Chapter 5

Displacement Beyond Borders:
Acholi Notion of Historic Homeland After War and Flight

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on how the Northern Uganda war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan Army (1987-2008) reformulated Acholi people's local construction of place, political belonging, material, and emotional connections. In other words, how historical processes with war, flight, and displacement reshaped meaning of being Acholi in Northern Uganda. The two-decade period of war in Northern Uganda (1986-2008) led to the displacement of Acholi people both internally and externally. Almost the whole population of Acholiland were affected by the LRA insurgency that dismantled societal structures that had for long anchored Acholi culture. During this turbulent period, Acholi people lived in camps and in the neighboring countries, especially Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), and Kenya, among others. This gives this conflict a cross-border dimension.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter, focuses on how the northern Uganda war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan army (1987-2008) reformulated Acholi people's local construction of place, political belonging, material

and emotional connections. In other words, how historical processes with war, flight and displacement reshaped meaning of being Acholi in northern Uganda *(see Odongoh in this volume)*. The two decade period of war in northern Uganda (1986 - 2008) led to the displacement of Acholi people both internally and externally. Almost the whole population of Acholiland were affected by the LRA insurgency (Bøås and Bjørkhaug 2014) that dismantled societal structures which had for long anchored Acholi culture. During this turbulent period, Acholi people lived in camps and in the neighboring countries especially Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR) and Kenya among others. This gives this conflict a cross-border dimension.

Being a transnational ethnic group, I undertake a cross border, diasporic or transnational framework regarding war and displacement to conceptualize Acholi dispersion both internally as IDPs – Internally Displaced Persons, and externally outside Ugandan borders (Levitt 2001; Appadurai 1996). The LRA war in northern Uganda has a cross border dimension as the rebels exploited the porous colonial geopolitical line to instrumentalize guerrilla activities against the Ugandan troops, a process that devastated almost the entire Acholiland. Living within a landscape of violence, encampment and displacement shuttered and redefined Acholi idea of sociality and belonging which had for long been anchored within the umbrella of homestead, which is the social entity comprising of extended family ties and relations. The traditional customary structures that shaped Acholi man or woman were all destroyed. "Destruction of livelihoods is a common theme in civil wars, resulting in a high degree of vulnerability, instability and insecurity for the affected households" (Sundnes and Shanmugaratnam 2008:65). This leads to break up of the social fabric.

The argument is premised on the assertion that Acholi returnees may have not only developed varied identities which they acquired during flight but the multiple identities may also be problematic in the reconstitution of post war Acholi community. The multiplicity of identities may affect the way Acholiness or being Acholi is defined today, i.e. how the socio-cultural and even the geographical boundary might be contested by the new Acholi. Before going into empirical discussion, it is important to bring out some conceptual leads around borders and boundaries.

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