Chapter 4
Acholi Without Roots:
Categorizing the Displaced in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This chapter interrogates historical processes with war and displacement resulting from armed rebellion between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda between 1987-2007 that created contesting notions of being Acholi. The chapter shows how Acholi war trajectories experienced through taking refuge amongst other societies, conscription into warfare of mainly child abductees, and encampment divided the current Acholi into new imaginaries and solidarities. Lasting for over two decades, the LRA war led to the emergence of different cultures based on the different life pathways that Acholi took during violence and displacement: the culture of camps or IDPs (donation, food aid, governmental/humanitarian organizations' assistance) and the culture of war (forceful abduction of children and recruitment into rebel forces and militias).

INTRODUCTION

This chapter interrogates historical processes with war, and displacement resulting from armed rebellion between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda between1987-2007 that created contesting notions of being Acholi. The chapter shows how Acholi war trajectories experienced

through taking refuge amongst other societies, conscription into warfare of mainly child abductees and encampment divided the current Acholi into new imaginaries and solidarities. Lasting for over two decades, the LRA war led to the emergence of about three different cultures based on the different life pathways that Acholi took during violence and displacement – The culture of camps or IDPs (donation, food aid, governmental/humanitarian organizations' assistance); The culture of war (forceful abduction of children and recruitment into rebel forces and militias); The culture of exile (Acholi people fleeing away mainly to south of Sudan now South Sudan[1] and returning with new life styles and identity). During return, they face new spaces, imaginaries and futures. In other words, the returnee Acholi can no longer read Acholi 'script' in a similar manner which has created social categorization and different forms of othering. I argue that even though the formerly exiled Acholi managed to return and are living within the same boundary, they are experiencing different spaces which highlights on the idea of different belongings, multiple identities, different memories and perceptions of home.

Contextualizing the Acholi

Prior to the LRA war, the Acholi people socialized through the culture of the homestead. By socialization through the culture of the homestead, I mean that the Acholi people were organized through a communal system steered by a unique system of clan and elder arrangement. They were divided into clans each headed by a chief or *rwot (rwod [p])* (Girling 1960; Atkinson 2010). Belonging to a clan guaranteed one access to the available resources in the community based on the idea of communality (p'Bitek 1984; Olaa 2001; Opiyo 2013). Acholi communality involved sharing in everyday life chores, such as tilling the land together, grazing together and hunting together. Communal existence was entrenched through family gathering around a fire-place on a daily basis – a system locally known as *wang oo*. Every Acholi man or woman went through this homestead tradition – a social process that made them custodians of the Acholi culture. It was expected that the young Acholi was duty bound to pass on this knowledge to the next generation. The Acholi who go through the homestead practice based on the stewardship of Acholi culture become the 'original' Acholi.

However, Acholi culture has over the years suffered politicization but at the same time it is also in constant flux. By politicization I mean the current Acholi define themselves in three different categories, espouse ideas of the

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