

War Reparations in Northern Uganda: Interrogating the Role of the Acholi War Debt Claimants' Association

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Abstract

The Acholi War Debt Claimants Association, the people's initiative to claim for war reparations in northern Uganda, was formed in 2005 before the final peace talks that took place in Juba, South Sudan. The state did not have a transitional justice policy until 2019. Thus, the Association became the primary voice for Acholi claimants who lost their livestock in the 20-year insurrection. Primary data on the Association was assembled in 2011, 2016 and 2022, enabling me to follow its trajectory over a decade. In this article, I show why cattle and goats were such important resources for Acholi people, and how the Association – a non-state agency – worked to process claims for their replacement. To the extent that these claims were met, compensation was given in (invisible) money rather than (tangible) livestock, which engendered opacity, suspicion and conflicts between the Association and government, and within the Association itself, leading to new conflicts.

Keywords: War reparations, Acholi War Debt Claimants Association, livestock compensation, transitional justice, northern Uganda

Introduction

The Acholi people's demand for compensation for their resources lost in the twenty-year war started way back in the early 1990s, long before the *Joseph Kony* insurgency came to an end. But to date, almost thirty years later, the matter is yet to be concluded. The protracted insurgency which started in 1987 (Gesseldorf et al. 2012, Gersony 1997) devastated the livestock resource base of the Acholi people so badly that it deprived the majority of the population of their life-long savings – their cows. The Acholi kept livestock (cows, goats, sheep, and chickens) as a form of storage for their wealth although they were not traditionally among the cattle-keeper communities in Uganda. Taking away their cows therefore left them with no fallback position. This not only made them poorer but also worsened the economic disparity which already existed between Acholi-land (and the north in general) and the rest of Uganda (GoU 2007). That might explain why the international development agencies which played a big role in the peace talks in Juba, South Sudan, between the rebels and the government of Uganda, advocated for the people to be compensated for violations of their rights (Amnesty International 2008). Hence, the agreements signed in Juba between 2006 and 2008, specifically mentioned that government was to pay reparations. However, the agreements were marked by 'significant flaws and fell short of ensuring prompt and effective

reparations for the victims' (Amnesty International 2008:5). Additionally, the government of Uganda lacked a transitional justice policy; hence, there was no concrete plan or mechanism for implementing the provisions on reparations. It should be noted here that Acholi War Debt Claimants Association (AWDCA), hereafter referred to as the Association, was formed in 2005, much earlier than the peace talks or the agreements. By the time the peace agreements obliged the government to pay for reparations regardless of whether the violations had been committed by the rebels or government forces, the Association's claims system to demand for restitutive justice was already in place.

In this article, therefore, I have not focused so much on transitional justice in its broader scope. Instead, I focus on the role the Association played in the pursuit of compensation claims it made on behalf of the war victims in Acholi subregion. These are individual victims who lost their livestock during the twenty years of war between Joseph Kony and the government of Uganda. Any reference to transitional justice will simply be for post-war theoretical contextualisation.

I examine the circumstances that led to the formation of the Association (AWDCA) – a local initiative that did not involve government or donors, but which mobilised the community to demand for their rights as victims of war. It established itself as a link through which Acholi people could claim for their lost resources from the state. I show how, in spite of its internal weaknesses, the Association eventually became the main infrastructure for processing war reparation claims in Acholi-land; and how cattle came to stand for lost resources in a land where livestock rearing is not the primary economic activity. But I also show why and how such an important tool that had achieved so much ended up engendering new conflicts in post war Acholi-land contrary to the intended purpose.

Background

I had just resumed data collection for this article when the government announced its renewed commitment to compensate war debt claimants with an extra one hundred and fifty billion shillings (UGX 150 bn.) in additional war reparations funds for Acholi, Lango, and Teso subregions. The first fifty billion shillings (UGX 50bn.) was launched by president Yoweri Museveni in Lira in March, 2022 (Emwamu & Muron 2022). The unique situation was that for the first time since government started paying war reparations in 1994 (Olaka 2009), claimants were not going to be paid through their Association. Each claimant was required to fill the yellow form issued by his/her Local Government, and to have a bank account so the money would be deposited directly into his/her personal account. All previous payments had been effected through the Association.

It should be noted that in spite of its internal weaknesses, the war debt claimants' association in Acholi-land had hitherto made its mark as the 'official' voice of the people on war reparations both in the population and in relation to government. A number of small groups from different parts of Acholi had attempted to engage the state on war reparations but they had all either withered away or rebranded into something else, leaving the Association unrivalled. Over time, the Association had become so synonymous with war reparations in the subregion that all matters to do with compensation for war victims in Acholi were either directly addressed to or negotiated through it. So, I wanted to find out whether this was still the case and how they had reached that position.

The first time I visited the Association offices in Gulu town in 2011, the new committee chaired by Eng. Noah Opwonya had been in office for only one year having overthrown Norbert Adyera and his team at the end of 2009 after accusing them of corruption, nepotism, and

mismanagement. But in spite of the seeming internal divisions within the Association, the government had gone ahead to release the second instalment of the compensation funds to them. Did this mean that the infrastructure of the Association established by the pioneer leadership was solid enough to warrant government trust to that extent?

When I finally met Adyera, the founder chairman, I was surprised he was a middle-aged man. Having interacted with Eng. Opwonya's group of fairly elderly people in their late 60s or early 70s, I had expected Adyera to be in a similar age range, but no. He told me in an interview that when he and six others initiated the Association in 2005, he was in his early 30s and did not even have any cows to claim. So, what motivated him, I asked. He said he initiated the Association to actualise his father's dream. His father, who had a terminal illness and was bed-ridden at the time, asked him to organise the victims so they would not be cheated out of their lost livestock resources. Adyera told me that his father had viewed the organisation as a bridge (peace-building) between the government and the people of Acholi at a time when there was a lot of mistrust between the two. In his writing, Gersony (1997) points out how the people blamed the loss of their livestock on the army, while the army was convinced the people collaborated with the rebels. Acholi War Debt Claimants Association was finally initiated at a public meeting held at Gulu Public Primary School on July 9, 2005 with Adyera as its first chairman. He stressed that the pioneer team were so committed and prepared to volunteer; they worked for free to ensure the Association took off.

He said that as pioneers, they were convinced the benefit to the community would not stop at being compensated for their lost resources. It would also help rebuild their self-esteem as Acholi people, which was important in motivating them to fight poverty and food insecurity in the immediate aftermath of the war rather than depend on the ever-dwindling donor handouts. The government, on the other hand, he said, would benefit by, among other things, winning back the confidence of the Acholi people, especially those who were convinced their livestock had been 'looted' deliberately in order to impoverish them.

On his part, the pioneer secretary of the Association explained the difficulties they had to endure at the beginning. He narrated how the state had viewed them with suspicion and was not willing to cooperate with them. At the same time, no foreign agency funded their activities. So, unlike other community-based organisations at the time, the Association did not access any donor funding. Even the letter they wrote to the president in 2006 appealing for a negotiated settlement remained unanswered for a full year. It was not until they went to court that he finally responded. Adyera emphasised that it was their spirit of voluntarism and sheer commitment that motivated them to continue the struggle. In the end, they were able to establish an infrastructure within the Association that enabled them to mobilise and organise claimants from the grassroots in the entire Acholi subregion to claim for their rights.

In the next sections we examine and try to make sense of the Association's role in the struggle for war reparations for Acholi people in view of the absence of a transitional justice policy.

War Reparations and Transitional Justice

In the context of transitional justice, the concept of war reparations comes as part of the process of peace building aimed at sustainable post war economic recovery (van Boven 2009). The theory holds that when administered in conjunction with other elements of transitional justice such as a truth and reconciliation commission, reparations can foster peace and development, especially

when they address the economic imbalances that may have contributed to the conflict in the first place (Nkurunziza 2008).

In the case of Acholi-land, there were claims of socio-economic inequality as the reason for the war, but also outcry for compensation for livestock resources lost during the war. But amid all this, there was no policy on reparations or transitional justice. Thus, even after the government committed itself to pay for reparations in the Accountability and Reconciliation Agreement of 2007 and the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) component in 2008 during the peace talks in Juba, there was no policy or legal framework to operationalise it.

Conventionally, reparations refer to redress given to victims of serious or gross human rights violations or abuses. They are treated as an integral part of the transitional justice mechanism following a violent conflict either at inter-state or intra-state level. Literature on the subject indicates that reparations paid out to individuals or communities for violations of their rights are guaranteed by international principles on human rights and international humanitarian law (Schwager 2005; van Boven 2009; Zegveld 2003) although politics ultimately determines the final action (Moffett 2017). In this article we shall only focus on the stolen animal resources. Hence, we shall pursue the right of the citizens whose animals were taken or stolen during the war to claim for reparations. The data obtained from the field indicates that while some of the animals were taken by rebels or government troops with a promise to compensate them after the war, a significant portion of the livestock was simply stolen by men in uniform or rustled by people who were assumed to be from Karamoja.

Transitional justice refers to the ways countries emerging from periods of conflict and repression address large-scale or systematic human rights violations that the normal justice system will not be able to provide an adequate response to (TRAC FM/ WIPC July 2020). It consists of processes and mechanisms aimed at three types of justice: retributive, restorative, and distributive as a means of reconciliation in the context of post-conflict reconstruction (Kasapas 2020). The five forms of reparations – restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition (van Boven 2009; Zegveld 2003) – can all be mapped along the three types of justice.

Within international law, reparations are part of the responsibilities of those who have violated the rights of others in a conflict or war. Both Schwager (2005) and Magarrell (2007) stress that under international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and domestic laws of individual countries, the individual is a bearer of rights (rights holder); hence, if his/her rights are infringed upon during an armed conflict, he/she is entitled to get compensation for the loss resulting from the violation. However, individual countries have been ‘reluctant to entitle, explicitly and in general, victims of violations ... to claim reparations’ (Zegveld 2003: 497). The challenge, Zegveld opines, is that humanitarian law treaties ‘do not expressly envisage causes of action for victims in national or international law, so victims are hardly able to exercise their rights’ (ibid. 497). They use the technicality as an excuse to deny victims their rights; and, as already observed, this is further compounded by the absence of a permanent enforcement mechanism at the international level (Terzieva 2019; Zegveld 2003).

In the case of Uganda, the country did not have a transitional justice policy until 2019 (TRAC FM/ WIPC July 2020). Hence, in spite of the fact that the government had committed itself under the Juba peace agreements in 2007 and 2008 to pay reparations, it had no enabling policy or law to fulfil this. It was only when the Association sued the government that the president finally responded to their letter by instructing the Attorney General to negotiate an out of court settlement.

A few cases where collective demands for reparations have been made similarly include the victims of the massacres in Herzegovina in 2014, and the unfair detentions of Iraqi citizens in 2016. The two cases involved the Netherlands armed forces and Danish soldiers respectively. In both cases, collective justice was demanded of foreign powers. Similarly, they were not asking for restorative justice because that would be impossible in both cases given the foreign elements as perpetrators in the claims. In the rulings in favour of the victims in both the Netherlands and in Denmark, the issues revolved around the armies of the two countries having been involved in violations of the rights of the indigenous people in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Iraq respectively—countries where they had been deployed as peace keepers (Terzieva 2019).

Whereas the two cases largely highlight claims for retributive justice, the case of Burundi where military coups were experienced almost every two years between 1966 and 2006, is different. The local population did not take the initiative to ask for reparations; but neither did the government take the lead. Hence, the discontent continued and so did the revolutions. According to Nkurunziza (2008), reparations can play a big role in peace-building, especially when they correct economic imbalances that may have contributed to the conflict in the first place. He opines that had the state taken the initiative to address the imbalances using reparations, there would have been less political upheaval. In contrast to these examples, the Acholi reparations case was rather unique as a non-state bottom-up initiative that filled a gap that neither the state nor the international community had planned to act upon.

The implementation of transitional justice in northern Uganda has been rather slow if not lacking (Macdonald 2019). For example, the government was reluctant to implement compensation for lost cattle, just as it was reluctant to put the policy on transitional justice in place. (The policy was only approved by cabinet in June 2019). Instead of working on the policy, the government tended to apply ad-hoc methods by representing transitional justice and war reparations as covered by the projects that development assistance provided. The main project was the Peace, Recovery, and Development Plan (PRDP), but this would not respond to the individual victims' concerns; and according to Magarrell (2007) such projects cannot be considered as part of reparations programme.

Although 'reparative options' in transitional justice include 'collective, symbolic and other forms such as social services for the affected communities' (Macdonald 2019: 245), symbolic reparations such as erecting memorials or infrastructure projects are not targeted at individual victims whose form of reparation requires lists of names, number of animals lost, and the value attached. Moreover, these material resources can be converted into cash that can in turn be invested in other resources other than the ones lost, to facilitate faster economic recovery. During the negotiations with the Attorney General in 2008, a monetary value was assigned for each animal: a cow at UGX 600,000, and a goat at UGX 150,000. These were later revised to UGX 1 million for a cow and UGX 250,000 for a goat. Thus, throughout, compensation has been paid in the form of money, which is far less visible than the living animals. As a consequence, it easily evoked speculation and suspicion; and as we shall see, conflicts quickly emerged within the Association itself, and between the Association and the government; sometimes culminating in unconstitutional change of leadership.

Research Tools and Data Collection

My initial object was to investigate what appeared to be the acrimonious relationship reported in the media between AWDCA and the government regarding reparation claims. I wanted to

understand the compensation delays that seemed to drag on endlessly. However, I knew that collecting data on such a sensitive theme would not be an easy task not only because of the political nature of war reparations, but also the complex accusations regarding the disappearance of Acholi livestock in which the army had been named. So, I decided to shift the focus of the study to the role played by Acholi War Debt Claimants Association in claiming for war reparations for victims of the war. I knew that while government officials were likely to be suspicious of the motive for my study, in the eyes of the Acholi community I stood the risk of being mistaken for a state agent trying to spy on the authenticity of people's compensation claims. So, in line with Burawoy (2009), I made it a point to explain to all my potential and actual interlocutors about myself—that I was a lecturer at Gulu University and a PhD student who was only conducting research for the purpose of seeking to understand the challenges in the post war recovery processes in order to guide policy makers. One of the advantages I had was that many of the local government officials (both councillors and civil servants) in Gulu district at the time were my current or former students. This greatly worked in my favour as those who knew me quite often introduced me to those that I had not met.

I collected field data by recording my field notes in my notebooks and took photographs and voice recordings using my smart phone. And in line with the Research Ethics Guidelines issued by Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST 2014), I assured my respondents that I would treat all the information they gave me with maximum confidentiality. I promised not to divulge their identity unless they gave me permission to do so. However, for officers of government, I decided I would mention their positions, while for the Association chairs, they agreed that I could use their real names.

There was another practical challenge. My initial field visits took place in August 2011 when the war had been officially over for about five years, but many Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) were yet to relocate back to the villages where they lived before the war. It was still risky to traverse the countryside. Hence, I decided to concentrate my data collection efforts in urban and semi-urban areas only. I only went deeper into the villages when I went back for the second phase of data collection from May 2016 and later, from March 2022.

I started collecting additional primary data for this article in March 2022 using qualitative methods which included ten in-depth interviews, four non-structured interviews, one focus group discussion, and non-participant observation. In-depth interviews were mainly with key informants; except for the previous and current chairpersons of the Association, members of the executive of the Association provided most of their data through a focus group discussion. My observation centred on livestock resources as compensation for war crimes and related activities in selected homesteads. Although sheep are important for some traditional rituals, they remain very rare in Acholi domestic economy.

Primary data was obtained from 21 participants. Eleven key informants were purposively sampled to represent both eastern and western Acholi as follows: the two Association chairpersons, the pioneer secretary, the chairman of the compensation committee, a politician, three Local Government staff, and three elders. Unstructured interviews involved the LC 1 chairperson of Paduny village in Awach sub county and three recent beneficiaries of reparations giving a total of four. Six members of the executive council were involved in a focus group discussion. Politicians were represented by the Gulu Resident District Commissioner; while the Local Government technical team was represented by the District Production Officer (DPO), Gulu district, the Coordinator for National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), Amuru, and the District Veterinary Officer (DVO), Amuru. The three elders included a retired teacher from Awach sub-

county who was currently operating a *polota* [small shop] in Gulu town, a university don working at Gulu University, and a *Rwot* (clan chief).

The DPO was chosen because of his long service and wealth of experience in veterinary services in the subregion. He had served in various capacities related to animal husbandry since he graduated from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at Makerere University, in Uganda, in the late 1970s. At the time I met him for this study in 2011, he told me he was looking forward to his retirement which was due in two years. Between them, the NAADS coordinator and the DVO of Amuru met many ordinary farmers both in crop and animal husbandry in the course of their day-to-day duties and responsibilities; hence most of the data about agricultural activities in western Acholi could be captured through the two officers. The three elders represented different shades of opinion in the region. All the respondents were men, as resources and wealth are culturally in the male domain in Acholi as is the case in many African cultural systems. Even the Association executives did not include women. So, I did not consider this to be a limitation.

I also used secondary data from newspapers and other records, including online resources. Being a political issue, war reparations have continually been discussed both in the media and through other forums. Although AWDCA compensation claims have been perpetually treated with suspicion by state agencies and although the Association is embroiled in internal wrangles over money and leadership, which have greatly weakened its influence, the Association remains the ‘official’ mouthpiece of Acholi on war related compensations. As I continued to write these pages in 2022, both print and digital media were still carrying occasional reports of the ongoing controversies around the Association and livestock compensation.

‘It is the Victims who Asked for Cows’

The prioritisation of livestock (cows) in the demand for compensation put to the government by AWDCA may seem surprising given that cattle-rearing was not the primary economic activity of the Acholi. So, why did an area where cattle-keeping was not the primary livelihood activity decide to concretise its reparation claims in terms of livestock? Assets such as vehicles, machinery, and even human lives lost in the war did not feature in the Association’s negotiations with the government for compensation. This is one of the questions I put to the executive committee members in the focus group discussion. The members revealed that priority was given to livestock because of its significance in the socio-cultural as well as the economic life of an Acholi family. But one of them put it slightly differently, thus:

It is the victims who asked for cows. They wanted to replace their animals which they lost so painfully at the hands of the Karamojong rustlers. The campaign of stealing our livestock was so swift that within the first three years of the insurgency all our cows were gone. By 1990 there were no more cows in Acholi. Some people were even injured or killed trying to protect their livestock. That is why many were even prepared to testify in court.

On my first visit to AWDCA offices in Gulu town in August 2011, as a follow up on interviews I had conducted with the Gulu District Production Officer and the NAADS Coordinator of Amuru district, I put this question to AWDCA chair. By this time, Norbert Adyera had been replaced by Engineer Noah Opwonya. In his response, Opwonya was a little more elaborate. He

explained the multi-purpose nature of the cow in Acholi cultural and socio-economic settings. In his view, the term, *dyang* (cow) was merely used in the negotiations as a generic term to refer to all categories of livestock as well as other resources people lost as a result of the war. Thus, the use of the term did not negate the existence of other types of resources that were lost in the war. Both from the literature and field data, I learned that cows had served and continued to serve multiple functions in the Acholi community. Girling (1960), Gelsdorf et al. (2012) and Gersony (1997), among others, all comment on the significance of the cow as a mark of status and wealth among the Acholi in addition to its social and cultural functions in the performance of rites and rituals.

From my field observations, the cow and livestock in general had a new function in Acholi-land as a means of promoting economic enterprise and private investment – which had expanded the scope of economic activities in the rural setting. Originally, livestock was largely kept for social and cultural functions as explained below, or as a form of banking, a store of wealth. However, the disaggregation of the economy into specialised sectors resulting from semi-urban conditions created in Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camps during the war has seen the introduction and expansion of butcher shops in all small towns and trading centres in Acholi. Households no longer have to own livestock to enjoy meat or milk on their menu on regular basis. Even if an individual or household owns some livestock, they can now purchase meat in small amounts from the nearest meat shop for consumption without having to slaughter a whole animal or go hunting wild game each time they want to enjoy meat. The political independence of South Sudan in 2011 also offered other possibilities. It had opened up new market opportunities for livestock for the people of northern Uganda, and Acholi in particular.

Other explanations lay in the cultural functions of livestock. In their study on motivations for leaving IDP camps after twenty years of the LRA insurgency, Whyte et al. (2013) found that livestock were generally at the centre of many socio-cultural activities including celebrations, fines, funerals and rituals. For example, a number of youths I interviewed in 2011, and later for my PhD study in 2016, told me they could no longer afford to marry, let alone hold wedding ceremonies because of poverty, which they blamed on the depletion of livestock consequent to the twenty-year insurrection. In an in-depth interview at about the same period, mzee Otim, one of the elders at Awach trading centre, confirmed the narrative when he disclosed that loss of cows and other forms of livestock resources during the war had made people so poor, they could no longer afford to pay bridewealth. Marriages, he said, had thus become a luxury that many young people in Acholi-land could no longer afford. Mzee Otim further said that instead of going through the traditional customs of marriage, lovers now simply moved in together and started producing children without any regard for the heavy customary fines associated with such behaviour.

I also observed that although actions such as elopement, cohabiting and having children out of wedlock have become widespread in Acholi land, traditionally they are still considered immoral and attract cultural fines. The fines including *poro* or *luk* are paid in form of livestock whose value is largely determined by the elders. When a cohabiting couple produces children before introducing themselves formally to the woman's parents, the man has to pay *luk pa latin*, a fine of a goat for each of the first two children, in addition to any other fines and related cultural rites as may be determined by the elders (Porter 2016).

It should also be noted that in addition to its marriage-related significance, livestock is also required at different stages of the funeral rituals. For example, a goat must be slaughtered for people who dig the grave regardless of who is to be buried there; one cow or more has to be sacrificed at the last funeral rites, depending on the status of the deceased persons. One of the

Rwodi (clan chiefs) in Pader district in eastern Acholi told me in an interview that he had to sacrifice a bull and two cows to celebrate the last funeral rites of his late father, which also marked his own accession to the throne. Without such livestock, he said, such a ceremony could not have been held. There was another *Rwot* in Paicho sub county, Gulu district, who was feeling psychologically tormented because he had so far failed to raise a cow, some goats, and a sheep, to be able to exhume the remains of his late wife in order to accord her a befitting burial. He said that she had died during the war and had to be buried in the internally displaced people's camp at the trading centre, but that he had since failed to transfer her remains to his own ancestral land, as many often struggled to do (Meinert & Whyte 2013; Jahn 2016). He lamented that it was not only psychological but also social torture to feel so inadequate among his own subjects.

Then, of course, there are other rituals such as *mat-oput* which is performed to reconcile individuals, families, clans, or communities in the case of violence that ends up in death. Without livestock, such aspects of Acholi culture cannot continue to be respected. The lack of livestock in the aftermath of the war, therefore, has both socio-cultural and economic significance. The implication is that the absence of livestock, especially cows, has the potential to alter the Acholi cultural traditions and practices; hence, the importance attached to cattle in the war reparations claims.

The position of cattle in Acholi culture was so special that villages had a specially designated place called *ulet*, away from the settled areas, where cows were taken for grazing instead of leaving each family to graze on its own land. So, just as they had the communal *kitar*, a large tract of land away from the village for crop production, so did they have the *ulet* for livestock, especially, cows. The principle used in the establishment of *kitar* and *ulet* was the same – that families should be able to graze their animals on lands that were far from the gardens of crops to minimise conflicts that were likely to arise when cows or goats stray into crop gardens of neighbours or relatives.

As already mentioned above, cows were also used as a measure and store of wealth and status; hence, the presence and number of cows in a family indicated its socio-economic status. This was further enhanced by the new economic possibilities that gave cattle a new significance after the war. For example, some development agencies that came to rural Acholi when peace returned promoted the idea of using oxen to encourage peasant farmers to plough larger portions of land in order to produce more, both for sale (income) and for food (food security). In a key informant interview, the resident district commissioner told me the subregion was likely to become the food basket of the whole country if its small-scale farmers could increase their acreage using the new technologies being introduced to them.

Thus, both from the empirical data as well as the literature, the multi-purpose nature of livestock in Acholi is clearly demonstrated. They are not only of economic but of cultural and social value as well, which goes to explain why cows became the Association's rallying call for reparations.

Visible and Invisible Resources

It should be noted that while AWDCA claimed for war reparations in the form of livestock, the compensation made by the government was not made in form of physical animals. Claimants were paid the equivalent in money terms instead, which made the expected cows quite invisible. At the beginning, the money was paid through the Association's bank account, and the Association would then pay it out to individual claimants in cash. So, it was not easy to see any evidence of the

compensation payments made; but at least, people would know who had been paid. However, this became even more complex in the most recent payments launched in March 2022, because the money was paid directly into the claimants' individual bank accounts by the government, which made it even more invisible. When I visited the LC I chair for Paromo village, Gweng-diya parish, Awach Sub County, after the 2022 payments, he told me he had endorsed claim forms (the yellow form) for ten people in his village but he could not tell who of them had been paid unless those who had been paid told him themselves. Even if he knew, he could not tell how much they had received or how they had used their compensation funds.

On further probing, the LC chairperson told me it would have been better if the claimants had been given cows directly to replace their lost animals because in such a case, it would have been easy to see how many people have been compensated and to replace the livestock in the land. The invisibility of the compensation also made it difficult to know how much had been paid out to bona fide claimants and how much of the funds had probably been misappropriated by officials or embezzled. This invisibility, therefore, greatly fertilised the internal suspicions and mistrust between members and executive officers of the Association on matters of fairness, accountability and transparency, which partly fuelled the coups and counter coups within the Association. Such was the case when Eng. Opwonya organised a come-back campaign after being overthrown by John Kiza Nyeko in 2016 (Labeja 2016). Each time the government released some instalment of the cattle compensation funds, the suspicions and mistrust within the Association heightened and sometimes ended in the leadership being replaced.

During the latest phase of my data collection which started in March 2022, my research assistant helped me to uncover some of the invisibility. Having identified some of the people in the area who had received funds from the latest release of 2022, she linked me to three recipients who were willing to participate in my study. Of the three, one who had claimed for 46 cows said he had only been given UGX 4.9 million; another one who had claimed for 30 cows had received only UGX 2.1 million; while the third one who had claimed for 60 cows had been given UGX 5.9 million. From the expected total of UGX 136 million for the 136 cows for the three, only UGX 12.9 million (about 9.5%) had been received. But none of them knew who else had received, what they had received, the criteria used to decide who receives or how much they should be paid. And for those who had not received, no one had any idea when or how much they should expect for the next phase. The invisibility coupled with uncertainty nurtured right from the very first payments, created more suspicion and mistrust, which made it very easy for members to be manipulated and mobilised against the Association leadership.

The economic significance of translating the cows into bank accounts, however, was that as invisible resources the money could now be invested in resources other than cows, particularly so, given the expanded scope of economic activities available in post war Acholi-land. Indeed, when he was officially launching the UGX 150 billion reparation funds in March 2022 (for Acholi, Lango, and Teso sub-regions), the president of Uganda echoed this. He advised thus, 'Don't use the money to get cows and marry more women...You must go for agriculture but also for the pocket ...' (Emwamu & Muron 2022). The advice provides the logic for the government decision to pay war debt claimants in the form of invisible resources given the expanded economic activities available in post war Acholi. The main challenge, however, was that concealing the compensation in invisible bank account deposits not only provided fertile ground for mistrust and suspicion which engendered new forms of conflict, but also the possibility of not utilising the funds resourcefully.

Role of the Association: Analysing State-claimants' Relations

When I met the then chairperson of the Association in 2011, Eng. Opwonya, he told me about the processes involved in compiling the lists of claimants.

The register contained all the necessary details about a claimant: his physical address, location in terms of village, parish, sub county, county, and district. It also contained the claim(s), the period (year) when he lost the property, the circumstances under which he lost it, and the monetary value which was attached to the claim(s), among other things.

But he stressed that the above process was not as simple as it may sound. It required human resources prepared to take up the responsibility without expecting monetary compensation; the Association did not have any external source of funding that would enable it to pay. Other logistics required to accomplish the stated tasks included transport for the voluntary enumerators, counter books in which to take and keep the records and secure storage for the recorded material. He stressed that nothing was taken for granted. The data obtained from each claimant had to be authenticated and certified by the Local Council officers in the areas where the claims were made to ensure that those making such claims were telling the truth. Once these claims had been verified, they were taken to the Association's head office in Gulu town where they were entered into the computer by the Association's secretary and thereafter stored both in hard and soft copy.

However, much as those conducting the registration exercise were volunteering, minimal financial resources were required to facilitate them to do the job effectively. When I asked this same question to the pioneer chair, Norbert Adyera who was now out of office, he confirmed the information as correct.

The next question to Eng Opwonya was how he and his colleagues got the money they spent in their operations. To this question, he explained:

Unlike other organisations involved in post war development projects, our Association never received any donor aid. The money we rely on is the small contributions that come from the members themselves in form of membership fees. There are people who have accused us of not being fair to those who lost property but do not have money to pay membership fee. There is nothing we can do about that. To be a member, one must pay.

Although interviewed differently and a few years apart, the two chairmen were also in agreement on the issue of membership.

Regarding accusations that officials of the Association were misusing the funds for their own personal benefit, Eng Opwonya complained:

The government does not even appreciate that we are doing their work for them. We have provided the infrastructure for handling war reparations which has saved them a lot of time and resources, but instead of being grateful to us they are simply treating us as if we are thieves.

He further explained that AWDCA was not just a small organisation for Gulu district but rather for the entire Acholi sub-region; and that its reparations infrastructure system had been certified even by state officials who were fighting them.

However, despite the impressive picture of the Association painted by the chair, a section of the members agreed with government officials who accused the leadership of embezzlement and corruption. The production officer, the veterinary officer and the NAADS officer in separate interviews each pointed out how the committee had been accused of misappropriating funds so far paid by the government. The accusations centred on the Association officials distributing less money than what had been released to them by the government and sharing the rest among themselves instead. They were also accused of selective payment whereby they only paid their relatives and friends, leaving the rest of the members in the cold. Thus, whereas the records infrastructure could be praised, the payments system appeared as a point of concern.

When I put these accusations to the focus group discussion that I held with the Association officials under Eng. Opwonya, the executives exonerated themselves of the embezzlement charges pointing out that as an Association they did not benefit from any form of external funding. Yet they faced many challenges including expenses such as rent for office space for all the years the Association was in existence, allowances to the executives who sacrificed a lot of their time and other resources to serve the members' interests, volunteers who collected data in the field, and transport costs both within the region and outside. I observed that although they tried to justify themselves, they did not want to put a figure on the amount they had paid themselves or what they spent in 'office expenses.' It was also clear that if the allegations were true, then they were committing the very same mistakes for which they had overthrown the pioneer leadership. But there could be no solid proof without audit reports. In fact, Eng. Opwonya's team was being accused of bribing high ranking government officials so that they would not be audited so there would be no proof in case anyone sued the Association.

That aside, the Association officials were also accused of bribing government officials in a bid to influence them to release more funds faster. But on interrogating this claim, I found that the process involved the Ministry of Defence officials who could not be easily accessed by the Association. Hence, even if the bribes were paid, they couldn't have solved the problem of delays given that the delays were largely blamed on the military. The chairman said he was certain that the defence department was only interested in finding fault rather than resolving the problem. He said that each time he went to the defence department at their Bombo military headquarters to check on the progress, they would tell him that his figures were too high and they always insisted on conducting field visits to verify the figures at the grassroots.

But the public also had its own version. There was a strong sentiment expressed by all the three elders I interviewed at different times that linked the delays to public criticism of the army's discipline in the early days of the insurgency. They said that the story circulating in the Acholi communities was that government troops had participated in stealing Acholi cows directly or indirectly and that soldiers had collaborated with Karamojong cattle rustlers by buying the stolen cows from them. Mzee Okello, one of the elders in Awach who lost cattle to thefts in the early days of the insurgency, told me in an interview that it was possible the army was acrimonious to the Association and the Acholi in general because people had come out openly to point out their grievances against them. He said that some elders came out to state that they had seen army trucks moving with cows towards Karuma bridge. The bridge is the main gateway into Acholi from central region; hence, taking the cows towards the bridge means exporting them from Acholi sub-

region. This account matches what appears in the research works of Gelsdorf et al. (2012) and of Weeks (2002) ten years earlier.

When Gelsdorf and his research team interviewed the army commander in the area in 2012, he denied that the army was involved, although he acknowledged that some errant soldiers may have got involved at individual level. He promised that punitive measures would be taken. But there is no evidence of any action taken against any military suspects on the matter either before or since.

On the other hand, the mistrust between the state and Acholi war debt claimants appears to have been rekindled when the government introduced new conditions which required all claimants to register afresh through the Local Government structures in readiness for the UGX 150 bn launched in March 2022. The LC I chair of Paduny in Awach told me that the 'yellow form' issued by the district LG was like starting the registration process afresh because those without it were deemed not to have registered even if they appeared in the original Association registers. So, he said, it is like the role of the Association has been tactfully overlooked and taken over by the government. But retired Justice Galdino, who chaired the newly established Compensation Committee, disagreed with this interpretation although he acknowledges that claimants from Omoro district who had not registered on the yellow form had been left out of the official lists forwarded for the March, 2022 payments.

Galdino said that in spite of the financial challenges facing the Association, he had had fruitful engagements with the Attorney General since his appointment on 16 November 2020. One was that the two sides agreed to tour the sub region in 2021 to meet the registered claimants. Although the Attorney General and team never showed up, the tour had gone ahead as planned. He said they started in Kitgum district in April and finished in Omoro district in October, which enabled them to verify all the claimants registered by the Association in Acholi sub region. However, when the Attorney General's list came out, both Adyera, the pioneer chair, and Justice Galdino alleged that it contained ghosts (Independent 2022) even as it was short of 4, 320 genuine claimants.

He further explained that when the government technical team issued unrealistic conditions that all claimants must indicate their Tax Identification Numbers on the newly introduced yellow form (Okumu 2022), it was his committee that protested on behalf of the Association; and when the new claimants' lists were displayed at the sub counties in March 2022, it was his committee that highlighted the anomalies on those lists such as ghost claimants (Independent 2021). They also contained under-age people who cannot have been born during the time the cows were stolen (1986-1989); many names were also missing as already observed, and the number of cows listed had a shortfall of 192, 546 (out of 436,811). In sum, in spite of the long delay to pay off the reparation claimants, the Association still played its role of defending the victims' rights despite its internal challenges.

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that forming the Association was an innovative idea that played a great role in mobilising war victims in Acholi-land to demand their rights, thereby plugging a vacuum that had been filled neither by the state nor the international community. The creativity is underlined by the grassroots Association model that tapped into the Local Government structures to register and to verify claims yet remained outside the state machinery. This was quite unique as it articulated the community's claims for reparations that could not be easily dismissed in spite of the absence of a

policy on the matter. The other uniqueness lies in the nature of the claims being against their own country. Claims for justice made by the Iraqis against Danish forces, for example, were that they had been detained unfairly in their own country by a foreign force on a peace-keeping mission. Acholi claimants on the other hand, targeted the government.

It should also be noted that it was through the Association that the corruption in government was clearly noted, although the bribery claims may not be verified due to absence of the Association's audit reports. On the other hand, the ghost names on the lists of claimants, the military's reluctance to act against suspect errant soldiers, and the lack of coordination between government departments handling the claims all point to challenges in government that delayed the handling of reparation claims. Finally, while claims focused on visible physical resources (cows), the compensation came in invisible forms such as money and bank accounts. Such a mode of payment held the potential to make significant changes in the victims' economic possibilities, but therein also lay the seeds of danger. The invisible form of payment created the possibility of the resources disappearing without a trace, and of breeding conflict through suspicions and mistrust between the members. The conflicts and mistrust within the Association not only weakened it internally, but also affected its effectiveness as the voice of the Acholi war debt claimants. Thus, the Association that started as a unique uniting factor currently stands as a source of mistrust, divisions and conflict, whose sustainability hangs in the balance.

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