays everyone’s sins differently (Adong Florence, Focus Group 1, 8/29/18).

So Adong saw that any misfortune which befell her children might ultimately come because she had done something wrong, most likely some sin of which she had no knowledge. In Adong’s understanding of God, knowing the right thing to do lay outside of her comprehension. She could try her very best to live righteously, but still fail. Thus whenever her child fell sick, it caused her to wonder what she could have done to cause such a thing. Interestingly, Acholi tradition does teach that sickness may come as punishment for a sin. While the Acholi tradition places less emphasis on a supreme being than surrounding tribes, it does include a supreme spirit, “Jok.” For the Langi, the Acholi’s closest neighbors, Jok can reward humans, but also punishes sin with sickness and painful death, a view echoed by Adong and some of the others (Kyewalyanga, 1976, 248). Thus Adong’s explanation blends the Job account with traditional understandings of misfortune.

Emmanuel Katongole ties traditional beliefs in powerful deities to the ways in which African believers in many contexts conceive of God. He sees the lack of dialogue about a “vulnerable/hidden/crucified God” in African theology stemming from multiple sources, but a main one being a traditional cosmology which does not leave room for the idea of a vulnerable or suffering god. “They expect their gods to be bigger, stronger, more powerful, and more enduring than humans... it is thus not difficult to see why, with the emphasis on ‘miracles’ and a ‘mighty’ God who ‘reigns’ supreme, Pentecostalism has become quite appealing” (Katongole, 2017, 120). He sees many strengths in this theological approach, but also the deficit, which does not locate God in suffering, thus making lament a rare practice, as believers become unwilling to question this supreme god.

Job’s friends use this same unquestioning logic. When confronted with Job’s seemingly inexplicable suffering, they tell him that he must have done something wrong to cause the death of his children. God himself appears to speak with Job later on in the book, and refutes this accusation himself. Job is, in fact, innocent. Gutierrez emphasizes Job’s innocence in commentary on the book (Gutierrez, 1985, 69). While the Job narrative does deny that God does punish for sins, it also teaches that even the innocent suffer.

These women’s understanding of God’s supremacy makes them believe that he has orchestrated every detail of their lives. They believe that each instance of suffering comes from his hand, and “his ways are higher than our ways,” so they cannot fathom what they have done to deserve this punishment. However, not everyone at Amani construed God’s supremacy in this way.

Multiple Narratives Part 3: God Stands With Us and Works to Defeat Suffering

The narrative that God stands with these women and works to defeat their suffering arose throughout my time at Amani more than any of the others. Even the women who held the view that God causes suffering also affirmed that God brings all good things into their lives. Many of them, like Amono, wake up each morning and pray to thank God for bringing them safely through the night. Even those who thought perhaps God caused their suffering to punish them also testified to the fact that he had saved their lives. This theme arose almost daily throughout my internship at Amani as we shared testimonies. Women would thank God for anything from preventing their house burning down, to the recovery of a sick child, to financial provision. While some attributed misfortune and death to God, everyone unanimously described him as the giver of blessings and life.

“Because My Life is Like This”

Many of the women spoke of coming to believe in God because of seeing his work in their lives. Amono told us how this happened for her after a season of unbelief. The thing which led her to believe in God again, in addition to her lament, was him overcoming her suffering, which showed her his concern and love for her. Not only did God spare her life, he also gave her many other blessings.

It is because of the present change that happens in your life, that is how you can affirm that God is available. Otherwise how would I have found that God is present or there the times I was abducted? So I look at now that I’m alive, and then I believe that God is still there because he loves me and is taking care of me. Even if I went through that trying time, he has given me children, he has given me a better life. Even right now I am still alive. And I suspect that God is still alive, because my life is like this (Amono Lilly, Focus Group 1, 8/29/18). Amono’s expression of faith came because she saw how God had helped her through her ordeal. This “better life” included not only children, but the healing and...
empowerment she has experienced through Amani. She did not express value in the suffering itself, only God’s help through it. Her love of God has come through seeing him improve her life. This “better life” does not mean the absence of trouble: Lilly struggles often to put food on the table while also buying costly medicine. Yet looking back on the trajectory of her life, she could see God helping her through these trials. Many of the women echoed this conclusion: they knew God loved them because he saved their lives and must have a purpose for them. Atek saw not only her own life but the lives of her children, whom God saved from kidnapping and poisoning, as evidence of his love. “I think God has no bad plans for me, he has good plans for me, because he has given me children. He still has good thoughts for me, and He’s still giving me more gifts” (Atek Lilly, Focus Group 1, 8/29/18). Atek saw God as the preserver and creator of life, one who has “good thoughts” for her.

God As Comfort

Nearly all of the women at Amani expressed that God gave them comfort, especially hearing his word (the Bible). Amono said, “When I hear the teachings in church, they bring peace to my heart” (Amono Lilly, Focus Group 1, 8/28/18). Atek, too, testified to this peace. She specifically referred to how the Beatitudes, a passages in which Jesus expresses preference for the poor and broken hearted, had become a source of peace for her.

I felt very good on Sunday when I went to church, because I felt what was being taught in the Bible, that God is so close to those people who are grieved in their hearts. That means that God is nearer to those people who are hurting and He is also nearer to those who love him. That’s all I know (Atek Lilly, Focus Group 1, 8/29/18).

For Atek, the Bible’s teaching that God has a special blessing for those “grieved in their hearts,” what most English versions translate “brokenhearted” or “those who mourn,” gave her peace and comfort. She knew that God takes notice of the evils done to her and her grieved spirit. The Bible gave her assurance that although in this life she may have received a broken heart, God promises her more blessings because of what she has endured. This became a source of encouragement. Alice too found comfort in God’s word. “When I go to church, I listen to God’s word a lot. Every time the word is read, and then being taught, it brings peace to my heart” (Apiyo Alice, Focus Group 2, 8/29/18). In one conversation I had with several of the women over afternoon tea, I asked if they found trauma healing activities like the one we had just completed helpful. They unanimously told me that they found them helpful; in fact, they found anything that involved talking about God, reading the Bible, or praying helped them to unburden their hearts. As most of them cannot read on their own, Bible preaching at Amani offers them a vital chance to receive encouragement throughout the week (Field notes 11/29/18). Thus for some of these women, God only represented a source of comfort and strength. For others, God represented both trials and punishment, but also comfort and peace. Bad things can be attributed to any source: God’s indifference or absence, his discipline or punishment. They can also stem from human agency and evil, or from the agency of demonic beings, especially as harnessed by humans for witchcraft. Or evil can be directly attributed to Satan. Yet without dispute every good thing comes from God.

Jesus as Victorious

One theme in particular stood out from those who saw God as opposing and overcoming suffering: Jesus as victorious. Jesus the one who in dying defeated death and every challenge these women face. This theme came out particularly strongly whenever one of the women faced issues of witchcraft and cursing. One day, when all of Amani visited Dorothy’s home, she told us about how people had been placing curses on her family, causing two of her relatives to go to the hospital. We prayed fervently for about 15 minutes, invoking the power of Jesus to counteract the destructive power of witchcraft against this family (Field notes 9/28/18). These beliefs held by many of the women at Amani echo the cosmology which one anthropologist recorded in South African pentecostal churches: “The principle message of these churches is the same: illness, poverty, and unhappiness are products of demonic action that can only be undone through being ‘born again’ in Jesus (Ashforth, 2005, 105).” On one occasion, I spent the night at Achora’s home. Before going to sleep, the whole family lifted their voices together in Acholi gospel songs and exuberant prayer, singing lyrics about how God loves all people and Jesus has won the victory. When I asked if the family did this every night, they all replied with an emphatic yes!, and her mother told me that there was a lot of witchcraft in the area, so if the family did not pray at night, “the spirits disturb people’s minds” (Field notes 11/20/18). Upon waking up in the morning, we also prayed and sang to thank God for protecting us through the night. These instances demonstrate that they count on God not only to protect them, but also trust that Jesus has won the
victory over the forces of darkness which threaten to disturb them.

I saw this same trust in a victorious God through passionate prayers whispered to God in the dark of night, pleading for the redemption of alcoholic husbands. I saw it in entreatments for safe delivery of twins, or prayers for the healing of HIV. These women repeatedly expressed faith that God could help them overcome the many challenges they faced, and we celebrated many answered prayers together.

Achora spoke of her confidence in Jesus’ plan for her life. Throughout the course of my internship I witnessed how she drew strength from the presence of God in her life and the belief that he was helping her to overcome challenges she faced in her marriage. On Independence Day, which I celebrated with her family, we walked together through her fields. As we stood hands sticky with sap and heaped high with pink sweet potatoes, she told me about the many challenges she faced, and had faced in her lifetime. Yet she knew that God had a plan for her life and so she did not fear for the future.

On another occasion, we had both arrived to work by seven in the morning, her sewing machine already whirring. When I asked if she had eaten yet, she told me that she was praying and fasting, because she was waiting for God’s deliverance and guidance in a difficult situation. She then told me, “You know, God can speak to us in dreams” and proceeded to describe the dream she had the night before. In the dream, she had to cross over a deep chasm with a very narrow bridge while a large, dark figure pursued her. Upon reaching the other side, a man with a gun greeted her and told her to continue up the path to a large house, he was waiting to stop “bad people.” “But for you, you are a good person, we have been waiting for you.” The dark figure pursuing her stumbled and fell to the bottom of the gorge. She continued up to the big house, and the belief that he was helping her to overcome challenges she faced in her marriage. On Independence Day, which I celebrated with her family, we walked together through her fields. As we stood hands sticky with sap and heaped high with pink sweet potatoes, she told me about the many challenges she faced, and had faced in her lifetime. Yet she knew that God had a plan for her life and so she did not fear for the future.

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The dark figure pursuing her stumbled and fell to the bottom of the gorge. She continued up to the big house, then woke up. She interpreted this dream as a sign that although she was going through a trial, she would overcome it. “So you don’t have to worry about me, I know I already have the victory” (Field notes 11/15/18). This dream from God gave her comfort and strength for the journey. It shows that Achora saw God not as the sender of menacing figures, but the one who blocks their path. Not the one obstructing her road to a better life, but the one welcoming her into a home. For Achora, Jesus offered victory over the evils she faced in her life.

This illustrates that judgement does not always have negative implications for these women. Inherent in Achora’s dream, and in her worldview, lies the concept of judgement. Yet this judgement is the liberating type: justice. Because she serves a just God, she knows that God will not allow dark figures, power-hungry men, or the tragedy of death to have the final say. Because she served a victorious God of justice, Achora knew that she had a safe place to run, a promise of a better life to come and help along the way. Kenneth Surin arrives at this same conviction in his analysis of various theodicies, arguing that for God to be good he must carry out some form of judgement, because people like Achora have seen the full extent of human evil and a God of mercy without justice can do nothing for the oppressed (Surin, 1986, 157). Achora knew that God’s justice is not a thing to be tampered with, but for her it brought joy: God will punish the wicked and shelter the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable. At the end of the day, evil will not win, Jesus will. In this view, God directs the details of Achora’s life, but Jesus has taken any judgement for Achora as a believer, and all that remains for her is God’s love and provision. This understanding considers agents other than God. Demonic forces cause evil, and believers stand locked in a battle between forces of light and darkness, but Jesus has won the ultimate victory. Thus in the arc of history, God is supreme.

**A Unifying Theme: God is Supreme**

Regardless of differences in how they perceived God, the women of Amani all spoke highly of God’s sovereignty and duty to worship him. One Acholi word, *wot* (pronounced “wohr”), encapsulates this idea. One can alternately translate *wot* as respect, awe, worship, obedience, or devotion. Children must show *wot* to elders, the members of an organization *wot* to their superiors, and we must *wot* God. This word showed up during nearly every discussion during the trauma healing program, during focus groups, and during the teachings the women did during devotions time. *Wot* is paramount to an Acholi understanding of God.

Many of the women found the concept of *wot* to be sure footing when wrestling with difficult questions. During one of the focus groups, Adok returned to this concept as she articulated her search for meaning in grief. Her voice full of emotion, maybe close to tears, she told us,

I have felt that way about God because I have lost three dear people in my life, they were so dear to me, so I thought about that and made a conclusion. I asked God, “why me? God, why do you do this to me?” Then later I concluded that it is God who gives and takes (Adok Florence, focus group 8/29/18).

Her sentiment echoes Job’s words upon losing everything: “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the
name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). The women during the focus groups unanimously affirmed Job’s conclusion. God is supreme. He can do what he wants, his ways are higher than our ways, and when we cannot understand, we can respect him. Gustavo Gutierrez’s commentary on the book of Job draws this same conclusion: that God has total divine freedom, and his justice reaches higher than one mere mortal can comprehend. The women praised this response in Job, recognizing that if God gave Job everything, then God reserved the right to take it all away.

Each week during trauma healing workshops, after seeing a small group act out a Biblical story, we would discuss in groups what we had learned from the stories. Nearly every week, the answers included what one Th. The first week, in response to the story of Joseph, the three groups concluded that the story demonstrated how “God is bigger than people” and “We should love and trust God” (Field notes 11/6/18). The next week, in response to the creation story, groups produced responses such as “The power of God made everything possible with just a word,” “God is big and strong,” or “supreme,” “We must love God and obey his commands,” “God can do whatever he wants,” and “we should respect (wot) God” (Field notes, 11/8/18). The following week, learning about the fall in the garden and God’s promise to redeem humanity, responses emphasized how humans try to compete with God, and how we should instead obey God (Field notes, 11/15/18). Upon reading about Jesus’ healing of a bleeding woman, everyone concluded, “The story shows us how big/mighty/supreme God is” (Field notes, 11/22/18). In the week that we talked about Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane and crucifixion, while people emphasized God’s love for humans, groups also pointed to the sovereignty of God, that even Jesus cannot tell God what to do (Field notes, 11/27/18). Taken together, the prevalence of wot throughout these responses is striking. Every week, at least one response would include what one can translate as “God is big,” “God is mighty,” or “God is supreme”. These women seem to have unanimously arrived at the conclusion that regardless of the highs and lows in their own lives, God is big, he is mighty, he is supreme. God elicits devotion by nature of being God.

**IV. Concluding Thoughts**

With the sort of trauma these women endured, they cannot give packaged, easy answers. What they can affirm is that they have all experienced life and loss: the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Some take comfort in knowing it all happened for a reason. Others take comfort in knowing Jesus has given them the victory. Others simply conclude, it happened, and learn how to go forward. Surin describes the attitude that many of the women at Amani portray towards suffering:

> From the standpoint of the victims of evil themselves, the question of the intelligibility of evil per se might not arise at all…The practical problem of eradicating or bypassing the travails in question would be paramount for such persons. Indeed, it is perfectly conceivable that the interests of the victims of evil may be such that the question of the intelligibility of evil per se is for these persons irrelevant or even unanswerable (Surin, 1986, 64).

These women navigated what caused the events in their lives in multiple ways. Yet they have no need to create logical formulas to explain away the inexplicable or resolve tensions which should not be resolved. Instead, these survivors of unspeakable evil must find what will keep them moving forward. For these women, at the end of the day, they make sense of the world by concluding that *they are not God. “His ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:8).” This study offers insights into theology that are valuable for thinkers beyond the Ugandan context. These women have survived the unimaginable, and come to a place of faith as they unburden their hearts and learn how to keep going. They teach the world that what matters more than explaining evil is walking with those who experience it, knowing that over it all, God is supreme. As far as who should lead discussions about suffering going forward, Lilly’s words contain great wisdom: “God is nearer to those people who are hurting and he is also nearer to those who love him. That’s all I know” (Atek Lilly, Focus Group 1, 8/29/18).

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