

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

## Anger Management With Art In Northern Uganda

**Dr. Marian Liebmann**

### **Abstract**

These workshops arose out of a request from a Ugandan colleague, who had been working with victims of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war 1988-2004, started by Joseph Kony and rebel forces. She and her colleagues felt some direct work on anger would be helpful.

Most of the anger being expressed has arisen from people's experiences in the LRA wars. Boys and girls were abducted and recruited into the LRA army and taught how to kill; they suffered beatings and watched brothers and sisters die at the hands of the LRA. If they were able to escape, they returned home only to find that often their parents had been killed by the LRA and their houses burnt down.

Clearly any short-term training could not remove the causes of the huge anger that has built up. So the focus of this training was to introduce strategies of handling anger so that people did not make things worse for themselves.

Case studies and examples of participants' art work are included. The article also reflects on the relevance of such work in cultures where both art work and therapy are not very usual or available, and whether such work can be sustainable.

**Key words:** conflict, Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), trauma, Uganda, war

## **Introduction**

These workshops arose out of a request from a Ugandan colleague, Grace Kiconco Sirrah, with whom I had worked on previous visits to Uganda in 1999 and 2002, on those occasions providing training in mediation and restorative justice. Grace had been working with victims of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war 1988-2004 (started by Joseph Kony and rebel forces). She had been running Healing of Memories workshops, based on a post-apartheid model from South Africa (Lapsley 2012, 2013). Much anger was expressed in those workshops, so that Grace and colleagues felt some additional direct work on anger would be helpful. Other organizations also said that anger was a huge problem for the people they were trying to help. Grace knew of my work on anger management using art, and contacted me to see if I could come. I raised funds (approximately £5000) from small charities in Bristol and London for a month-long visit to Uganda for three 3-day workshops on 'Anger Management with Art' for communities in Northern Uganda and a 5-day mediation training for people in helping roles. The workshops took place in January 2011.

Most of the anger being expressed had arisen from people's experiences in the LRA wars, which in turn had roots in the colonial and political history of the area. Boys and girls were abducted and recruited into the LRA army and taught how to kill; they suffered beatings and watched brothers and sisters die at the hands of the LRA. If they were able to escape, they returned home only to find that often their parents had been killed by the LRA and their houses burnt down.

Boys were trained to fight and found themselves committing atrocities to survive. Girls were made to carry heavy loads until they dropped and were then beaten; some were trained in military tactics; they were also given to adult soldiers to be their 'wives' and bore them several children. If they escaped, they were often widows with young children (many soldiers were killed in battle) and returned home to find few relatives alive, and facing rejection of their children as 'rebel children'.

Clearly any short-term anger management training could not remove the causes of the huge anger that has built up – this will take many generations. So the focus of this training was to introduce practical strategies of handling anger to help people not to make things worse for themselves, e.g. by alienating friends and relatives, or committing acts of violence. The training courses were based on my work as an art therapist working in a community mental health team in multi-cultural central Bristol.

Much of the success of the workshops was due to Grace's thorough preparation on the ground and well-planned follow-up. She visited community leaders, church pastors and ex-combatant groups, who in turn mobilized their communities to participate. She also arranged meals, accommodation, transport, photocopying and huge quantities of cheap paper.

## **Objectives**

We drew up the following objectives:

1. To give participants an understanding of anger and ways of working with it constructively.
2. To give participants the opportunity to use art materials to look at and express anger issues.
3. To give participants practical tools for dealing with anger.

4. To provide an opportunity for participants to make personal plans for dealing with anger, and participate in a group plan if appropriate.

## **Workshop content**

The workshop content included the following topics, interspersed with breaks, prayers and songs:

### ***Day 1***

- Introductions
- What makes people angry (verbal sharing)
- What is anger? (art)
- Is anger good or bad? (verbal sharing)
- Physical symptoms of anger (group art)
- Anger cycle (short talk with diagram)
- What's underneath the anger? (hurt, needs, fears) (art)

### ***Day 2***

- Early family patterns (art)
- Anger and conflict (art)
- Triggers of anger (group art)
- Ways of calming down (verbal sharing)
- Dealing with conflict: I-statements (verbal sharing)
- Positive self-talk (verbal sharing)
- Relaxation and guided imagery visualization: a peaceful place (art)

### **Day 3**

- Anger and trauma (art)
- Strategies to handle anger – summary of the work (verbal sharing)
- Picture review (art)
- Personal action plan (verbal/ written)
- Group action plan (verbal/ written)
- Evaluation and ending

### **Materials used**

I had taken a variety of simple art materials, bought in the UK, to provide choice and variety. The most popular were pencils (lead and coloured) and erasers, perhaps because people had used these before. Felt-tip pens were also popular (fine and broad). Paints were used by a few (we mixed them in plastic drinking mugs, with a brush in each (see figure 1), and bought plastic plates for mixing). Clay was very popular with some of the women in the Lira group; lay untouched in the Gulu group, but was enjoyed when instructed to use it for one exercise; and was not available for the Kitgum group. The oil pastels, soft pastels and charcoal remained almost untouched.



Fig 1: Paint and brushes at the ready

### **Workshop experiences**

It was clear in each workshop that participants found drawing pictures very helpful – in many cases they would have liked more time. They were not shy about sharing, and did not feel embarrassed about the basic level of their drawing skills. In the UK I usually provide time for personal sharing in pairs, as people are often unhappy about sharing personal issues with a large group. However, in Uganda participants were happy (indeed preferred) to share everything with the whole group.

Some of the strategies were new to participants (e.g. anger cycle, positive aspects of anger, paying attention to physical symptoms, resolving conflict through I-statements) but others were well-known to them, such as ways of calming down. For these, creating a group list provided more choices for them to select from.

Although the timetable of each workshop was initially designed to be the same, it worked out differently with each group. The expectation was that the workshops would be run in English, but the community leaders found that many of those in greatest need did not speak English, so they provided an interpreter. This meant that we could not cover all the topics as envisaged, but by being flexible we managed to include most of them in different ways, e.g. by changing an individual exercise to a group one (requiring shorter feedback time).

Altogether 68 people took part (of whom 28 were men and 40 were women) in the three main towns in Northern Uganda, about a half-day's travel from each other, and a day's travel from Kampala, the capital of Uganda, where Grace is based. In all the workshops almost all the participants attended for the whole three days, something I was told was quite rare. Attendance increased as a few new participants joined late, but (with one exception), no one dropped out.

### **Lira workshop**

The venue was a large evangelical church on the outskirts of Lira. The church had been cleared of plastic chairs and our small group was set up in one corner and used other space as needed by participants. Most worked on the concrete floor, two were able to work at a small table. The catering was done by women from the church. See figures 2 and 3.



Fig 2: Lira: workshop venue



Fig 3: Lira: Working on the floor

Participants had been recruited through the Combat Veteran Ministers Association (COVEMA) and the local church. The group consisted of 12 women and 4 men. The women were mostly illiterate and were mothers of several children (some of whom were in evidence from time to time) and made their livings by peasant farming or small businesses. They had mostly found out about the workshop through personal suggestion from someone who had heard the announcement in the church and realized their need. In an initial round about why they had come, they shared horrific stories about abduction by the LRA and the problems they had faced on their return. Many had been rejected by husbands or their husbands had died at the hands of the LRA, so they were mostly on their own. Although this meant they were struggling with enormous practical and emotional problems, Grace pointed out that the absence of husbands may have given the women the freedom to attend the workshop so consistently. The men all

spoke and wrote good English – they had been in the army, and were angry due to their lives being taken over by that experience – one said he had been prevented from studying to be a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer. Two were now school teachers in the army primary school. Two of the men ‘came and went’ - one was the pastor who was Grace’s main contact, the other was the church administrator who supported us but took little part.

Some of the women really loved working with clay (see figure 4) and also enjoyed painting the clay models they made. See figure 5, a model of two people drinking ‘local brew’ (leading to gossip and anger).



Fig 4: Lira: women working with clay



Fig 5: Gossiping while drinking local brew

### **Gulu workshop**

The venue for the workshop was Bwangatira, a rural village about four miles from Gulu Town, under three large mango trees (see figures 6 and 7). The men sat on benches, the women on mats on the ground. We moved as the shady patches shifted with the sun. Finding a firm space to rest sheets of paper for drawing proved difficult, so we obtained a few cardboard boxes (also in short supply) and cut them up to form rudimentary drawing boards.



Fig 6: Under the mango trees



Fig 7: Gulu workshop in progress

The group that came together consisted of members of two groups: COVEMA and a church group meeting at Bwangatira. Some were members of both groups. Although we started with the 20 participants expected and catered for (in terms of handouts, programmes and certificates), more joined as the first day progressed. In the end there were 31 participants, of whom 9 were men and 22 were women, two or three of whom were nursing babies. The age range included some young people and some quite elderly people, with many in between. Several of the women were involved in cooking, so came and went as their tasks allowed. Three boys (aged 13, 9 and 6) joined in enthusiastically with art work. A 15-year-old girl stood in for her mother on the last day.

All the participants had terrible stories to tell about how the war had affected them, and we made the space for them to do this. Almost all had been abducted at some point during the 20 years of LRA activity. The men had mainly been forced to fight and had gruesome tales of battles they were forced into, seeing brothers and sisters killed, trying to escape – and where they succeeded, often returning home to find their parents had been killed and they were on their own, facing prejudice from neighbours for their involvement in the LRA. Some had been in government forces. The women had been forced to carry heavy loads, and were often distributed to older men to be their wives. When they returned home with their children, they found prejudice against them for their forced involvement. One woman described how a potential husband said, ‘First send Kony’s children back to the bush’. For all of them one of the biggest losses they mentioned was their education, which had stopped dead at whatever stage they were abducted; and very few of them saw any prospect of re-starting it.

Again, pencils and felt-tip pens were the most popular media, with one or two people using paint. The clay, fetched with a bike from a local river, was ignored completely until we asked them to do the exercise on triggers of anger in small groups using clay – which they did with great gusto (see figure 8).



Fig 8: Gulu: clay work

### **Kitgum workshop**

This workshop took place in a classroom of Kitgum Public Primary School. The arrangements were made by a retired Church of Uganda canon, the Reverend Nicholas, whom Grace knew through work with the Acholi Religious Peace Initiative, which has done much to mediate the many conflicts resulting from the recent wars. He was an inspirational figure but clearly not a born organizer, as many of the practical arrangements were not in place at the start. Some participants complained about this, and all was in order by the second day. Working in a classroom meant that participants could work on the walls (which many of them chose to do) as well as the floor (see figure 9).



Fig 9: Kitgum: working on the walls of a classroom

Most of the participants had been hand-picked by Reverend Nicholas – those who had been abducted, and were in the greatest need of the workshop, could understand and speak English, and lived nearby. An international Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) called Food for the Hungry, working with women who had been abducted, provided the six women participants. The 16 other participants were all young men between the ages of about 25 and 32. Most spoke good English. Several course participants were on vocational training courses run by Food for the Hungry or other NGOs, or were being sponsored to go back to school and catch up on their education. In terms of educational level and understanding, this group was at a higher level than the other two groups. Even so, there were several participants who did not understand English, so we still needed an interpreter. One of the participants, David, undertook this task with enthusiasm; when he was not available or was contributing his thoughts,

others interpreted. There are more than 50 languages/ dialects in Uganda, so people are well used to interpreting for each other.

The higher level of understanding meant that this group grasped all the concepts and strategies well and gained many skills. But it had its drawbacks: most of them had been on many courses and had expectations based on previous experience of NGOs with large resources, such as printed T-shirts, books, courses on other subjects, more transport money (a small amount had been budgeted for and was distributed), better food and drink, accommodation for the couple of participants who had come some distance, and so on.

### **Group work**

Although most of the work was done individually, I introduced group work for some exercises where it was appropriate, or to change the rhythm. This resulted in some very interesting pictures and discussions.

### ***Physical symptoms***

Participants worked on an outline of a calm-looking person, adding symptoms of their own or others' anger. Figure 10 shows a group of men from the Gulu workshop working on this. The physical symptoms are a headache, red staring eyes, tears, a lump in the throat, palpitations in the chest, and tension in arms and legs. The importance of this exercise is that these symptoms are often precursors of anger escalating, so can be useful warning signs.



Fig 10: Physical symptoms of anger

### ***Triggers of anger***

Participants worked as a group, as in figure 11 in Lira with drawing materials, or with clay as in Gulu (see figure 8) or with paint as in Kitgum (see figure 12). In this picture, there are two triggers of anger for the person in yellow – first, he has stubbed his toe and it is bleeding; second, the person in blue has overtaken him in running away from a fierce dog, but has not told him of the danger behind him!



Fig 11: Lira: small group working on triggers of anger



Fig 12: Lira: triggers of anger

### **Personal and group action plans**

Everyone in all the groups was able to make a personal action plan to deal with anger in their lives, selecting the strategies and techniques that suited them best. Two of the groups (Lira and Kitgum) were able to make group plans to pass on the skills at future seminars or through the churches; the Gulu group could only focus on alleviation of poverty measures. The Kitgum NGO 'Food for the Hungry' stated its intention to incorporate the materials into its training curriculum.

## **Evaluations**

We used an evaluation form with 10 questions, prepared on the assumption that participants would be literate in English. However, as many of the participants did not speak or write English (several were also illiterate in their own language), we paired up those who could write English and those who could not. Our interpreters also helped to explain the questions. This worked well in Lira and Kitgum, but in Gulu we had 31 participants, of whom only five could write in English. We decided to reduce the number of questions to five, choosing those that had elicited useful responses in the Lira evaluation, and to write them on a flipchart with spaces to be filled in. We divided the group into five small groups of six, each with one flipchart of questions and one English-writer, who tried to elicit a group response to each question.

Overall the evaluations for the groups showed that all participants had enjoyed the course a lot, especially the art work, which was new to many of them. The pictures show an increase in confidence with materials, and the clay was especially popular with several of the women. Participants seemed able to express their thoughts and feelings visually, and to be able to use the pictures to explain these to the group – they were not at all embarrassed about their often limited drawing skills, and were eager to share their drawings in the group. The art provided a bridge to expressing painful experiences, which were often difficult to put into words, and the act of art-making gave people time to digest those experiences.

## **Quotes**

**Angel** - I have learnt how to manage anger and stop it from exploding.

**Pamela** - I have learnt how to identify symptoms of anger.

**Gloria** – I have learnt how to stop the spread of gossip.

**Dorothy** - I used to beat my child so much but now I have learnt to control my anger and won't beat my child again.

**Mercy** - It has helped to stop reflecting on my past and the nasty experiences of the war.

**Betty** - When I am angry, I will go and sit under a tree and later go off to pray. I will also sing songs that will calm me down.

**Tim** - Peace belongs to everybody and we can bring it and destroy it as well. If a friend wrongs you, it's best to sit down and peacefully settle it.

**Mark** - Peace is one of the things that will help us live longer. I've learnt to calm down when angry.

**Andrew** – I have learnt what anger is and its triggers. I have also learnt that anger can be controlled by relaxing and discussion. Thoughts of a peaceful place can comfort and calm one down.

## **Case studies**

### **Rebecca**

Rebecca was abducted by the LRA with her brother and taken to the bush, where she had to run with heavy luggage and was slapped in the face if she could not run fast enough. She still has problems with her eyes from this. She escaped when government troops engaged the LRA in battle and found her way home. Her brother was killed in the bush and her father was killed at home, so she relocated to the nearest town, where she still resides. She described having anger in her heart from all of this. In one picture about anger she drew a neighbour's goat destroying her crops (see figure 13) – her first impulse was to fight the neighbour with her fists. She also enjoyed using the clay, and in an exercise on 'anger and conflict', moulded two pots, one closed and one open to depict unhelpful and helpful communication styles in conflict (see figure 14). In her evaluation she highlighted the art sessions as particularly useful, and at the end said, 'I feel released of anger.'



Fig 13: Neighbour's goats eating her crops



Fig 14: Open and closed pots representing communication

### ***Morgan***

Morgan was abducted in 1997 as a young boy and trained in military tactics. In one battle he received splinters of bombs in his side. His brother died. Eventually he was captured by government soldiers and taken home, where he found his parents were dead. He was determined to catch up on his education but had no sponsorship, so made bricks to pay for his school fees – he had succeeded in catching up with his primary education, but making bricks would not cover secondary school fees, so he felt very despondent. In his picture about anger generally, he drew himself as a returnee, drinking to drown his sorrows and taking a knife to himself (see figure 15). In the visualization of a peaceful place, he said he looked around the world but could not find a peaceful place, so in his imagination took off to heaven and drew Jesus, angels, flowers, the sun and stars (see figure 16). In his action plan he included: not responding in anger immediately, but looking for the right reason instead of guessing, helping others calm down, not triggering more anger, looking for a quiet place to settle his mind, teaching others about anger, praying and reading the Bible to calm down. In his evaluation he said he enjoyed it very much and learnt a lot; what he liked best was looking for a solution to the problems he had, and helping others to calm down.



Fig 15: Contemplating suicide



Fig 16: Visualizing heaven

### **Natasha**

Natasha was abducted in 1995 aged 14 and taken to Sudan. It was impossible for her to escape and she stayed there eight years, and had three children by one of the soldiers. She returned in 2003 when the father of her children was killed in battle. Her mother and father died soon after. In her village she was looked on as an outcast – other children threw stones at her children, calling them ‘rebel children’, so she moved to the town (Gulu). She saw no future for herself or her children, and in particular no possibility of education. She looked angry and was clearly having difficulty with her latest baby of 11 months. In her picture about anger generally, she drew a soldier trying to abduct a child (see figure 17). In her picture about the needs underlying her anger,

she drew a picture of children being angry and upset at not being able to go to school when their friends could (see figure 18). In her picture about 'anger and conflict', she drew her brother beating her up (see figure 19), which contributed to her leaving home and all the subsequent problems. Her picture about 'trauma and anger' showed her abduction and walking till her leg was so swollen that she collapsed under a tree, and was in danger of being killed by a rebel soldier (see figure 20). Her personal action plan included crying to get some relief and forgiving or asking for forgiveness, and trying to ignore insults that made her angry.

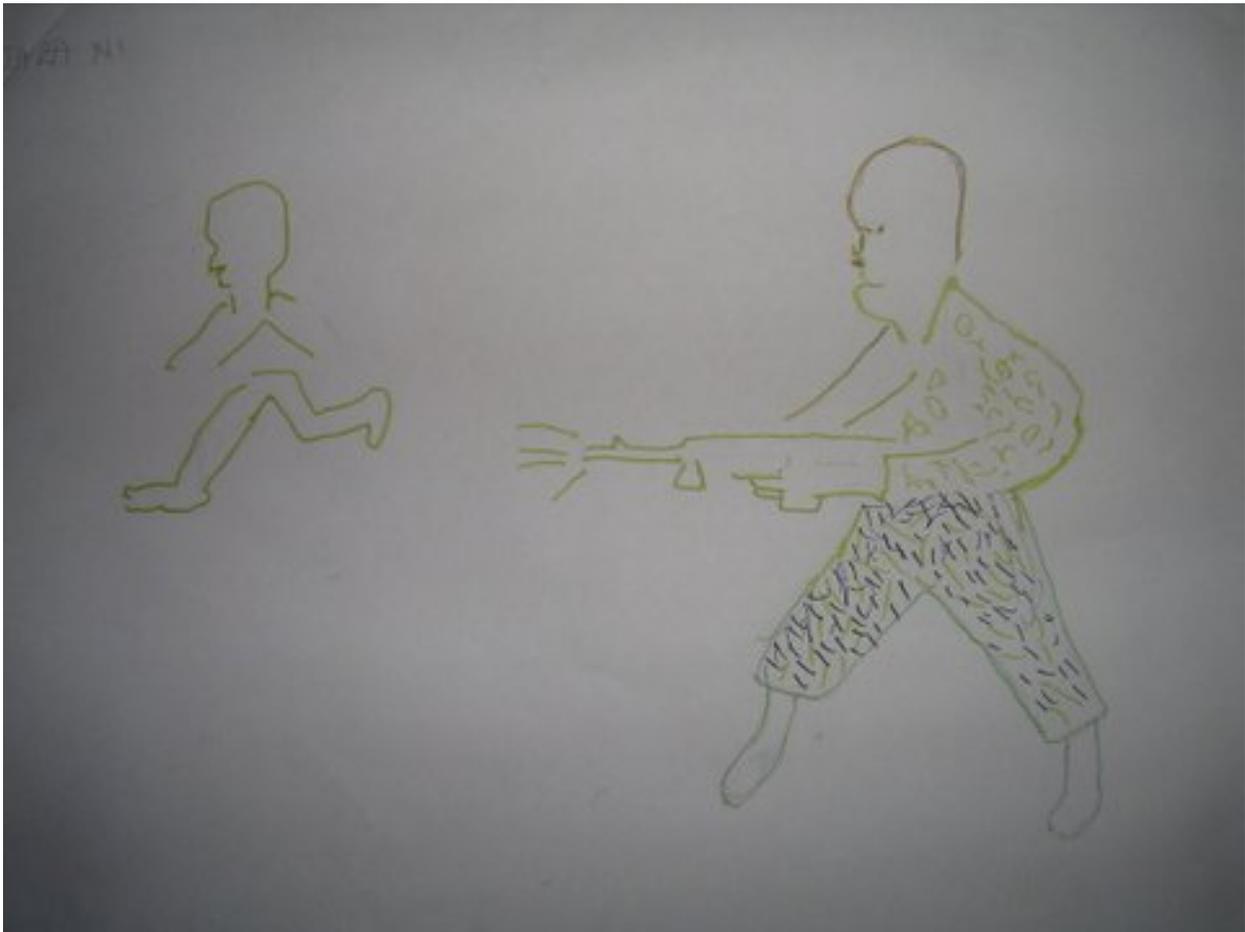


Fig 17: Soldier abducting child



Fig 18: Need for school fees



Fig 19: Brother beating her up



Fig 20: Collapsing under a tree

### **Thomas**

Thomas was abducted as a teenager, and at the age of 45, could still remember the day he was tied by rebels (see figure 21). He escaped but was caught again, with his younger brother, who could not move fast enough to escape, and was killed. Thomas still felt guilty that he was not able to protect his brother well enough (see figure 22). His picture relating anger and conflict showed a neighbour's piglets running amok in his vegetable garden (figure 23). His 'peaceful place' was his banana plantation, where he enjoyed seeing his bananas growing healthy and strong, and felt at peace tending them (figure 24).



Fig 21: Tied by rebels



Fig 22: Unable to protect his younger brother

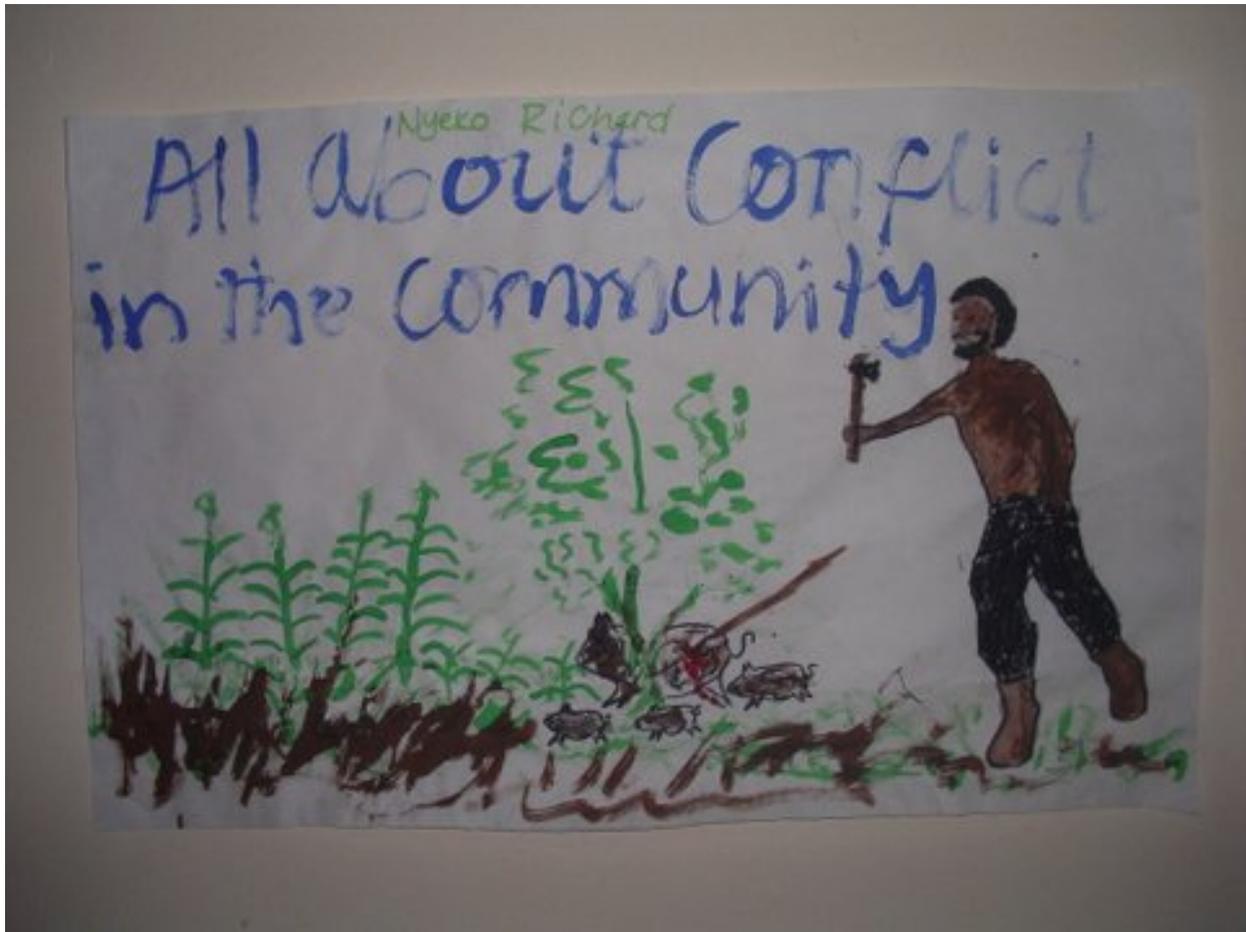


Fig 23: Conflict in the community

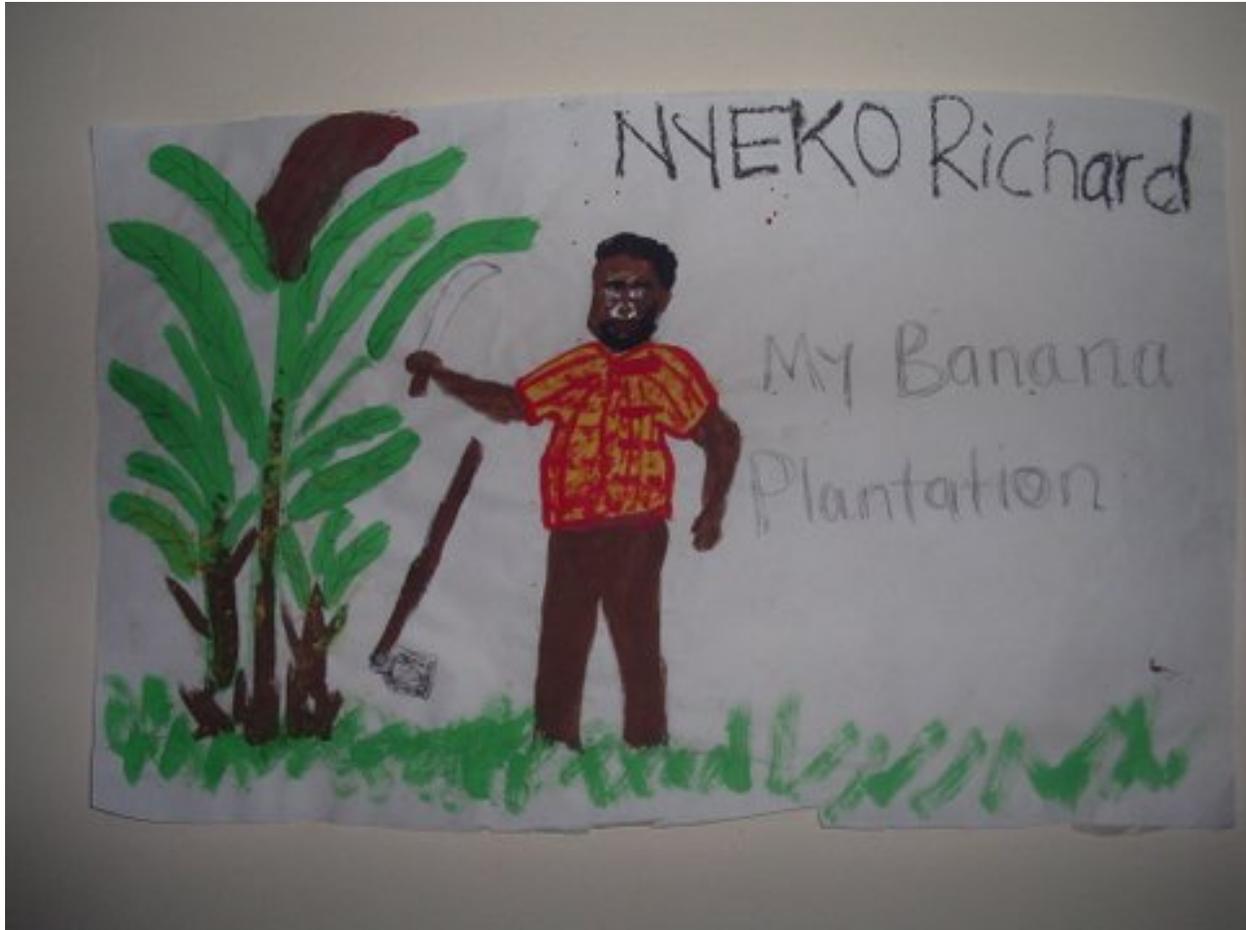


Fig 24: Thomas on his banana plantation

### **Summary of 2011 workshops**

Participants were keen to be involved, as it gave them some hope in their very difficult situation. Some groups had unrealistic expectations, based on other workshops they had attended, that I would provide printed T-shirts and free books. But mostly they were just grateful that they had a few more tools in their hands and heads to deal with their difficult lives now.

## **Revisiting the following year**

In March 2012 we returned to all the participants, and ran a one-day workshop in Anger Management with Art for each of the previous groups. We also took booklets of pictures from last year's workshop to give to all the participants. I had compiled these from photos taken during the workshop (with permission), with the help of a graphics student at the University of the West of England.

Our objectives were:

- To hear about progress over the previous year
- To revise the concepts of anger management
- To use art materials again
- To revise and update group plans

Our programme included:

- A time I managed my anger well (verbal + art)
- Anger cycle (reminder of diagram)
- Ways of calming down (art)
- What's underneath the anger? (art)
- I-statements reminder (verbal)
- Group pictures on harmony (group art)
- My peaceful place (art)
- Updating group plans (verbal)

We used art for most of these, and participants enjoyed using the art materials again.

The workshops again turned out differently in each place. In the village near Gulu we met again under the mango trees – but we had 51 participants (including 16 children), only 11 of whom had attended in 2011. The rest had come because they had heard good things from last year's participants. There was great enthusiasm but it was fairly chaotic and I worried that the new participants acquired a very shallow understanding of anger. Nevertheless some of the teenage boys seemed to gain a lot. The story below shows one outcome

A 15-year-old boy came to tell us of the changes he had seen in his father, who used to beat him and his siblings, so that they lived in fear of him coming home. Following the workshop in 2011, he stopped beating them, and instead, when they made mistakes, taught them how to do better. Now the children no longer ran away, instead they tried to please him. Even their mother was now free. If there were misunderstandings, the family talked about them.

In Kitgum and Lira we had just the participants from 2011, so we were able to run the workshops as planned. There was a better understanding of anger, as the example below from the Kitgum workshop shows.

Peter lived in an incomplete house, which he drew. He had obtained bundles of straw for the roof, and paid people to fix them on. He came back and found they had not done anything, which made him very angry. He felt hurt because he had already paid them half the money. His unmet need was clearly his house fit to live in, and his fears were that the workers would never return, and that rain would make it impossible to do the work, and he would have nowhere to sleep (see figure 25).

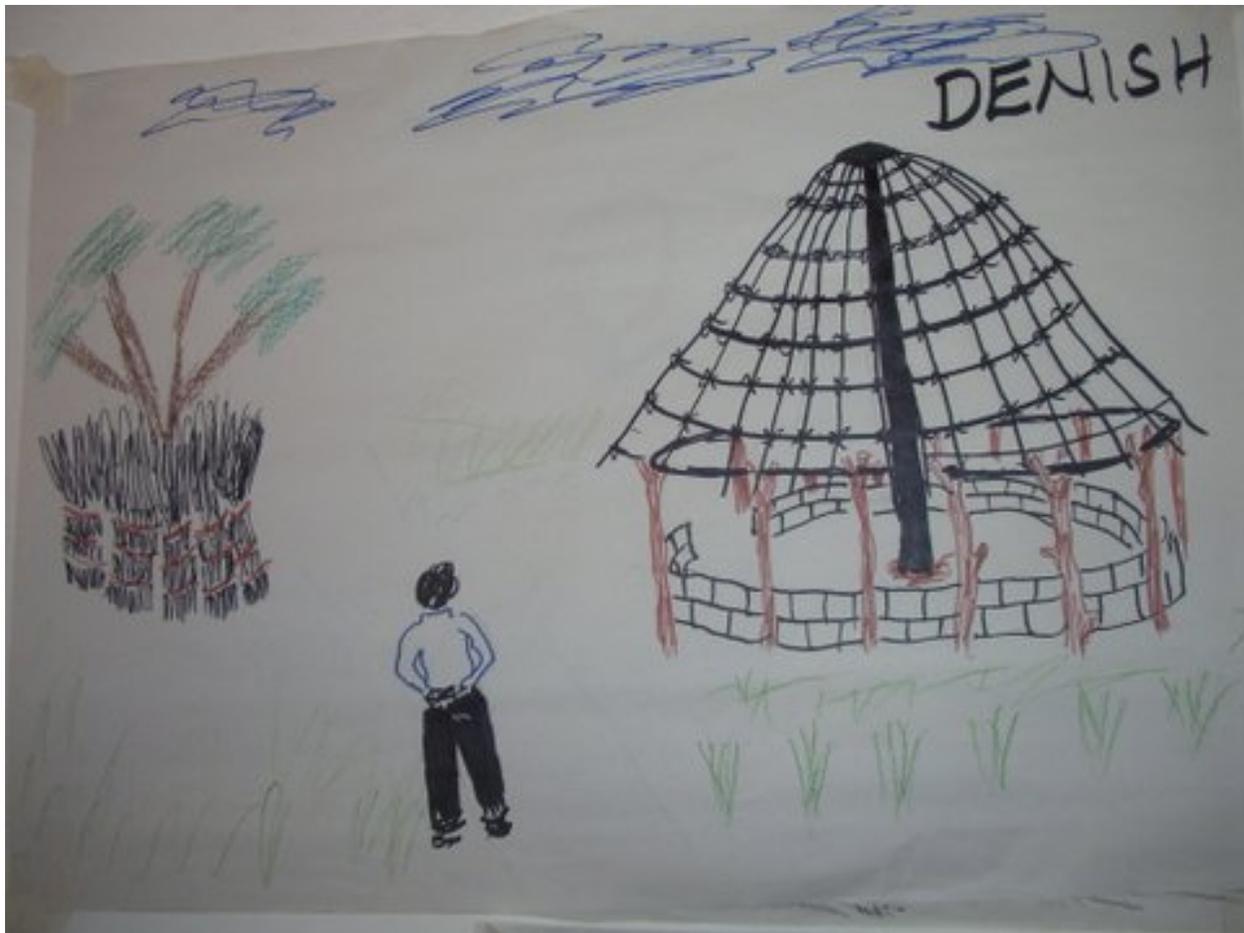


Fig 25: Peter's incomplete house

The Kitgum group also did interesting group drawings of harmony and the role of anger management (see figure 26). This picture shows several paths from huts and villages all leading to one bore-hole, where there is a long line of jerry-cans. Water was short at that time of year. This scenario was often the cause of serious anger, especially if someone 'jumped the queue' – sometimes even leading to fights. There was a clear role for anger management techniques to resolve such issues.



Fig 26: Conflict at the bore-hole 6378

The Lira group too had stories to tell. Margaret related how her neighbour had borrowed something from her but had refused to give it back to her when she went to collect it, making her very angry. She managed to pray and then cool down, till she was able to talk calmly about the issue – and even forgave the neighbour. She also told the story of another neighbour who was beating his child, and how she persuaded him to let the child go and stay with other relatives, and helped the whole situation to calm down.

### **Sustainability**

The charities who gave us the grants were concerned that our work should help communities become more sustainable. Grace and I identified three levels of sustainability:

1. Workshop participants gained tools they could use in their lives, and this helps them lead more positive lives.
2. Participants were also passing the skills on informally to others in their lives 'along the way'.
3. Participants might also introduce the skills into existing organized or informal groups that already met regularly, e.g. widows' groups, young people's groups. This clearly depends on the leadership of these groups.

However, they were unlikely to be able to take the work further in organized workshops, unless a further source of income could be identified. Nor do they have ready access to art materials, except charcoal and clay. I left the remaining art materials with Grace, so that they could be used in further workshops if the opportunity arose. Most of the women participants do not have the kind of lives that include leading formal trainings, but they do have many opportunities of informal contact with others.

## **Conclusion**

We felt very encouraged at the way most participants had been able to use the skills they had learnt in 2011, and the follow-up workshops helped to consolidate this. Although they had not used art materials in this way before, participants seemed able to engage with the media very quickly, and found it useful and enjoyable to use art materials to explore difficult and traumatic issues. There did not seem to be any cultural barriers preventing this engagement. However, it did prove difficult for participants to organize any formal ways of passing on their skills – but were able to use many informal means to do this.

Dr. Marian Liebmann O.B.E.

Bristol Central Recovery Team, Avon & Wiltshire Partnership Mental Health NHS Trust;  
Bristol University, Visiting Scholar.

## References

Lapsley, M. (2012) *Redeeming the Past: My journey from freedom fighter to healer*. Cape Town: Institute for Healing of Memories.

Lapsley, M. (2013) Institute for Healing of Memories. [www.healing-memories.org](http://www.healing-memories.org). Accessed 31/8.13.