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Ethnicised Politics and the Changing Lwo Identity in Eastern Africa: A Case of the Acholi of Uganda

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Abstract

There is an astonishing difference between the image of the Acholi as portrayed by the early European visitors to eastern Africa and that offered by Uganda's post-colonial politicians. Modern scholarship on the Acholi has generated prejudices, stereotypes and occasionally, damaging ethnic categorisations and labelling. Similar scenarios have been reported about other Lwo peoples in South Sudan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Kenya. This research analyses the ways in which divisive-regional and ethnicised politics have affected the image of the Acholi of Uganda over the years. I have reviewed relevant literature, conducted archival research, and key informant interviews to investigate the ways in which divisive politics have been damaging to Acholi identity.

Key words: Acholi, Lwo, ethnicised politics, stereotypes, prejudice, identity.

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Introduction

This article addresses the changing identities of the Lwo peoples of eastern Africa with a particular focus on the Acholi of Uganda. The article argues that the ethnicisation of politics in Uganda has contributed to the rise of prejudice and stereotypes against the Acholi making their post-colonial image astonishingly different from that provided by European explorers and Christian missionaries in the precolonial period.

Ethnicity and ethnic contestations have been phenomenally problematic in Africa since the days of European colonialism (Ake 1993). All East African countries are ethnically plural and, save for Tanzania, have experienced ethnic conflicts with cases of tribal chauvinism reported in Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and South Sudan. The Lwo peoples have been at the centre of all the ethnic conflicts in East Africa except for Rwanda. Focusing on the Acholi as a case of the Lwo peoples of eastern Africa, the article illustrates how politics of ethnicity have altered their image over the years.

The Lwo are a Nilotic group of people who are reported to have lived in the Bahr el-Ghazal region of what is now South Sudan and then split up some six hundred years ago and spread out into the region. According to Ogot (1974), the Lwo migrated from Bahr el-Ghazal and settled under different names in present day South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya and Tanzania.

A small group of them remained in the Bahr el-Ghazal area for some time then moved westwards to the regions of present day Wau City on the banks of Jur River in the Wau State of South Sudan. This Lwo group that remained in the Bahr el-Ghazal area is known as the Jurchol. Their language is quite similar to that of the Alur of Uganda, the Anywak of Ethiopia and the Joluo of Kenya.

The Lwo group of people found in Ethiopia are known as Anywak. They occupy the Gambella region near the border with South Sudan (McGill, Iggers & Cline 2007). In South Sudan, the Lwo ethnic groups include the Shilluk of Malakal (Upper Nile State) and the Acholi of Magwii County. The Acholi, Alur, and Jopadhola are the Lwo people in Uganda. The Democratic Republic of Congo also has a group called Alur.

In Kenya and Tanzania, the Lwo are called Luo or Joluo. In all these countries, the Lwo have been involved in ethnic conflicts with neighbouring communities. For the case of Uganda, the Acholi face stereotyping and name-calling to the extent that there is an astonishing difference between their image as portrayed by early Europeans that visited the region and that offered by post-colonial politicians and some scholars of Uganda's history.

Similar cases of ethnic conflicts have been reported about the Lwo peoples in different parts of east and

north eastern Africa such as the Shilluk of South Sudan, the Anywak of Ethiopia, the Alur of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Luo of Kenya. This article analyses how divisive-regional and ethicised politics have affected the image of the Acholi people of Uganda over the years. It shows how divisive politics can be damaging to a people's identity.

Ethnic Conflicts involving the Lwo in East Africa

The Hema, Lendu, Biri, and Okebu in the Ituri Province, one of the 25 provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, have been at odds with the Alur at different times. There were reports that these conflicts have been out of attempted ethnic cleansing in the region (Pottier 2004). Between 1999 and 2004 many Alur were forced to flee across Lake Albert to Uganda where hundreds are in refugee camps especially Kyangwali. Others moved to live with relatives in Uganda in expectation of returning to Congo when ethnic tensions in Ituri Province eased.

Ethiopia is a large country with eighty ethnic groups. The Lwo in Ethiopia are called Anywak. They number about three hundred thousand people; they are considered a minority in Ethiopia. They live in the Gambela region. Gambela is a Lwo word for "bring my millet", which is the staple food of the Lwo people. Despite their minority status, the Anywak of Ethiopia have come under intense ethnic persecution by Ethiopian highlanders. McGill, Iggers & Cline (2007) have reported that more than a thousand Anywak live in Minnesota, USA, having fled ethnic persecution in Ethiopia. They give an eyewitness account of the ethnic conflict in Ethiopia as follows:

> Two troop trucks containing uniformed Ethiopian soldiers had arrived in town and disgorged soldiers who then went from home to home in the village, calling out the Anuak men and boys and shooting them dead in the street. Occasionally, the soldiers were joined by non-Anuak citizens, or lighter-skinned Ethiopian "highlanders," who shouted "Today is the day of killing Anuak!" and killed their victims usually with long spears, knives, or machetes.

The ethnic conflict in western Ethiopia involves the Anywak who are Lwo and the other groups reported here as highlanders. The highlanders say that the Lwo belong to South Sudan and should go back to their country. This is because of the affinity the Anywak have with southern Sudanese communities, such as the Shilluk and Dinka.

In Kenya, although at the time of independence in 1963, the British preferred Oginga Odinga, a Luo to become president, power went to Jomo Kenyatta and the Luo have never led the country (Klopp and Kamungi 2008). Following the 2007 botched elections, the Luo came under attack especially in the Central Province. The Kikuyu, who are the majority people as an ethnic community in

Kenya have vowed never to elect a non-circumcised person as president of Kenya.

The Luo do not circumcise their boys as a cultural practice. Hence, the talk of non-circumcised people is generally understood in Kenya politics to refer to Luo politicians like Raila Odinga, the late Robert Ouko, late Tom Mboya and Peter Anyang Nyong'o among others. The Kikuyu ethnic group, who are politically and ethnically the majority in Kenya, on the other hand, circumcise their sons (Ogot 1974).

Meanwhile power in South Sudan is in the hands of the Dinka, the largest ethnic group in the country. Lwo people such as the Acholi in Magwi County and the Shilluk are largely in the opposition. The Dinka have many times attacked the Acholi of Pajook and Magwi and told them to "go to your country" (Personal communication with a South Sudanese refugee in Palabek Kal on 3 March 2019). The Dinka, according to this interviewee, argue that all Acholi are Ugandans.

Some post-colonial politicians in Uganda also, incidentally, view the Acholi as South Sudanese – this is the reason they were at some point in the 1980s called Anyanya after the Anyanya rebel movement of southern Sudan that fought for secession from Sudan. In this way, the Acholi in Uganda have been viewed as South Sudanese while those in South Sudan are viewed as Ugandans. According to Lomo and Hovil (2004), the nationality of the Acholi, in the opinion of some politicians in Uganda is revealed by one government official observation:

> Someone came into my office once while I was away. When I came back, I asked my colleagues whether the person was a Ugandan or a foreigner. They said, 'Oh, he was not a Ugandan. He was an Acholi.' This is characteristic of wider things in the country (Lomo and Hovil 2004).

These government employees knew the visitor to have been Acholi, they also knew the Acholi to be Ugandans but their report betrays the attitude and speech pattern that was prevalent in southern Uganda most especially during the National Resistance Army (NRA) bush war of 1981 to 1986 and its immediate aftermath.

The Lwo are easily identified wherever they are found because they pursue similar patterns of development and carry similar physical features such as their height and skin complexion. The typical Lwo economy is mixed farming involving cropping as well as animal husbandry. The Lwo languages are also close to each other and are particularly distinguishable from the languages of other Nilotics, the Central Sudanic and Bantu communities among whom they live. The dark skin colour has been the identity of the Lwo and Sudanic peoples of East Africa.

One of the Lwo communities in Sudan is called Jurchol, meaning dark-skinned people. They live around the town of Wau in the Republic of

South Sudan. Crazzolara (1951) has also suggested that the name Acholi may have come from "col" the Lwo word for "black". Lwo peoples are generally known, by their Bantu and Plain Nilotic neighbours, as people with a dark skin colour. Many of the people who migrated from Sudan include the Central Sudanic Madi are dark-skinned. Sudan in Arabic means "land of dark people".

The Lwo also have similar customs of marriage, burial, leisure and political organisation. The Lwo do not have any autocratic centralised system of government. A Lwo, according to Crazzolara (1951),

> Is frank, candid and pleasant in dealing with bonafide individuals who approach him; he likes to talk, joke and laugh. He is hospitable and generous to guests and visitors without distinction. He treats all as equals for there is no class distinction among them.

By "no class distinction" Clazzolara is referring to the segmentary nature of the Lwo political systems and their egalitarian social structures. Although there are organised chiefdoms among them, the Lwo groups remain segmentary in that the chiefdoms were and still are autonomous with the chiefs wielding equal powers and none exercising colonial or imperial control over another. The Lwo were generally peaceful among themselves and with their none-Lwo neighbours during the pre-colonial period.

The distinctive personal names of Lwo also help to identify them quite easily. Popular names, such as Okello, Okema, Okullo, Auko, Atoo, Apiyo, Lam, and Lakot are common to all and are found in all their territories from Gambella in Ethiopia through South Sudan to Uganda, Kenya and down to Musoma Municipality in the Mara Region of Tanzania. Lwo clan names have also been maintained in all the land they occupy. Names, such as Gem, Koc, Lamogi, Payira, Lamwo, Puranga used in the present Acholiland in northern Uganda, are also found among the Jurchol of Wau, the Anywak of Gambela, and the Luo of Kenya and Tanzania.

Lwo dialects are easily distinguishable from Bantu languages and other Nilotic or central Sudanic dialects. Recently, when President Magufuli of Tanzania greeted President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya in Lwo dialect during the 17th Ordinary Session of the East African Community Heads of State Summit in Arusha held on 2nd March 2016, the majority Bantu in Kenya and Tanzania were uneasy with it and the matter went viral.

Magufuli, is reported to have said to Kenyatta in greeting: "*Wachi ane matie machieni*" (Tell me the news prevailing that side – Kenya (Kimuyu 2016). Lwo speakers from Uganda understood what he meant. Although he is not a Lwo, President Magufuli, chose to greet his Kenyan counterpart, who also is not Lwo, in Dholuo; why did he chose to use Luo? He told the guests present, "President Kenyatta's language (Kikuyu) is of course very difficult but I can speak Kijaluo,

which is also spoken in Kenya" (*Kenya Today* 2016).

Magufuli's use of Lwo to greet President Kenyatta did not go well with many of his countrymen and women as well as many Kenyans. One commentator called Magufuli "The East African joker!" Another said he was the East African Jacob Zuma, to imply that he was ridden with scandal. This was around the time when the former president of South Africa was facing trials for corruption. Another commentator called Dholuo a "heathen language" and asked why the president chose to use it (*Kenya Today* 2016).

All these negative comments point to aversion towards the Lwo people and their language. The case of ethnicised politics becomes stronger when one considers that during the said 17th Ordinary Session of the East African Community Heads of State Summit, Magufuli also spoke in another two languages from the region. He spoke some Kinyarwanda (language of the Rwandans) and Luganda the language of the largest ethnic group in Uganda (Kimuyu 2016); yet Magufuli's use of these other languages did not receive any negative comments similar to those Lwo attracted.

Ethnicity in Pre-colonial Uganda

Pre-colonial Uganda had four major identifiable linguistic groups namely the Bantu, the Plain Nilotics, the River-Lake Nilotics and the Central Sudanic. The Bantu were the largest and occupied the western, southern, central, and some parts of eastern Uganda. The descendants of the Bantu groups include Baganda, Banyoro, Batoro, Banyankore, Bakiga, Basoga, and Bagisu. The Plain Nilotics are represented by the Iteso, Karamojong, Kuman, Kakwa, and Langi. While the Lwo include Acholi, Alur, Chope, and Jopadhola. While some of the Central Sudanic groups are the Lugbara, Aringa, and Madi. The four major linguistic groups have sub-groups with different but inter-related languages.

In terms of political organisation, however, pre-colonial Uganda had three major groups. Firstly, there were the highly centralised and despotic societies with kingdoms: Buganda, Bunyoro, Toro and Ankole (Mutiibwa 1992). The second was the poly-cephalous societies that were characterised by the existence of several centralised chiefdoms none of which was big and strong enough to dominate another. For this reason, the chiefdoms remained small in population, territory and economy. These included the Acholi and the Alur people. The third political category was the purely segmentary societies, such as the Langi, Karamojong, Bakiga, and Iteso. They had neither chiefs nor royal families. Their leaders were 'army generals' and elders.

In all the three political categories of the pre-colonial societies, there were clans with known clan members and each of the clans had lineages

created by outstanding family heads (Karugire 1980). This is why Deng (1997) has argued:

> Traditionally, African societies and even states functioned through an elaborate system based on the family, the lineage, the clan, the tribe, and ultimately a confederation of groups with ethnic, cultural, and linguistic characteristics in common. These were the units of social, economic, and political organisations and inter-communal relations.

Marriage was forbidden among members of the same clan and lineages; clansmen could not wage war among themselves. Members of the same lineage, clan, chiefdom, and kingdom lived as family by loving and supporting one another. Although Busoga is a kingdom today like Buganda and Bunyoro, it was a poly-cephalous society in the pre-colonial days (Karugire 1980).

Busoga had eleven principalities that were the same as the chiefdoms of the Acholi and the Alur. In fact, some of the principalities were founded by Lwo chiefs during their migration from Bunyoro to eastern Uganda. Names, such as Namugalo and Bulamogi in Busoga point to Lwo connections. The Lwo who settled in Busoga however lost their culture including language and adopted those of the Bantu among whom they lived.

The different kingdoms of pre-colonial Uganda rivalled each other over scarce resources. There were wars, raids and counter raids as well as foreign trade. These raids and wars such as between Buganda and Bunyoro were in the true sense inter-state conflicts rather than ethnic struggles. When the kingdom of Buganda waged war against Bunyoro, it was most likely a territorial-expansionist war between two independent and powerful political entities (Karugire 1980).

The segmentary societies related positively among themselves with limited cases of territorial conflicts. A typical example was the Teso-Karamojong contacts following the migration of the Iteso from Karamoja to their present land. The Karamojong and Iteso are both plain Nilotics and moved to what is now Uganda as one block from Ethiopia. Although the Karamojong settled in their present land, the Iteso proceeded farther south and settled in their current territory close to Lake Kyoga. The Iteso and Karamojong, however, regarded themselves as one ethnic group (Lamphear 1976).

The centralised kingdoms fought with each other but this should not be understood as ethnic conflicts. The conflict between Bunyoro and Tooro kingdoms, for instance, were territorial and imperial in nature. For some time, Tooro was a vassal of Bunyoro Kingdom. Hence, the hostile relationship between the two states was because Bunyoro fought for imperial domination over Tooro while the Batooro preferred and struggled for social, political, and economic autonomy.

Hardly was there any degree of hatred between the southern centralised societies and their northern segmentary polities. Trade existed, especially about salt from Katwe (Karugire 1980). The name-calling that became rampant together with feelings of exclusion started during and after the British rule. It is a known fact that the rulers of Bunyoro, Tooro, Buganda and Busoga were descendants of the Lwo whose brothers were in control of northern Uganda polities (Karugire 1980).

The cordiality of the relationship between centralised kingdoms of southern Uganda and the segmentary societies of northern Uganda was exhibited during the time of British colonisation of Uganda. The earliest Christian missionaries in Acholiland came from Bunyoro. Rwot Awich of Payira chiefdom wrote a letter to the king of Bunyoro to send for him Christian teachers so that his people could benefit like the Banyoro were already reaping from the activities of the missionaries. Such a letter could only have been written to a leader with whom one was at good terms. When the British overpowered the monarchs of Buganda and Bunyoro kingdoms towards the beginning of the twentieth century, they took refuge in northern Uganda, first among the Acholi and later among the Langi where both Omukama Kabalega and Kabaka Mwanga were eventually captured in 1899. The two leaders could have fled to northern Tanzania or eastern Congo but they chose to hide in northern Uganda. Rwot Awich gave them protection until they were troubled by the activities of the Nubian forces in Acholiland. This fear forced Mwanga and Kabalega to relocate to Kangai in Lango where they were captured.

Such cordial and caring attitude that existed in pre-colonial Uganda between the Bantu communities and the Nilotics as explained above evaporated and disappeared completely during the colonial and post-colonial periods in Uganda. Generally:

> Colonialism invented traditions accentuated hitherto latent tribal consciousness among African peoples, making fluid ethnic boundaries and identities more rigid and making ethnic rivalries more pronounced (Ibhawoh 2010).

British colonial officials practised indirect rule in Uganda as they did in Nigeria. Indirect rule solved the problem of a shortage of European colonial administrators, so African soldiers/politicians, such as Semei Kakungulu could easily fill the void. However, the African colonial administrators were overzealous to impress their European bosses hence they were hostile, oppressive and insensitive to the feelings of their subjects.

The ruthlessness of Bantu colonial administrators in northern Uganda marked the start of the negative comments, stereotypes and hatred between communities of northern and southern Uganda. Put differently,

the Bantu-Nilotic animosity began during the British colonial period. It was Semei Kakungulu who coined the phrase "Lango mito alek" (personal interview with a Lango elder in Oyam District on 6 March 2019). He instructed his lieutenants to "torture the Langi using the pestle". The effect is that Bantu communities began to look at people from northern Uganda as subjects while northerners saw the Bantu people, basing on the activities of colonial African administrators, as hostile and oppressive.

Ethnicity under British Colonial Rule

The colonial system of administration, which combined indirect rule with the principle of divide and rule, is the genesis of ethnicised politics in Uganda. This should not be understood to mean that the ethnic identities in present day Uganda never existed prior to 1894 when the Britain took over the administration of Uganda. Ethnicity and ethnicised politics were sharpened by the historical conditions found in the affected societies (Okuku 2002); for the case of Uganda, the different ethnic groups already occupied their present lands by the time the British arrived in the country.

When the British brought these independent polities under one administration, they started to compete for the available limited resources. Cleavages soon developed as one group struggled to take advantage and outwit other groups in such a competition. The societies and individuals that collaborated with the British remained on good terms throughout the colonial period and the reverse was true (Kasfir 1976). Such societies and individuals were favoured as colonial agents and administrators hence eliciting the anger and envy of those disfavoured members of the protectorate. This planted the seeds of ethnic conflicts witnessed in post-colonial Uganda.

The British favoured the collaborating societies not only in the sense that they selected and appointed colonial administrators from among them but they also provided social services and constructed vital infrastructure as well. The first schools in Uganda, namely, Mengo High School was built in 1895, Namilyango High in 1902, Gayaza High in 1905, King's College, Buddo, in 1906; all built in Buganda.

Likewise, the first hospitals Mengo (1897), Lubaga (1899), and Nsambya (1903) were also located in Buganda. The same applied to other infrastructure including roads, ports, and railway networks. To many outside Buganda, this favour was to reward the Baganda for cooperating with the British arising from the Buganda Agreement of 1900. This agreement became the template for other agreements the British signed with different societies of Uganda.

Buganda became more developed than the rest of Uganda and became a superior kingdom. The Baganda also became the most educated people in

the protectorate and they began to despise low jobs of security guards, the army, and police that were taken up by other groups. These jobs went to lowly educated people especially from northern Uganda and this opened another chapter in the politics of ethnicity especially when the security forces began to oppress the Baganda just like their colonial agents had done before (Gersony 1997). The British were reluctant not only to colonise but also to develop some parts of Uganda seen as less productive (Odoi-Tanga 2009) especially the north and north-eastern territories. Such places remained for a long time without schools, roads, telephone services, police posts, among others.

With time, this lopsided development set the peoples of the less developed regions against those of areas that were slightly better developed. Hence:

> On the instantiation of political ethnicity, ethnicity is politicised, politics is ethnicised and ethnic groups tangentially become political formations whose struggles with each other and competing interests may be even more conflictual for the exclusivity of ethnic group membership (Ake 1993).

Baganda agents were not only to become colonial officials but they also enlisted in the British colonising army and worked hard to subdue other societies especially the Banyoro who resisted the British under Kabalega and the Acholi who waged two rebellions namely the Lamogi Rebellion of 1912 and the Paimol Resistance of 1917. Some of the resisting chiefs of the Uganda protectorate were imprisoned in Buganda. Rwot Awich of Payira for instance was incarcerated in a prison in Kololo at the current Summit View military facility. Buganda, to the British, was a safe place where dissidents could be kept away from their people and "rehabilitated". The Baganda appeared to be traitors to other ethnic groups in Uganda.

Although the districts created by the British colonialists aimed to ease administration, they had ethnic undertones. Acholi District, Lango District, Bugisu District, and so on, meant that other ethnic groups could not be comfortable in those districts. The fact is that those districts were multi-ethnic despite the names that suggested mono-ethnic status. Teso District had Kuman and the Acholi District had Madi, Chope, and Alur. The current border conflicts between the Madi and Acholi over Apar Game Reserve originated from these ethnicised districts. To the natives, Madi District was strictly for the Madi people and Middle Nile District would have been accommodative to both societies.

The establishment of commercial enterprises, factories, tea estates, railway depots and other major investments in Buganda and the rest of the southern region was another way by which the British were seen to favour southern Bantu communities. The north remained without

significant investments throughout the sixty-eight years of British rule. This means that people from the north had to migrate to the south in search of jobs. Labour immigrants from northern Uganda were often rebuked and loathed by their Bantu employers. The fact that people from the north were employed by those from the south created a kind of master-servant relation that led to political animosity.

Many Bantu people loathed people from northern Uganda to the extent that they did not want anybody from the non-kingdom regions to lead independent Uganda. kingdom:"?" independent

Obote's victory in the 25 April 1962 election was therefore a surprise to many and it was of little wonder that he received limited allegiance from Buganda. The Uganda People's Congress (UPC) alliance with Kabaka Yekka (KY) was expected to fail as it did in 1964. Throughout Obote's reign from 1962 to 1971, he never appealed to the Baganda as national leader because they preferred a person of royal background to lead the country. The special status that the colonial government accorded the kingdom regions of Uganda over and above the non-kingdom societies was responsible for the little legitimacy that the first UPC government had.

The kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro, Tooro, Ankole and later Busoga had their leaders, territories, emblems and police force officially recognised. They were said to be cultured and civilised, and were made to believe that they were superior to other people and therefore natural leaders of Uganda while the people originating from non-kingdom areas, such as Milton Obote were inferior and in away meant to be their servants. This was the basis of the resistance against Milton Obote that culminated into the 1966 crisis and the eventual abolition of monarchies in Uganda (Amone 2011).

Meanwhile Uganda's colonial army became heavily dominated by people from northern Uganda since those from the Bantu, in southern part of the country, despised it as a job for illiterate people. Acholiland became the recruitment yard of the King's African Rifles (Postlethwaite 1947). The Acholi dominance of the army was briefly challenged by Nubians from 1971 to 1979 when Idi Amin was in power; that dominance was restored upon Obote's return of exile in Tanzania in 1979 in form of the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA). The brutality of the UNLA, especially in reaction to the rebellion against the second Obote buttressed the image of the Acholi as a cruel people.

Today's Image of the Acholi

The overwhelming presence of Acholi men in the colonial and post-colonial armies of Uganda has been the benchmark for the evaluation of the character of the Acholi as a people by many Ugandans from the southern part of the country. Before 1986, if

one visited the towns of Uganda that hosted a military barracks, there would be a part of the town known as the "Acholi Quarter". There were such 'quarters' in Kampala, Jinja, Moroto, Mbarara to name but a few examples.

The Acholi Quarter was a section of the town where Acholi military officers housed their relatives and spouses that could not be accommodated within the barracks and as such were where these officers spent their leisure time (Amone 2011). Unfortunately, the colonial army was trained to oppress the indigenous people. Even when independence was attained, the oppressive nature of the army did not change.

This character remained within the nature of Uganda's army. When challenged by rebels, especially the National Resistance Army, a guerrilla force that waged war in Luwero Triangle and other guerrillas in West Nile from 1981 to 1986, the national army became completely detached from the citizens whose lives and property it was meant to protect. Instead, the army looted, raped and killed people suspected to be rebels or sympathetic to the rebels. The national army of Uganda in the Luwero Triangle and in the West Nile region was referred to as "the Acholi" army (Gersony 1997).

Rebel forces created this categorisation to sow seeds of discord by portraying the government forces as aliens to win support of the population. The trick worked and the national army became an alien force worth opposing militarily. As opposition, against the government and the national army – the UNLA – intensified, the ethnic antagonism labelling and hatred against the Acholi grew. The Acholi became characterised as murderers, rapists and looters on account of the behaviour of the national army that committed such atrocities.

The rise of transgressive rebel movements in Acholiland that challenged the government of Yoweri Museveni from 1986 to 2006 did not help rehabilitate the ethnic image of the Acholi. Rebel leaders: Alice Lakwena, Severino Lukoya and Joseph Kony led groups at different times, whose human rights record were worse than that of the defunct UNLA. All the three rebel leaders mentioned were Acholi and their militants were predominantly Acholi. They all opposed the National Resistance Army, which was very popular in the Bantu regions of Uganda having successfully routed the much-hated UNLA. It appeared to the people of southern Uganda that since the UNLA was brutal and in a similar vein, the Lakwena, Lukoya, and Kony rebel groups committed a lot of atrocious, the Acholi people are generally murderous and uncouth.

Hence, especially since 1986, the Acholi have been cast in negative light and this is purely due to their dominance in Uganda's military from about 1912 to 1986 as discussed above. However, it is the ethnicised

politics of Uganda that made the Acholi appear to some as ignoble. Acholiland occupies only about 28,000 of Uganda's total area of 236,040 square kilometres. The Acholi makes up only 4 per cent of Uganda's total population. To blame this small population for all the problems this country has witnessed is to take politics of ethnicity to the extreme.

The Acholi were called Anyanya, at some point in time, first to categorise them as foreigners (Sudanese) since the Anyanya were a rebel movement based in then southern Sudan, fighting the government of Sudan. The Anyanya morphed into the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) that eventually won independence for South Sudan. But the name-calling was also intended to show political and social rejection for the Acholi people, whether in national or institutional leadership. Peter, not real name, said that when he was posted to head a non-governmental organisation in Hoima, in the 1990s, people called him Anyanya during his maiden speech as the organisations regional manager.

Rita, another Acholi born recounted how in the 1990s when her husband was posted to Mubende District as District Population Officer, she happily moved there to live with her husband with their two children. However, she was forced to return to Kampala because Mubende residents often reminded her and their children that they were "Kony". If she was lucky, they would call her "Mudokolo". Literally, "Mudokolo" means someone from Dokolo locality now a district, but incidentally were from Gulu District, miles away from Dokolo. The term was designed to connote backward and primitive people! In many other places in southern Uganda today, if a person from Acholi picks a quarrel or a fight with a person from any Bantu community, the Acholi is blamed out right and called a "Kony" in reference to the brutality of Joseph Kony.

Likewise, Nobert Mao, the President General of the Democratic Party (from 2010 to date), once narrated that while a student at Makerere University, suggestions were made to change the name of the Acholi Makerere University Students' Association (AMSA) to remove the word "Acholi". Makerere University, like all public universities in the country, has associations of students from different ethnic groups. The students of the one of the Acholi is AMSA. who mooted the idea, feared to be identified as Acholi due to some kind of Acholi phobia. Such students feared speaking Lwo, the language of the Acholi. They preferred English or broken Luganda to Lwo, which they were fluent in, even when speaking to fellow Acholi.

As late as 2006, at the installation of Sabino Odoki as Auxiliary Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Gulu, one national leader who hails from the southern part of the country declared. "We shall transform the people in

the north from material and spiritual backwardness to modernity" (Todd 2010). The northern part of Uganda indeed lags behind in development relative to central and western Uganda. This was, as discussed earlier, largely because of the uneven concentration of investments and infrastructure in this part of the country. It has nothing to do with spiritual backwardness of the people of northern Uganda.

Modern scholarship focusing on the history of Uganda has equally been damaging to the Acholi identity (Mutiibwa 1992, Odoi-Tanga 2009). Some publications by outstanding scholars in Uganda especially those in politics, have generated prejudices, interpretations, and occasionally damaging ethnic categorisations, labelling and stereotyping. For instance during the LRA war, it was written: "Those Acholi are killing each other up there, and they always will. Why should we be concerned? [...] they are like that!" (Lomo and Hovil 2004). Tanga Odoi, a researcher on the political history of Uganda, wrote that the pre-colonial Acholi were not as civilised as the people of southern Uganda and that the British colonial government had little to consider Acholiland for. In part, he wrote:

> Acholiland was marginal in many ways to early British colonial rule. It was viewed as occupied by a tribe of a quite different and inferior order and its people (the Acholi) were perceived as "naturally lazy" and as having little to contribute to the "development" of the colonial economy (Odoi-Tanga 2009).

Such views are completely different from what British administrators and early European visitors themselves penned about the Acholi as already pointed out and as will be discussed in the next section. If the Acholi were perceived as inferior and lazy, why did the British prefer them to other ethnic groups of Uganda for the colonial army? Reminiscing about the war in the Luwero Triangle between 1981 and 1986 and the atrocities that accompanied it Mutiibwa (1994) wrote: "The Acholi goons who killed my father removed the clothes he was wearing". He, however, goes ahead to reveal that by the time of the murder, he was in exile. How did he know that those who killed his father were Acholi?

In addition, would it not have been more responsible of him to write: "The UNLA goons who killed my father removed the clothes he was wearing"? When I interviewed Col. Walter Ochora, a former UNLA soldier, he revealed that the brigade, which operated around Professor Mutibwa's father home (Semuto in present-day Nakaseke District) was commanded by Lt. Col. Kiyenga. He further revealed that the overall commander of the operation in Luwero, at that time, was Col. John Ogole (personal interview with Col. Walter Ochora, ,in Gulu); none of these two former UNLA commanders was an Acholi.

Similar to the sentiments expressed by the professor mentioned above, Maj. Gen. James Kazini, a long-time member of the Ugandan army's High Command and indeed commander of the UPDF at some point, blamed all military violence on the Acholi. He argued: "If anything, it is local Acholi soldiers causing the problems. It is the cultural background of the people here: they are very violent. It is genetic" (Lomo and Hovil 2004).

James Kazini was one-time commander of the UPDF 4th Division based in Gulu, he later commanded the national army after the Acholi had lost dominance in the institution. Since 1986 after the National Resistance Army (NRA) defeated the UNLA, the Acholi lost dominance of the national army. It is, therefore, difficult to comprehend how the Acholi can be blamed even for the crimes committed by NRA. General Kazini was blaming Acholi soldiers for the crimes committed by the NRA. One such crime took place in Palabek Kal Sub-county in the present Lamwo District. The commander here was called Abiriga who is not an Acholi (JRP 2012). The mention of Acholi as perpetrators of the crimes was because of the pre-existing prejudice and stereotyping against them.

Accusations that the Acholi are primitive have also been ripe. Even during the Nairobi Peace Talks of 1985, mention was made that the Acholi are primitive (Gersony 1997). A memo, reportedly from one government official to another in 1987 had this in part: "I have now realised that the Monkeys called Acholis are sitting upon Gold Mine. It is surprising that even the British Colonialists did not make them utilise the rich land properly" (Todd 2010).

This talk about the primitivity of the Acholi could have been a political gimmick orchestrated by politicians who wanted to wrestle power from General Tito Okello, an Acholi, between 1985 and 1986. It is important to contrast these stereotypes about the Acholi with the opinion of non-political actors who lived among the Acholi. Below I re-collect and analyse the views of European Christian missionaries, adventurers and explorers who worked among the Acholi. I consider their opinion neutral because they were neither Acholi nor Ugandans of any ethnic background.

Earlier Image of the Acholi

It is now known that war in general and ethnic conflicts distort the truth (Todd 2010). Many facts concerning the Acholi have been distorted. In 1903, Reverend Lloyd met Rwot (chief) Ogwok of Padibe, one of the then chiefdoms of the Acholi. This is what he reported about Ogwok:

> He extended to us the heartiest welcome, ushering us into his hut with the natural polish of a born gentleman. I was greatly struck by this man …. He sits and sleeps on a kareb and entertains his guests with coffee (Lloyd, 1911).

By 1903 Acholi chiefs were civilised as to draw the admiration of European visitors. They entertained their visitors by serving them coffee although the Acholi did not produce it. Ogwok was drinking imported coffee probably from Ethiopia. Reverend Lloyd did not report the form of primitivity that non-Acholi Ugandan politicians have alleged as discussed in the previous section.

When another European, J. R. P. Postlethwaite, known to the Acholi as Langalanga, met Rwot Ogwok, his impression is not different that of Rev. Lloyd, he wrote:

> He speaks Arabic very well, always wears European clothes and came to meet me riding on a donkey, getting off and kissing my hands with all the manners of a polished Arab (Milner 1952).

These are descriptions of the Rwot (chief) of a people now considered primitive. If Acholi leaders were drinking coffee, riding on a donkey and wearing European clothes, the people he governed could not have been primitive. Another Christian missionary, Reverend Father Lucien, also lived among the Acholi and wrote about them. He was much more impressed than Reverend Lloyd.. Here is what he stated:

> What did I see in those few days? Something deep rooted in the Acholi nature.... Something not yet ruined by the so-called progress of civilisation ... In them from childhood upwards are born the virtues of endurance, courage and resourcefulness ... the qualities of cooperation and the sense of community effort and mutual help (Lucian 1946).

This was at a time when the British "civilisation of Africa" had not been successful in northern Uganda, so the Acholi culture was still undiluted.

It has been alleged that the British were reluctant to colonise northern Uganda because the inhabitants were lazy and primitive (Mutiibwa 1992, Odoi 2009). But a letter dated 1909 to the Commissioner of the Nile Province by his Assistant Commissioner stationed in Koba near present day Gulu District Headquarters states otherwise:

> Every endeavour has to be made to administer this healthy and fertile country inhabited by a fine intelligent race, keen on acquiring knowledge, and anxious to share the benefits that accrue to those under our protection (Gulu District Archive, A 46/351/ Opening of Gulu Station.

This letter was written by a European officer to another European. As can be seen, the junior officer is appealing to his boss to ensure that the Acholi are colonised because they are a fine, intelligent and healthy race. So, the alleged primitivity and backwardness of the Acholi relative to other ethnic groups in Uganda was not observed by this European administrator. One can only conjure that the negative stereotypes against the Acholi emerged in later years due to the nature of divisive politics that emerged after independence.

Lloyd (1911) wrote about the perceived militant nature of the

Acholi, "overall one would call them a fine race physically, but not warlike." His views are corroborated by those of Baker (1874):

> I arrived here today (January 13th, 1876) five days after Fatiko (Patiko) [….] A vast undulating Prairie of Jungle grass and scrub trees… The Shuuli (Acholi) are a very polite people, always ready with greetings and inquiries after one's health.

In addition, that:

> The men of Shooli (as the Acholi were called) are the best proportioned that I have ever seen; without the extreme height of the Shilluks or Dinkas, they are muscular and well knit, and generally their faces are handsome (Baker 1874).

The proportionality of the Acholi was, however, contradicted by Odoi-Tanga (2009) when he wrote that the Acholi were inferior people. All political history books on Uganda state that Acholiland was the major recruitment region for both the colonial and post-colonial regimes of Uganda. According to Major Graham, "On recruiting safaris we went for the chaps who were tough and strong and ran quicker than anyone else" (Hugh 1983). This remark by a British army officer does not point to inferiority of the Acholi people.

Many Acholi men and women are unhappy about the negative image of their identity but they lack the platform to air their views. Others simply fear to speak lest they are treated as political opponents or rebels. Kony reportedly established the LRA to reclaim the honour of the Acholi people (Faber 2017). Other scholars have stated that Acholi nationalism remained a cornerstone of the LRA war (Gersony 1997; Lomo and Hovil 2004). Thus:

> The north/south conflict in Uganda is the LRA's raison d'être. This conflict is the result of foreign power interference and the historical marginalisation of the Acholi people before, during, and after the colonial period (Faber 2017).

The atrocity that Joseph Kony's rebellion meted out on the Acholi negates in a way the assertion that he waged war to reclaim the honour of the Acholi but it is a fact that there are deep seated grievances in Acholiland towards the current government. The reasons for these grievances hinge on loss of lives of loved ones, loss of cattle, marginalisation, stereotyping and name-calling as discussed in this article.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to illustrate that today's stereotyping and name-calling against the Acholi is a product of ethnic politics in Uganda. I have also demonstrated that ethnicised politics in Uganda is a product of discrimination and elite rivalry. When the various ethnic communities of Uganda were brought under one realm of administration by British colonial forces, competition for national resources began. Politicians, at times relied on the national army to outwit

their opponents. Unfortunately, the Acholi dominated the national army until 1986. This was why the Acholi bore the brunt of ethnic stereotyping and name-calling because of the army's brutality.

Negative stereotypes against the Acholi and other communities from northern Uganda as presented in this article show that there are individuals in the country who do not accept Uganda as one country. The Acholi, just like other Lwo people of eastern Africa, have been cast in negative light for reasons beyond their control. Had the Acholi been antediluvian, murderous and inferior as some politicians and scholars have stated, European visitors to Uganda whom we can assume to be neutral would have been the first to report this fact. The contrast between the image of the Acholi as presented by early European visitors and that offered by some scholars and politicians in post-colonial Uganda, therefore, help to shed light on how damaging the politics of ethnicity have been in Uganda especially to the Acholi ethnic group.

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