

Reasons for the British Choice of the Acholi as the Martial Race of Uganda

Charles Amone

Senior Lecturer of History, Gulu University-Northern Uganda and Fulbright Visiting Scholar,
Millersville University of Pennsylvania-USA.

Abstract

During Uganda's colonial period, the British encouraged political and economic development in the south of the country. In contrast, the Acholi and other northern ethnic groups supplied much of the national manual labor and came to comprise a majority of the military, creating what some have called a "military ethnocracy". This reached its height with the coup d'état of Acholi General Tito Okello in July 1985, and came to a crashing end with the defeat of Okello and the Acholi-dominated army by the National Resistance Army led by now-President Yoweri Museveni in January 1986. In this paper, I analyse the reasons for the British choice of the Acholi as the martial race of Uganda. The more accommodative pre-colonial political system of the Acholi coupled with the positive remarks by early European explorers and the harsh natural and economic situations made the Acholi dominate the colonial army in Uganda. When the Acholi economy was merged with the international capitalist system the Acholi youth was naturally forced to join the army, the only salaried employment left for him.

Keywords: Acholi; Military; Martial race; Valour; Labour

Introduction

The British divided their Uganda Protectorate into two, namely labour and production zones. The division was based on presumed natural qualities of the people of northern Uganda and those of the south. The people of the north were regarded to be strong, muscular and hard working while the southern peoples were perceived as weak, lazy but intellectually superior. The accuracy of those accolades is debatable. There existed sub-zones in each of the two zones. In Northern Uganda, the people from Acholi-land became warriors; West-Nile communities were plantation workers while those from Teso were deemed fit for the police force. This paper analyses reasons for the British choice of the Acholi as the martial race of Uganda.

Pre-colonial history of the Acholi

"On the whole", wrote Lloyd (1908), "one would call them a fine race physically, but not warlike. Probably if they had a leader, they would make a fighting tribe". By 1903 when Rev. A. B. Lloyd arrived in northern Uganda, the Acholi were living under separate, distinct and independent chiefdoms. Politically the Rwot (Chief) was the top- most figure. He was assisted by a group of chiefs called Jagi (Singular, Jago). The Rwot of the Acholi did not have as much powers as the Kabaka of Buganda, Omukama of Bunyoro or even the Asantehene of the Asante. Land, for example, was not owned by the Rwot but it belonged to everybody in the kingdom and

the king was never a despot. Although the concept of “Acholi-hood” existed prior to the arrival of European colonisers, it was limited...It was not a fully formed, self-identified ethnicity until early twentieth century, at the height of colonial and missionary power (Atkinson, 1994).

In military terms, the Acholi chiefdoms never had a strong army although by 1900, there were more than 20,000 guns among them. Traditionally, they used clubs, bows and arrows, spears etc to defend their land from the aggression of their neighbors such as the Madi, Karamojong, Langi, Alur, Topech and Didinga. But when they started trading with Abyssinians, Arabs and Karimojong, the Acholi acquired guns. All males were called upon to take up a military duty whenever there was a threat. The fighters were easily mobilized by sounding the royal drum of each chiefdom. The army of pre-colonial Acholi was both garrisoned as situational depending on the period in question. Before the Acholi began to face the wrath of slave trade and imperialistic forces from the north, there were no major foreign threats hence no need for a standing army.

However, from about 1850 onwards, when the “Khartoumers,” as Arab slave dealers from Cairo were called, began to venture into Acholi-land with dangerous consequences, there was an abrupt change. All the leading states developed standing armies including Padibe, Palabek, Payira, Lamogi and Koc. The standing army of Padibe kingdom was the most powerful all over Acholi-land, thanks to the diplomacy and political maneuvers of Rwot Ogwok: In preparation for war with the chiefdom of Payira, Rwot Ogwok joined hands with the Kuturia, who came to trade, and raised a standing army called the Buchura. This was what made Padibe so powerful in the later half of the nineteenth century. By the time the British colonised Acholi-land, these standing armies were already in place and disarming them became a nagging task for the British. The major cause of the Lamogi rebellion of 1911-1912 was this policy of disarmament (Personal communication with Picho Oywelo, The Rwot of Ariya).

The Acholi “have no sultans of any consequence” claimed the explorer Speke (1863), one of the first European visitors to Acholi-land. He was referring to the poly-cephalous nature of the people. Although there were chiefs scattered all over the land, none wielded authority over the entire people and there was no political or any other system that brought all Acholi people under one realm.

Socially, the Acholi chiefdoms were highly egalitarian, like all other Lwo societies. Father Crazzolaro who spent more than thirty years in Acholiland and who has so far made the most detailed anthropological research on the Lwos described a Lwo man as follows:

He is frank, candid and pleasant in dealing with bonafide individuals who approach him; he likes to talk, joke and laugh. He is hospitable and generous to guests and visitors without distinction. He treats all as equals for there is no class distinction among them (Crazzolaro, 1950).

The dry seasons were for sports, games, courtship and visits. The humility and hospitality of the Acholi allowed everybody including strangers to feel at home. One European visitor was impressed. He wrote;

I arrived here today (January 13th, 1876) five days after Fatiko(Patriko)...A vast undulating Prairie of Jungle grass and scrub trees...The Shuuli (Acholi) are a very polite people, always ready with greetings And inquiries after one’s health (Baker, 1874).

It is amazing that about fifty years later, the Acholi who were “very polite and always ready with greetings,” became the warrior race of colonial Uganda.

The people now called Acholi had a rich variety of wild game roaming the land they occupied. This high population of wild animals is explained by the supportive savannah grassland type of vegetation coupled with favourable climatic conditions of high temperatures, clear sunshine, moderate humidity and high altitude. Sir Samuel Walker Baker once called this land, the paradise of Africa. “As we approached Patiko,” wrote Baker,

I gave orders that on the morrow all the troops were to appear in their best uniforms, as we were only six miles from Fatiko...On 6th February we started at 6:10 am. We were now in the country where I had been well known on my former exploration – in the paradise of Africa, at an elevation of 4,000 feet above the sea (Baker 1874).

Patiko or “Fatiko” as Samuel Baker called it is now a sub county in Gulu district. Baker himself benefited enormously from the rich wild life of the Acholi territory. The cheapest way to feed the two thousand people he travelled with was to hunt on a daily basis because the cattle population had been wiped out by slave raiders from Khartoum.

While hunting began primarily as a method of survival, in time, it became interlinked with other aspects of culture. Initiation ceremonies sometimes included a demonstration of hunting skills and prowess. Ceremonial hunting was also used to deepen a sense of collective identity. Until the rich game resources of the area were depleted in the last century, multi chiefdom hunts organised in the dry season were the largest scale undertakings engaged in pre-colonial Acholi. The rigours of these hunts prepared Acholi men for military services.

Later Samuel Walker Baker described the Acholi as people of “fine physique.” To him, “The men of Shooli (as the Acholi were called) are the best proportioned that I have ever seen; without the extreme height of the Shilluks or Dinkas, they are muscular and well knit, and generally their faces are handsome (Baker, 1874).”

The colonial Labour policy

“What I know the Colonial Government does think about West Nile” fumed the area MP, “is to keep it a human zoo, and get cheap labourers from it to work in places like Kakira, Kawolo (central Uganda) and where new industries will be started” . He went on, “I do believe that government does think that if industries are started in west Nile, the flow of labour from that district to other districts will be stopped” (Hansard 35, 3135-3136). Up to 1962, no industries, large plantations nor bituminized roads existed in northern Uganda.

The emigration of labour from Acholi-land to other parts of Uganda was not a surprise. The British had introduced taxes and monetized the economy: money was now the only medium of exchange. One was forced to work for a salary if they were to keep afloat the new economic system. Those like the Acholi who lacked investments in their regions were forced to migrate out of their regions. Their efforts developed the regions in which they worked more than where they hailed. As has been stated:

The uneven spread of colonial economic and infrastructure development between cash-crop and labour reserve regions ... introduced significant regional differentiation in access to cash crop production, trade, education, wage labour and state employment amongst different ethnic communities to produce sharper edges in the confrontation and competition of political tribalism (Kasfir, 1972).

Meanwhile the migrant labourers had to be closely monitored so that their tribal origins are never lost. Application forms for government employment included a question on the tribe of the prospective job seeker. Census forms requested similar information. The government intention was not only to encourage migrant

labour but also to ensure continuity of tribal systems. Thus, the protectorate Government laid the foundation for the controlled system of migrant labour by retribalising the unemployed ... It began to make the tribe rather than the individual the basic unit of social organization. Individual rights were subsumed under tribal obligations. In a very real sense, the tribe, in official parlance, at least, now owned the people (Kasfir, 1972).

In line with the above the colonial administration legalised a Vagrancy Ordinance in 1925, which restricted the migrant option to two: he could either work or he could return home to the "tribe". The migrant labour from Acholi-land was of low quality, mainly casual workers. They could only occupy low profile jobs because of the minimal education received or outright illiteracy. The first schools to open in Uganda were all in the southern half of the country especially Buganda. The Baganda became the most educated in Uganda and the most affluent since they occupied most of the senior non-military posts in both government and non-governmental enterprises. Considering that university degrees were the gateway to the most powerful positions and greatest economic opportunities, the fact that 40 percent of the 1698 persons who entered Makerere University before 1954 from all parts of east Africa were Baganda explains much of their predominance today.

Education continued to be dominated by the Baganda throughout the colonial period and up to today. Writing about the situation in the highest institution of learning in Uganda - Makerere University in the 1950s, Nelson Kasfir (1972) stated that while Baganda over representation has fallen, and continues to fall, they still provide over 50 percent of the Ugandan entrants as late as 1953. And that, of Uganda students abroad in the last quarter of 1960, 143 were sponsored by the then Kabaka's government, as compared to only 106 sponsored by all the rest of the districts and kingdoms of Uganda. This imbalance in education meant that the Acholi, and other communities of the north, were to continue working in the central regions but occupying low key posts for a very long time.

Even when cash crops were introduced among the Acholi like elsewhere in Uganda, the situation did not alter much. The natural conditions in Acholi-land especially East Acholi could only favour annual crops like cotton and tobacco. These two crops are labour intensive yet harvested only once a year. The north was left to grow an annual cash crop cotton whose returns were over a long period of time and at low prices. This marked the beginning of disparity between the north and the south as far as economic development is concerned, and prompted many Acholi men to enroll in the army.

The Acholi were still at a disadvantage compared to the southern communities who grew coffee, pyrethrum and tea among others. But the Acholi had no choice because unlike before they were now confronted with a capitalist system in which the economy was highly monetized. Therefore, the young Acholi had only two alternatives: to get a job elsewhere or to grow cotton. When cotton prices began to drop after world war two, the situation was even more precarious. The Acholi were left with one choice: to look for salaried employment which meant traveling to the south where they were despised and insulted. An area member of parliament noted that: Acholi District is poor, it has remained poor for a long time for various reasons; it is far away from the cattle trade and money circulation. There is lack of employment in the district. This has been illustrated in many ways. In the past, we did get a lot of people coming down here (Buganda) in search of work. Most of them go back worse than when they came ... Acholi District is one of those areas in Uganda which has lagged behind economically (Mamdani, 1984).

As noted above Acholi District lacked employment opportunities in industries, plantations and state enterprises. What was readily available was the army, to which young Acholi men went in large numbers.

According to Karugire (1980), The bulk of the Protectorates armed services were recruited from Northern Uganda, particularly Acholi, Lango and West Nile in that order of numerical representation. This became the established order throughout the colonial period. And it was not long before the colonial government invented a rationalization for building this ethnically unbalanced army: the people of northern Uganda were the ‘martial tribes’ of the Protectorate, and since the African soldiers required in the colonial army were those of strong physique, stamina, speed of reaction and upright bearing, the answer was tailor made: recruit from northern Uganda.

“On recruiting safaris we went for the chaps who were tough and strong and ran quicker than anyone else. It was a terrible mistake” . Those were words of Major Iain Grahame, a British officer serving with the 4th Battalion of the King’s African Rifles in Uganda as reported by

Hugh (1983). What the army officer is regretting here is that they preferred people of valor, courage and physical strength rather than level of education. Most Acholi recruits were men of physique and height relative to those of other regions (Personal communication with Ret. Major Anywar in Gulu).

Conclusion

The British did not wish to encourage any degree of unity among the different communities of Uganda. Keeping them at variance meant that there would be no nationalist movement for independence. Hence the British invested only in what they regarded as production zone. The labour zone was only to supply the production zone with man power. Until independence, the British established no single investment among the Acholi. The effect was that within a short time the demand for labour in Buganda caused wage inflation and stimulated a flow of migrant labour from Kitgum, Gulu and parts of West Nile, Northern Province. However, due to limited educational facilities, most Acholi could not get salaried jobs other than those of the armed forces. With time it became the job of the Acholi.

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