The Acholi people of northern Uganda: The forgotten community

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Abstract

This article explores the lived experiences of the Acholi people of northern Uganda who have been exposed to armed conflict, violence, and internal forced displacement into government controlled and self-settled-camps. For three decades the Acholi have been subjected to all forms of human rights violations. The camps began to emerge soon after this current government took power in 1986 and subsequently (Finnström, 2008; Gersony, 1997). The camps are also referred to as "Protected Villages" by the government. As a result of lack of provision for basic needs, up to 1,000 people have been dying on a weekly bases from starvations and preventable diseases in these camps (World Health Organisation, 2005; Dolan, 2009).

This article focuses on why the Acholi people have been victimised and examines how the Acholi people have used their collective agency to survive the hardship, the lack of basic provisions, the suffering and neglect that they face on their everyday life in a hostile environment.

Introduction

In 2003, Jan Egeland, the then United Nations Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs, visited northern Uganda camps and described the situation to which the two million Acholi people have been subjected as: "The worst humanitarian disaster the world has ever seen, and the world biggest neglected and forgotten crisis". A similar voice echoed that: "The entire society is being systematically destroyed, physically culturally, socially, and economically in full view of the international community. The Human rights catastrophe unfolding in northern Uganda is methodical and comprehensive genocide" (Otunnu 2005:4). Equally, the violence to which the Acholi people were subjected prompted Acholi Religious Leaders to draw the attention of the international community to 'the forgotten plight of the people in displaced camps in Acholi…" Acholi Religious Leaders and Peace Initiative (ARLPI, 2001).

Uganda, a former British colony, obtained its independence in 1962. Since then it has experienced political violence (Ogenga Otunnu, 2017; Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 1987). The current government, the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) led by Yoweri Museveni

ascended to power through military means in 1986, having fought a guerrilla bush war for five years, and has been in power since then[1]. The arrival of NRA/M was portrayed as a revolution against the then president Obote's second term in government which was described as oppressive, and mainly dominated by members from the north and eastern parts of the country. However, Onyago-Odongo (2000) observes that toppling Obote's second government was a mistake and a 'rape' of democracy in Uganda as he was considered a new generation of leader/ a model for other African countries. However, Museveni soon turned violent, and repressive against populations in northern and eastern parts of the country, particularly against the Acholi people, who, the NRA/M claimed, had occupied high positions in the previous government. The Acholi were regarded as "enemy" and became the target. This became a justification to wage war against the Acholi people, and the regime has exposed them to armed conflict, violence, and internally forced displaced them into 250 government controlled camps all over Acholiland (Finnström, 2005). As a result, Acholi have been subjected to systematic state killing, lynching, arrests and imprisonment of innocence civilian without trail, disappearances, destructions to their properties, and other forms of violence such as rape were prevalent against the Acholi people (Amnesty international, 1991, 1994; Dolan, 2009; Finnström, 2008).

Who are the Acholi people?

Uganda is a multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-class, multi-racial, cultural diverse, multi-religion and multi-society country (Otunnu, 2017; Nzita and Mbaga-Niwampa, 1998; Okot p'Bitek, 1971). The Acholi people is one of the ethnic groups that occupy the region of contemporary northern Uganda. In the past, anthropologists described the Acoli/Acholi[2] as part of the umbrella groups of Luo/Lwoo (synonym) who are considered ethnically and linguistically related. Luo groups are also known to be spread across the East Africa plain, from Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya to Uganda and Tanzania (Girling, 1952; Crazzolara, 1950).

The Acholi people are the fourth largest ethnic groups and makes up to five percent of Uganda's population. Most contemporary Acholi live in the rural villages within a clans/kinships structure, and collectively hold the titles of territories that had been granted to them in the colonial era, then known as Acholiland (Finnström, 2008; Atkinson, 1994; Allen, 2019). Characterised as 'peasants', most Acholi people live from mixed farming of subsistence crops

[1] The NRA is a military body and NRM is a political organ.
[2] The terms are often used as synonyms but critics argue that the latter is a colonial version of the former.

and raising livestock, and supplement their income with small scale hunting, fishing, cash crops, as well as work for other employment both locally and nationally (Atkinson, 1994; Branch, 2005; p'Bitek, 1989). However, war, violence, and internal forced displacement have had detrimental consequences on the community. Their livelihoods, as well as the economy and the environment have been devastated. This article draws on ethnographic research carried out with the Acholi people who have been displaced into government-controlled areas as well as in self-settled camps away from their ancestral homes. The article offers a range of theoretical concepts, such as victimhood and agency which are pertinent to understanding the plight of the Acholi, before turning to some of the strategies the displaced communities have developed in order to survive.

Context and Conceptual Framework

Three forms of violence

Johan Galtung (1969) identifies three forms of violence: direct, structural and cultural violence. Galtung argues that these three forms of violence are interrelated and mutually reinforce one another in their characteristics. With direct violence, he establishes that there is a clear subject-action-object relationship between direct violence and the victim, and he distinctively differentiates direct violence as being fast, and dramatic as well as personal and visible. For example, when a war is fought there is direct violence since killing or hurting a person is visible in such action. He further argues that direct violence affects human beings both physically and psychologically; hence, the consequences can be devastating apart from destroying human security, livelihood and human development.

Galtung defines structural violence as a form of violence without a subject-action-objects relationship but a clear victim. This is also known as indirect violence. This form of violence is slow in nature and also known to impact social inequalities. Galtung argues that structural violence is also the main cause of other hidden forms of violence which are perpetrated through uneven distribution of resources. For example, the lack of education facilities is such a form of violence and has a devastating impact, because it affects educational achievement, and, as a result, produces low income for generations. The same applies to uneven distributions of hospital facilities, housing and other essential services. It therefore follows that if services in some districts are available for some groups only, these increase social inequalities and impact on the lives of people.

It is not only the uneven distribution of material resources that affects a community. So is lack of power for the people which means that the existing structure deprives them of the chances of voting or denies them freedom of speech or bargaining power, as well as the power to protest or strike. Galtung further notes that direct violence feeds on structural violence which has its root in social issues such as socio-economic, cultural, religious, ethnic, and racial inequalities which he considers the greatest killer of all different types of violence.

The third type of violence is cultural violence. The nature of cultural violence is reflected in how the ruling elites undermine a group by blaming the victim of structural violence, and as well as stereotyping, discriminating, exploiting, and use religion and ideology in order to undermine them. If we imagine the three forms of violence as a triangle, notes Galtung, we can say that the triangle stands on direct or structural violence and cultural violence is its apex (Galtung 1990:294).

All three categories relate to the lived experiences of the Acholi people who have been described as a community without voice (Egeland, 2003). Historically, religion and language have been one of the tools used to oppress and inflict violence against the people who have been colonised. In relation to violence against the Acholi people, I argue that the brutal colonial legacy, the injustices and marginalisation that the Acholi people suffered in the hands of colonialists (Finnström, 2008; Allen, 2019; Ojok, 2006; Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 1987; Bitek, 1989), are either wholly or partly a contributing factor to the current violent situations in Uganda, in particular against the Acholi people. The current government enacts those violent rules, i.e. this current government introduced disenfranchisement and military rule against the Acholi tradition values (Finnström, 2008; Dolan 2009).

Victimhood

Dahl (2009:393) defines a victim as "a person suffering for reasons unrelated to his /her own agency". Dahl differentiates her definition of victimhood from one in which passive objects have been acted upon by other forces, not active agents. In the latter victims are defined by the mark that has been made on them rather than the mark that they have made on the wider world. She further elaborates that the term victim in its core sense should be considered as relational and points out that "…the concept of victimhood is used as themselves [victims] being

expressions of agency in a contestation over accountability, responsibility, recognition and possible indemnification or blame… These are not victims, but agents" (Dahl 2009:391).

The concept of victimhood is intertwined with the concept of agency, and is widely used among scholars to highlight lack of acknowledgement of victims in criminology and/or within tribunal processes (McEvoy and McConneachie, 2012; Bonacker and Safferling, 2013). There is now a growing body of literature which focuses on several aspects of victimhood, such as changing the narratives on victimisation and recognising the impact of crimes on survivors. Some studies concentrate on the many perspectives of victimisation and victimhood, while others concentrate on the hierarchies of victimhood such as: "the good victims, bad victims and iconic victims" (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012:529). Other still, are concerned with the construction of victimhood and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion which create "us-them" dichotomies that produce "collectives of victimhood" (Rosland 2009:1). On the politics of victimhood, Sayer (2019) draws on Arendt's theory which perceives victimhood as associated with collective identity as well as an individual's identity. Following Arendt, Sayer shows how the politics of victimhood is becoming more and more wedged into vulgar ways of narrating the experiences of suffering, which is neither liberating nor accurate or efficient in terms of reflecting the worldly reality or agency.

Agency

Agency is a concept used by different disciplines. In some strands of Sociology it is defined as: "Action or the stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of the events-in-the world, and the capacity for action, and the ability to make decisions and choose options" (Giddens 1993:81). Giddens also considers agency with reference to time and space in which human beings can exercise power by recreating an existing structure, of effecting transformation or identity. Within this conceptual framework, an analysis of agency becomes the exploration of processes shaped by a collective capability to act to change in the world.

In the present study I have framed "agency" in relation to the trials and tribulations for the Acholi people who have experienced neglect, and been subjected to all forms of human rights violations, internal forced displacement, victimisation and marginalisation. The concept of agency is useful when it comes to unpacking how the Acholi people collectively used their agency to challenge these difficult situations and survived. The Acholi are resilient

communities. As I have already mentioned, during the colonial period they suffered the hardest at the hands of colonialists. Through their resilience the Acholi pulled through together and challenged the British rule which was not only discriminatory but brutal. They used their agency to band together to survive and resisted British rule, also known as "*Loc anconya*" (Finnström 2008:52). Known as *Lamogi* the insurrection led by the Acholi became an icon of resistance to British cruelty, violent structures and discriminatory policies (Finnström 2008; p'Ojok 2006).

Experiencing extreme levels of violence, particularly situations such as internal forced displacement, diminishes individual and collective agency because under such situations agency is constrained and is experienced as being in the hands of others or, to be more precise, power resides in the hand of the oppressor. Finnström (2008) notes: "In such displacement and brutal regime, cultural and social agency diminish as the logic of domination and violence enter the most spheres of everyday life" (Finnström 2008:133).

According to a report issued by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2019 on global forced displacement, the number of displaced people worldwide have topped 70.8 million, of which more than half of this number are actually Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), not refugees. These people have been uprooted from their homes, and these are not only great tragedies but also the causes of increase in poverty, deprivation, social inequalities, hunger, and health ills leading to premature deaths. But despite the fact that internal displacement has emerged as one of the great human tragedies of our time, 'the issue is still ignored by international bodies' (Kofi Annan, cited in Francis Deng, 1998 preface). Worse still, those living in self-settled camps may not be acknowledged as refugees and soon become invisible (Refstie, 2008).

Uganda is home to two million IDPs, and currently hosts one of the largest refugee communities in the world, the third out of the top ten refugee receiving countries (UNHCR, 2019; IMDC, 2014). This preference of 'refugees' over 'IDPs', I argue, is challenging in terms of planning, social development, prioritising resources, and in achieving justice and sustainable peace-building. Equally, Uganda is also where the policy to protect IDPs was launched in 2009, known as the Kampala Convention. This is a treaty of the African Unions (AU) which has been legally adopted (IMDC 2010; Ongara, 2017), which provides the setting for the present

empirical evaluation of the impact of forced internal displacement and the effects on communities.

Methodology

The present article is part of a larger project I undertook for my postgraduate research carried out in the period between 2017-2018. This ethnographic and multi-sited fieldwork explored how the Acholi ethnic group had been living in government-controlled camps and in self-settled camps in Kireka hill (known as Acholi camp) in the suburbs of Kampala, and at Bweyale, in the Kiryangdongo district. The research focuses on living in the camps in terms of the consequences of displacement and lack of access to basics such as those defined in the previous section.

My participants were recruited with the help of gatekeepers and through snowballing. I conducted ethnographic research and participant observation with the aim to understand their lived experiences and the impact of internal forced displacement as well as their human rights violations. I conducted structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with 45 participants. In addition, I carried out informal conversations within the Acholi community.

Findings

Adopted Survival Strategies

The term survival strategy which seemed to have been borrowed by behavioural scientists from physiology, is now commonly used among researchers in relation to vulnerable groups who have been violently uprooted from their stable environments by armed conflicts, violence or other natural disasters (Deng, 1998; Harrell-Bond, 1986). Harrell-Bond states that: "[for] Refugees and displaced people […] survival strategies is not merely a process of transition within a cultural commune, but a model for social change" (Harrell-Bond 1986:9). Similarly, Suarez and Black (2014) defined survival strategies as: "highly fluid processes. It involved any activities that individuals, and communities undertake to counter, mitigate, deter, avoid or overcome threats during armed conflict. [….] Rather than understating survival as a series of short-term tactics, responses or strategies aimed towards meeting the bare necessities of life, it is a long-term process deeply embedded within social, economic and political contexts" (Suarez and Black, 2014:2).

Before the war arrived to northern Uganda in 1986, this part of the country for decades had been relatively peaceful, and in terms of livelihoods and sustainability, most Acholi families kept livestock such as cattle, sheep, and goats and practiced mixed farming (Atkinson, 1994; Branch, 2005); these made the whole Acholi districts self-sustainable. This is reflected in their old adage of "*arwoth-ki-odda"*, which simply means self-sustainable and a happy life, a concept that Acholi people are proud of, and uphold dearly. There is a belief that there is a reason why Acholi districts are known to produce no beggar as was seen in other districts (Heron, 2004); because within the community, everyone was supported then, and everyone had right to land which they could utilise to his or her desires, no restrictions whatsoever (Bere, 1955; Atkinson, 1994). However, they certainly became vulnerable, and in the wave of politic and ethnic violence, that image became a target and Acholi people found themselves persecuted and victimised for who they are, and they have been reduced to nothingness but to IDP status and destitute. Because Acholi communities no longer have access to their ancestral land and resources which used to enable the communities to be much stronger and independent, and as a result of war, and internal forced displacement for over decades which desecrated their traditional values, they became vulnerable.

My research has found that Acholi livelihoods have been destroyed, including their food storages, crops and livestock either destroyed or looted/stolen by NRA soldiers (Finnström, 2008). One participant says: "Camps have become death traps. We have been living on the edge. Ultimately, we are humiliated and dehumanised". Another participant added: "*Kwo tek…* (means life has become unbearably difficult). The reality is we are being ignored that we are hard to reach, backward... But we can be reached easily by guns". These quotes show how war survivors are left struggling on their own.

It is undeniable that war shreds communities and rips apart entire societies. The Acholi people have been in the thick of violence. Stripped of their human rights, neglected, and forgotten, however, the Acholi people collectively have risen up to the challenges. Amid these difficult situations, they banded together to create their own destinies and adopted a spectrum of survival strategies and coping mechanisms. Among the range of survival strategies that they have adopted are self-initiated programmes created to deal with the crises that engulfed them, from providing education for both children and adults to organise training, workshops and outreach schemes and other supporting materials urgently needed for their survival. For example, IDPs

indicated that when they were herded by the government army into Protected Villages there were no shelters, they struggled to provide for themselves shelters, some basic form of protection: “We erected our own huts”. Evidently, their claim has been supported by the evidence on the UNHCR website, showing one of the camps in Kitgum district which had been constructed by IDPs themselves. Please refer to the appendix for a relevant image. They also provided basic health care including caring for members of family with mental illness, provided social support to each other, spiritual and psychological support among the least of positive psychological and well-being they could present. As a woman who runs a local organisation told me:

> Everyone is in desperate need but we try our best to prioritise high risk groups such as mothers and babies, and include related health conditions to receive help and care as quick as they can. We also care for the young ones, particularly those separated from their families as a result of war, violence, and those who have been wounded... despite having no money or resources -- but we have compassion (P3, 2018).

Providing care is paramount, woven in solidarity and collectiveness that exist within the community, to which they referred as: *ribbe aye tekko*, (it means that they are worthy together or stronger together and together they can go far). Another organisation revealed to me that they have been looking after children who have lost their parents to war, violence and as a result of internal forced displacement. According to one of the support workers, a 58-year old woman,

> In our record there are as many as a thousand children that we provide range of care; from accommodation, food, and try to educate them or send to schools or colleges. As well as looking after their physical health, we look after their psychological well-being.

Another key source of coping and hope is the support of the diaspora. My study found that strong ties and solidarity are extended between those who are living outside the country and those left behind in camps. Solidarity has influenced their survival and coping with the challenges they face in camps. As Fransen (2015) notes, social ties within conflict-affected societies and diasporas remain a strong focal point. My findings confirmed that the inflow of financial support from the diaspora has been significantly important for the survival of IDPs, and war victims in northern Uganda who have no access to any financial support including

bank credits. The neglected, invisible and forgotten communities have been heavily relying on overseas remittances as their lifeline, providing them with the basic needs, such as medicines and helping with health care bills including helping them to meet school requirements, uniforms, books and fees for their children. Some notes that without overseas remittances there would be no food for their families to survive, nor would there be a roof over their heads. Participants showed genuine gratitude towards their countrymen and -women who help them in many ways. Overseas remittances have been broadly discussed by social scientists and policymakers since the number of refugees and IDPs globally have grown rapidly after the two world wars, and remittances are taken as important variables in order to evaluate transformation (Van Hear, 2002, 2000). Van Hear (2002) argues that that although international remittances are believed to be small, they are vital as a growing financial inflow into the country of origin and stable incomes for recipients.

With regards to income, the Acholi have also adopted a scheme known as 'income generating or revolving scheme' or *bol-licup* or *kalulu* in the local language. It involves some forms of collective mutual arrangement and willingness to part with some cash on a weekly or monthly basis depending on what terms those involved have agreed to. For example, a group of ten people agreed to put £2.00 every week or month, and also agreed who should receive this money in the first, and subsequent months; the process rotates until everyone involved in the group receives the same amount. This strategy is important for the IDPs' survival since they are not able to access bank credits for many reasons, such as not being able to meet bank requirements such as producing a land title as a surety or even cannot provide proof of address.

In addition, some Acholi supplement their income by carrying out dangerous, unconventional and irregular work. I observed them doing work such as quarrying which, they stressed, was demeaning and opposes to their traditional values as agrarians. Unfortunately, I observed all ages, men, women and children as young as eight quarrying to survive. In addition to survival strategies and coping mechanisms, my ethnographic findings suggest that the Acholi people use their collectiveness, inventiveness to survive, they hustle to make a living, for instances young women and men tend to do mobile vending, such as hair dressing, mobile pedicures, deliveries, including domestic work. Auma's story represents many of them. She lives in one of the self-settled camps, she hustles to make ends meet. She and her family survive on such mobile vending and casual domestic services or informal work. Auma said:

> I often get phone calls, and people ask me to work in their homes, many of whom I do not know. The jobs vary from washing clothes, ironing and cleaning, and sometimes cooking and feeding animals among the least. Some people aren't nice though, often they tend not to respect you at all. Sometimes they even refuse to pay me money or pay too little. But what can I do? (interview, 18.10.2017).

Despite many challenges, she concludes that: "[it] is better than begging". Just to emphasize on the begging, it is understandable that when it comes to begging, participants indicated that it is a culturally and socially sensitive issue, it bears huge and strong social stigma. Amid these crises, the Acholi people have become creative exploiting any hidden skills, despite living a bare life and in liminal space. For example, women have formed beads-making groups, or turn glossy magazine paper into beautiful objects such as necklaces, accessories which they sell - and this has become their source of income. Traditionally, beads-making or such craft work predominantly done by women was regarded as having no financial value and seen only as a form of socialising. However, IDP women have also established networking which expands internationally, something which is extraordinary for their circumstances.

Conclusion

In the light of the evidence, the findings reveal that it has certainly been a trial and tribulations for the Acholi people who have been neglected, forgotten and deprived of a voice among human rights violations that they suffered, but they proved that they are resilient, and demonstrated that amid those difficult situations and challenging times they can rise up to the challenges. These qualities have been shown through their efforts to adopt varied approaches for their survival and coping mechanisms to deal with the crises that engulfed them. The findings also offer new insights which inform the world of what has happened, and is still happening in Acholiland and against the Acholi people. The article has revealed the impacts of war, violence and the agonies of internal forced displacement on the Acholi lives, economics and social lives. It also highlights the continuous injustices, victimisation, marginalisation of the Acholi people as well as being casualty of land grabbing organised by the government in favour of big international co-operations and industrial farming, all of which will increase social inequalities. This, I believe, will contribute to many premature deaths in this community.

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Appendix 1: an aerial image from the UNHCR website, taken in 2004 showing one of the government controlled-camps in Kitgum district.