

The Beauty of Acholiland Before the Conflict

By Charles Onencan

To understand what is happening in Northern Uganda, one has first to digest the period before the conflict.

Most people in Northern Uganda agree that for the past two decades, the humanitarian situation in the sub-region is one of the worst worldwide, and the most forgotten. Situated only 332 km north of Kampala, Uganda's capital city, Acholiland is endowed by beautiful scenery, lush vegetation, rivers, game animals, birds and above all, abundant fertile land which has been communally owned, cultivated and handed down by Acholi families to their descendants from generation to generation.

The Acholi people who were prosperous two decades ago were predominantly agriculturalists practicing subsistence farming alongside animal husbandry as a major source of livelihood. Cotton, tobacco, coffee and maize were among the major cash crops grown by the people. Successful agricultural production was made possible because the sub-region had a well linked network of roads and rails that enabled transporting agricultural products to meet the market demand. In addition to marketing infrastructure, processing and storage facilities were also at their disposal.

Complimenting agricultural production in Acholiland was the wide-scale ownership of short-horned cattle used for ploughing and serving as a source of wealth. Cattle were abundantly owned and would be sold as needed to support family activities.

Poverty, famine and drought were unheard of in Acholiland because of the conducive environment for agricultural production, a tradition of cattle and livestock ownership and being a hard working community. In short, the Acholi community was prosperous and self-sufficient.

Aware of the dynamic of a changing world, the Acholi community long realized that economic independence without having an educated community would not sustain development. The Acholi community embraced education with utmost dedication and encouraged their children to enter many professions and those which were supported by their economy. Acholi students in primary, secondary, and vocational schools and institutions of higher learning excelled as education was seen as important to development of the community. Education is so important in Acholi society that its importance was incorporated in the Acholi anthem known as "Lubaro pa Acholi."

Education among the Acholi community was not seen in terms of formal education only. Informal education that consists of cultural values was passed from generation to generation through oral tradition that encompassed the entire social setting.

Cultural values included respect for humanity, charity, dances, courtship, marriage, hard work, morals, and love for community. The Acholi community was always regarded highly for the way it organized its social setting to embrace justice and peace and where reconciliation could be administered by the community.

Health was always looked at as a priority and before the conflict, there were nearby dispensaries to treat ailments. Major illnesses were treated at main hospitals in towns. Malnutrition and killer diseases rampant today in the Acholi community were not a threat before the conflict because medical services were easily accessed.

Many Acholis believed in the metaphysics of God and praised Him for his wonderful creation. In a nutshell, before the conflict, the Acholi people lived in highly organized communities with absolute liberty and equality within an African setting.

Much has changed. An eighteen year war that refuses to go away has resulted in the deterioration of Acholiland and Acholi society. At present, there are more than one-million-five-hundred thousand displaced persons in Northern Uganda living in Internally Displaced Persons camps with inadequate food, water, and medical services living in highly overcrowded settings. Those who are desperate and starving and venture back into their villages often meet the rebels who kill them.

The Acholi community can no longer access their lands and this has been so for much of the population for over 18 years. The Acholi population has become conditioned to relying on handouts in IDP camps. Violence of the insurgency drove people into the camps, but now the worst form of violence is poverty. Hand-cuffed by being unable to be productive, parents and elders can no longer feed their families. Once self reliant, Acholi society has become dependent.

A shocking glimpse behind the scenes is the alarming rate of HIV/AIDS. Gulu District has the highest rate of infection in the North standing at over 20% against a national rate of 6%. Young people from age 12-30 are being swept away by HIV/AIDS due to an earlier engagement in unprotected sex. Why is this happening? The strict moral observations that were enforced by the Acholi community before the conflict cannot be implemented now due to the structure of life in IDP camps. Many children have been orphaned by the conflict. Many parents and elders are no longer around and those who are no longer have respect of the children or the ability to influence their values and lifestyles.

Trapped in poverty, young girls are vulnerable to men who use money as bait. Then there is the situation of the children who are commuters where unsupervised nights dictate the trend of events. The deterioration of society means that youth now practice what they watch on videos, listen from the radio and from peer pressure. Excessive drinking, an increasing drug abuse rate, lack of supervision and inadequate sensitization about the dangers of HIV/AIDS is contributing to the destruction of a community that one day may be no more.

Another sad reality of the northern insurgency is that Acholi children are no longer being educated properly. The village schools that were once so many and well known for offering quality education are destroyed or vandalized and evacuated. What is left are the fewer schools near the IDP camps and amalgamated schools in towns. There are great disadvantages to these schools. There is inadequate classroom space, lack of scholastic materials, understaffing. Without the income and wealth Acholi people once had, they are no longer able to provide school fees for secondary and vocational schools and higher education. The informal education which passed along Acholi values is much less now due to the changed lifestyles in the IDP camps. How is the next generation being prepared in the camps? Will they make good citizens?

The work of groups committed to social action is bearing fruits and giving hope to the displaced in the sub-region. An example of such groups is Caritas, a Christian founded organization that is helping the people in IDP camp in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader led by program coordinators like Fr. Felix Opiyo. Caritas programs provide psychosocial services, clean water and sanitation, agricultural projects and care to people living with AIDS. Caritas AIDS services include counseling, training on positive living, nutritional assistance and scholastic materials for children affected by HIV/AIDS.

Not only Caritas but many international and local organizations are committed to the betterment of people in the IDP camps and improving the overall situation, groups such as Concerned Parents Association that advocates for the return of abducted children and serves children and parents, and GUSCO that provides rehabilitation to formerly abducted children. Save the Children and World Vision are among many others that try to improve the condition of people in the north.

Apart from the services and hope that humanitarian organizations bring to the Acholi community displaced by the conflict, for how long shall the agony, torture, trauma, poverty, killing, maiming, rape, abductions, and marginalization continue? The war in Northern Uganda is the cause of the plight of the Acholi community but this war has never attracted much international attention until recently. Events in neighboring nations Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Darfur in Sudan have always overshadowed the situation of the Acholi community in Northern Uganda.

Most people in Acholiland, particularly the leaders of civil society who have been involved in peace building initiatives are absolutely convinced that the war will not end without a serious involvement of the international community. People of Northern Uganda are tired of fighting and favour a peaceful negotiation to end the hostilities. There is skepticism about a military solution and the Acholi traditional culture favors reconciliation (mato-oput).

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