

“Rule by Fear”: British Colonial Reconstruction of Political Authority in Acholiland, 1889-1962

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ABSTRACT

The paper revisits how the British colonial state reconfigured the existing structure and institutions of political power and authority in Acholiland to organize and govern society as a way to entrench its extractive logic. This occurred in three major phases. First, by deploying missionaries, church education institutions (schools, catechism), and interpreters, the British attempted to transform the intellectual consciousness of Acholi society to construct an “educated” governable modernized native subject, constructed in the image of British logic of rule. Second, British rule introduced the institution of native law and custom into Acholi to ground indirect rule whereby colonial chiefs mediated state’s access to society. By fragmenting the institutions and offices of traditional Acholi power, represented by *Rwodi kalam* (educated chiefs) vis-à-vis *Rwodi moo* (anointed chiefs), British governance excised political authority of its chosen *Rwodi kalam* from the cultural component relegated to *Rwodi moo* and thereby vulgarized chiefly authority. Consequently, political chiefs were cut off from their social base and this made Native chiefs lose legitimacy, leading to the outbreak of social discontent and conflict. This was also manifested in the naming format whereby Acholi offices were renamed Ganda terms such as *Mukungu*, *Muluka* (parish chief), village chief, etcetera, which further fragmented society due to confusion of political and cultural roles. By creating new territorial offices where they did not exist before, the British reconfigured the spatial reach of Acholi hereditary institutions leading to a clash of roles, duties and responsibilities in restricted “homelands”.

Keywords: Colonial Governance, Missionary Education, Chiefly authority, Acholiland. * PhD Candidate, MISR, Makerere University, Kampala.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the construction of Acholi customary authority by the British colonial governance between 1889 to 1962. It argues that the British colonial state reconfigured the existing structure and institutions of power in Acholiland to organise and govern society so as to entrench its extractive logic. This occurred in three major phases. First, by deploying missionaries, church education institutions (schools, catechism), and interpreters, the British attempted to transform the intellectual consciousness of Acholi society to construct an “educated” governable modernized native subject, constructed in the image of British logic of rule. Second, British rule introduced the institution of native law and custom into Acholi to ground indirect rule whereby colonial chiefs mediated state’s access to society. By fragmenting the institutions and offices of traditional Acholi power, represented by *Rwodi kalam* (educated chiefs) vis-à-vis *Rwodi moo* (anointed chiefs), British governance excised political authority of its chosen *Rwodi kalam* from the cultural component relegated to *Rwodi moo* and thereby vulgarized chiefly authority. Consequently, political chiefs were cut off from their social base and this made Native chiefs lose legitimacy, leading to the outbreak of social discontent and conflict. This was also manifested in the naming format whereby Acholi offices were renamed Ganda terms such as *Mukungu*, *Muluka* (parish chief), village chief, etcetera, which further fragmented society due to confusion of political and cultural roles. By creating new territorial offices where they did not exist before, the British destabilized the spatial reach of Acholi hereditary institutions leading to a clash of roles, duties and responsibilities, in restricted “homelands”.

Third, confusion of political and cultural roles in various offices led to the outbreak of social discontent leading to resistance most symbolized by the Lamogi rebellion of 1911-12. Social discontent also revealed the deepening social divisions between an increasingly educated commoner stratum, anglicized educated elites, and an emerging petty bourgeoisie, all of whom struggled to and jostled for positions of influence to appear useful to the new British authorities.

This paper also shows that whereas aspects of the micro sphere such as cultural rituals showed a disinterested colonial state, the purpose of the civilizing mission, however reveals that the macro sphere governed and influenced many practices of society including those that attempted to evade it. Episodes of resistance against British rule were not unique to Acholi but can be understood in the tension between the modernizing claims of the British colonial logic and its actual practice, which left unfulfilled hopes in many areas under colonial yoke. This paper, however, identifies the specific ways in which colonial contradictions presented themselves in Acholiland and the various efforts of the colonial state, interpreted as “colonial reform” to prevent imperial decline. I will show in this paper that colonial reform as a response to native resistance was only possible because the colonial structure had stabilized. In this consolidative phase, colonial rule relied mainly on disguised consent as opposed to naked violence to achieve its aims and therefore endear its logic to the masses. I hope to show that the earlier attempts to ethicize Acholi into a “tribe” allowed the British to enforce the idea of Acholi as a tribal homeland against the very logic of a diverse Acholi society in the precolonial period.

This paper is organized into two major sections, the first section presents the actual British construction of customary authority anchored in an “ethnic” and “tribalist” image. I show here the transformation of Acholi society was first and foremost intellectual and epistemic because British forerunners such as missionary agents and church schools allowed a new form of modern values and sensibilities to enter Acholi society to inform the native behaviours and practices. Relatedly, the extension of Anglican version of Christianity as the ideology of official statecraft in Acholi allowed an educated Anglicized stratum to be chosen for colonial administration. Also, new offices were created, which affected the territorial organization of counties, which also created political confusion, leading to social strife. The second section discusses the nature of native responses, focusing on the unique issues in Acholi that spurred conflict. I also show here that the nature of native agency as resistance was produced by colonial structure. I highlight the aspects of colonial reform and emphasize that it continued the colonial logic because it merely changed tactics of coercive rule disguised as consent. Furthermore, the fact that Acholi actors joined political parties like DP and UPC merely continued political action as conceived in the image of imperial power in its foresight for the end of colonialism.

I. British construction of Customary Authority in Acholiland

a) The role of Missionary education and Anglicization

It is important to state from the outset that colonial intervention in Acholi like in other parts of Africa was shaped by the ‘civilizing mission’ based on racial stereotypes deployed by the colonizing forces to justify their political and economic objectives in the protectorate. Missionary work and Anglicization played a critical role in introducing new cultural values that would form the basis of new forms of sociality to transform the Acholi colonial subject into a governable community. British administrators depicted the people of Acholi as uncivilized and immoral individuals who frequently went naked, highlighting their perceived lack of civilization¹. Particularly, on the existing political system, they perceived the autonomy of the Acholi and the fragmented control of territories among chiefs who had limited authority over their subjects as inadequate to advance colonial interests in the region compared with that of Buganda kingdom systems². Karuna Mantena has written that the British colonial state utilized its experiences in late colonial India to design a regime of subjectivity that was based on introducing values such as British education and Christianity termed as civilizing mission as an alibi for the colonization process.³

¹ Moorehead, Alan. "The White Nile." (1960), p.68; see also, Laruni, Elizabeth. *From the Village to Entebbe: The Acholi of Northern Uganda and the Politics of Identity, 1950-1985*. University of Exeter (United Kingdom), 2014, p.84. ² Moorehead, Alan. "The White Nile." (1960), p.68. ³ Mantena, Karuna (2010), *Alibis of Empire*.

Once in Uganda, the British colonial state applied a template similar to its colonial experience in India by propping up missionary schools and Anglican values as beacons of its civilizing mission to work as the precursor to the formal colonization of the territory. The responsibility of influencing societal norms and practices fell largely on Anglican and Catholic missionaries who aimed to convert and assimilate the indigenous population. But the missionaries restricted their activities in 'mission villages' within the vicinity of established missionary stations in urban areas². Beyond these villages Acholi continued to worship *Jok* (Supreme being) and performed traditional rituals unrestrained.³

Missionaries such as catechists and lay workers played a forerunner role to the colonial agents and were instrumental in aiding colonial powers in exerting control and influence over local systems of social consciousness and governance. Whereas Chapter two highlighted the fact that Acholi did not have a centralized belief system, but multiple deities, with each chiefdom having its own *Jok* (Supreme being), missionary education came to transform this fact and presented the idea of British cosmological order to displace the Acholi belief model. Christian missionaries introduced a standardized worship for all the Acholi, requiring them to worship only one Supreme being, the Christian God, instead of multiple deities. As discussed in chapter two, in the pre-colonial period every chiefdom in Acholi had a *Jok kaka*, as they are called. The missionaries begun by degrading the Acholi cosmology including portraying the *Jok* as evil beings and labelled the native priests (*Ajwaka*) as witch doctors and sorcerers, aligning them with Satan. This depiction was heavily criticized by Okot P'Bitek as inaccurate and misleading. Conversely, P'Bitek viewed the *Ajwaka* as a multifaceted figure, serving as a psychiatrist, healer, priest and provider of solutions for the Acholi people⁴.

Importantly, in the process of discrediting the *Jok*, the missionaries undermined the chiefdoms and chiefly power, as the Acholi believed that the chiefdoms were sanctioned by the *Jok* and the chiefs were ordained by them, thus drawing spiritual authority from them to maintain social order and seek divine blessings such as health, fertility, and favourable weather, as outlined in Chapter two. This clash of belief systems between traditional Acholi structures and Christian missionaries significantly impacted the religious and socio-political landscape of the Acholi community. The missionaries, particularly the Verona Fathers and the British CMS, played a significant role in shaping Acholi society within the context of colonial indirect rule⁵. Their influence was so profound that they became instrumental in maintaining authority and control on behalf of the colonial administration. While Native Administration served as a prominent channel for colonial power, missionary institutions also exerted considerable influence through their actions mirroring colonial practices, such as tax collection and legal judgments⁶. This alignment with the missionaries led to a transformation in power dynamics within Acholi society, as identification with the missionaries becoming a key aspect of acquiring influence and status. In most cases, being Anglican was the pre-requisite for becoming a chief. For example, in 1913, of the thirty-six Acholi baptized, thirteen were appointed as native chiefs⁹.

Relatedly, the missionaries strategically targeted sons of chiefs, taking them to separate missionary stations in Gulu and Kitgum towns. During the period between 1917 and 1962, various Christian groups such as the Mill Hill Fathers and the Verona Fathers established missionary stations in the Acholi region, attracting readers (*Lokotyeno*) from chiefdoms like Palaro, Paimol, Patongo, Adilang, and Palabek. These readers would undergo a period of three to six months of religious instruction at these stations before being baptized. Those from non-royal backgrounds who received missionary education used this opportunity to rise in Acholi society, becoming prominent figures like appointed chiefs and politicians in the District Council. In *Lokotyeno* schools/stations, Acholi learners were not only instructed in catechism but were also instilled with Western values like obedience and loyalty to authority while discouraging subjects that could build political

² Wild, John Vernon. "Early travelers in Acholi." (*No Title*) (1954), p.58.

³ Solomon Oyat (Resurgence of Acholi Customary Authority), interviewed by Tony Apecu, July 2023, Nwoya District.

⁴ p'Bitek, Okot. *Song of Lawino*. Vol. 2. East African Publishers, 1995.

⁵ Wild, John Vernon. "Early travelers in Acholi." (*No Title*)(1954), p38.

⁶ Laruni, Elizabeth. *From the Village to Entebbe*, p.79. ⁹

Ibid.

consciousness and revolutions⁷. The Christian educational approach aimed to facilitate a mindset change conducive to smooth colonization.

Additionally, Acholi students were taught their own history and culture to foster a sense of unity among the Acholi people. Books like *Lok pa Acholi Macon* (Acholi history) and *The Lwo Language* by Rev. Pellegrini and Rev. Crazzolaro respectively were utilized in teaching Acholi learners, highlighting the role of missionary writings in shaping the educational curriculum and collective identity of the Acholi community. This resonates with the observation by Igham that 'the education was designed to shape the character of the students and change their minds in preparation to colonial modernity'⁸. To Mudoola the "colonial education domesticated its subject, at least in parts...the educated were domesticated to support missionary and later colonialists in their diverse activities"⁹. This shift towards a collective Acholi identity over allegiance to specific chiefdoms reflects a broader goal of shaping character and preparing individuals for colonial modernity¹⁰, aligning with the missionaries' efforts to bring about social and cultural transformation within the Acholi community.

The appointment of chiefs from missionary-educated Acholi elites led to destabilization in customary authority, with conflicts arising between the appointed chiefs (*Rwodi Kalam*) and the hereditary chiefs (*Rwodi Moo*). Girling observed that missionary mobilization activities weakened the traditional authority of chiefs, creating room for colonial authorities to restructure customary power more smoothly and with reduced resistance¹⁴. This shift between traditional leadership structures, missionary influence, and colonial interests within the Acholi community would later implicate the power relations in Acholi¹¹.

Furthermore, missionaries promoted a tribal consciousness in Acholi and neighbouring areas primarily by developing a written vernacular language and producing written accounts of local tribal history and customs. Girling observed that history would be written to fit the "needs of the present social order"¹² which was the creating of Acholi as a distinct tribe which did not exist in pre-colonial period due to multiple presence of different language speaking groups in the now Acholiland. Later missionary-educated elites like Rueben Anywar¹³ and Lacito Okech adopted the writing of Acholi histories and delved into the history of their people, but also facilitated an exchange of knowledge between missionaries, colonizers, and local scholars, shaping the historical narrative of Acholi society. Lacito Okech's contribution to missionary work through his writings even led to his appointment as the chief of Koch chiefdom¹⁴, emphasizing the significant role missionaries played in influencing not just governance but also intellectual and cultural pursuits within the Acholi community.

Nonetheless, the missionary had direct influence and control only over the households (mission villages) living in the immediate vicinity of their churches, who were regarded as 'the people of the mission.' Beyond the mission homes, "non-Anglican" practices such as polygamy and traditional religious beliefs, were prevalent especially in areas where colonial influence had not reached. Moreover, missionary activities faced resistance, with some chiefs refusing to send their children to missionary schools due to the belief that Western education could undermine traditional leadership skills. Instead, they preferred their sons to undergo traditional training, resulting in a disparity in educational attainment between chiefly families and commoners. This resistance was however temporary because with time, many commoner families realized the need to attain western education and took it up with the fact that commoner families, whose children were more likely to attend missionary

⁷ Odongkara Moses (Resurgence of Acholi Customary Authority), interviewed by Tony Apecu, May 2023, Kitgum District.

⁸ Ingham, Kenneth. *The making of modern Uganda*. Routledge, 2023, p.125.

⁹ Mudoola, Dan M. "Religion, ethnicity, and politics in Uganda." (*No Title*) (1996), p.75.

¹⁰ Amone, Charles, "Colonialism and the creation of Acholi ethnic identity in Uganda, 1894 to 1962", p.85. ¹⁴

Girling, Frank. *The Acholi of Uganda*, p.202;

¹¹ Girling, Frank. *The Acholi of Uganda*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Offices (1960), p.202; see Komujuni, Sophie. "To be a chief and to remain a chief: The Production of Customary Authority in Post-Post Conflict Northern Uganda." PhD diss., Ghent University, 2019, p.53-54.

¹² Girling, Frank. *The Acholi of Uganda*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Offices (1960), p.199.

¹³ Anywar, Reuben Stephen. "The life of rwot Iburaim Awich." *Uganda Journal* 12, no. 1 (1948): 72-81.

¹⁴ Otim, Patrick W. "Local Intellectuals: Lacito Okech and the Production of Knowledge in Colonial Acholiland." *History in Africa* 45 (2018): 275-305.

schools, emerged as influential figures in the Acholi community and have played a significant role in shaping affairs in the region, surpassing the chiefly authorities in terms of Western education and influence.

To conclude this section, it is noteworthy that Missionary education played a dual role in serving both colonial interests and local/national interests, as some of the educated intellectuals later became advocates for their community and nation. Initially, the colonial state needed interpreters, who must have either passed through the education system or been Arab interpreters. Acholi interpreters like Okello Mwaka, Obwona Shuli, and Omara Angamu played a crucial role in the British colonial administration by bridging the language barrier and facilitating communication between the colonialists and the Acholi people. Their fluency in both English and Arabic allowed for effective communication and negotiation, ultimately aiding in the extension and entrenchment of British rule in Acholi. This highlights the significance of local interpreters in colonial governance and their role in facilitating interactions between colonial powers and indigenous communities. Some of the interpreters were later integrated into the colonial administration. For example, Okello Mwaka was appointed as the chief of Puranga but was rejected and later killed for championing colonial policies against the interest of the indigenous. The Acholi interpreters, many of whom had previous experience working with Arabs, were more inclined towards supporting the establishment of British Administration in the hope of being integrated into the colonial system, rather than working within traditional chiefdoms. These interpreters sought to regain their positions of influence and power that they had enjoyed while working for the Arabs. This shows agency of the interpreters who through personal motivations and strategic calculations aligned themselves with the changing colonial powers to assert their own positions within the evolving power structures. The interpreters did more than mediate colonial power over the indigenous.

b). Invention of Acholi society as a tribe

British colonial officials intended to transform the nature of Acholi political organization, which they thought was unsuitable as a tool of British administration.¹⁵ With such hindsight, colonial officials went to Acholi with the perception that the past Acholi indigenous society lacked any real organization or continuity as expressed by Postlethwaite, the pioneer District Commissioner for East Acholi with its Headquarters in Kitgum:

I was dealing with a tribe that had no system of ancient holdings, nothing that answered the *Bataka* of Buganda, whose life was at the tie of communal and who from force of circumstances, had perforce been in the habit of moving every few years of their own volition.¹⁶

Commenting on colonial intervention in Acholi, Adam Branch observes that “the British created chiefs in Acholiland on the model that they imagined proper African chiefs would be and believed to help raise particularly the savage Acholi up the civilization ladder”¹⁷. As highlighted in the above section, the configuration of customary power in Acholi like in other segmentary or ‘stateless’ society was shaped by colonial racial prejudice and misinterpretation of the existing political system as well as the need for administrative convenience, reduction on administrative costs and fear of possible violent resistances by the natives. But the absence of a chiefly structure was in some areas, as Postlethwaite noted in 1915, a “blessing in disguise” since no “hereditary chieftainships” could be recognized.²² This would give the British an opportunity to reconfigure Acholi political structure and culture in their own image because they could deny the pre-existing Acholi structure as suitable for their own needs and interests. They hence proceeded to construct their own tribal and ethnic idea of Acholi society.

To begin with, historians and anthropologists on Acholi such as Bere¹⁸, Atkinson¹⁹ and Girling²⁰ consider 1898 as a pivotal moment in the modern administration of Northern Uganda. This date symbolizes a notable

¹⁵ Bere, Rennie M. "An outline of Acholi history." *Uganda Journal* 1 Vol 11, no. 1 (1947), p.58.

¹⁶ Postlethwaite, John Rutherford Parkin (1947): *I Look Back*. London: T. V. Boardman, p.56-7.

¹⁷ Branch, Adam. *Displacing human rights: War and intervention in northern Uganda*. Oxford University Press, 2011, p.49. ²² Postlethwaite, John Rutherford Parkin (1947): *I Look Back*, p.56-7.

¹⁸ Bere, Rennie M. "An outline of Acholi history.", p. 4

¹⁹ Atkinson, Ronald R. *The Roots of Ethnicity: The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda Before 18*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, p.262.

shift in the relationship of Acholi from its connection to Egypt and Sudan towards becoming integrated within the emerging Uganda Protectorate. Despite holding prejudiced views of the Acholi people as "naturally lazy" and their land as lacking economic potential competition from French and Belgian colonial interests in the region compelled the British to include Acholi within the political framework of the Uganda Protectorate²¹. The policy of indirect rule implemented by the British government in Acholi allowed for the preservation of certain traditional practices among the local population. By appointing chiefs, collecting taxes, facilitating conversion to Christianity, and promoting education, the colonial administration enforced certain changes while still maintaining a degree of continuity in the traditional ways of life for the Acholi peasants²². The policy of indirect rule in Acholi meant that the natives were expected to adopt specific changes mentioned above while preserving their traditional way of life. Beyond these specified adjustments, the local population was encouraged to continue with their traditional practices, showcasing the selective nature of colonial intervention in maintaining certain aspects of indigenous culture within the framework of colonial governance.²³ This means that colonial structure intended to produce a colonial subject who was obedient to the colonial authorities but also disciplined and deattached to the social base of cultural customs and traditions.²⁴

Tribalization of social groups in Acholiland into one "tribal" group became a key component of colonial governance. The most outstanding impact that colonial production and reproduction of customary power which was mainly aimed at unifying Acholi as a tribal entity in tribal homeland has been achieved. Since then, Acholi ethnic card has been deployed to determine politics at the local and national level. In this connection, the colonial authorities effectively consolidated the diverse chiefdom boundaries in Acholi to establish a singular political identity of the "Acholi tribe" within a defined tribal homeland. This deliberate restructuring institutionalized a rigid categorization of "Acholiness," which subsequently became a determining factor for inclusion or exclusion during the colonial era and beyond. The imposition of this singular identity framework emphasized tribal affiliations over geographical residency, shaping social dynamics and power structures in the region under colonial rule. This territorial reorganization by the British further solidified the concept of the Acholi as a distinct and separate entity, reinforcing boundaries that had not been previously as pronounced and potentially disrupting the pre-existing social and economic interconnectedness among different chiefdoms in the region. In this connection, Girling notes:

The whole of Acholi to a greater or lesser degree now forms one large group of persons, united by bonds which are a combination of kinship, territorial, political relationship and ritual, as well as by bonds of common subjection to alien rulers and of territorial and secular relationships.

Another impact that can be derived from the above extract is the polarization between Acholi and other ethnic groups through colonial boundary demarcation, separating Acholi from neighbouring Alur and Madi communities. This resonates with Mamdani's claim that every institution touched by the hand of the colonial state was given a pronounced regional or ethnic character. It became a truism that a soldier must be a northerner, a civil servant, a southerner, and merchant, an Asian. In northern Uganda, as a strategy of divide and rule the British discouraged inter -district networking and trading and instead encouraged internal development of each tribal district. The delineation of what later became known as Acholi territory was a colonial construct. The precolonial period, within the chieftaincies, there were instances where individuals of different ethnic origins lived together without discrimination, such as the Paracel people of Madi origin in the Palabek chiefdom. Neither the area nor the people who inhabited it were perceived as a unit, either by the people themselves or by neighbouring groups. This highlights the complex dynamics of pre-colonial social structures and interactions that were reshaped by colonial policies and administrative boundaries in the region.

²⁰ Girling, Frank. *The Acholi of Uganda*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Offices (1960), p.199.

²¹ Laruni, Elizabeth. *From the Village to Entebbe: The Acholi of Northern Uganda and the Politics of Identity, 1950-1985*. University of Exeter (United Kingdom), 2014, p.68.

²² Wild, John Vernon. "Early travelers in Acholi." (*No Title*) (1954), p.58.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jean and John Comaroff (1992), 'Home Made Hegemony: Modernity Domesticity and Colonialism in South Africa', In Karen Hansen (ed.) *African Encounter with Domesticity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp. 37-74.

c). Redrawing administrative boundaries to create one Homeland for the Acholi people

A new ethnic homeland was created by administrative fiat when the British colonial offices were set up in Gulu district in 1910, followed by the establishment of Chua district with its headquarters in Kitgum in 1914²⁵. By 1913, East and West Acholi were designated as separate districts, each led by a District Commissioner, typically a white individual with Mr. Sullivan for Gulu district and Mr. J.P.R. Postlethwaite for Kitgum district²⁶. This transition meant that numerous chieftaincies, which previously operated independently, were now governed by foreign administration. In 1937, the two districts were amalgamated into one Acholi District with its headquarters in Gulu district under a white District Commissioner. The amalgamation of the two districts came with the integration of chiefs into Acholi Council and the constitution of the Council which was formalized in ordinances issued in 1949. On 5th March 1938, the Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province in his Annual Report on the State of Native Authority stated how the amalgamation of Gulu and Chua districts to form one administrative unit headquartered in Gulu, became an “important landmark”²⁷. This amalgamation meant that pre-colonial chiefly offices, roles, actors, and interests were reconfigured in the new British image of tribal homeland for the Acholi people, setting the stage for a politics of decentralized despotism against local forms of social democracy and diversified political power.

During the re-organization process, the British established a hierarchical structure of chiefs at various levels; County, Sub- county/Division, Parish, and village. This system aimed at increasing efficiency and reducing costs in governance. In this process, local individuals who demonstrated influence over rural communities and supported colonial rule were selected and appointed as 'chiefs' by the Colonial Administration, incorporating them into the governmental framework.²⁸ This reconfiguration had a logic. As both early European anthropologists and colonial officials defined non-Bantu speakers like Acholi in terms of political institutions that they lacked but not in terms of how they organized their political life,²⁹ which points to a choice to misrepresent Acholi segmentary political power as suggested by Karugire that “coming from a centralized government themselves, the British “could not make head nor tail of the segmentary societies of Uganda most of which were to be found in eastern and northern Uganda”³⁰. In this connection, Hesketh Bell, cited by Girling referred to Acholi as:

Unlike those of Uganda (Buganda) and Unyoro (Bunyoro), are apparently unwilling to submit to the domination by chiefs. There were no more powerful local authorities through which we may transmit our directions, and every group of families seems to live independently and to be more or less at various with their neighbours.³¹

Against this backdrop and the British experience in Buganda, colonial administration sought to reshape Acholi political and administrative systems by imposing elements of the centralizing model and the British Local Government model through the indirect rule system. Key to this endeavour was the institution of chiefs, tribes, tribal homelands, and customary law, with tribes being invented based on administrative territorial cohesion. This process reflects the colonial administration's efforts to assert control and establish a hierarchical system that would serve their governance objectives, despite the diverse and intricate social structures already present in Acholi society. This resonates with Mamdani's view that “often tribes were created based on administrative territorial contiguity as villages were brought together under a single administrative authority. Chiefship was similarly manufactured, and chiefs were imposed”³². Mamdani's observation underscores the complex

²⁵ Karugire, Samwiri Rubaraza. "Roots of instability in Uganda.", p.21.

²⁶ Girling, Frank. *The Acholi of Uganda*, p.121.

²⁷ MUL/AS, Annual Report from Provincial Commissioner on Native Administration, Northern Province, 31st December 1937, p.30

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Odoi-Tanga, Fredrick. "Politics, ethnicity and conflict in post independent Acholiland, Uganda 1962-2006." PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2010, p.103.

³⁰ Karugire, Samwiri Rubaraza. "Roots of instability in Uganda." (*No Title*) (1996), p.21.

³¹ Girling, Frank. *The Acholi of Uganda*, p.199.

³² Mamdani, Mahmood. "Citizen and subject." In *Citizen and Subject*. Princeton University Press, 2018, p.41. see also Crowder, Michael. "Indirect rule—French and British style." *Africa* 34, no. 3 (1964): 197-205, p.178; Khapoya, V.B., *The African Experience:*

dynamics of colonial governance and the manipulation of traditional structures to serve colonial interests. Drawing on the relatively successful implementation of indirect rule in Buganda, the British were eager to introduce a similar system in Acholi. British officials were dispatched to the region to garner support from local chiefs, aiming for a seamless establishment of colonial authority. Treaties were swiftly prepared for chiefs to sign, described by Dwyer as meticulously worded documents with blank spaces for names and dates, primarily designed to preemptively assert British control over Acholi's foreign affairs.³³

In mid-1898, Major MacDonald moved from Kampala to northern Uganda with two intentions: First, was to clear the remnants of the Nubian mutineers from Buganda who migrated to the north. Second, sign treaties which he did with several local chiefs from several chiefdoms, save for Payira chiefdom where he failed to come to terms with chief Awich.³⁴ Macdonald was replaced by Major Delme-Radcliff, who combined carrot and stick in his quest to subjugate Acholi under colonial administration. Writing in 1947, Bere who served as a District and Provincial Commissioner for Northern Uganda notes that Major Delme-Radcliff, "became a legendary figure in Acholi where he made useful contacts with many of the chiefs and his recommendations of identifying chiefs with the quality of colonial administration and making them part of the government organizations, shows his wisdom and foresight."³⁵ Major Delme-Radcliff, known as '*Langa*,' by indigenous people gained a reputation for employing a military strategy to quell rebellious chiefs in Acholi during his expeditions³⁶. The nickname '*Langa Langa*,' referencing a lion that operates at night signifies his fierce and strategic approach to dealing with opposition and maintaining control in the region. This depiction highlights the use of force and intimidation by colonial authorities to assert dominance over resistant elements within Acholi society.⁴² The key administrative changes can be seen below:

County chiefs: At the highest level of the administrative structure, six counties were established under County Chiefs who retained the traditional title of the *Rwot* (Acholi name for chief). These Counties were named after significant geographical features such as rivers and mountains, including Aswa, Kilak, Omoro, Chua, Agago, and Lamwo as opposed to the names of the major chiefdoms. The naming strategy was aimed at unifying disparate chiefdoms into a cohesive Acholi tribe and centralize the political system under the colonial governance framework. This deliberate effort to consolidate and organize the region's diverse entities reflects the colonial administration's approach to governance and its impact on local power structures in Uganda. To advance the goal of centralization and unification, non-hereditary leaders, referred to as *Rwodi Kalam* (loosely translated as chiefs of pens), were appointed at the county and lower levels in addition to the traditional hereditary chiefs known as *Rwodi moo* (loosely translated as anointed chiefs). In some instances, this led to the displacement of hereditary chiefs, causing tension between the two categories of leaders. This intentional restructuring of leadership roles from hereditary to appointed positions showcases the complexities and challenges inherent in blending traditional and colonial governance systems, highlighting the power dynamics that emerged during this period of transition in northern Uganda. For instance, it was only in Aswa, Lamwo and Agago Counties where the sons of *Rwot Awich* of Payira; *Rwot Ogowok* of Padibe and *Odier Abar* of Adilang lineage were recognized respectively. The County Chiefs of Kilak, Omoro and Chua were either strangers in their areas or the descendants of commoners³⁷, implying that the ritual context in these areas were separate from the political authorities since the appointed chiefs did not have traditional legitimacy to perform

An Introduction, Longman, 2010, p.10; Ranger, Terence. "The invention of tradition revisited: the case of colonial Africa." In *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-century Africa*, pp. 62-111. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1993, p.63.

³³ Dwyer, John Orr. *The Acholi of Uganda: Adjustment to Imperialism*. Columbia University, 1972, p61-62.

³⁴ Anywar, Reuben Stephen. "The life of *rwot* Iburaim Awich." *Uganda Journal* 12, no. 1 (1948), p.72-81; see also Gray, John Milner.

"Acholi history, 1860-1901." *Uganda Journal* 15 (1951): 121-143, p.41.

³⁵ Bere, Rennie M. "An outline of Acholi history.", p.7.

³⁶ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

³⁷ Amone, Charles, "British colonialism and the creation of Acholi ethnic identity in Uganda, 1894 to 1962.", PhD Dissertation, 2014,

any rituals in clans to which they did not belong. Gradually, appointments to chiefly official and administrative offices tended to be made from the emerging educated class irrespective of lineage background.³⁸

Division/Sub- County Chiefs: Under the County Chief in the administrative hierarchy, the position of *Jago* (plural: *Jagi*) Division or Sub- county chief was established³⁹. This restructuring led to the reduction in status of the previously autonomous chiefdoms of the Acholi to Sub-counties; like Palabek Sub- county, Padibe Sub- county, and Puranga Sub- county. Although the Sub-counties were named after prominent chiefdoms, nonhereditary leaders were also appointed as Sub- county chiefs, indicating a deliberate shift towards a centralized administration that integrated traditional titles with colonial governance structures in Acholi.⁴⁰

Parish Chiefs: The colonial administration introduced the office of Parish chief, known locally as a Mukungu (plural Bakungu), within the newly reorganized administrative system. It is important to note that the term 'Mukungu' was of Bantu origin and had no equivalent position in the traditional pre-colonial political structures of the region. This imposition of foreign administrative titles underscores the significant changes and influences brought about by colonial rule on local governance systems and leadership roles in Uganda. The Bakungu were chosen by the County Council. Each Mukungu would be responsible for between four hundred to seven hundred poll taxpayers.⁴¹ To avoid any conflict of interest, on assumption of power, Mukungu ceased to be the representative of his own clan, which is another fundamental change in the Acholi political system, which ensured that political action was bent and bound to a new political master. Underpinning this action was the imperious belief by the colonial officials that chiefs at all levels should act as unifying political figures to centralize the various clans into a larger tribal group that could be more easily administered.⁴² This was well observed by Bere who noted that "the urgent trend of modern administration has been to bring the clans together and to make Acholi conscious of their unity as a single people."⁴³ Building on the argument by Bere, Amone and Amuura claim that reorganization of customary power was aimed at creation of a bigger Acholi tribal identity and that was a reason that the villagers were encouraged not to attach too much importance to their clan identities.⁴⁴ For the colonial authority to assume that chiefs would become a unifying political figure for the entire Acholi was to ignore the power of the clan system from below (clan heads, Rwodi Kweri, Dar ker, diviners, etcetera).

Village chiefs: Within the Parish structure, there were typically three to five villages overseen by the Won Paco (father of the home), a role that was introduced under colonial rule and did not exist in traditional political systems. Additionally, the heads of commoner lineages, known as Ludito kaka, were not officially recognized by the colonial administration but held informal acknowledgment from chiefs. Despite their traditional role of overseeing village affairs, their involvement in governance was limited; only a few were selected by other Ludito kaka to serve on the sub-county council.⁴⁵ The configuration of customary power in Acholi is summarized in the annual report of the Provincial Commissioner of the Northern Province to the General Governor that:

All chiefs have been encouraged to engage their own clerks, who are Acholi educated at the local missions; practically every chief has his clerk now, and lately a considerable number have commenced to tackle Tax Registers. Houses of a more substantial and civilized type are being built by the chiefs, many of them own bicycles, they all possess chief's robes, and their police are now organized⁴⁶.

³⁸ Finnström, Sverker. *Living with bad surroundings: War, history, and everyday moments in northern Uganda*. Duke University Press, 2008, p.33.

³⁹ Bere, land chieftainship among the Acholi, p.50-52; see also Paine, Clare. "Ker Kwaro Acholi." *A Re-Invention of Traditional Authority in Northern* (2014), p.53.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.52.

⁴¹ Laruni, Elizabeth. *From the Village to Entebbe*, 2014, p.199.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Bere, Rennie M. "An outline of Acholi history.", p. 4.

⁴⁴ Girling, Frank. *The Acholi of Uganda*, p.175.

⁴⁵ Bere, Rennie M. "An outline of Acholi history." *Uganda Journal*11, no. 1 (1947): 1-8, p.8.

⁴⁶ National Archives.A46/808 Secretary Minute Paper, no.2134. Northern province. Annual, Report, 1914-15.

The structure of colonial administration had also been tried in Teso and Lango where the British had imposed Baganda chiefs to preside over native administration before local headmen were appointed to replace them due to gross misconduct.⁴⁷ Unlike in Teso and Lango, however, the British combined their appointed chiefs (*Rwodi Kalam*) with the anointed hereditary chiefs (*Rwodi Moo*) in Acholi.⁵⁴ These chiefs operated under the authority of the British District Commissioner, illustrating the nuanced approaches taken by the British in utilizing traditional leadership structures within different regions of Uganda to facilitate indirect rule. Because of the unique governance structure of the Acholi and other segmentary ethnic groups in northern Uganda that set them apart from the 'centralized' kingdoms of southern Uganda, they were governed under the District Council institutionalized under the Native Authority Ordinance of 1949, rather than holding federal or semi-federal status granted to the former. This distinction shaped the organization and reorganization of Native Administrative structures in Acholi leading up to independence, reflecting the diverse governance systems existing within the region and the nuances of colonial administration in different cultural contexts. With stereotypes and misconception, the colonial authorities in Acholi implemented reforms that aimed at articulating and rearticulating the Acholi customary authority and power structure based on their own colonial logic.

In terms of leadership, British officials circumscribed the chiefly authority and made it as the key symbol of Acholi political authority, leaving out other ingredients of the same customary authority. This centralization of chiefly power created opportunities for lower power holders like clan heads and elders to strengthen their influence from the grassroots level, leading to a situation where the significance of the chief as a symbol of customary authority dwindled. In this case, clan heads and elders instituted themselves as alternative center of power to the chiefs. More importantly, circumscription weakened the power of chiefs by being isolated from the network of customary actors (social bases) which they depended on in the pre-colonial period. It should be recalled that in the pre-colonial period, clan heads and elders were the advisers of the chief and spokesperson of their won clans in the chieftom. The bondage between the chief and the lower power holders was broken by the colonial actions. Furthermore, in the colonial administration's approach to Acholi leadership, hereditary chiefs retained their ritual roles despite the centralization of power and integration into the native authority structure. This paved way for the chiefs to keep in touch with his subjects and maintained loyalty from the chieftoms and clans. The hereditary chiefs, working with emerging Acholi elite took advantage of this gap to mobilize against appointed chiefs in various chieftoms, protesting the marginalization of the latter.⁴⁸ This created space for indigenous people to engage in grassroots politics, dealing with important issues like conflict resolution, marriage, land distribution, and spiritual/ritual matters that deeply impacted the Acholi community.

The colonial authorities seemed more focused on macro-level politics at the district level, neglecting these micro-level concerns that were pivotal for the everyday lives of the Acholi people. This was problematic because in a diffused political space with multiple centers of power like in Acholi, segregating the chiefly authority meant weakening their social power base to perform efficiently. Indeed, colonial authorities were dissatisfied with the performance of some chiefs, especially the hereditary ones who used to depend on customary structures to perform their duties leading to their dismissal and suspension as well as replacing them with non-hereditary leaders⁴⁹. This shows that despite identifying the weaknesses of the hereditary chiefs, colonial officers did not look at their action of reconfiguring customary authority as the problem for their poor performance. It was in 1938, when they resorted to follow the Acholi traditional system when chiefs started to perform satisfactorily. In this connection, the Provincial Commissioner for Northern region in his annual report reported that the policy adopted two years ago, of organizing the tribal administration on the basis of the

⁴⁷ Gartrell, Beverly. "British administrators, colonial chiefs, and the comfort of tradition: an example from Uganda." *African Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (1983): 1-24, p.3; See Also; Vincent, Joan. "Colonial chiefs and the making of class: a case study from Teso, eastern Uganda." *Africa* 47, no. 2 (1977): 140-159, p. 150. See also, Tignor, Robert L. "Clan Leaders and Colonial Chiefs in Lango: The Political History of an East African Stateless Society, c. 1800-1939." (1980): 130-133, p.131; Tosh, John. "Colonial chiefs in a stateless society: a case-study from Northern Uganda1." *The Journal of African History* 14, no. 3 (1973): 473-490, p.140-41. ⁵⁴ Mamdani, Mahmood. *Define and rule*, 2012, p.9.

⁴⁸ Girling, Frank. *The Acholi of Uganda*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Offices (1960), p. 198.

⁴⁹ Laruni, Elizabeth. *From the Village to Entebbe*, p. 68. See also National Archives.A46/808 Secretary Minute Paper, no.2134. Northern Province Annual Report, 1914-15.

Acholi clan system, and the hereditary influence of the headmen, has been followed and developed, with results reported to be satisfactory⁵⁰. The limitation of colonial intervention is also seen from the lack of uniform system of local government in Uganda⁵¹ and in the contradictory and conflicting actions and positions of colonial officials in Acholi. Whereas some colonial officials desired to introduce a completely new administrative system devoid of traditional systems, others such as Bere the District Commissioner preferred a hybrid of the two. He was also opposed to the creation of the paramount chief and the ideal of transferring chiefs outside their lineage roots. In 1943, protesting the plan to abandon the traditional systems in native administration, Bere noted that:

With any African tribe, full understanding of the indigenous system is of fundamental importance if a successful reconstruction of its administrative machine is to be achieved; even a modern local government should be designed to keep in touch with tradition.⁵²

The above extract resonates with Sir Henry Maine's critics of the British officials in India for failure to understand the customs of the natives and govern them according to these customs and traditions. To him the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 was due to lack of understanding and knowledge of the logic of the native institutions found in customs and traditions and how they could be utilized in colonial administration⁵³. Maine, therefore, suggested that the natives should be governed according to their customs. Consequently, officials appointed to serve in the colonial offices overseas were trained in the doctrine of indirect rule before they were deployed. Perhaps Bere was an apologist of Maine to whom Mamdani traces the origin of Indirect Rule⁵⁴. Underpinning Bere's argument was the claim that "the position of the traditional chief is one of the great complexities, for he must be a representative as well as a ruler of his people, not only the authority but also it is of vital importance to any African administration and the welfare of the other people that this link should have not been broken."⁵⁵

The limitation of the colonial system is also seen in the failure to contain clan identities and rivalries that dominated the District council during the colonial period. Clan identities and clan rivalries continued to play a significant role in the election of District council representatives in Acholi, as politicians often relied on their clan affiliations to garner support. This underscored the influence of the clan system within the colonial administration and highlighted the enduring importance of pre-colonial clan identities as a crucial aspect of social and political life for many Acholi people. The ability to mobilize support based on clan allegiances demonstrated how deeply entrenched these traditional social structures remained in the face of colonial interventions. As Leys observed, the "sentiments for the thirty or so 'old chiefdoms', which the British tried to undermine by imposing an administrative structure of six counties, was kept alive through competition for 'status in the modern political system.'"⁵⁶ However, the above articulation has been critiqued by scholars such as Karugire and Kabwegyere who emphasize the transformative character of the colonial structure in Uganda. Karugire and Kabwegyere argue that the concept of indirect rule did not mean a total reliance on indigenous institutions. To Karugire, indirect rule rested on a flawed premise as it depended on the assumption that colonies could be governed through their pre-existing indigenous institutions and norms, even though colonialism had systematically weakened these structures to facilitate the establishment of a new colonial order⁵⁷. In brief, he argues that, even though indirect rule sought to govern colonies through indigenous institutions, the underlying colonial influence remained hidden within these so-called native spaces. The facade of autonomy and self-governance often masked the continued manipulation and control exerted by colonial powers.⁶⁵ Kabwegyere agrees with Karugire and observes that despite colonial administrative roles being filled at the intermediate level by Africans, it should not be taken to mean that these Africans were performing these

⁵⁰ MUL/AS, Annual Report from Provincial Commissioner on Native Administration, Northern Province, 31st December 1938, p.27.

⁵¹ Karugire, Samwiri Rubaraza. "Roots of instability in Uganda." (*No Title*) (1996), p.25.

⁵² Bere, Land and chieftainship among the Acholi, p.52.

⁵³ Maine, Henry Sumner. *The effects of observation of India on modern European thought: the Rede lecture delivered before the University of Cambridge on May 22, 1875*. John Murray, 1875, 216-217.

⁵⁴ Mamdani, Mahmood. *Define and rule: Native as political identity*. Harvard University Press, 2012, p.9.

⁵⁵ Bere, Rennie M. "An outline of Acholi history.", p.9.

⁵⁶ Leys, Colin. "Politicians and policies: an essay on politics in Acholi, Uganda, 1962-65." (*No Title*) (1967), p.16.

⁵⁷ Karugire, Samwiri Rubaraza. "Roots of instability in Uganda." (*No Title*) (1996), p.25. ⁶⁵

Ibid.

roles through pre-existing indigenous institutions. In many cases, Kabwegyere argues, “the quasi-traditional institutions were in fact created by the British colonialists, and this involved a process of social and political re-organization”⁵⁸. In this case, colonial state structure produced and influenced the agency of the native actors. Colonial structure conditioned the parameters in which both new and old chiefs jostled for political influence, and thereby influenced the contestation by which customary hierarchies were co-produced. The history of Acholi is intricately intertwined with the agency of chiefs who played significant roles in aiding the colonial project in the region. Many Acholi chiefs who served the colonial system were honored and those who critiqued the British were dishonoured.

II. Acholi native contestations and responses to British colonial governance a). Native contestations

The structure of Acholi customary authority imagined by the British was despotic and it laid the foundation for native resistance. This is because the colonial system strengthened the authority of non-hereditary chiefs within the colonial administration. The construction of customary authorities in Acholiland altered the nature of customary roles and powers of customary chiefs. By reconfiguring the holders of power and the balance of power between hereditary and non-hereditary chiefs who were reduced to cultural content, British colonial rule opened up opportunity for native resistance. Under indirect rule, the roles of colonial chiefs in Acholi shifted from traditional ritualistic functions practiced in the precolonial period to colonial-sanctioned roles. The Native Authority Ordinance of 1919 institutionalized the authority of colonial-appointed chiefs, positioning them as key figures in the colonial administration's control and governance of indigenous populations. By consolidating judicial, legislative, and executive powers in the hands of these chiefs, the ordinance perpetuated a system that upheld colonial interests and subjugated subject populations.

Such a despotic legal framework highlights the intricate mechanisms through which colonial powers maintained dominance and exploited resources in colonized territories, ultimately shaping the social and political dynamics of the time.⁵⁹ The specific roles included: presiding over customary courts, collecting taxes, and overseeing administrative tasks such as mobilizing labour for public works, largely serving colonial interests.⁶⁰ This transformation altered the nature of leadership in Acholi society, aligning the chiefs more closely with the colonial administration and its objectives rather than solely focusing on upholding traditional customs and practices. This resulted in isolation of hereditary chiefs from the community, weakening their traditional legitimacy which has persisted in the contemporary moment. The configuration of customary authorities also brought changes in the power of chiefs. However, the distribution of power was not uniform but varied between hereditary and non-hereditary chiefs, with the latter granted excessive powers while the former lost significant levels of power despite being allowed to perform their ritual functions. The despotic nature of Acholi chiefs was documented by a number of scholars and alluded to by a number of informants, agreeing to the fact that colonial chiefs were autocratic in their offices and tended to favour friends and close kin with or without the knowledge or consent of the British officials.⁶¹ For example, Girling who conducted research at the courts during the colonial rule quoted an appointed Acholi chief as saying:

You see, we must rule by fear. The people are lazy, they do not realize what good things the government is doing for them. How can we Acholi progress unless we grow cotton, pay our taxes and dig latrines as the government wants us to do.⁶²

Similarly, Branch argues that it was such unqualified British support for colonial appointed chiefs who had no customary rights to their offices, that made the colonial administration the target of resistance in Acholi,⁶² It

⁵⁸ Kabwegyere, Tarsis B. "The politics of state formation and destruction in Uganda." (*No Title*) (1995), p.74-75.

⁵⁹ Mamdani, Mahmood. "Citizen and subject.", p.87; also see Branch, Adam. *Displacing human rights: War and intervention in northern Uganda*. Oxford University Press, 2011, p.49.

⁶⁰ Hopwood, Julian. "Elephants abroad and in the room: explicit and implicit security, justice and protection issues on the Uganda/Sudan border." *London: London School of Economics, Justice and Security Research Programme Paper*22 (2015), p.4. ⁶¹ Okot Billy, (Resurgence of Acholi Customary Authority), interviewed by Tony Apecu, June 2023, Pader District.

⁶¹ Girling, Frank. *The Acholi of Uganda*. London, p.185.

⁶² Branch, Adam. *Displacing human rights: War and intervention in northern Uganda*. Oxford University Press, 2011, p.49.

must be emphasized that at every level of the colonial structure of the native administration in Acholi District, there was a wide chasm between the government appointed chiefs and the traditional/ritual chiefs of the past political power. Generally, the appointed chiefs ruled through instilling fear in their subjects while hereditary chiefs tended to uphold the pre-colonial non-violence approach. Configuration of customary authority also led to a change in the nature of customary chiefs. There was a shift towards salaried colonial chiefs in Acholi which was a departure from the traditional practice of hereditary leadership and the strict association of chiefs with specific chiefdoms. This allowed for the transfer of chiefs like Eriya Alier and Okello Mwaka to different administrative units regardless of their lineage background. However, their relocation to Labongo and Puranga chiefdoms respectively was met with resistance from the local population, highlighting the importance of traditional legitimacy in performing ritual functions and the inherent challenges of imposing colonial-appointed chiefs in a deeply rooted traditional society.⁶³

Another fundamental change in the native administration was the bringing on board youth mostly from missionary educated elite to the helm of leadership. Younger individuals were given administrative roles due to education requirements.⁶⁴ This shift created tension between the traditional elders, many of whom did not have formal education, and the emerging educated class.⁶⁵ The clash between the old guard and the new generation highlighted the complexities and challenges that arose from the changing dynamics within the leadership hierarchy in Acholi under colonial rule.

The creation of the Lawirwodi (Paramount chief) marked a turning point as a form of resistance from below. The Uganda African Local Government Ordinance of 1949 marked a significant shift in governance structure by allowing one of the County Chiefs to become the chairperson of the District Councils instead of the District Commissioner. This change presented challenges in appointing a Secretary General or President, particularly considering the clan rivalries among the royal ancestral lineages of the County chiefs. Consequently, in 1950, with the influence of Acholi elite in the District council, two positions were created; Lawirwodi (Paramount chief) is the first among equals and Langolkop Madit (Chief Judge of the District Courts). The Lawirwodi, who was to chair the District Council and acted as the Senior Executive Officer, was associated with the concept of paramountcy, causing tension with the colonial administration as they specifically opposed the appointment of leaders from the major rivaling chiefdoms of Payira and Padibe to this influential role⁶⁶. As a result, district councillors from among the County chiefs instead elected Matayo Lamot, the chief of Agago as Lawirwodi and Yona Odida, Chief of Aswa as Langolkop Madit. There was increasing competition for the Lawirwodi post, which aroused 'considerable' chiefdom rivalries⁶⁷. In 1953, Mateo Lamot lost the position to Phillip Adonga, County Chief of Chua, and the chief of Palwo Pajule.

The District Council was not, however, satisfied with the Lawirwodi post and still sought an executive district head who would then be able to meet with the Kabaka of Buganda on an equal footing. Similarly, The District Commissioner, R.M Bere, was also opposed to the idea of a paramount chief stating in 1949 that: "It will not be permitted to try and make a sort of hereditary king whose family would become rulers. This would not be at all in accordance with modern ideas and the intention of giving the people more say in their own government."⁶⁸ Consequently, in 1959, after much debate between the Protectorate Government, the Ministry of Local Government and the District Council, the Lawirwodi position was abolished and a ceremonial head, entitled Laloyo Maber (good ruler), was created⁶⁹. The establishment of the Laloyo Maber position was motivated by several factors. Firstly, it was a response to the constitutional requirement by the colonial administration for each region to have a Constitutional Head in anticipation of independence, akin to the creation of the Won Nyaci in Lango. Secondly, concerns within the District Council over the potential hereditary nature of the Lawirwodi title prompted the change. Additionally, the election of Phillip Adonga, a

⁶³ Okidi Ladwar (Resurgence of Acholi Customary Authority), interviewed by Tony Apecu, July 2023, Gulu City.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.32.

⁶⁷ Behrend, Heike. "Lakwena, Alice." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. 2020, p.18.

⁶⁸ Bere, Rennie M. "An outline of Acholi history.", p.8.

⁶⁹ Okidi Ladwar (Resurgence of Acholi Customary Authority), interviewed by Tony Apecu, July 2023, Gulu City.

central figure from Pajule, aimed to address these rivalry concerns by positioning someone from a central location between east and west of Acholi, potentially alleviating tensions between chiefdoms in these regions. It should be emphasized that the position of the *Laloyo maber* transcended the conventional roles of the chiefs in Acholi, as the position holder was elevated to a cultural and political figurehead with centralized political powers that far surpassed those of a native chief.

However, the intention for *Laloyo Maber* to transcend clan rivalries did not fully succeed in doing so. Chiefly power and clan loyalties were still an essential part of Acholi polity. Public support and clan ties meant that chiefs could not simply be dismissed and contained politically to the periphery. Similarly, the *Laloyo Maber* post, although non-executive, once again sparked considerable rivalry, particularly amongst the major clan heads. It is noteworthy that the creation of constitutional district heads in Uganda reflected a desire to emulate Buganda's administrative autonomy and political system, particularly the institution of the Kabaka.⁷⁰ Leys observed that Buganda's dominant position had sparked envy among other regions in the country, leading them to aspire to a comparable level of self-governance and traditional leadership structure.⁷¹ Furthermore, Councils known as *Lukiiko* (Bantu term for council or parliament) introduced in various regions of Uganda to facilitate regular meetings among chiefs, with gatherings in Gulu scheduled for the first Monday of each month, aiming to guarantee the efficient communication of directives from colonial administrations⁷². However, the *Lukiiko* lacked legislative authority and could not solely modify native traditions and laws. This was contingent upon approval from the Governor, implying their influence was constrained in terms of power and jurisdiction.⁷³ This trend highlights the influence of Buganda's political arrangements on the broader aspirations of other regions within Uganda.⁷⁴

B). Resistance By Some Chiefdoms

It is important to state from the outset that the nature of colonial rule shaped the nature of native resistance. In Acholi, colonization was marked by a combination of violent and passive resistance strategies. The resistance put up by the Acholi was a response to the specific challenges and disruptions brought about by colonial rule, particularly the restructuring of customary authorities and attempts to disarm the population. The Lamogi rebellion during 1911-1912 underlined the depth of this resistance, reflecting the complexities and difficulties faced by colonizers in trying to subdue traditional societies. The people of Lamogi chiefdom objected to the planned disarmament exercise to rid Acholi of guns acquired from Arab slave and ivory traders. They perceived the disarmament as depriving them of instruments of power and making them vulnerable to external attacks. In another development, Chief Awich of Payira defiantly resisted British attempts to subjugate his chiefdom by refusing to sign treaties. This was compounded by the British action of signing a treaty with his rival chief Ogwok of Padibe. Awich's staunch opposition led to him mobilizing 5000 men to combat British troops, resulting in his capture and subsequent exile in 1901⁷⁵.

The restructuring of Acholi customary authority under colonial rule which involved the disbandment of non-collaborative chiefdoms, the arrest of rebellious chiefs, the dismissal of chiefs deemed detrimental to the new order, and the appointment of non-hereditary chiefs to replace them was key trigger of resistance as indicated below. Indeed, chiefs Eriya Alier from Payira chiefdom and Okello Mwaka who were transferred to Labongo and Puranga chiefdoms respectively were rejected by the people, on the account that no chief rules over other chiefdoms where he had no traditional legitimacy of performing ritual functions⁷⁶. Okello Mwaka who was a very close ally of colonial officials was eventually killed by the people of Puranga. The people of Labongo rejected Chief Eriya who hailed from the rivalling chiefdom of Payira. His presence was perceived as

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Apter, David E. *The political kingdom in Uganda: a study in bureaucratic nationalism*. Routledge, 2013, p.

⁷² Gertzel, Cherry J. "Party and locality in Northern Uganda, 1945-1962." (*No Title*) (1974), p.19.

⁷³ Bere, Rennie M. "Land and Chieftainship among the Acholi." *Uganda Journal* 19, no. 1 (1955): 49-5, p.50-52.

⁷⁴ Paine, Clare. "Ker Kwaro Acholi." *A Re-Invention of Traditional Authority in Northern* (2014), p.46.

⁷⁵ Laruni, Elizabeth. *From the Village to Entebbe*., p.69.

⁷⁶ Odoi-Tanga, Fredrick. "Politics, ethnicity and conflict in post independent Acholiland, 2010, p.108. ⁸⁶

Girling, Frank. *The Acholi of Uganda*, p. 198.

promoting the Payira paramountcy over them⁸⁶. For example, working with the District Commissioner Wright, chief Alier ordered for the confiscation of cattle belonging to the Labongo people and forced them to provide forced labour on public roads. Early on, Payira auxiliaries working with British army officer Wagstaff attacked, killed and confiscated Labongo cattle⁷⁷.

Other chiefdoms that resisted administrative re-organization include Alero which resisted merger with Koch chiefdom. The people of Paimol in eastern Acholi also resisted British imposition of leaders over them leading to the 'Paimol uprising' of 1918, following the killing of chief Lakidi and replacing him with Amet, the chief of the neighbouring Lira, Amiel⁷⁸. Amet's appointment drew outrage in Acholi for two reasons: being an outsider from the chiefdom and being a leper. To the Acholi a leper is an outcast in society and appointing one as a leader was perceived as bringing a curse into the society. Other affected chiefs include the chief of Atiak who was deposed in 1927 for failure to carry out government orders, and was replaced by Zakariya Atoyo from Patiko chiefdom, rendering the lineage leadership to end at that time. In some instances, some humiliating punishments were handed out to these traditional rulers for trivial offences⁷⁹. For example, the ruler of Pajule chiefdom called Alier was put in latrine pit by the District Commissioner, and he died soon after⁸⁰.

The resistance to colonial rule in Acholi and other parts of Uganda was also attributed to the character/agency of individuals, especially the appointed chiefs who held excessive power and became autocratic and despotic in their administration. In Acholi and Karamoja, chief Okello Mwaka of Puranga⁸¹ and chief Achia of Nabilatuk elders⁸² were killed by the locals respectively. Achia and other chiefs became unpopular for making petty by-laws and using their power to impose imprisonment for long time and going against personalized authority of clan elders. Chief Okello Mwaka was a close ally of British officials in Acholi and was viewed by the locals as an imposter. Commenting on the killing of Okello Mwaka, the District Commissioner Postlethwaite wrote:

"our warrant chief Okello Mwaka became very unpopular and was murdered by his enemies... I tried these murderers sentencing four for long imprisonment and four to death" .

Generally, the imposition of non-hereditary chiefs among the Acholi was not well-received, especially by the hereditary chiefs and their clans. The giving of guns as rewards for chiefs who cooperated with British administrators allowed for a new form of coercion that helped strengthen not only their own authority but also the authority of the parties they represented. This resonates with Branch's claim that it was such unqualified British support for colonial appointed chiefs who had no customary rights to their offices, would eventually make the colonial administration the target of resistance in Acholi.

The provision of guns provided a means for these intermediaries to assert control and influence in their interactions with both the British officials and the communities they served, displaying the complex dynamics at play within these power structures. The foregoing paragraph speaks to the claim by Tosh and Vincent that contestations and the resistance were triggered by the ways in which colonial authorities reconfigured customary power, giving appointed chiefs excessive power over other elements of the same customary authority. In this connection, Tosh refers to this configuration of chiefly power as a fiction, self-deception and misperception on the part of colonial administrators. This resonates with the exposition of Vincent that "colonial officials did not recognize the nature of the indigenous political power, misinterpreted local institutions and found in them a generalized uniformity". Such configurations of power made resistance from below inevitable because it was not based on traditional legitimacy. They failed to recognize clan elders were

⁷⁷ Dwyer, John Orr. *The Acholi of Uganda*, 1972, p.164; See also Odoi-Tanga, Fredrick. "Politics, ethnicity and conflict in post independent Acholiland, Uganda 1962-2006."p.107.

⁷⁸ Dwyer, John Orr. *The Acholi of Uganda: Adjustment to Imperialism*. Columbia University, 1972, p.108.

⁷⁹ Karugire, Samwiri Rubaraza. "A political history of Uganda." (2010), p.125.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Kabwegyere, Tarsis B. *The politics of state formation and destruction in Uganda*, p. 5.

⁸² Mamdani, M., P. M. B. Kasoma, and A. B. Katende. "Karamoja: Ecology and History. Centre for Basic Research Working Paper No.

22." *Kampala: CBR Publications* (1992), p.30.

the 'true representative of the local people, deriving their authority from traditional social organization' rather than the appointed chiefs.

Moreover, instances of abuse within the new system were documented, with chiefs engaging in nepotism and showing favouritism towards specific clans in appointments and service delivery. These actions often led to conflicts and contestations between the chiefs and their subjects. The Acholi displayed a keen awareness in distinguishing between *Rwodi kalam* and *Rwodi moo*. These two categories of chiefs were distinctly separated within the colonial administrative framework, with the latter (*Rwodi moo*) maintaining authority based on lineage rituals and historical political power within their communities. It is noteworthy, that whereas the non-hereditary chiefs gained excessive power in colonial indirect rule, the hereditary chiefs significantly lost power despite being allowed to continue with ritual functions. In this regard, Girling observes by 1937, "the privileges and the power of the chiefs had declined too far to be revived." In response to colonial suppression and the imposition of despotic state-appointed chiefs, hereditary chiefs in alliance with the emerging petty bourgeoisie sought to challenge this power dynamic by joining political parties (DP and UPC) as a means to unify their collective interests and increase Acholi representation in national politics. This alliance aimed to address the marginalization of traditional chiefs and rural Acholi by strategically leveraging political power and advocating for a more inclusive and representative governance structure within the Acholi community.

At the grassroots level, with the separation of chiefly power from other traditional leaders, lineage heads and elders formed a parallel power centre and marginalized the colonial chiefs as a counter measure. This dynamic has persisted into the contemporary moment with clan leaders and elders increasingly assuming more authority and influence, effectively supplanting the role of the chiefs. This shift highlights the adaptation and resilience of Acholi societal structures in response to external pressures and attempts at manipulation by colonial and post-colonial authorities. There was also resistance at the District Council in which councillors with the support of some colonial officials, particularly Bere objected to the institution of the Lawirwodi (paramount chiefs) as the Constitutional Head of Acholi District. They instead pushed for the creation of the Laloyo Maber (good leader) with no strict adherence to traditional hereditary leadership. The District Commissioner, R.M Bere, was also opposed to the idea of a paramount chief stating in 1949⁸³

Resistance against the colonial establishment of chiefly power was also evident among non-chiefly groups including the emerging class of mission-educated youth who sought representation in local government structures. The Young Acholi Association (YAA), formed in 1921, echoed the calls for reform made by other youth associations like Young Baganda Youth Association. The YAA's quest for political change and inclusion within the Native Administration highlighted the youth's aspiration for recognition as a separate political entity. Viewing the District Council as a platform to address grievances against the traditional gerontocratic social order, the Acholi youth aimed to challenge societal hierarchies based on age, marital status, and gender. This resonates with the view of Laruni that in considering chiefs for appointment, colonial authorities gave priority to missionary educated elite and this created contestations between the educated group and uneducated traditional leaders.

III. Colonial reform

Whereas colonial reform came to represent a more consensual form of rule than coercion, it was conceived as a resistance to colonial contradictions. Nevertheless, reform occurred in the context of colonial stability. It is crucial to recognize that while resistance efforts in Acholi did not hinder colonial projects significantly, there were some reforms and adaptations made in response to the resistance. For instance, colonial administrators were compelled to make frequent configurations and reconfigurations of the Native Administration not only to promote efficiency and reduce cost but also making the administration acceptable to the indigenous people. To avoid further resistance, in 1936, the British opted to implement a completely hereditary system of clan chiefs within the Acholi Native Authority by giving chiefs areas that roughly coincided with pre-colonial clan boundaries, resulting in around fifty such divisions. This is seen in the Annual provincial report in 1930 that:

⁸³ Bere, Rennie M. "Land and Chieftainship among the Acholi." *Uganda Journal* 19, no. 1 (1955): 49-5, p.50-52. ⁹⁵
Annual Provincial Report, 1930.

“with amalgamation of the two Districts, an opportunity was taken to reorganize the native administration on lines more approximating to the Acholi tribal system of hereditary and less on the Baganda system of a bureaucratic civil service”⁹⁵. District Commissioners could now turn to District Council for advice on all tribal matters. It is interesting to note that colonial authorities were now not only getting advice from the people they originally despised but also appreciating that the traditional political system was effective as noted by the same annual provincial report. It states that “the policy adopted two years ago, of organizing the tribal administration on the basis of the Acholi clan system, and the hereditary influence of the headmen, has been followed and developed, with results reported to be satisfactory”⁸⁴.

Critically, we can interpret this change as a matter of colonial political strategy because such tribalization was meant to orient an emerging native political elite into a tribal consciousness that would resonate with the nationalist project. The deployment of tribal identity by the Acholi elite at a national level, particularly in response to the emergence of political parties like the Democratic Party (DP) and Uganda People's Congress (UPC), reflects a strategic tool used to advance their agenda and assert their influence. In a bid to compete with Buganda's privileged position, the Acholi elite positioned themselves within the national political landscape by asserting tribal claims to counter existing power structures and challenge the dominance of other regions.

CONCLUSION

Colonial reconfiguration of Acholi customary authority culminated into its instability with a strong legacy in the contemporary moment. Since the configuration of customary authority in the colonial period, the institutions of customary authority in Acholi have been unstable characterized by resistance, instability and significant decline in political power and influence of chiefs. Many of the implications from this legacy can be teased from the creation of a new elite class. By reconfiguring customary power, colonial authority created space for the rise of a new class of Acholi individuals primarily from commoner backgrounds. These individuals referred by Laruni as petty bourgeoisies manifested both a social and economic consequence arising from the colonial constructs. This class was socially and economically empowered, and they found themselves increasingly detached from the traditional societal values and structures. This shift highlights the profound impact of colonial rule on social dynamics within the Acholi community, leading to the emergence of a distinct class with altered perspectives and connections to traditional norms and systems. It is this class that championed the Acholi ethnic interest at the district and national levels. It is important to note that the colonial politics of ethnicization was also avenue for anti-colonialism as the Acholi mobilized the same created tribal identity to demand for its interest at the national levels. On the whole, the foregoing chapter has highlighted critical aspects that resonate with the central claim of this thesis. Colonial reconfiguration of Acholi social, cultural, economic, and political spaces concretized into social fabric and significantly altered the existing forms of sociality and political culture. Through the ethnicization of a restricted homeland, the colonial state ensured that chiefly positions became contestations both from society and above, yet the idea of the homeland spoke to an already curtailed political field. Consequently, the colonial politics of define, divide and rule continued to manifest in social spaces, leading to conflict and social strife, morphing into political constituencies.

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7. Interviews

⁸⁴ 96 Ibid.

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9. Interview with OB, June 2023, Pader District.
10. Interview with OL, July 2023, Gulu City.
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APPENDIX: Note on Research approaches.

This article is the outcome of a mixed methods research approach. Field work, involving interviews, focused group discussions, participant observation, visits to archives and other libraries, was conducted between January to December 2023. Archival visits were done at the District and missionary archives located in Gulu city. In Kampala, I visited the archive of Makerere University (Africana section) and the National archive in Wandegaya. This archival research was intended to highlight the logic that informed historical constructions of customary power and authority in Acholi. The reports on the communications between colonial officials and the customary chiefs revealed rich insights into the nature and character of the relationship between both domains. Missionary archives also proved useful in highlighting how first European contacts imagined Luo communities. Local government archives in Gulu city and in Kampala archives proved critical in revealing the internal discussions about the formation of Ker Kwaro Acholi (KKA) as a cultural institution of the Acholi people and their subsequent relationships with the local government structures and other humanitarian agencies and NGOs operating in Acholiland.

Interviews conducted in the course of the year 2023 amounted to forty-five (45). Discussions with respondents purposely chosen from different categories of people whose work had a close relationship with the chiefly authorities in the eight (8) districts constituting Acholiland. Interviews were conducted with chiefs representing the chiefdoms of Pagak, Lamogi, Pabbo, Parabongo, Paibona, Patiko Pageya, Aria, Alero and Koch Goma in western Acholi and chiefdoms of Agoro Tee Got, Ogole, Labongo Amida, Koyo, Adilang and Pajule chiefdoms in eastern Acholi. The inclusion of various chiefs from different chiefdoms was intended to provide a rich understanding of the historical migration patterns into Acholi region and to also ensure an inclusive interpretation of the internal differentiations in customs and traditional practices. The interviews were organized to target both those chiefs involved with Ker Kwaro Acholi and those who contest the institution; only this inclusion would provide alternative opinions about the true perceptions surrounding the institution. Other interviews were conducted with civil servants, politicians, elders councils, media talk show hosts, NGO representatives, officials from the ministry of gender, academicians, and some leaders of social civil society organizations.

Focused group discussions were also conducted with different categories of people including: clan heads, women, rwodi Kweri, and youth groups. Respondents in the FGD were sampled using the snowball approach and participants identified purposefully. Participant observation was also important during the field work exercise. Important observations were made when I participated in two events to bury two chiefs who passed away. During this occasion, I observed some changes in the Acholi burial practices and the politicization of customary practices, as manifested in the speech ceremonies. I also attended four press conferences called by the two factions of Ker Kwaro Acholi following leadership wrangles which emerged during the research and I closely followed the unfolding events in the media. These pressers enabled me to discover the invisible discourses being appropriated by the paramount chief, council of chiefs and officials of Ker Kwaro Acholi to legitimate their positions and personal interests. The contestations between the two conflicting factions of chiefs helped to reveal information that had been hidden from the researcher and also not known in the public domain.