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in Eastern Uganda

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Education as Identity:

The Scaffolding of “Being Educated” in Eastern Uganda

Abstract

In eastern Uganda ‘being educated’ is an identity people work on throughout their lives. An educated identity is developed through joining committees, educating one’s children, or subscribing to a recognizable set of behaviors. Education is a ‘scaffold’ that can be built up or knocked down, and is related to, but broader than, experiences of going to school or being young. ‘Being educated’ has ongoing political advantages: those who are seen as more educated have a better time of things in disputes, in dealing with different authorities, and are more likely to benefit from government and NGO schemes. Examples from different social settings highlight the need for an ethnographically open, relationally aware, and politically attuned approach to what people are doing when claiming an educated identity.

Keywords: Education, school, politics, youth, identity, Teso, Uganda

[Note to editors the abstract will be translated into Ateso in the final version]

Florence shuffles her papers and looks embarrassed.ⁱ We sit at the weekly meeting of the *asianut* savings group in the village of Oledai in eastern Uganda. Florence oversees the *engeso* (emergency) book; she records small amounts of money paid into the fund. More usually Florence's friend Christine, an unemployed schoolteacher, would oversee the book. Some of the women sense that Florence is not quite up to the job, and when Christine arrives, Florence is asked to step aside. As the book is handed over, Florence comments that the previous entries had confused her. She does not want to admit that part of her difficulty comes from her lack of formal education; Florence has only a few years of primary schooling. Other women smile and there is some enjoyment amongst them in seeing Florence flustered. She is a strong-willed, dominating presence, and is something of a 'big woman' in the area. Despite her lack of formal schooling Florence has built a reputation as one of the more educated people in the area. This she has done through making an 'educated home' – two of her daughters are at university. Florence also sits on a number of committees, though in positions that avoid the more detailed book work of keeping accounts and updating members records.

What does it mean to be educated in Oledai, a rural sub-parish of about 180 households near to the trading center of the recently created district capital of Ngora? Educated identities are something that can be worked on throughout a life. It is a political status, actively deployed in meetings, disputes, public occasions. Though conceptualized in Ateso, the language dominant in the area, in relation to popular understandings of what takes place in schools, 'being educated' is also recognized as something that can be cultivated through the course of a life. People of different ages work on being educated, through sitting on different committees or by going along to workshops run by NGOs or local government,

extending the sites where educated identities are worked on far beyond the school (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

Educated people are also those familiar with the procedures and paperwork of committee life; they are more likely to talk about national politics, and more likely to be friends with other educated people. They might, like Florence, be busy educating their children. In other words, the phrase 'being educated' goes beyond ideas of formal schooling, drawing on practices of upskilling that an individual undertakes in adulthood. This approach theorises education differently to dominant approaches within the anthropology of education which have assumed a fairly clear division of "schooling" on the one hand – that thing that formal education systems do within the four walls of an institution – and "education" on the other – the forms of training that societies expect of people who are 'knowledgeable' (cf. Levinson, Foley and Holland 1996: 2). Instead "being educated" is understood in relation to the attributes that schools are meant to confer on students and the way these are worked on throughout a life.

Larger efforts at "being educated" might be supported by smaller educational affects: a pen and paper in the breastpocket; diligent notetaking at a meeting; a nicely ironed shirt; the upright bearing of a schoolteacher. If you asked a resident of Oledai to take you to the home of an educated man (the sort of request that happens when government officials or NGO workers need to do community mobilisation), you might well be directed to the compound of Ivan Onai. In his late twenties, Ivan is a 'born again' Christian, and speaks with fluency in English on the importance of 'community sensitization' and 'women's empowerment'. Ivan is always well-turned out, serves as a youth councilor at the sub-county, and runs a youth group in the village. Though Ivan dropped out of school after

doing poorly in his A Levels, he manages to cultivate the identity of a university graduate through his manners, political career, and committee work. He is felt to be more educated than many of his better credentialed peers. He continues to school himself even though his own relationship to schooling ended sooner than he would have liked.ⁱⁱ

Similarly, a near neighbour of Ivan's, Fastine Oberei, a man in his early sixties, navigates the events surrounding the death of his granddaughter in ways that are reliant on his educated identity, maintained through his work in church, and his positions on various community committees. In the twenty-four hour period between the death and burial, Fastine draws on his recognized status as educated to deal with the police and local authorities. He has an understanding of procedure and knows how to make his case. But the burial is also informed by criticisms others in the community had of Fastine's failure to make an educated home: his children has not done as well as he had.

These empirically derived observations – that 'being educated' is an identity that can be worked on through the course of a life, that 'being educated' involves others and has political effects, and that the attributes of schooling do not end in school – suggest the value of a more open-ended approach to the study of education and schooling than has been common in anthropological writings, where the focus has been more on childhood, the domestic sphere, the lived experience of being in school, and the subjectivities and cultural formations that settle upon younger adults (Stambach 1998; Simpson 2003; Cole and Durham 2008; Durham and Solway 2017; Masquelier 2019). Rather than look to the specific identities schooling fosters among children, as Demerath's work on students 'acting extra' in Papua New Guinea suggests, or Corbett's study of students 'learning to leave' in Nova Scotia explores, I explore the identities of older people, and how they continue their own

relationship to ‘being educated’ through their lives (Demerath 1999, 2000; Corbett 2004). Instead of assuming that education is something abstractly aspirational or future-oriented, located in the imaginaries of young people and those educating them, I examine the prosaic, political affairs of people of different ages to see educated identities at work (cf. del Franco 2010; Stambach and Hall 2016). I also challenge the idea, widely held, that school is the place where educated identities are fixed; and show how educated identities can be worked on by people of different ages, across many contexts (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

In developing these ideas, three contributions are made. The first builds on what anthropologists have said about the role education plays in shaping identities, experiences, and expectations among young people. Though recognizing some of the limitations to scholarship on youth, I also build on an idea within this literature that education can be a ‘scaffold’ around which people assemble and rework identities (Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery 2004). The second develops perspectives on education as a pragmatic everyday object (Bledsoe 2000; Bolten 2015). ‘Being educated’ has, for many adults, a very present, political quality in their own lives; it has everyday uses which take us in a different direction to studies that see education mostly as a future-oriented investment or aspiration focused on younger people (cf. Mische 2009). Scholars exploring the practical uses of ‘imagined futures’, as in Frye’s work from Malawi, focus on younger people and their aspirations meaning that the everyday, political activity of older people in relation to education goes unobserved or untheorized (Frye 2012, Stambach 2016). Third, there is a return to earlier work on ‘bigness’ and its relationship to local politics in east Africa and elsewhere, showing the ways in which educated identities are cultivated through committee work and the business of getting ahead. In engaging with these ideas, and the literatures that support

them, education becomes something open, everyday, and more concerned with politics than might otherwise be expected.

My argument shifts the ground away from Bourdieu and Passeron's focus on schools as sites where educated identities are set (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, see also Reed-Denahay 2005, chapter 2). Instead, we see educated identities being worked on through the course of a life. Schools in Oledai are important not only for the 'inculcation and pedagogy' that takes place within the classroom, but also important as referents against which ideas of "being educated" circulate more widely in society. It is as much practices that referred to what might come from school – whether in the form of the committee skills, competence in English or the books and pens an educated person carries with them – as the actual experience of schooling itself that mattered. These referential practices made it possible for community members such as Ivan, Florence or Fastine to become more or less educated in the eyes of others as they moved through their lives. While Bourdieu places 'an almost exclusive emphasis on schools' my approach extends the work of educated identities to other institutional spaces and life stages (Reed-Denahay 2005, 65).¹

¹ What was also different in Oledai is the reflexive way people discussed schooling and education. Education was less mystifying to people living in Oledai, where interlocutors expressed fairly clear-eyed views on the value of "being educated". They were able to talk about the conscious forms of "work" people did to maintain or augment educated identities at different points in their lives.

Education is a scaffold that can be built up or dismantled

Since the 2000s, much of the available anthropological work on educated identities focuses on young adults; typically university-educated, often unemployed, men. Scholars show the different ways they are stuck, unable 'to experience progress and take on the normative responsibilities of adults' (Mains 2007, 659; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Hansen 2005; Christiansen, Utas and Vigh 2006; Ralph 2009, Honwana 2014; Dawson 2014). There is a sense that 'being educated' is something conferred by school and university which has to be made sense of in the years immediately after. Masquelier's work from Niger, for example, shows young men drinking tea, and forming groups – *fadas* – as a way of filling in the day, of dealing not both with 'ennui, apathy and temporal anxiety' that comes from unemployment and the question of what it means for them to be educated (2013, 474). In Ethiopia many young men feel ashamed by the types of work available to them because they are educated and either stay unemployed *in situ* or move to other towns to make their work invisible to wider family networks (Mains 2007, 660). In Jeffrey's work from the north Indian city of Meerut, young men pass time on street corners, making their lack of work something that is 'seen', and in the process generating a masculine solidarity (2010a, 2010b). Education, in the sense of formal schooling, does something to young people, in terms of cultivating identities and desires.

I, like my interlocutors, take a different line of approach pointing to the ways 'being educated' can be a sort of work throughout a life. In place of the idea that 'being educated' is mostly worked on during school and in the years immediately after, being educated' is

cultivated by people of different ages (cf. Mains 2009). Here, I find Jeffrey's earlier, co-authored, work from rural north India, useful (Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery 2004). In particular their conception of education as a 'scaffold' can be extended to theorise a more open-ended relationship to the question of what it means to be educated.ⁱⁱⁱ While Jeffrey et al limits the use of scaffolding to discourse we can extend their idea to include daily practices through which educated identities are worked on. In suggesting a useful structure that can be assembled or dismantled, the metaphor of 'scaffolding' does a good job of capturing the recognizable, practical ways people do things as they become more (or less) educated: you may join a committee, you may 'fail' to educate your children; you may become a more committed church member, you may fall in with the wrong crowd; you may, like Ivan Onai, listen to the BBC World Service, or you might start to lose the skills in written and spoken English you once had. It is a way of conceptualizing 'being educated' as a type of work that can be undertaken at different points in a life. This way of thinking about education as a scaffold also gets us over the slight hump of seeing educated identities as mostly about the after-effects of time spent in school: Florence was a middle-aged woman trying to build an educated identity for herself in middle age; Ivan was making himself more educated through his committee work, personal style, and cultivated use of English.

We can also see that what goes into the scaffolding depends on the bric-a-brac around at a particular time, which is itself dependent on smaller and larger shifts in society and the economy. Florence benefits from government policies promoting gender equality; she is also living through the financialization of rural life Uganda – the growing numbers of savings groups, microcredit schemes, moneylenders. A financial landscape that involves women more visibly in the business of paying for education. In a similar way, Ivan benefits

from the politicization of “youth” in Uganda, a structural shift in the meaning of what it is to be a young man with an interest in politics (cf. Cheney 2008, 93-94). Ivan avails himself of opportunities in the local government system by turning himself into an educated “youth leader”, a new bureaucratic category with reserved positions in Uganda’s local government system. There are political benefits to embracing a youth identity in the late 2010s. These structural shifts around money and politics affect the habitus – the ways ‘standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking’ – of what it means to be educated and who and how you can make yourself a recognizably educated person (Bourdieu 1990, 70).^{iv}

Being educated can be pragmatic

A second point is the somewhat prosaic observation that ‘being educated’ has practical benefits. Florence is the first in the area to benefit from government initiatives in the area (‘improved’ orange trees, China plates, a bicycle); Ivan gets to meet with NGO workers and shares his phone number with a visiting researcher (and later asks that researcher to bring along a smartphone on his next visit). This is a large part of why educated identities are worth cultivating, because of ongoing, material advantages. It affords a way of ‘making do’ of things as they are, meaning that educated identities are made present through mundane, everyday interactions (de Certeau 1984, xii, 37).

In pointing to these everyday uses, ethnographic work is more likely to analyse expressions of ‘being educated’ as political acts. In place of the ‘future-oriented’ turn of many other anthropological accounts of schooling and education, there is a here-and-now-ness to much

that could be observed in Oledai (cf. Masquelier 2013, 472). While it is true that assembling the scaffolding of an educated identity takes time, it is also true that this scaffolding matters because of the difference it makes in momentary interactions. Rather than drawing on Appadurai's notion of the 'capacity to aspire' or looking to studies of education to produce a more 'robust anthropology of the future', much of the talk about education in Oledai had a quotidian edge: how was a case settled?, who got what at yesterday's meeting?, which person gets a loan? (Appadurai 2004, 5; see also Stambach and Hall 2016). It is useful to see educated identities as having a tactical, make-do quality; moving us in a different direction to anthropological approaches that orient themselves toward education as a 'social field on which the future is imagined' (Stambach 2016, 2).

In arguing for the everyday, tactical advantages 'being educated' produces, and the way these advantages were recognized, I borrow from scholars who point to the pragmatic uses of schooling and education in adult lives (Bledsoe 1990; Alber 2004; Bolten 2015). Bledsoe's work from Sierra Leone, shows education as something that matters in relationships between grown-ups, that can have a current, political edge. In an article on fostering ideologies in Mende society, she gives the specific example of a poor family turning a blind eye to the treatment of their teenage son because the parents wanted to maintain good relations with the schoolteacher who is fostering him. In this instance a debate about education concerns relations between the poorer adults (the parents of the teenager) and richer patrons, a social fact that produces a certain 'distaste' for those – researchers included – who hope that education will be about more than 'pragmatic' concerns (Bledsoe 1990, 74). Bolten's work, also from Sierra Leone, shows how schoolteachers cling to their educated

status, while students ‘seek opportunities and networks outside of the academy’ as a way of trying to assure a future (2015, 25). In seeing time at school as an opportunity to connect to patrons – businesspersons, community leaders – students treat formal education in a pragmatic way, recognizing its relationship to politics.

If Bledsoe’s argument leads us back to a concern with the family and the experiences of children (the focus is on ideologies of child rearing), and Bolten’s focus is on the lives of students and schoolteachers, their ideas can also be opened up to look at different sorts of adults, operating in spaces only be indirectly related to formal education. Courts, savings groups, church committees, funerals, clan meetings, homes are all sites where ‘being educated’ can be worked upon or put to work, and where educated identities and competences can be cultivated (Kell 2005). They are also spaces where children are often absent or unimportant. An approach that takes us some distance from earlier work on the ‘cultural production of educated persons’ which focuses on schools as sites where educated persons are made (cf. Levinson, Foley and Holland 1996).^v

Being educated makes you bigger

My third observation comes from the way education forms part of a longer conversation with politics in eastern Uganda. Joan Vincent and D.H. Okalany’s work shows how identities are worked on in ways that have political effects throughout a person’s life in the Teso region (Vincent 1968, 1982; Okalany 1973). This line of argument benefits from anthropological work on becoming ‘big’ with its emphasis on the interplay of individual personalities and established political practices (Swartz 1958; Nash 1965; Godelier and

Strathern 1991). 'Bigness' is useful as a term for the way it emphasizes the ongoing efforts adults put into political careers and the way this extends our thinking about educated identities, particularly given the tendency of studies of education and schooling tend to tail off when young people are felt to have settled into adulthood.

In the Teso region where Florence and Ivan live, would-be local politicians ascend to positions of prominence in the community through participating in a number of arenas – government, religious, customary – at the local level (Vincent 1968, 283; cf. Watson 1956). Vincent's work from the 1960s shows the way the acephalous inheritance of the Iteso, the dominant society in the region, intermingles with the hierarchical structures set in place by colonialism: schools, churches, and a cash crop economy built around cotton (see also Summers on the gendering of this history). Across the twentieth century a local political arena emerged that was relatively competitive, where individuals – always men – came to prominence through gathering supporters, in ways that would mean their voice carried weight in local debates. As Okalany notes the ideal was one where men were expected to develop identities 'of understanding and impartial judgement' who could present themselves 'not as rulers but as arbiters... an arena where personal qualities mattered (1973, 129).

Vincent develops ideas of 'bigness' by drawing on W. Watson's earlier work among coal-mining communities in western Scotland (1956). Watson observed how the 'social prestige of individuals' was something worked upon through a life, from one occupation to another (1956, 131). In taking Watson's concept into the Teso region, a context where salaried and wage work were rare, Vincent focused on political spaces, showing how 'bigness' was achieved through 'progressive ascent through a series of positions in one or more hierarchical structures' (1968, 283). An individual, such as Florence, might join the

committee of a savings group – a relatively minor institution – and from there might work join a larger structure (depending on how your work is rated by your peers). In Florence’s case she went on to become the treasurer of her clan and joined the village council. There can be, if managed well, a self-reinforcing cycle – where being seen as educated helps get you on the committee, while at the same time reproducing an idea of yourself as ‘educated’. As earlier ethnographic accounts from Africa demonstrate, what goes into committee work can be informed by ideas of the competences schooling is meant to confer: note-taking, use of English, respect for hierarchy, appropriate dress (Grindal 1973; Peshkin 1972).

An obvious shift in the political landscape in Oledai is the way ‘bigness’ is now available to women. Florence entered middle age at a time when politics and society in Uganda were experiencing radical shifts that opened ways to a political career for women in the village. Included in this is the mass expansion of schooling at all levels. This led to a decline in older models of sponsorship that preferred sons over daughters. This expansion has also been coterminous with a deepening financialization of life in rural Uganda in ways that are gendered (Vokes and Mills 2015). Women are expected to bear the direct costs of sending children to school through taking loans and joining savings groups (in the past their contributions were mostly invisible). In this they are encouraged by NGOs and government agencies, in a landscape that scholars have characterized as neoliberal: women are targeted by microcredit NGOs such as BRAC as ‘responsible’ borrowers (Wiegratz, Martinello and Greco 2018). At a more prosaic level there is also the requirement for women’s representatives at every level of government, enshrined in the constitution of 1996.

This article came out of a return to Oledai late in 2018 (I have been visiting the area since 2003). I was working on a grant looking into the role education played in the lives of

younger adults, more specifically the lives of recent university graduates. I was interested to know the ways in which unemployed “youth” made sense of their educated identities, given that Oledai was a rural site and most of the work on education and youth in Uganda and elsewhere focuses on towns and cities. I was working with the assumption that educated identities came from the school experience, which would settle down as young people transitioned into adulthood, along similar lines to Jennifer Cole’s work on youth and generational change in Madagascar (2004; see also Dungey and Meinert 2017). I had not really thought about the work older people put into ‘being educated’. But I went along to savings group meetings, court hearings, clan meetings, burials, and church services, and found that education was there, and was being worked on, not only by those who were recently graduated, but also by those who were middle-aged, by the elderly, and by people with very different levels of formal education. In these spaces it makes little sense to focus only on the young, or to think of education as a pension-like investment parents make in their children (Crivello 2011). Rather, educated identities, are being made, and unmade, all the time.

Up to this point, the phrase ‘being educated’ has been used as if its meaning is somehow self-evident. The next section explores ideas circulating around these words. I reflect on the way the word for “educated” *esiomit* is, in Ateso, the same word for school. I see this elision as analytically fruitful for the way it underlines the lack of a distinction people drew between schooling as that thing that went on inside the institution of the school, and the work individuals could do to build or maintain these attributes in their claims to an educated identity in later life. My approach runs in a different direction to anthropological work that make a much sharper distinction between schooling on the one hand, and education on the other (cf. Levinson, Foley and Holland 1996: 2).

[Please insert image r here]

A group of men and a burial book. The photo was taken from the burial of Fastine Oberei's granddaughter, January 22, 2019. (Photograph, Ben Jones).

Being *esimiot* “educated/schooled” in eastern Uganda

One afternoon in early December 2018, I sat down in the home of Florence. It was in the early part of the hot dry season that runs from November to February. I had gone along with my friend Stella Aguti. Florence's home is a mix of grass-thatched huts with one very dilapidated iron-roofed house. She had gathered a group of older women at my request. The subject of education and schooling came up several times in conversation. One of Florence's friends, an older woman who had had some training as a nurse, told me that education 'trims your manners and helps you think differently'. She also told me that 'being educated' helps in managing disputes and getting a favorable outcome in the village court; it helps you get onto a committee. Being educated might not lead to salaried work, though 'even if you do not get a job being educated helps; at least the educated ones get something like a VHT'. (A 'VHT' is a member of a Village Health Team, a government-sponsored position in the community that 'mobilizes' others on health issues). Though VHT positions are unpaid they sometimes come with benefits – money for attending workshops, familiarity with policy and 'government talk', a bicycle for 'mobilization'. I also asked Florence and her friends to reflect on what was bundled up in the phrase 'educated person' – *itunganan yen esimit*.

In Ateso there is no clear distinction between the word ‘education’ and the word ‘school’. The root word for both, *esomero* refers to the physical structure of the school, and the phrase *itunganan yen esiomit* suggests an individual able to show the manners and competences associated with someone who has been within the physical structure of a school.^{vi} Being ‘educated’ is on one level tightly bound to the idea of what is acquired through spending time in a school building. Included in this is facility with spoken English (the language of higher levels of government, religious institutions, and non-governmental organizations in Uganda).^{vii} School is also understood to give a person ‘the ability to think A, B, C, D, 1, 2, 3’ meaning being able to organize what you are saying in ways legible to those in positions of authority. An educated person is also someone who is assumed to have undergone the implicit curriculum of discipline and structured sociality of school life: sports competitions, the boarding school experience, teacher-administered corporal punishment. (There is less of a focus on subject knowledge or the explicit curriculum, other than spoken English, when describing what it means to be educated).

But there are other things you can do to acquire these attributes, even if your own experience of formal schooling is patchy. Florence knew some English through spending time with her university-educated daughters; Ivan listened to the BBC World Service as a way of cultivating an educated vocabulary. Both studied the procedures of the committees on which they sat. I observed Ivan setting up a new youth group in the village, watching him guide his peers carefully through the correct sequence of a meeting: ‘opening prayer, introductions, minutes of the previous meeting, debating the issues of the day, any other business’. Participation in church was also a way of ‘educating’ yourself, underlining the strong link in the Teso region, and Uganda more generally, between Christianity and

educated identities. Florence and her children were expected to go along to the local Catholic outstation every Sunday, Ivan took on a leadership role in his local Pentecostal church. In this way you could become more educated, you could build up your scaffolding. There were other spaces that offered their own forms of education, spaces that, like the school building itself, offered opportunities to ‘trim your manners’ and ‘think differently’.

In this respect I, like my interlocutors, find myself a different position to scholars in the anthropology of education field, who draw a clearer line between schooling and education. Levinson, Foley and Holland for example, make a distinction between schooling, or that thing acquired through spending time in formal institutions, and ‘education’, which has to do with a much broader sense of training and cultural criteria by which people are considered ‘knowledgeable’ (in many cases forms of knowledge that are different from what schools are meant to convey) (1996: 2). In Oledai these things, as the phrase *itunganan yen esiomit* suggests, were not so easily separated: what was attributed to schooling was also a way of judging competences elsewhere. What was observed outside school a way of defining what should be acquired within. So even a person who had high levels of ‘inborn knowledge’ – a phrase used to describe someone, like Florence, seen as ‘naturally’ intelligent – was expected to perform this intelligence in ways that reflected assumptions about what would have happened to her if she had had more years in school. The way Florence managed herself at a meeting, was also a way of imagining what schooling was doing to younger people. The accusation I sometimes heard – ‘have you gone to school?’ – was less a query about papers or subject knowledge, than a rhetorical criticism about whether you were exhibiting the behaviors expected of someone who had spent time in school. What it meant to be an ‘educated person’ was unimaginable without ideas of schooling, but what schooling was was also unimaginable without thinking about the wider landscape of

committee work, burials, disputes that gave education its prosaic, practical meaning in adulthood.

Educated work also had a gendered quality. Women were judged on whether they were making an educated home, not just in terms of whether their children were in school, but also in terms of the look of the home itself: whether children were ‘polite’ in greeting visitors; whether children were provided with a ‘balanced diet’; whether younger children in the family had ‘decent’ clothes to wear (typically meaning clothes that were clean and without too many signs of wear and tear). Women were judged on the behavior of adult daughters and younger children of both sexes, men were judged on the behavior of adult sons, reflecting the patrilineal, patrilocal structure of parenting and marriage in the area (Karp 1978).

What was also striking was that having a salaried job – though this might be thought of as the ultimate expression of ‘being educated’ – was not so important in judging someone’s claim to an educated status.^{viii} This was due to the limited amount of salaried work, the unsteady nature of that employment, and the much wider availability of “committee careers”.^{ix} As far back as 1935 outside observers noted the fact that ‘after the completion of the elementary school course, the majority of children return to their villages and are absorbed in agriculture... only a limited number could hope for employment’ (Thomas and Scott 1935, 317). “Jobs” in eastern Uganda tend to be rare and precarious.^x Careers in the army, civil service, and local government, can end abruptly. Older men in Oledai had lost jobs in the army and police force due to a change in government in 1986, while administrative reforms in the neoliberal era have made jobs in local government uncertain, NGOs tended to run through funding cycles employing people in good years and letting

them go when the money ran out. (The COVID-19 pandemic has only underscored this unsteadiness with large numbers of job losses and temporary layoffs). As such, educated identities are often productively invested in longer-term ‘committee careers’ where ‘sitting allowances’ and occasional remuneration are an intermittent reward.

There is also a temporal quality to ‘being educated’. It is a phrase that played out differently for different generations. Florence, for example, was of school-going age when the formal education system was disrupted by the Teso Insurgency of the late 1980s (it was also a time when educating daughters was less desired than in the present).^{xi} This meant her way of being educated came more from ‘making an educated home’ (*ere lo isiomitere*) and the opportunities for learning English through spending time with the daughters she is educating. The situation was different for Ivan, who might be considered a drop-out despite completing his A’ Levels (a level of qualification that would have been considered an achievement for a woman of Florence’s generation) affected the identity of a university student. Ivan, through his committee work, smart clothes, and polished English, worked hard at being recognized as more educated than others. In either case, the point is that ‘being educated’ was a form of work that extended into adulthood.

The next section picks up these themes through the story of Fastine Oberei, a ‘big man’ who has to deal with the sudden death of his grandchild. Fastine worked at assembling a particular educated identity for himself that was typical of his generation. We find him using this status to make his way through the very difficult situation that surrounded his granddaughter’s death – dealing with the police, the clan, and fractious relatives. We also see how the death touched upon the awkward question of whether he was maintaining the

scaffolding around him, most obviously the question of whether he was continuing to make an educated home.

Fastine: an educated man and a tricky death

On January 20, 2019, a Sunday, a young girl – one-and-a-half years old – had been left with her older sister, in the home of her grandparents. While playing in the compound the younger girl fell into a pit latrine and drowned. The grandfather, Fastine Oberei, was called home by his wife who had been resting when the tragedy occurred. Fastine was grazing his cattle. On returning he retrieved the body, and then called his neighbors to witness the tragedy, including elders from the clan. An officer-in-charge of ‘family affairs’ at the local police post and someone from the district Criminal Investigations Department were called to the home. By the time they arrived a crowd had gathered, and the police asked those present how the child had died. The neighbors affirmed what Fastine and his wife reported. The incident was recorded, and the officers left. Fastine was charged the relatively small sum of five thousand shillings (US\$2) for the cost of fueling the police vehicle. He then spoke with the village council chairman to explain what had happened. The next day the funeral was held.

From experience, I knew that such an incident, with its appearance of a lack of care, could be tricky to navigate. It was the type of highly charged situation that could reopen existing conflicts, and could also lead to costly entanglements with local authorities. The police in the area were known to make money out of family difficulties. The grandfather could have been arrested (with money required for your ‘stay’ at the police post, and for your release).

The village council chairman might have complicated matters further, linking the death to other issues in the family. The death of a young child could also lead to rumors of occult forces and accusations of witchcraft. But when I spoke to a neighbor about the case and asked why these complications had not arisen, I was told Fastine 'is not one of those chaotic people'. The neighbor went on to tell me that Fastine was one of the more educated men in the village and, while not always straightforward to deal with, knew his way around the various institutions. Fastine managed the death of his granddaughter in a procedural way: bringing in the neighbors as witnesses; calling on the police to come and register the incident, while asking the village council chairman to record a single version of events. It was a pragmatic way of making do.

Fastine Oberei, in his early sixties, had attended lower secondary school in the nearby trading center. Growing up at a time when education was highly rationed, meant that even a few years of secondary school were enough to make him stand out from his peers, a time when less formal schooling was needed to make an educated identity, and when that identity was mostly available only to men. Fastine's time in lower secondary school had also given him a start in making him one of the 'big men' of the area. He worked on this early advantage by going on to serve in leadership positions in his clan and taking on an active role in his local Catholic church (I always found him wearing a rosary around his neck, sometimes he carried his missal). Fastine also served on a number of committees in the church outstation at Nyamongo. He had a detached, playful demeanor and this served him well in different roles. The scaffolding of his committee career also kept him abreast of certain competences: an understanding of current procedures; a good command of English, which could otherwise slip without regular use; knowledge of and connection to wider networks. His handling of the very difficult situation surrounding the death of his

granddaughter showed the ways in which his educated identity was something he had been able to maintain over time. It also had very pragmatic uses at certain moments.

[Please insert image 2 here]

Fastine Oberei at home, he wears a rosary around his neck, January 23, 2019.

(Photograph, Ben Jones).

Where Fastine came in for criticism was regarding his children. Now in early middle age, his children had not done as well in life as many expected and did not show the same political skills as their father. Two sons had a difficult relationship with him. Fastine was also criticized for the fact that he failed to cultivate good manners among his children. In a sense he was felt to be an educated person who was not cultivating an educated home. A neighbor put it this way:

...we have a man here called Fastine who God wanted to use in order to help his family. But the family where he comes from... people have not studied properly.

As with Florence's slight wobble in the savings group meeting, Fastine's claims to an educated identity had its own vulnerabilities.

I went along to the burial around midday and was accompanied by others who also wanted to share their condolences. We arrived at a point well before the funeral service and were put to sit near the 'big men'. There were around four to five hundred people, which was typical, and there were two big marquee-like shades for guests. There were also rows of

plastic chairs – a measure of development in the eyes of many guests. The young girl was in an open coffin near a large mango tree in the middle of the compound, with mostly women sitting nearby. Music was played over a speaker system that had been rented, and speeches were given with the help of a microphone. I observed a parish councilor, and a scattering of local politicians and church leaders. The Master of Ceremonies wondered why more ‘big people’ had not come, telling us that he would keep an eye out for any late arrivals (the guest list was a measure of Fastine’s claims to ‘bigness’). As we waited, I listened to some gossip concerning the newly elected committee of Atek Isas (a neighboring clan to Fastine’s).

Before the funeral mass, a number of people were called to make speeches of condolence. Fastine addressed the mourners, recounting events from the day before. He did this in a composed and methodical way, giving the mourners his version of events:

It was after Mass on Sunday when the incident happened. Two young children were at home and happened to go to the pit latrine. One of them was one and half years old the other was three years old. The younger one fell inside the latrine and the older one tried to raise the alarm. When the news reached me, I went there to check and did not see anything, so I went for a torch. Again, I did not see anything. It was a new latrine and had only just started being used, so it was deep. I reached down and then put my left hand inside and felt the hand of the child. When I pulled the child up, she was already dead. After pulling the child out a crowd had gathered in my home. I called on the elders to witness what had happened and summoned the police. When the police came to see what had happened, they said there was

nothing they could do. It was purely an accident. So, we did not have to take the child for a post-mortem. We were left to bathe the child and organize for the burial.

Fastine was setting out the facts in an 'A B C D 1 2 3' way. He was trying to put to rest other versions of the story that had been circulating. Fastine concluded his speech by reminding those present that the death was an accident, and that 'it was not done intentionally, so when you go back do not go and gossip or say that it may be associated with witchcraft or some other ritual'. The village council chairman also spoke, telling us that the child died accidentally, that people should not spread false rumors. There then followed a number of collections to help the family of the deceased.

After the speeches and collections, the catechist led burial prayers (assisted by one of Fastine's sons, an assistant catechist in a neighboring outstation). The homily focused on how villagers should learn to behave like children, and should be innocent and honest. To underline his point the catechist offered a cautionary tale:

A woman may ask her husband to take the cow to sell for school fees. But the man can sell at seven hundred thousand shillings and on his way back home he pockets one hundred thousand shillings. He will make up a story that there were too many cattle for sale that day at market. He is a man who is stealing from his own family.

The person next to me said it was an unusual choice of story and probably had something to do with Fastine's tangled relationship with his family. One of Fastine's sons had had a job as a security guard, the lowest paid category of salaried work in the area, but had been let go, and was staying at home. The eldest son was estranged from Fastine and had a

reputation for drinking (I learned that this son partly blamed his parents for the death of his niece). It was not that Fastine's children had not gone to school, so much as they had not carried that education into how they conducted their later lives, affecting not only their own scaffolding, but also Fastine's.

Our next example returns us to Florence Akol, a very different type of person. Florence was a generation younger than Fastine, and as mentioned earlier, had only a few years of primary school behind her. Florence grew up at a time when 'educating girls was not a priority for parents', as she told me, but came into middle age at a time when political careers were much more open to women. Florence was, perhaps, the most obvious example of someone in the village making an 'educated home' from scratch, and the most obvious example of a woman moving up the village hierarchy. Florence received little help from her husband, but was respected for the way she struggled to send her children to school through her own efforts. She had also worked hard to learn English and improve her committee skills. Florence participated in a range of village institutions, including the savings group that met every Friday afternoon.

Florence: a woman becoming more educated in middle age

Over the course of four months, I went along to the *asianut* savings group meeting. The group had been operating since 2012, and was set up with the help of a Ugandan NGO, UWESO (Ugandan Women's Effort to Save Orphans), though it now operated independently. There were about forty-five members of the group, which included a mix

of more formally educated members, including schoolteachers, businesspeople, and poorer women such as Florence Akol who brewed beer for a living. For many of members of the group the meetings were an intensely social affair, taking up three hours every Friday afternoon. The group met in the home of Anyabo Petelina, one of three wives of the former sub-county chief (from a home that had been in a land dispute with Florence Akol and her husband, and which Florence had, to the surprise of some, been able to fight to a standstill in the courts). Meetings were held under a large mango tree on an open piece of land between Petelina's house and a better-looking house belonging to an absent co-wife. In what follows there is a moment where Florence criticizes some people passing by. It may seem like a small thing but, from past experience, I knew that Florence's freedom to speak was sustained by her committee career and the home she was making.

I tended to arrive early, to listen to the gossip that was shared before the main work began. At most of the meetings I went along to, there were reminders of who was more educated. The committee members tended to have more in the way of schooling and got to sit on chairs. The chairman, a former soldier, and other educated members of the committee tended to dress more in the style of townspeople (work shirts or newish hole-free t-shirts for the men, skirts, and blouses for the women). The general membership sat on mats (women) or benches (men) and wore clothing that was more common in the village (workaday traditional dresses for the women and ragged t-shirts for the men). Florence often turned up in the clothes she used for farmwork, and, unlike other 'big people' in the group, preferred the mat, albeit a mat next to the committee. Florence could be rough-and-ready in her manner but was a stickler for the rules, standing up for herself when she felt that procedures were not being followed. Florence was admired by many of the women on

the mat because she was ‘struggling for education’. Alongside brewing beer to raise money for school fees, she also quarried stone by hand, a laborious activity.

Photo 3: Florence (third from left) with members of her savings group committee. Florence insisted on sitting on the chair for the photo (normally she would be sat on the mat next to the woman, just out of shot, on the far right).

In the above photograph Florence sits on a chair with a pen poised over a notebook, her ability to write down names and numbers was mostly acquired later in life, from studying other committee members, and from learning from her daughters at home. A form of “committee literacy” that enables her to take on different roles in the village (Kell 2005).^{xii} Florence also lives with the vulnerabilities that come with this patchwork set of skills. More formally schooled members of the committee could upbraid Florence for the way she kept her records. Her scaffolding was a bit shakier.

At a particular Friday afternoon in late January 2019, three people passed by on a motorcycle singing Gospel songs. This was before the meeting proper had started, and came at a lull in conversation. The singers were going to work as ‘prayer warriors’ in the home of someone who had requested help.^{xiii} Florence said to those of us assembled that the singers ‘are only after money and eating’. Another woman, of a similar age, challenged Florence saying: ‘those are God’s people you will get a curse; you leave them go’. An older man sitting on a bench chastised Florence and said that ‘the prayer warriors only eat food because they are invited’. Another commented: ‘the reason Florence is against those people is because they are saved and would not buy beer from her home’ (‘prayer warriors’ are tee-total). Petelina,

in whose compound we were sat, broke the tension joking: ‘when you run to those people for help with your own problems Florence they will come and break your beer pots’.

Freedom to speak, even on something as small as a passing group of prayer warriors, related to Florence’s status as a someone making an educated home. Educating children has helped Florence achieve a ‘big woman’ status in the village, conferring a form of social distinction that has long put education in conversation with politics in the Teso region. She sat on the committees of other institutions including the sub-parish council, the clan, and the local burial society group chaired by Fastine. In many ways Florence was skilled in the practice of ‘spiralism’, ascending through a number of spaces that were public and open to criticism (Vincent 1968: 283). She told me that her election to positions came because of the way she conducted herself and how she was managing her home. While she could not claim to be a person with school-based credentials, she was becoming more ‘educated’ in the sense that she was taking on more attributes associated with those who had gone to school. Florence’s also underlined this point by having friends who were women with relatively high levels of formal education: an unemployed schoolteacher, a retired nurse.

This is how education makes its presence felt in Oledai. It is there when Fastine navigates the death of his granddaughter, when Florence speaks out at a meeting. Fastine’s careful handling of the death depends on his career as a committee man, on his identity as a committed Catholic. Florence’s freedom to criticize some people passing by depends on her status as someone making an educated home, and on practices of institutional ‘spiralism’ that have seen her climb up the village hierarchy. In both situations claims to ‘being educated’ are central, even though Fastine and Florence only had a few years of formal schooling between them, years that were long in the past. In both cases, it should

be said, claims to an 'educated' status were never entirely settled. Fastine's claim was undercut by the sense he was failing to make an educated home. Florence's struggles with book-keeping could raise a smile. 'Being educated' was a form of work.

The scaffolding of "being educated"

"Eyes glaze over" when anthropologists see the words "education" or "schools" (Levinson, Foley and Holland 1996: 20). This quote comes from the end of the introduction to *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person* by Levinson, Foley and Holland, where two of the authors recall a conversation about a proposed panel for the meetings of the American Anthropological Association. Holland asks Levinson to leave the word "schooling" out for fear that it might put anthropologists off from coming to the sessions. It suggests that at the time of writing, in the mid-1990s, there was a less than productive relationship between anthropology, schooling and education. In the years since things have not entirely changed. An afterword to a 2015 edited volume on 'student futures', for example, notes how 'curious' it is 'that education has not, in similar ways to medicine and law (as well as childhood and youth), become a more widespread topic of study among anthropologists' (Hall 2017: 161).

The contrast between education and schooling as a limited area of research in anthropology and a major subject of debate in the public square is sharp. Schools loom paramount in the popular imagination, and educated identities are central to everyday interactions. Part of the problem may be that in staying too close to the idea of schools as sites of cultural production, and in focusing on young people as products of those sites, the orientation for anthropologies remains institutional and sociological rather than ethnographic and

cultural. Hall suggests that schooling and education are subsumed too easily in other anthropological domains: notably childhood and youth studies. Anthropological work on the social identities and cultural formations of students and school-leavers becomes a subset of more conceptually innovative work in anthropological studies of youth, rather than a contribution to an anthropology of educated identities across the lifecourse (Durham 2000).

The approach suggested here is different, in that it asks for an ethnographically open and aware of relationships and places across a much wider landscape. In looking at educated identities over the lifecourse, and understanding how 'being educated' is something being worked on in savings groups, at burials, on committees we get closer to cultural understandings of education and schooling. In methodological terms, this means recognizing the simultaneous ubiquity of educated identities, and the shifting terrain that determines what goes into these identities. In other words, asking what the scaffolding is, and then stepping back to document the range of activities and ideas that allow for that scaffolding to be built up (or knocked down). This means moving away from the school gate, and producing a list of things that reflect popular ideas of what schooling should produce in adults: in eastern Uganda this means competences in committee work, a good command of English, an 'organized' home, an ability to 'think A, B, C, D, 1, 2, 3'. The list would be different somewhere else.

This also means getting over what Bledsoe once described as the 'distaste' many anthropologists have toward thinking of education as something political and pragmatic. As the cases in this article attest, 'being educated' is often about mundane, material concerns: who meets the NGO worker? Who deals best with those in authority? Who gets

to sit on a savings group committee? Concerns that also create the everyday opportunities to work on 'being educated' and spaces where those identities are recognized and accredited.

What are the implications? Such an approach enables an anthropology of education attentive to ideas circulating about education and schooling in society., that looks to everyday political concerns to understand what it means to be educated in a given context, that conceptualizes educated identities as a scaffolding that can be built up or knocked down at different points in the course of a life. By moving away from the school gate and by focusing on the work people do, education becomes a more prosaic, significant object for anthropological research.

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ⁱ In line with past practise in my writings, I have not anonymised Florence or others mentioned in the article.

ⁱⁱ Ivan was described to me as someone "who had stopped along the way". A generation earlier someone with A Levels, like Ivan, would be considered highly credentialed. The massification of Uganda's education system means that this is no longer the case, even in a largely rural district such as Ngora.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery use the term in relation to discourse, suggesting the commonly shared statements around comporment, behaviours and respect that get said when asking about education in Uttar Pradesh (2004). My own use of the term also focuses on educated practices and activities.

^{iv} Here I follow Reay's use of habitus in educational research to think of Bourdieu's term as having a methodological focus that is most usefully encountered as 'a conceptual tool to be used in empirical research rather than an idea to be debated in texts' (Reay 2004, 439). So, for example, structural shifts in economy, society and politics means that a

particular habitus has developed around ‘big women’, such as Florence, in the Teso region that was not there in the past.

^v Levinson, Foley and Holland retain a focus on schools as sites where educated persons are culturally produced (1996)., a different point of departure, both conceptually and methodologically, to the one taken in this paper.

^{vi} The word *esomero* (school) is a loan word from Luganda, the language of a neighbouring society. The Teso region was subdued in the early colonial period by the *bakungulu* (the “men of Kakungulu”, a Ganda warrior and ally of the British) (Twaddle 1993: chapter 5). The political and educational structures found in the region were, in their original form, mixing Ganda and British systems of administration.

^{vii} English takes on particular significance in the Teso region. The language otherwise spoken in the region, Ateso, is unrelated to the majority Bantu languages of central and western Uganda. So English, and the education system that underpins it, is the way people in the Teso region connect into Uganda’s wider economy and politics.

^{viii} I found people to be sanguine about the prospect of salaried work. The ways in which adults spoke about formal education was rarely about the ‘bright future’ promoted by development agencies and government campaigns. They mostly resisted the “education for jobs” and “education as future investment” narratives guiding much of the development studies research into education and schooling in Uganda (Datzberger 2018). Instead, I was expected to take seriously the mundane, prosaic, ways in which education mattered in their lives.

^{ix} As Finnström observes in work from northern Uganda, there is an understanding that though education may not necessarily ‘deliver anything’ in terms of salaried work it is still useful in how it distinguishes one home from the next (2006, 204).

^x A good example of this mix of semi-employment and agricultural work would be the Catechist Training Centre at Kidetok. This was a place where the Catholic Church offered courses to catechists from across the Teso region. The centre made a specific virtue of training catechists and their wives in agricultural production, on the understanding that they should not depend on themselves, rather than a salary.

^{xi} The Teso Insurgency was a violent rebellion against the government of Yoweri Museveni, and overlapped, though was in many ways different to the conflict involving Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda (Epelu-Opio 2009; de Berry 2000).

^{xii} See also Aikman's study of 'life-long learning' in the biography of an older woman in the Peruvian Amazon (2019).

^{xiii} 'Prayer warriors' pray in response to some misfortune. The family hosting them hopes for some sort of miracle, healing or resolution. Though the origin was in Pentecostal churches in the Teso region, prayer warrior' groups are also found in Catholic and Anglican churches.