



The Relevance of the Theory of Primordialism to the Evolution of Acholi Ethnic Identity in Northern Uganda

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Abstract

This article discusses the relevance of the theory of primordialism to the rise of Acholi ethnic identity in northern Uganda. Ethnicity is a term of two broad theoretical categories namely primordialism and constructivism. Each of the two has several sub-theories. Modern historians have tended to ignore primordialism in preference for new concepts like instrumentalism, cultural determinism, historicism and regionalism. Using fieldwork conducted among the Acholi and analysis of secondary data from different writers, the author contends that the theory of primordialism is relevant to the rise and metamorphosis of Acholi ethnic identity. He argues that many of the authors who have criticized Clifford Geertz's primordialism have only been able to use the different varieties of primordialism under different names.

Keywords: Primordialism, ethnicity, identity, nationalism, evolution, acholi.

Introduction

For most historians, ethnicity is a debate between two interactive dimensions: primordialism and constructivism. Constructivism considers identities to be modern, while primordialism assigns them a pre-modern or even prehistoric origin. The "primordialist" view asserts that ethnic identity is part of our essential human constitution and that our desire to identify with a group whose characteristics we possess is simply reflexive. The urge to reject "the other" was encoded in our oldest human ancestors¹. That urge has often resulted in oppression of weaker ethnic groups by more powerful ones, as well as xenophobia, and violent "ethnic cleansing. The theory of constructivism, on the other hand, assumes that ethnic identity is malleable and dynamic rather than innate and unchanging. This view asserts that ethnic identity--indeed any identity-- is "constructed" by social, political, and historical forces, and that individual identities change over time as social contexts change. Furthermore, people exhibit different identities in different contexts. Identities disappear and return (or are "re-invented"). They are always fluctuating.

An ethnic identity is a collectivity of people who are united by a cultural or emotional bond and form part of a larger population with whom they compete for political, social and economic resources². It is a group of people whose members identify with each other, through a common heritage, often consisting of a common language, culture, religion and ideology that stresses common ancestry. Members of an ethnic identity are usually conscious of belonging to that ethnic group; moreover ethnic identity is further marked by the recognition from others of a group's distinctiveness.

The Acholi are a Lwo people, who migrated to northern Uganda from Rumbek in southern South Sudan. The Lwo are found in northern and eastern Uganda, South Sudan, western Kenya, eastern Congo, western Ethiopia and northern Tanzania. Today, the Acholi of Uganda are found in the northern Uganda districts of Gulu, Amuru, Nwoya, Kitgum, Lamwo, Pader and Agago. They are bordered by the Alur, Jonam and Madi to the west, the Banyoro, Chope and Langi to the south and the Karimojong, Jie and Labwor to the East. Then to the north, in South Sudan, Acholi's neighbours are the Didinga, Lotugho, Dodoth and Dinka. Acholi-land stretches over fifteen thousand square miles to the east of the Albertine Nile from approximately 2 degrees 30 minutes to 4 degrees north latitude and from 31 degrees to 33 degrees east longitude³. Eleven thousand square miles of this territory are occupied by the Acholi of Uganda. The rest of the land lies over the border in the Equatoria state of the Federal Republic of South Sudan. This article is specifically about the Acholi of Uganda.

Methodology

Although this paper is a result of extensive fieldwork in Acholiland, I began by familiarizing myself with the various theories of ethnicity. This I did by way of library research where I consulted the works of leading scholars of ethnicity. I read textbooks, magazines and journal articles. Two major theories stood out clearly; primordialism and constructivism, also called constructionism. Modern scholars have divided these into several sub-theories such as instrumentalism, existentialism, cultural determinism, historicism and regionalism. The question then was of the two major theories which one best explains the evolution of the Acholi ethnic identity?

Mine was largely qualitative research because I had to get ideas, opinions, theories and emotional attachments of the Acholi people and their neighbours. Such issues cannot be quantified hence I had to abandon quantitative methods. With the aid of six Research Assistants, I spent three months interviewing Acholi elders, women, men, traditional leaders and scholars. I did the same with neighbouring societies such as the Langi, Karimojong, Madi, Alur, Chope and Banyoro. This was meant to find out what made the Acholi different from the other groups in the region.

To augment fieldwork results, I consulted archival materials pertaining to the formation of ethnic identities in Uganda generally, and the northern Uganda region in particular. Most importantly, I used archival sources in Entebbe National Archives, Gulu District Archives and those of Kitgum District. It was not possible for me to get archival sources from the other districts of the Acholi. Other than Kitgum and Gulu Districts, the rest of Acholi district are recent creations and are still trying to build their record systems.

Results and Discussion

“Obeno pa wat pe cot” goes a popular saying among the Acholi. This is loosely translated as “kinship bonds can’t break”. The Acholi society is strictly egalitarian; everyone belongs to the society and society belongs to all irrespective of status. The Acholi identify kins through language, culture, economic activities such as the crops grown and above all the Abila. Every Acholi family has its Abila (Shrine). Whenever you go, as long as you are within Acholi-land, you will find a small hut constructed some one hundred meters from the hut of the man’s chief wife. The Abila is a sacred place of worship. It is the unifying symbol of the Acholi traditional religion. In the early days of the formation of Acholi identity, it was the Abila that differentiated the Acholi lineages from those of the Madi, Langi and Karimojong who built theirs differently. Acholi clans began to identify with each other more strongly when it became clear to them that the neighbors were not only different culturally, linguistically but also rivaled them over land, cattle and women. The strength and form of primordial attachments differ from individual to individual, from community to community, from one period to another. But within each person, each community and at every time there are particular ties, inferred from the feeling of natural, almost spiritual affinity rather from the social interaction.

In the period prior to European colonial rule, ethnic identity development was not only in Acholi-land but also elsewhere in what became Uganda. It has been argued, for instance, that:

By the time the colonialists arrived in this part of Africa, the Baganda were already a single people traditionally fixed on a relatively well-defined territory, speaking the same language, possessing a distinctive culture (a social organisational system based on patrilineal exogamous totemic clan lineages with the

Kabaka as its head) and shaped to a common mould by many generations of historic experience⁴.

Whereas in some African territories colonial rule molded ethnic identities, in other places it only set one group against the other under the principal of divide and rule. In Acholi-land, the British consolidated ethnic identity formation that had begun much earlier.

The Acholi are a people with common ancestry and descent. Up to about 1300 AD, Lwo people were living just south of the point where river Bahr-el Ghazal meets the Nile in the southern Sudan. This is regarded as the “cradle land” of the Lwo. Around 1400 the Lwo had begun to move south and east from this Sudanic cradle land leaving behind the Nuer and the Dinka. They are said to have emigrated from their cradle land in two main waves. The first moved northwards to Wipac from where another split occurred and the second slopped down the Nile up to Pubungu, where, again, another secondary dispersal took place. One section of the Wipac group proceeded eastwards settling at the Sudan - Ethiopian border and forming the Anuak people. The Lwo group that settled at Pubungu also dispersed in different directions with one group proceeding southwards up to Bunyoro. The descendants of this group later founded the ruling dynasties of the Bantu kingdoms in Uganda namely Bunyoro, Tooro, Buganda and Busoga.

The Lwo settled and lived according to clans and lineages. To live in the territories occupied, one had to belong to one of the clans or lineages. The formation of those clans and lineages marked the beginning of Acholi ethnic identity. It seems clear that by the nineteenth century, and even as late as the mid nineteenth century, the broad unity that characterized Acholi as a whole had not taken on any practical forms of expression. Neighboring groups had no occasion to deal with either the area or the people of Acholi as any sort of unit. Neither did people within Acholi. Two other examples of collective functioning or identity beyond the level of the individual chiefdom developed over the first half of the nineteenth century, consequent upon and largely conditioned by two major droughts and famine. The two were economic refuge and military confederation.

The phenomenon of economic refugees existed in Acholi-land due mainly to famine. Frequent drought in Acholi-land caused poor harvests and famine. During the famine of *Abongo wang dako* the people of Palabek Chiefdom migrated to Atyak Chiefdom that had not suffered much from the drought. The people of Atyak welcomed and fed them. But the immigrants over-stayed and even began to marry Atyak men and women long after the famine had ended. The people of Atyak told them “Atyak rac-ku, Palabek odok tugi” meaning, “The Atyak are good hosts but let the people of Palabek now return home”. This has remained a popular saying among the Acholi up to today. It is used when one feels they have done enough good to somebody but the person still demands more.

In the years that preceded European colonial incursions in Africa, the Acholi engaged in a number of activities that were indicative of the growing spirit of collective responsibility and a sense of belonging to a single and unified group. One of such activities was hunting. In Acholi-land, hunting was a communal activity. A clan or chiefdom organized it but there were poly-chiefdom hunts as well. It was this poly-chiefdom hunts that showed some degree of evolution of ethnic nationalism because it brought together members of different chiefdoms within Acholi-land though it excluded neighboring peoples like the Langi, Karimojong, Lotugho, Alur and the Banyoro. In 1946 Father Lucien participated in one of such hunts and reported as follows:

The Acholi and Lango are greatest hunters than any other of the tribes in my diocese. With its age long traditions, the sagas about it and the enjoyment of the strenuous activity which it affords, hunting has become part of the very life of an Acholi man and woman. And I had long wished to see something of it at first hand. The opportunity came in March this year.

After the hunt he said: What did I see in the two days? Something deep rooted in the Acholi nature. Man at his primitive hardest and best. Something not yet ruined by the so-called progress of civilization. Something far more valuable for them than the horns, skins and meat...The importance of these great hunts is their spiritual and social value. In them from childhood upwards are born the virtues of endurance, courage and resourcefulness. In these hunts the qualities of cooperation and the sense of community effort and mutual help are unconsciously fostered⁵.

Besides cementing ethnic bonds, hunting also prepared the Acholi for military duties just like it did to the Akamba of Kenya and the Yao of Malawi. During the colonial period, these three communities dominated the military in their respective countries.

Then there was the institution of marriage. Members of different Acholi chiefdoms related to each other through marriage not only as a political demeanor but also to inculcate a sense of oneness in the society. Although most Acholi marriages took place within the same chiefdom, as long as the couples belonged to different clans, quite a good number of people got spouses outside their chiefdoms. The propensity of princes in seeking lovers outside their specific chiefdoms is well recited in Acholi oral tradition and expressed even in songs. Hence there were numerous cases of inter-chiefdom marital relations in pre-colonial Acholi. Girling recounts that the aristocratic lineages were able through their numerous affinal kinship ties to exert influence on the policy of the domain. The largest of all domains, the Payira, had in it women of many of the other politico-territorial groups. Female agnates of the Payira were also found in many of the scattered domains throughout the region⁶.

Ethnic identities are ascriptive groups based on perceived common origin, skin color, appearance, customs, language or some combination thereof. The Acholi perceive kinship in the same way. There were collective praise names as well as individual ones. The praise names included Wod Obworo, Wod Twon, Wod koc, Wod Lyec etc. The feminine versions were Nya Obworo, Nya Twon etc. "Wod" means "son of" and "Nya" is "daughter of". When two men meet and one says "Wod Twon", if the other bellows the same, they are brothers even if they were meeting for the first time. The "Centre" of the Acholi was the combination of the praise names, Luo Language, The Abila shrines, territory, customs etc.

One of the most astounding characteristics of the evolution of the Acholi as an ethnic group was the development of Luo as a unifying Lingua - Franca. The Luo language was by mid nineteenth century spoken by all the people who became Acholi irrespective of their origins. It became a symbol of common heritage and a distinguishing feature from those who were non Acholi. Acholi-land is situated at a meeting point of the three language families usually known as Nilotic, Sudanic and Nilo-hamitic. Luo was the Nilotic language with which the Acholi were identified and differentiated from other Nilotics as well as the central Sudanic and Nilo-hamitic peoples. The emergence of this language was indicative of the general rise of new socio-political order in the region. Therefore, the Acholi developed specific and peculiar characteristics of ethnic identity by the beginning of the eighteenth century. If a group decided not to join this system, ultimately it had to leave this area. Such a group was considered an outsider⁷. This is in line with the theory of primordialism where:

Ethnicity is partly expressed as being bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood. The human body itself is viewed as an expression of ethnicity...it is crucial that we recognize ethnicity as a tangible living reality that makes every human a link in an eternal bond from generation to generation- from past ancestors to these in the future. Ethnicity is experienced, a guarantor of eternity⁸.

This takes us to another feature of the evolving Acholi ethnicity - territory. Viewed through the prisms of primordialism, territory occupies a central aspect of the factors leading to the rise of an independent ethnic group. The degree of coherence among the Acholi became greater because of, among others, living in proximity to each other. Put differently, the fact that they occupied the same territory and lived under the same socio-political, economic and geographical conditions made the people develop similar emotional sentiments leading to the evolution a strong sense of ethnicity. This territory is Acholi-land as is known today comprising the seven districts already mentioned.

Albeit without boundary demarcations akin to the modern borders, the Acholi knew what their territory was as much as

they understood the territories of other groups in the vicinity such as the Banyoro and Alur. The reference of “our land” with regards to the specific territory of the Acholi and “their land” to mean the territory of other communities in the neighborhood denotes the prevalence of separate ethnic identities. These separate territories were respected even though the different groups that occupied them were not necessarily hostile to each other. This was the situation on the eve of the European invasion and occupation of Uganda in general and Acholi-land in particular.

During the pre-colonial epoch, in case of an attack by hostile neighbors, adjacent Acholi chiefdoms formed alliances against the non-Acholi aggressor. The baseline of the military alliances was cultural homogeneity. I should emphasize here that the different Acholi clan groups had a strong sense of cultural affinity. They prided not only in their common ancestry but also about the proximity of their respective settlements. They knew that Acholi-land was different from Madi-land or Lango-land. And this was through the unique traditions of the Lwo settlers. As has been stated, the Acholi, the inhabitants of this territory, are distinguished from surrounding peoples by their customs, and in spite of internal differences, by cultural homogeneity. Military confederations among the different Lwo clans showed that there was a sense of kinship. Many were formed in response to the threats of slave trade.

When it came to matters of joint efforts, the Acholi clans easily allied with each other than with any of the other communities in the neighborhood. Such activities as hunting, farming, grazing and fruit gathering were communally done but exclusive of the non-Acholi groups in the region. This historical reality shows that ethnicity was manifested positively among the Acholi in their closer identification with others who shared the same chiefly sociopolitical order, and negatively in their awareness that they were not Jie, Lango or Alur.

Conclusion

By the time the first European visitors to Acholi-land namely John Hannington Speke and James Grant, arrived in 1862, the Acholi were already on their land worshipping their Jogi (gods), speaking their Luo language, using their praise names and revering their Abila as symbols of collective identity. These are clear primordial indices. There can, therefore, be no better understanding of the evolution and metamorphosis of the Acholi ethnic identity than through the lenses of the theory of primordialism.

In this paper, I have illustrated the evolution of an Acholi ethnicity-an Acholi society- that began to emerge prior to the

beginnings of the colonial rule. This process was not completed before colonialism. But such a process is never complete. The Acholi are today, as they were at the beginning of this century, in their always “unfinished process of coming to be”. The major forces that brought the Acholi under one realm and continue to bring them are common ancestry, common language, common territory, common threats and common customs. All these are facets of primordialism. To borrow a phrase from one of the leading primordialists, “the metaphors of blood, bone and flesh joined by the emotive experience of tears, pain, joy and laughter produce the least transient within the realm of ethnicity”⁹. The evolution of Acholi ethnicity should be seen from this perspective.

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