Generations and Access to Land in Postconflict Northern Uganda: "Youth Have No Voice in Land Matters"

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Abstract: Generational tensions are one of the many forms that land conflicts take in northern Uganda. The convention in Acholiland was that young men gained land-use rights through their fathers and young women gained them through their husbands. This pattern of generational governance has become complicated in the wake of the civil war and decades of internment in IDP camps. Lacking husbands, young women are using land of their patrilateral kin, while young men who grew up with their mothers may use that of their matrilateral relatives. This article, based on fieldwork in the Acholi subregion between 2014 and 2016, explores classic anthropological concerns about gerontocracy and patriliny in a contemporary postconflict situation. It describes the discreet land access strategies of young men and women and the ways in which they seek to complement dependence on relatives by renting or buying land. The image of the "war generation" as morally spoiled is countered by an examination of the consequences of war and internment for young people's claims to use land.

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Résumé: Les tensions générationnelles sont l'une des nombreuses formes que les conflits fonciers prennent dans le nord de l'Ouganda. La convention en Acholiland était que les jeunes hommes acquéraient des droits d'utilisation des terres par l'intermédiaire de leurs pères et les jeunes femmes à travers leurs maris. Ce modèle de gouvernance générationnelle a été compliqué à la suite de la guerre civile et des décennies d'internement dans des camps de personnes déplacées. À défaut de maris, les jeunes femmes utilisent la terre de leurs parents patrilatéraux, tandis que les jeunes hommes qui ont grandi avec leur mère peuvent utiliser celle de leurs parents matrilatéraux. Cet article, basé sur des travaux sur le terrain dans la sous-région d'Acholi entre 2014 et 2016, explore les préoccupations anthropologiques classiques avec la gérontocratie et la patrilinité dans une situation après ces conflits contemporains. Il décrit les stratégies d'accès à la terre des jeunes hommes et des femmes et les moyens par lesquels ils cherchent à compléter leur dépendance à l'égard des parents en louant ou en achetant des terres. L'image de la "génération de guerre" tel que gâtée moralement est contrariée par un examen des conséquences de la guerre et de l'internement sur les prétentions des jeunes à l'utilisation des terres.

Keywords: Land access; youth; generations; marriage; bridewealth; Acholiland; postwar land conflicts

Youth in Africa have been the subject of intense study in recent years. Constituting a large and growing proportion of the population, they are targets of concern and intervention by policymakers. Whether seen as victims of war and structural violence or as agents of change, they are also subjects of increasing scholarly interest. Yet surprisingly little attention has been given to the positions of youth in relation to land and land access. The focus has been on urban youth, militarized youth, unemployed youth, sexually active youth, and culturally creative youth (see, e.g., Christensen et al. 2006; Honwana 2013; Honwana & De Boek 2005; Mojola 2014; Parikh 2015; Vigh 2006). With a few exceptions (e.g., Sommers 2012), less attention has been given to rural youth needing a place to live and land to cultivate. Perhaps this is because such issues cannot be dealt with exclusively as problems of youth, but must be seen instead as aspects of generational relations.

In this article we present findings about rural land access and generational issues in the Acholi subregion of northern Uganda. We examine generation in its historical and genealogical senses; that is, we look at the interactions between familial relations and the historical locations of older and younger people (Durham & Cole 2006; Whyte et al. 2008). We assume that generation and gender must be considered together. Intergenerational tensions over land are widespread in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa. Our aim is to explore the specific consequences that the recent history of the Acholi subregion has had for these intergenerational relations. With its legacy of war and internment, its renascent patrilineal ideology, and its current flood of land anxieties and conflicts, Acholiland is a particularly

important setting for addressing intergenerational tensions over land, one that may shed light on other postconflict situations.

Our material was assembled over nine months between 2014 and 2016 in Nwoya District. In-depth interviews were conducted with forty-six individuals, mostly in their homes. In order to gain fuller insight into their situations, four were visited three to five times, and relatives were interviewed in some cases. The majority of these interlocutors are considered "youth," although many were married with children and they ranged in age from seventeen to thirty-three years. Included in the forty-six were older people as well: clan leaders, local government officials, village chiefs (*rwodi kweri*), and grandparents. In addition, three group discussions were held—one with five young men, one with five young women, and one with a mixed group of six young people. The names that appear in this article are all pseudonyms. Although we worked together in Nwoya for part of the time, the second author conducted nearly all of the fieldwork during periods of residence in the area that permitted participant observation. The first author carried out interviews with local council officials dealing with land disputes (also involving youth) and families in Awach subcounty, Gulu District, in 2014.

Land in Acholi

Accounts of Acholi in the late colonial period emphasized the ready availability of land. The major published work of that time even stated that the low population density was responsible for the slow rate of change in Acholiland (see Girling 1960). Vast expanses of land were not under cultivation and were used for hunting and grazing. Acholi people, like their Langi neighbors, were wary of the danger that British and other outsiders might alienate their land (Lagace 2016; Curley 1973). Yet there was enough land for people to offer land on which to settle to friends and in-laws. An ethnographer of the late 1950s wrote that land was plentiful, so its inheritance was no problem: "As land itself is not an economic problem, disputes in this respect are never serious . . ." (Foster n.d.: 243). We are not aware of any published accounts about land or land conflicts in Acholiland during the first two decades after independence in 1962, and all of our older informants asserted that land conflicts were not a problem before the war. Census statistics show that the population density for the Acholi districts (Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, Lamwo, Nwoya, and Pader) continued to be low in relation to other parts of Uganda (UBOS 2016). Acholiland stood in sharp contrast to regions such as Bugisu, where population pressure exacerbated conflicts, particularly intergenerational ones (Heald 1989).

In late colonial and early postcolonial times Acholi people subsisted primarily from farming, an activity that occupied both men and women. Major crops were (and are) finger millet, sorghum, groundnuts, sesame, sweet potatoes, maize, cowpeas, and pigeon peas, together with vegetables. Cotton, introduced to Uganda in the early 1900s, became the primary cash

crop until the collapse of the cotton marketing system under Idi Amin in the 1970s. Today cotton is grown on a smaller scale, while sunflower, sugarcane, rice, and some vegetables are cultivated for the market. Like other Nilotic peoples, Acholi kept cattle and other livestock, though they were not primarily pastoralists. Cattle represented wealth and were a form of economic and symbolic capital. They were the major element in bridewealth (*lim akumu*), and together with smaller animals, they were disposable assets that could be converted to cash if the need arose.

Most land in the Acholi districts was held under "customary tenure" by patrilineal descent units. It was assigned to individuals and households and devolved to sons, but ideally it was not to be sold out of the patrilineal group. Land held in this way was often called "ancestral land" (*ngom kwaro*); people spoke of it as "our land," in contrast to "my land," which was individually owned and could be more freely transacted. In principle, a son had claims to "our land" because of his link to his father and patrilineal ancestors. Land access and patrilineal belonging were closely tied. Senior men of a lineage had general authority over the allocation of land; they were seen as stewards of the land and exercised authority through meetings and mediation. In everyday practice a male household head had considerable control over the land farmed by his wife or wives. A young man's father assigned him the use of some of the gardens his mother had cultivated. When the father died, his eldest son assumed responsibility for the family land.

Virilocality meant that a woman moved to her husband's family and gained use rights to his land, which she would lose upon divorce or separation, and which might be weakened at his death, especially if a widow had no sons and was not inherited by one of her husband's agnates. Women had residual rights to use the land of their fathers and brothers if they left their husbands. Overwhelmingly, then, land was accessed through relations of gender and generation. Acholi were not organized in age sets and did not have rituals of initiation into adulthood. It was the event of marriage and the formation of a new household that made young men and women adults with use rights to specific gardens.

While many of these principles remain, certainly as ideals, gender and generational relationships were disrupted during the years of the Lord's Resistance Army war. Death, displacement, and the inability to marry properly with bridewealth weakened many claims. Acholi families lost all of their livestock to the Karimojong, the LRA, and the national army, making bridewealth payment very difficult (Finnström 2008). Removal of people from their land to the camps, and the way in which return took place when the war ended, caused disquiet and resulted in many and diverse land conflicts. People were told to go back and claim their ancestral land or "to return to where the war found them." It became clear, however, that these two places were not necessarily the same. Women who had found partners and borne children during encampment were expected to go to their husband's home, but if he had died or if the partnership was not recognized, their land access was in doubt (Whyte et al. 2013b). For many young people,

there were profound uncertainties about where they belonged, and where they could stay and cultivate land. Even though many dreamed of a life not tied to the hoe, nearly everyone aspired to establish belonging to family and land, if not in the present, then at least in the future (Baines & Gauvin 2014).

The War Generation

Acholi people have a long history of armed conflict. However, when they speak about "the war" now, they refer to the protracted conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the national army, the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), generally reckoned to have lasted from 1986 until 2006. It was UPDF strategy to intern the civilian population in "protected villages," allegedly to defend them from the depredations of the LRA; at the height of the war practically the entire population of the Acholi subregion was displaced into camps or to Gulu town and places outside of the war zone. The length of displacement varied; some people were away from their homes for up to twenty years. A generation of children came of age in the camps and a generation of parents spent years in those crowded conditions, having lost their livestock, unable to farm, and dependent on food aid (Dolan 2009). In the years after 2008, when people began to return home, land conflicts flared up all over the subregion.

One useful analytical tool for understanding the relations between young people and their seniors is the notion of historical generation, in the sense established by Karl Mannheim (1952). It refers to those who share common historical experiences, especially those who came of age in a particular period and have to reconcile the new times and experiences with the cultural heritage handed down from their forebears. Mannheim was concerned with the consciousness that a generation had "in and for itself." Great historical events such as wars tend to "magnetize" generational consciousness, as Robert Wohl (1979) argued in his study of the generation of 1914. At the same time, historical events can exacerbate generational conflict and sharpen the oppositional consciousness of youth and older people, a point made by several scholars in regard to the long war in northern Uganda.

Julia Vorhölter (2014) builds on these ideas in her analysis of Acholi youth discourses in Gulu town. She calls those who grew up in the mid-'80s and '90s the "war generation" because they shared conditions of displacement, deprivation, danger, and death. In describing generational consciousness, she suggests that these urban young people are seen, and see themselves, as links between the past and future, tradition and modernity, Acholi and Western culture. They are "Youth at the Crossroads," as she titles her book. According to Cecilie Verma (2013), they are not just at the crossroads, but liminal and dangerous in the way "in-between" phenomena can be. She describes how Acholi youth (*bulu*) have become ambiguous in the eyes of their seniors, who refer to them as *lakite*, or "somehow" in Ugandan English,

implying that they are tricky, unreliable, incomprehensible, changeable, uncertain, and possibly dangerous. Lotte Meinert (2015) shows how young men in Gulu themselves assume mistrust and trickiness as a starting point for social interaction.

Ben Jones (2009) reported a similar exacerbation of intergenerational tension in connection with the insurgency in Teso country to the east of Acholi. As in Acholiland, the theft of livestock accompanied the war. Raids took all the cattle, so fathers did not have the means to pay school fees or bridewealth for their sons. During the insurgency, young men became rebels and attacked prominent older men. After the war the elders, in turn, were at pains to put "willful" and "stubborn" young men in their place, although they also feared them.

In our own research, we heard negative views of both female and male members of the war generation, who were characterized as immoral and unwilling to accept the social order. Older people spoke critically of high rates of teenage pregnancy, the failure of young people to formalize partnerships through familial rituals, and the weakness of partnerships that resulted in many young women returning with children to the homes of their fathers and brothers. Concerning girls, one official explained,

> The generations of children born during the war are quite difficult to deal with; they became sexually active at a very tender age; they are undisciplined, and they are generally unmanageable. There are no girls in Acholiland—children do not have the opportunity to grow into girls. Instead they just move from childhood straight into adulthood. When you find a girl of twelve carrying a baby on her back, don't think she is babysitting for her elder sister or her mother. She is actually carrying her own child. (Interview, deputy chief administrative officer, Gulu District)

Young men, by comparison, are seen as having been spoiled by the quasi-urban life of the camps. Eager for money, they work at petty jobs only to get cash for gambling, videos, and alcohol. They are too lazy to pursue agricultural work—to "face the garden"—and they would rather drive a *boda-boda* motorcycle taxi than farm. A recurring stereotype, which we often heard, is that money-hungry young men would sell ancestral land and move to town. Underlying such negative images is an assumption that agricultural work, "digging," has moral value. Since using the land is an important way to make a claim on it, the stereotypes of youth unwilling to farm fit well with their exclusion from land rights.

Confirming this view of the dangerous potential of young men, we heard of several cases of land-related arson in which a son of one of the parties in a land conflict was thought to have committed the crime. It is widely believed that elders manipulate young men and use them as "toughs" in land conflicts (ARLPI 2010:14). Whenever wrangles between families or neighbors erupt into violence, it is assumed that the young men were the ones who took up sticks, spears, and *pangas* (machetes). Maria, a tailor

in Purongo, told how her father's brother's son torched the house and killed two cows of her elder brother. She was convinced that his paternal uncles put him up to it. He was a "returnee" who had fought with the LRA and thus was seen as inclined to violence. Some claimed that young toughs were paid to attack opponents; others thought they were merely encouraged. Several remarked upon the irony that even though young men might fight for land on behalf of their seniors, they did not benefit. Land retained or gained was still held by their elders. As Oryem, age twenty-eight, put it, "Afterwards it becomes family land and the youth are not recognized."

There is yet another way in which the "war generation" is burdened with a negative image in relation to land. A very high proportion of children and young people were abducted by the LRA (Neuner et al. 2012). Some were released or escaped after a short time; others stayed in the bush for years. But while the latter were treated as victims needing support by humanitarian agencies, they were often seen as brutalized and potentially aggressive by their home communities. Ex-combatants are reported to have settled in town in large numbers simply because they had great difficulty in accessing land (McKibben & Bean 2010). Women in particular, who often returned from the bush with "rebel" children, also had difficulty being accepted back as daughters, sisters, nieces, or wives—which also meant not being able to access land.

It was not only older people who expressed negative stereotypes about the "war generation." Taking the moral high ground, many young people condemned their age-mates who did not take agriculture seriously and did not plan for their future. One young Acholi musician, as Meinert and Schneidermann (2014) have discussed, plays on the image of the war generation as lazy by ironically adopting the show name of Lay-C.

However, young people also criticize their elders, sometimes in general but often in regard to a specific grievance against a relative, usually a male relative. They complain about the older generation's secretiveness concerning land matters, their selfishness and corruption, and of sales of land that should have been kept in trust for children and grandchildren. The specific accusations were varied: older men sold land and kept the proceeds for themselves, rather than sharing it with the young men of the lineage; they favored the children of one wife over another; they did not take care of the offspring of dead brothers; they just wanted cash to purchase alcohol or for their own private purposes; they used witchcraft to drive young people away.

Of course, both young people and their seniors realize that there are many kinds of young people, as there are many types of elders; the people we spoke to often acknowledged that the common discourse about the war generation disregards difference and frames age groups in stereotypes. Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate that these generalizations are not only prevalent, but that they also reflect a sense of moral virtue on the part of the speaker. This generational consciousness takes on a particular edge in relation to the principles governing generational access to land.

As families returned to their homes and farms, there was widespread consensus that "traditional" patterns should be continued after the long hiatus of war and displacement. But following these patterns has proved problematic in many instances—and this cannot be attributed simply to the moral shortcomings of the war generation. We suggest that young people's difficulties in accessing land are better understood through a more specific examination of relations between genders and genealogical generations that were affected by the war.

The oppositional consciousness of the war generation and the parental generation is one outcome of the years of conflict and internment—one that is easy to appreciate because it is often articulated. What is less obvious today is the way in which the years of displacement, in affecting the life conditions of parents of the so-called war generation, also influenced the relations between generations. Gerontocratic authority based on control of land, livestock, and resources was weakened during the camp years. As Dolan (2009) says, there was a vast gap between men's expectations of masculinity and their lived reality under internment. Adult men were respected for marrying, providing for a family, and protecting their family—that is, for having proper relations to women and youth. This relational expectation was very difficult to realize for twenty years. Fathers could not protect their families from the LRA or the UPDF, and they could not help their children with school fees and the formalization of marriage. When encampment ended, they regained authority over land, but still lacked the means to facilitate the social growth of their children. The concept of historical generations does not only refer, therefore, to generational consciousness; it also draws our attention to the effects of historical experience. Those effects were felt by the war generation and also by their parents—with consequences for intergenerational relations.

Customary Tenure: Gerontocracy and Patriliny

Gerontocracy—government by elders—is an inherent aspect of customary tenure in Uganda. One senior man in Nwoya put it succinctly: "Customary tenure means that the elders are in control." In such a form of governance, the tension between seniors and juniors is unavoidable. In a 2014 study of customary tenure reform in Mbarara, southwestern Uganda, Mathijs Van Leeuwen found that generational disputes about control over land were very common. "Fathers were afraid to hand over land to their children while still alive, fearing they might sell it. Youngsters interpreted this reluctance of their fathers as reducing their possibilities to make an independent living, or as imposing their authority" (2014:297).

In patrilineal societies in which elders control land and livestock—the primary means of production and reproduction—the generational opposition has typically involved disputes between junior and senior men. Fathers and their brothers in such a social arrangement are obligated to provide cattle for their sons' bridewealth, just as they receive bridewealth when

their daughters marry. (Although the rule of elder men may have been somewhat weakened in the colonial period when labor migration and cotton production opened possibilities for young men to earn their own money, the changes in livelihood were not as far-reaching in Acholiland as in many parts of East Africa [Girling 1960]). The operation of patriliny also involves potential tensions between a woman and her husband and his family or with her brothers if she remains single or leaves her partner (Burgess & Burton 2010). Today, therefore, gerontocracy and patriliny determine the possibilities of young men and young women differently, but they imply one another.

The 1995 constitutional recognition of customary tenure and the 1998 Land Act, which devolved authority over land matters to local statutory bodies, in fact reinforced the power of older men, who were the local council members as well as family and clan leaders (van Leeuwen 2014). In Mbarara, as in Acholiland, local government authorities currently rely on the testimony of local elders in resolving land cases, a practice that mutes the voices of young people and women.

One justification for the deference to older people is their knowledge of the past. In a system of customary tenure, where there are no documents or boundary marking stones to give evidence of land claims, the knowledge held by seniors is crucial. Their testimony often concerns the history of the use of the land: who was given the land, which former gardens can still be traced, who lived on a plot where the ruins of a house foundation can be seen, who planted which trees in the current landscape, who was buried where and when. Material traces of former land use can be used as evidence in settling land disputes, but witnesses have to interpret these marks—they do not speak for themselves. In court cases, knowledgeable older men and women are called as witnesses. The secretary of the subcounty court committee in Awach explained that the best witnesses are those over sixty-five: "Those under thirty years will not be able to give the background of a case. . . . A person of twenty-five years who says he attended a funeral may be doubted."

It was often asserted that much of this knowledge had been lost because so many older people had died during the long years of encampment. But young people also cast the knowledge as a treasure jealously guarded by seniors who intentionally kept important knowledge from them. A young man and woman working in the office of a water project in Purongo claimed that elders refuse to share relevant information: "The elders know where the land ends but they do not tell the truth to the young"; "Older people in the community don't tell the truth, they are not transparent"; "We young ones don't know what happened. The elders don't tell exactly what happened." Indeed, some evidence existed to support such an assumption. Caramella, a widow living in Awach subcounty, confided that she had not revealed details about land to her own sons, who were in conflict with her and with one another. Gerontocracy involves control over knowledge, as well as material resources like land and livestock.

There is thus a certain amount of muted resentment against the rule of elders. Yet in the Acholi subregion, there is still general support for it in principle. The ideology concerning ancestral land is in many ways similar to that described by Shipton (2007, 2009) for the Luo people of western Kenya, who are also Nilotic-speakers. Luo principles of attachment, entrustment, and obligation are highly relevant to understanding generational relations in Acholiland, not least the moral value of keeping land within a unit of ownership for the benefit of coming generations. "It is customary land and no one has the right to sell it because this land was there before they were even born and they will leave it here," said a forty-two-year-old village chairman. Or as Ambrose, a young man of thirty, explained: "Our father's father got this land. It has been used by our father and his brothers and sisters and us, their children. We will use it and leave it here to be used by other great grandchildren."

Respectfully Waiting For Land

The rules of gerontocracy, therefore, mean that access to land, authority over its utilization, and the enjoyment of its products are, by and large, dependent on the good will of the elders. "Youth have no voice in land matters," said Daniel, the youth representative on the LC II (the elected council at parish level), who was himself alienated from his father and disinclined to claim his patrilineal land rights. "We talk on land issues, but it's not easy to take those issues to the elders. . . . All responsibility of land is on the elders. When you bring these issues they say you are big-headed (*wii dit*)."

Our other respondents agreed. As one young man explained, "the elders are the ones who are involved in giving or allocating land to us young people, which means that as you grow up, you have to wait until the elders give you land because they are the ones who know which land to give you." Those youth who express impatience or take the initiative to ask for land before their elders deem it necessary to allocate it are seen as disrespectful, undisciplined, or "big-headed."

Warnings against big-headedness were admonitions to respect those with authority over land. Other sources confirm that young people do not readily challenge their elders on land issues. The Norwegian Refugee Council, which offered assistance in dealing with land wrangles, received 321 cases from November 2008 to October 2009. A report points out that only 13 percent of those cases were brought by young people between the ages of eighteen and thirty. "This is not because young people do not have as many land access problems as people in older age brackets; it is because they are intimidated out of challenging senior members of their communities on land matters" (McKibben & Bean 2010:7).

Customary tenure involves belonging as a son or more precariously as a nephew, or as a wife, sister, or daughter. It can involve showing humility and respect and being silent, even when you feel that you are being treated unjustly. It requires waiting for recognition as a relative; such waiting is

infused with trust that senior family members will in fact help you, but trust and hope are tempered by reservations, given the conflicts and anxieties surrounding land access in Acholiland today. There are families embroiled in land conflicts so grave that they are not able to allocate land to their sons. There are very large families with shortages of land, such that they cannot provide sufficient land for all of their sons to cultivate. Yet most young people do access some land through their consanguineal or affinal families in time.

In the ideal and normal course of affairs, children and unmarried youth cultivate gardens with their parents. When a young man marries, his father, father's older brother, or paternal grandfather—the one who "cares for the land"—shows him the portion where he and his wife can make their own gardens. But sometimes even married sons and their wives continue to share land, labor, and harvest with the head of the household. As Daniel explained, "As long as the head of the household lives, we [show] that respect." Showing respect (*woro*)—the opposite of big-headedness—is not just passive acceptance of authority, but a positive practice that can ensure access to land in time. If rights to land are confirmed through social relationships, then it is necessary to cultivate those relationships. According to Herbert, the father of a seventeen-year-old son and six other children, "Youth can be given land where to dig if they behave well before their elders. Otherwise, some of the youth . . . have been denied land by their relatives . . . because they disrespect them and do not behave in a humble manner as they should."

Many of the younger people with whom we spoke emphasized that they kept quiet and accepted the dispositions of their elders even when they thought they were being treated unfairly. Ambrose, age twenty-three, said "Young people should be sensitized about the dangers of land disputes because the relatives they disobey and oppose in land conflicts might be the ones to help them in future." Another young man told of how his deceased father's brother had sold land that had been jointly owned with his father. "I decided not to ask about the money," he said with resignation. By acquiescing to the authority of their seniors, the young hope to get their share some day.

If humility and respect require waiting upon the decisions of senior men, are Acholi youth thus caught in a position of "waithood"? The term, originally used by Singerman (2007) to describe the situation of youth waiting for adulthood in the Middle East, has been applied by Honwana (2013) to describe the condition of young Africans across the continent. Like Abdullah (1998), who wrote about "youthmen" in West Africa, and Obi (2006), who used the term "extended youth," Honwana points to the structural conditions of political economy that prevent youth from achieving the livelihood, residential autonomy, and marriage that traditionally are criteria for adulthood. "They see no prospects for steady employment and cannot be sure that their efforts to get an education will be rewarded," she says (2013:19–20).

Most of Honwana's evidence, however, is derived from urban settings, and most of her informants are young people who migrated to towns in search of jobs. The kind of waiting that we are describing is different. While the lack of employment opportunities is a problem in Acholiland, as it is throughout Africa, and while many young people are attracted to life in town, most Acholi youth have remained in rural areas, "in the village" as Ugandan English has it. They are not "stuck" in the same way that Sommers (2012) characterizes rural Rwandan youth. He describes the land access of Rwanda's youth as controlled more by government policy than by gerontocracy, and he does not write about the devolution of land rights from fathers to sons. In his view, Rwandan youth are resigned to government authority. What characterizes Acholi youth is patient expectation (or at least the ideal of patient expectation)—of being acknowledged as someone who has a claim to use, but not to sell, a portion of land. Nor are young Acholi unable to form partnerships and start families, as were the Rwandan youth described by Sommers. Marriage is problematic in the Acholi subregion, but in different ways.

Marriage and Genealogical Generations

Marriage, or at least cohabitation, is important for the land access of both genders. When a young man marries or sets up housekeeping with a woman, his seniors must allocate land for their new household, and when a woman goes to live with a man, she gains access to land that will be passed on to her sons in time (on these arrangements among the related Luo, see Shipton 2009). That said, the prevalence of marital instability in Acholiland affects land access for young people today. Despite the norms of patriliny and virilocality, there is general consensus that a woman whose marriage fails can always go home to her father and brothers. But this often gives rise to what people call "the nephew problem": the challenges faced by sons of women who left their husbands and returned to their original home with their children.

These children, who grew up at the homes of their maternal uncles, raised by a mother who is bitter toward their father and separated from a father who typically has other wives and children, often feel unwelcome in their paternal home and therefore disinclined to claim land. This feeling is even stronger if their biological father has died. Even if their father paid bridewealth, thus affirming that the children belong to his lineage and have rights to land, realities on the ground depend on the quality of the relationships. The problems are greater for the sons of fathers who did not pay bridewealth and were therefore not formally married to the mother. A man who does not pay bridewealth may still claim his biological children by making what is called a *luk* payment (regularizing his sexual and genitor relations) to their mother's family. This establishes their belonging to his clan and the right of a son to gain access to his land (see Porter 2017). According to the Acholi cultural organization Ker Kwaro Acholi (2008),

children for whom no *luk* is paid belong to their mother's lineage and have rights to land there. But they too may come to be seen as "nephew problems" and may be pressured to leave in the name of patriliny if there is shortage of land, if their mother's people are ungenerous, or even if they are thought to be a threat because they seem very ambitious and therefore likely to want more land.

Such problems were exacerbated by the marital instability that was often the outcome of war and displacement. Members of the war generation and the parental generation fled to towns, moved between camps, and spent years away from the land where they might have claims. The confirmation of marriage through transfer of bridewealth declined steeply during the war and encampment, when livestock and cash were lacking. The failure to pay marriage dues, together with the dispersion of families, hastened the decline of formal unions. It is not that marriage was always stable among the Acholi. Girling (1960) noted that Europeans reported in the nineteenth century that divorce and adultery were common, and he asserted that they were on the increase when he carried out fieldwork in 1949–50. Still, everyone married at least once; Paula Hirsch Foster (n.d.), who did fieldwork in the 1950s, reported that there were practically no women for whom bridewealth had not been paid. The payment of bridewealth continued up until the LRA war began; older people, who formed partnerships before the mid-1980s, report that they were formally married. As Julian Hopwood writes, the relatively abrupt decrease of bridewealth means that many young and middle-aged couples are now in a state of "marital limbo."

> These and other factors have resulted in massive levels of marital instability, leading to very many young women caring for children alone, or living with men who are not the fathers of their children. In the context of customary land claims, this has created much confusion. (2015:402)

It is here that the common experience of historical generations intersects with problems of genealogical generation and gender relations.

A "nephew" situation that we have followed closely is that of Daniel, whom we introduced above. He and his brothers stayed with their mother at the home of her brother, who himself had married with the bridewealth received for her when she married Daniel's father. Thus this uncle had a special obligation toward his sister, Daniel's mother. She had left her husband because of his relations with many other women, and she spent the last of the war years in another camp near her own family home. The affiliation of Daniel and his four brothers to their father's family was not in doubt, since their mother had been properly married before the war and her bridewealth was never returned. There also was available land at their father's home that the boys should have been able to use. But their mother did not want her sons to go there because she thought her former husband's family had used witchcraft against her and would likely do the same to her children.

So Daniel and his brothers remained with their maternal uncle and treated him with the greatest respect. All five boys, including those who were married, built houses on his land. The uncle had even announced officially at a meeting of his clan that he had given Daniel the authority to manage a portion of his swampland. Still, Daniel and his brothers worried about their future land access: what would happen when their mother died? Their uncle drank heavily, and they knew he was selling and renting land without discussing the matter with them. One brother summed it up: "We stay here like visitors who know that one day we will go back or leave this place." He was determined that they all should try to buy their own land rather than depend on their uncle.

Although Daniel and his brothers were apparently not seen as "problem nephews," they still were alarmed by the story of two nephews in the neighboring parish who were burned to death in their hut when they failed to leave after their mother's brother ordered them off his land. Other nephew cases are less dramatic, but still distressing. Stephen, twenty-three years old, told how his mother had separated from his father and taken him, along with his four siblings, to her father's land after the war. Now her father had died and her half-brothers—sons by her father's other wives—were trying to force Stephen's mother and her sons off the land.

The young women with whom we spoke had different problems of land access. Juliet (age 24) is an educated unmarried woman staying with her young child in the home of her elder brother. Juliet had previously gone to live with a man in Kitgum who agreed to marry her; his family even visited hers and received the "assessment list" specifying the bridewealth he was to pay. But then he disappeared, switched off his phone, and failed to bring the bridewealth payment at the agreed-upon time. So she left his home and went back to her brothers, where she was made to understand that daughters and sisters have no clear right to land. Although she was very bitter toward her child's father, she was somewhat more resigned about her landlessness. She pointed out that even though national law asserts the rights of daughters to their father's land, men are often loathe to give shares to sisters and daughters. She did not seem hopeful that this situation would change. "I am young," she said.

> I can't come with my ideas. I tried and failed. When there was a land conflict in the clan, I talked to my elder brother and asked why they don't give land to ladies. He said: "You are a lady and will marry and your big-headed husband will come and take the land. For you, you can only use land." Acholi are tricky. They are very strict on their land.

Juliet's brother was expressing a concern that we also heard from other men: if daughters were allocated shares of clan land, it would end up in the possession of their husbands from other clans.

Although she has completed her A Levels, Juliet has no source of income except farming, and over the two years we followed her she—along with two

older sisters who had also left their husbands—was using land from different sources. First Juliet and her sisters farmed on the land of their brothers. They borrowed from a different brother every season, grew food for their own consumption, and sold some for cash. But she told us in our discussions that she felt uncertain about the future of this arrangement. And indeed, in the course of our acquaintance she altered her arrangements several times, at one point moving to the home of an ailing sister, where she was allowed to grow sunflowers for cash on the brother-in-law's land, and then moving back to her brothers' land. At a family meeting her brothers had complained that the land was for them and their wives and children, not for their sisters who should be using husbands' land. Their father defended Juliet and her sisters: "All of you are my children and this land is not mine, I also inherited it from my grandparents. You are not supposed to stop the girls from using it unless I am the one who stops them." Since then, the brothers had said nothing, but one of them required Juliet to pay rent for the acreage that he otherwise could have rented out for income. He also harvested and kept the peas she had planted before leaving for Kitgum: "He said that I had gone away for marriage and they were the ones weeding and taking care of the garden. Besides it is his land and he wanted to use it. He was very harsh on me, so I just kept quiet and left him to do what he wanted."

All of these stories suggest, as Hopwood (2015) argues, that the land claims of Acholi women as daughters, sisters, and widows are often not respected by family and clan elders. Juliet's father supported her and her sisters. Still, we found that young women feel less secure in their land access than their brothers do, and that their claims as wives are only as strong as their partnerships.

Diversified Possibilities

The young people with whom we spoke were thus very articulate about the problems they face and their dependence on husbands and senior kinsmen for access to ancestral land. They rarely questioned gerontocracy and patriliny per se. To the extent they did so at all, their challenges might have been a consequence of the war, perhaps encouraged by humanitarian, civil society, and human rights organizations. But they did not seem to overtly challenge the authority of older people over family land. Instead they looked for other ways to exert initiative and take responsibility.

Indeed, as members of the senior generations claimed, many youth did not desire a life wholly devoted to farming. As Juliet said, "Digging makes you tired and old. I want to do business in Gulu." They did not imagine cutting their links to land entirely, but they wanted to combine farming and some other source of income. For most young people, agriculture and other sources of income were complementary, and they pursued other ways of earning cash. There were a few salaried jobs in the rural area, and those with secondary education, for example, might be fortunate enough to gain

employment with development organizations based in the subcounties. A number of these offered vocational training, and some of their "graduates" found work as hairdressers, builders, carpenters, and mechanics working in the small trading centers. Many young men worked in brick-making. In Purongo the oil companies provided some employment opportunities. And agriculture itself provided a source of cash as a day laborer on other people's land. Daniel and his brother raised pigs. Small-scale trading in produce or snacks like roasted meat and chapattis occupied youth of both genders.

As Deborah Bryceson (2002) shows, diversification has been an increasingly common strategy (or aspiration) for rural Africans, especially women and youth, since the 1980s. What she calls "the scramble *in* Africa" involves struggles to find alternative sources of income as the old cash crops decline. She suggests that as women and youth manage to find nonagrarian supplements to farming, they become less dependent on male heads of household and traditional authority over land access, and this tendency is evident in Acholiland. Like other young people in East Africa and beyond, Acholi youth are attuned to the "opportunity space" (Sumberg et al. 2012) in which they have to manage. While the few with full-time salaried jobs engage in what their Kenyan counterparts call "side-hustles" (Mwaura 2017), most rural Acholi youth do not have primary employment with activities on the side. They simply take advantage of whatever opportunities arise. While a few earn money in morally disapproved ways (Namuggala 2017), most try to support themselves and their families through some combination of farming and respectable enterprise.

Membership in groups is valued. Like agriculture, joining a group is itself thought to show good character and is encouraged by elders. "Youth groups" often include married people in their thirties who join forces in agricultural projects, using the land of one member or renting land, as well as pursuing activities such as music, dance, and drama. Other groups called "boli cup" are primarily savings and loans associations; these usually include older people as well as youths, with membership depending on the ability to make regular payments into the pool. Cash from these sources helps those without adequate access to family land to either rent or purchase land elsewhere—strategies that are much more common than the dominant rhetoric about ancestral land and customary tenure acknowledges.

The market for agricultural land has been expanding since the time of the camps (Whyte et al. 2013b). In 2014 and 2015, land could be rented at an annual cost of 60–100,000 UGX (U.S.$20–33) per acre.[1] Quite a few of our informants were renting land to grow market crops of rice, sugarcane, and vegetables, as well as the usual subsistence crops (maize, cassava, millet, sorghum, beans, sesame, groundnuts), and paying for the rental from the sale or partial sale of their harvest. Renting land allows flexibility from year to year for both tenant and landlord, without any violation of the principle that land held in customary tenure should not be sold. For young people, such arrangements afford them the independence of a private income,

although several of those we talked to used at least part of this money to help family members, so these were not totally individualistic enterprises.

What was most striking was the widespread hope of buying land one day. Despite pride in the Acholi value of ancestral land and shared customary tenure, and the constant warnings not to sell land, most of the young men we spoke to dreamed of owning individual land. (The young women, by contrast, seemed more concerned that their sons would one day be able to buy their own land.) As Dominic, age twenty-six, said: "I hope that I will be able to buy my own land one day and my children can say, 'this is my father's land.' I would also love to say, 'this is *my* land and not *our* land.'" A few of our young informants had succeeded in purchasing freehold land in their own names. During the resettlement period, government released and distributed land from the game reserves bordering Purongo subcounty. At the age of twenty-four, Christopher was able to get title to fifty acres of such land for the nominal fee of 15,000UGX (U.S.$5). But most young men who managed to acquire their own land had purchased it for the market price. Daniel worked for an oil company from 2009 to 2011, when his contract was terminated without payment of salary for some months. In 2015 he was called to collect his back pay from the company and he immediately invested in land. Older people advise youth who are earning money to do the same. A local council chairman spoke approvingly of young men in his village who had bought land; he knew who they were because he had been called to witness the purchase.

Conclusion

The LRA war and the long internment of civilians in camps contributed to great anxiety about land among Acholi people. Displaced from their farms, many feared that their land might be alienated. The principles of customary tenure and keeping land in trust for coming generations may have contributed to this anxiety. But the salient discourse about ancestral land and the emphasis on not selling it were also a response to the generalized anxiety about losing land. Customary tenure supports the rule of elders and the necessity of social belonging. At the same time, access to land through social relations became problematic because of the war. There were missing links because people had died, or because marital relations had not been formalized or had broken down. Land wrangles were widespread as people scrambled to resettle on ancestral land after the camps closed.

All of these factors have complicated land access for young people. For many, the strategy has been to show respect and humility while waiting for elders to allocate ancestral land for their use. We did not encounter any youth who spoke openly against the principle of customary tenure—an assertion that would be tantamount to speaking against Acholi culture. In the meantime, both those who are waiting and those who have little hope of accessing ancestral land have adopted diverse livelihood strategies. For men, renting land and buying freehold land are modes of working around

the authority of their elders and dealing with the predicaments they experience because of the loss of their parents or past disagreements between their mothers and fathers. And as we have seen, young women who are not dependent on a husband work out other land strategies.

It must be emphasized, however, that despite the challenges—and in contrast to the preoccupation of scholars with youth in cities—the commitment of these young people to the land remains steadfast. Even though they may long for jobs and find city life attractive, the young people in our study still value land—as a marker of belonging, of adulthood, and of security for the present and the next generation. When Daniel said that "youth have no voice in land matters," he did so wistfully. We suspect that many rural youth in other parts of Africa, especially those areas affected by conflict, are similarly concerned about access to land.

Acknowledgments

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Note

1. The value of produce depends on the soil, the type of crop, and when it is sold. An acre of rice can bring 490,000–840,000 UGX (U.S.\$163–280 in 2015). An acre of groundnuts may yield 560,000–700,000 UGX (U.S.\$187–233 in 2015).