

The Relevance of the theory of Constructionism in the Rise of Acholi Ethnic Identity to northern Uganda

Dr. Charles Amone

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

***Corresponding Author:**

Dr. Charles Amone

Email: Charles.Amone@millersville.edu

Abstract: Worldwide, two broad theories have been used to explain the rise of ethnic identities. These are the natural/biological theory of primordialism, and the manmade/ situational theory of constructionism also called constructivism. This research sets out to determine the relevance of the theory of constructionism in the rise and metamorphosis of the Acholi ethnic identity in northern Uganda. Using ethnography and grounded theory, the researcher established that the Acholi ethnic identity, which has occupied a center stage in the national politics of Uganda since independence in 1962, emerged due to extraneous factors making the theory of constructionism quite relevant to its evolution.

Keywords: Relevance, Constructionism, Primordialism, Identity, Ethnicity, Acholi

INTRODUCTION

The terms ethnicity and ethnic identity are derived from the Greek word "ethnos," normally translated as "nation" [1]. The terms refer currently to people thought to have common ancestry who share a distinctive culture. An ethnic identity is a collectivity of people who are united by a cultural or emotional bond and form part of a larger population with whom they compete for political, social and economic resources [2]. Another school of thought holds that an ethnic identity (or ethnicity) is a *group* of people whose members identify with each other, through a common heritage, often consisting of a common language, culture, religion and ideology that stresses common ancestry [3]. The concept of ethnicity differs from the closely related term race in that "race" refers to groupings based mostly upon criteria that are biological, while "ethnicity" encompasses additional cultural factors. Members of an ethnic identity are usually conscious of belonging to that ethnic group; moreover ethnic identity is further marked by the recognition from others of a group's distinctiveness. Processes that result in the emergence of such identification are called ethno-genesis [4].

To address questions of cultural pluralism in Uganda and to advance the effort to manage and order the contemporary ethnicities and identities, it is necessary to begin with a perspective and a base with which to define and explain the groups that appear. For most, it is a debate between two interactive dimensions: primordialism and constructionism [5]. These fluid and

fixed approaches begin with "deep emotional attachments to the group, supplying an internal gyroscope and cognitive map through which the social world is perceived, and historicizes selfhood in a web of primordial cultural meanings [6]. Social constructs are generally understood to be the by-products of countless human choices rather than laws resulting from divine will or nature. Social constructionism (also called constructivism) is opposed to primordialism, which instead defines specific phenomena in terms of inherent and trans-historical essences independent of conscious beings that determine the categorical structure of reality. This paper seeks to demonstrate the relevance of the theory of constructionism/constructivism to the rise and evolution of Acholi ethnic identity.

A major focus of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social reality. It involves looking at the ways social phenomena are created, institutionalized, known, and made into tradition by humans. The social construction of reality is an ongoing, dynamic process that is (and must be) reproduced by people acting on their interpretations and their knowledge of it. Because social constructs as facets of reality and objects of knowledge are not "given" by nature, they must be constantly maintained and re-affirmed in order to persist. This process also introduces the possibility of change: what "national interest" is and what it means shifts from one generation to the next. Put differently, ethnic identities are manufactured by man and not created by God.

Constructionists like Max Weber, D. Martin, A. Cohen, T. Erikson, J. Anselme, F. Barth and P. Brass contend that ethnic identities rise and fall under different historical situations. Such identities are constructed and deconstructed as and when deemed necessary by the people involved.

BACKGROUND

Models and theories of racial and ethnic identity development have rapidly multiplied in the last two decades as the “melting pot” framework of ideas [7]. The template for this endeavour is the 'constructionist' typology as an ideal explanation for the rise of Acholi ethnicity in northern Uganda. This classification is different from theory of primordialism which posits the enduring, rooted and emotive nature of ethnicity/nations; instead it avers that ethnic phenomena are constructed, malleable, or interest-based. The relationship with modernity is key here: constructionists consider nations to be modern, while primordialists assign them a pre-modern or even prehistoric origin.

The common theme in this effort is to define Acholi identity and the common elements that it contains. Although some claim that the definition should be focused purely on the shared common features, those which distinguish the imagined identity from other types of social groups, others go beyond this in the search for origins, the factors which produce the ethnic identity, in order to define it. Still others focus on the elements of identity, which are not shared by all, the elements that differentiate within the commonality of the whole. All agree, however, that the concepts of identity and nation are difficult to define, in their changing and dynamic character, and the many invocations, uses and re-creations which are involved in the processes of everyday life at both the individual and the group level. There is no doubt that these terms have real meanings, in that they have real value and real consequences in political allocations, distribution, and ethnic and class relation. But the definitions of identity and nation are still contested, and while its implications become ever more evident, we realize the ever-increasing need to define ethnicity, in order to better understand it and create a "more humane humanity."

Constructionism perceives ethnic and religious demands to be human creations, whereas primordialism considers them irrepressible psychological constants. Horowitz [8] writes that when peoples' interest-based attachments are in jeopardy, they respond rationally whereas when their familial or ethnic attachments are threatened, they react emotively. Hence the greater power of ethnic, as opposed to class, appeals. Passions play an analogous role in many ethnic identity development theories. Classic anthropological explanations for ethnicity based on mankind's need for meaning [9] or security in the face of the inexplicable [10], for example, are rooted in emotional drives.

Consequently, for these writers, psychological mind-states such as hope, awe and fear are paramount, and explain the universality of ethnic identities across human societies. Others point to ethnic identity's ability to satisfy 'peak' emotions deriving from our core evolutionary adaptations [11].

The Acholi are a Luo people, who migrated to northern Uganda from Rumbek in southern Sudan [12]. Some historians have doubted this cradle-land. Such Historians state that Rumbek in Barelghazel is the second or even third dispersal point of the Luo [13]. The Luo, they state, originally lived in Egypt from where they were pushed by Arabs from the Middle-East southwards. The debate on Luo cradle-land is outside my scope. Suffice to note that Luo history traverses several ethnicities, states and polities over the centuries without being confined to any single one of them. The Luo are a Nilotic race found in northern and eastern Uganda, the South Sudan, western Kenya, eastern Congo, western Ethiopia and northern Tanzania [14]. Today, the Acholi of Uganda are found in the northern Uganda districts of Gulu, Amuru, Nwoya, Kitgum, Lamwo, Pader and Agago. They are bordered by the Alur, Jonam and Madi to the west, the Banyoro, Chope and Langi to the south and the Karimojong, Jie and Labwor to the East. Then to the north, in the South Sudan, Acholi's neighbours are the Didinga, Lotugho, Dodoth and Dinka. Acholi-land stretches over fifteen thousand square miles to the east of the Albert Nile from approximately 2 degrees 30 minutes to 4 degrees north latitude and from 31 degrees to 33 degrees east longitude [15]. Eleven thousand square miles of this territory are occupied by the Acholi of Uganda. The rest of the land lies over the border in the Equatoria state of the Federal Republic of South Sudan. This article is specifically about the ethnic identity of the Acholi of Uganda.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE NAME “ACHOLI”

Although the Acholi have lived in their present location for four hundred years, the name Acholi with which they are known is a fairly recent nomenclature. It was not until 1937 that Acholi chiefs officially endorsed the name [16]. Originally these people were called variously by different people. The names with which they were known included Ganyi, Gangi, Lwo, Tekidi, Bakedi and Lango. The Langi called them “Ganyi” or “Gangi” which was derived from the Acholi word “Gang” meaning “home.” So the Langi called them “Jogang” which was then shortened to “Gang” pluralized as “Gangi.” The Banyoro to the west and other Bantu called them Bakedi or Tekidi from the Lwo word “Kidi” which was derived either from the word Mountain or the grinding stone both of which are called “kidi” in Lwo. The Madi on the other hand called the Acholi “Lango” because they failed to differentiate the latter from the former meaning cattle raiders.

Before the British conquest in 1910, the Acholi were divided under different independent chiefdoms numbering up to sixty. The Acholi identified themselves by the names of the various chiefdoms in which they lived. One would say “anWodKoc” or an “NyaKoc” meaning “I am a son of Koc” or “I am a daughter of Koc” respectively [17]. Nineteenth century European explorers who visited the Acholi including, John Speke, James Grant and Samuel Walker Baker did not use the name Acholi. Even the missionary, Rev. Lloyd Albert, who arrived in Acholi-land in 1903, never called the people Acholi [18]. This tells us that the name was not in existence. Samuel Walker Baker came very close when he called the people “Shulli” [19]. There is little doubt that “Acholi” as is used today metamorphosed from Bakers “Shulli”. But, it was not Baker who baptized the people Shulli. The Baptism was done by hostile foreigners who preceded Baker, the Arab slave and ivory traders [20].

A new stage in the development of Acholi ethnic consciousness began in the 1850s, when Arab speaking traders from Sudan arrived seeking ivory and slaves. The traders called Kuturia by the Acholi were succeeded in 1872 by another set of outsiders remembered by the Acholi as Jadiya. Between 1872 and 1888, the Jadiya were the official representatives of the Egyptian administration of the upper Nile. The Kuturia slave traders and the Jadiya both of whom were official representatives of the Turko-Egyptian government contributed to the creation of Acholi ethnic consciousness [21].

The name Acholi was given by the Kuturia. When the Kuturia arrived in Acholi-land they quickly recognized the affinity of the language spoken by the “Ganyi” with that of the Shilluk. They had spent years with the Shilluk in Sudan and learnt a bit of their dialect. Note that both Shilluk and the Acholi are Lwos so their languages are closely related. The Kuturia immediately began calling their hosts “Shulli” which was the way they pronounced “Shilluk.” The Acholi imitated the Kuturia and began to call themselves “Shulli.” But because the Acholi lack the letters “S” and “H” in their dialect, Shulli became cooli [22]. Later visitors called them “Acooli.” The current “Acholi” in use is the Anglicization of Acooli which emerged out of “Shuuli.” The presence of Arabic speaking outsiders from the north played a major role in further development of an Acholi ethnicity. When the Kuturia arrived in Acholi, they neither understood nor wished to bother with the intricacies of lineage and polity units and identities. Instead the outsiders identified, named, and began to define a larger entity. That entity was Acholi [23].

So by the time the British colonized northern Uganda the name Acholi was scantily used. The people, still under different chiefdoms preferred either to be

called Lwo or known the the name of their respective chiefdoms. The British, however, wanted to create a single ethnicity to ease administration. They did not only abolish the sixty or so independent chiefdoms and create a single one under an appointed chief, but also imposed the name “Acholi” on the people. The Acholi resisted this name for some time but in 1937, different Acholi chiefs met in Gulu and agreed to use the name [24]. There was need to receive money from the colonial government to run the Acholi District. For some time the district had missed this money because it could only be sent by cheque under a specific name which never existed. This was how the British colonialists “twisted the hands of the Acholi behind their backs” in order to make them accept their name [25].

THE THEORY OF CONSTRUCTIONISM / CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE RISE OF ACHOLI ETHNIC IDENTITY

Constructivism is a theory of ethnicity founded on the premise that, by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. And in nationalism theory, rational choice perspectives are firmly associated with constructionism [26]. They deem that individual preferences extend beyond material interests to encompass spiritual and collective goods.

The theory, constructionism/constructivism, defines ethnicity not as an empirically observable and static social system; but rather as a processional and fluctuating social phenomenon. This is also the neo-Marxist understanding of ethnicity [27]. Ethnicity is situational and in constant flux. Put differently, ethnic groups arise, crystallize, decay and even disappear as identifiable units under certain historical conditions. The Acholi ethnic identity developed both due to kinship ties and in response to external factors. In the proceeding argument, I will endeavor to illustrate the relevance of the theory of constructivism in the rise and metamorphosis of Acholi ethnic identity.

In everyday political and social interaction, ethnicity often appears in an instrumental guise, as a group weapon in the pursuit of material advantage; thus its activation is contingent, situational and circumstantial [28]. The Acholi ethnic consciousness began to take shape when struggles started between the different Luo and non Luo neighboring societies over land. For instance, the Jie communities to the east fought bitterly with the Luo over land around the Labwor area [29]. To the west of Acholi-land the Luofought with the Madi over the same resource in what is now Atyak Sub-county of Amuru District [30]. Ultimately, all identities are socially constructed, a collective product of the human imagination." Beyond the instrumental affiliation for political and personal advancement, constructivism include emotional

attachment and societal affiliation, which attempt to explain the links and bonds that are evident in the unity of group identities.

Bruce Berman [31] has argued that African ethnicities are not atavistic, primordial survivals of archaic primitive cultures, but rather modern products of African encounter with capitalism and the nation-state in the colonial and post-colonial eras. It is absolutely correct to assert that ethnicity in Africa is not a product of primordialism and primitivism. But where he concludes emphatically that ethnicity only arose out of the encounter with capitalism and the nation state in colonial and post-colonial eras, we tend to disagree. No doubt, the pogrom that has been visited on the Acholi began after the European colonial experience; however, the question of Acholiethnicity itself predates European colonialism and the Christian era. We, however, agree that ethnicity is situational. Whereas earlier approaches take ethnic groups as something given and permanent, new Marxist analysis recognizes that they are in constant flux [32]. They may arise, crystallize, decay and even disappear under certain historical conditions. For the case of the Acholi, it was even more vivid as illustrated below.

The German sociologist, Max Weber[33] defined ethnic identities as “those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation; furthermore it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists.” Weber maintained that ethnic groups were *künstlich* (artificial, i.e. a social construct) because they were based on a subjective belief in shared community. Secondly, this belief in shared community did not create the group; the group created the belief. Third, group formation resulted from the drive to monopolize power and status. This was contrary to the prevailing naturalist belief of the time, which held that socio-cultural and behavioral differences between peoples stemmed from inherited traits and tendencies derived from common descent.

It is important to note that some of the present Acholi clans were originally non-Lwo. Before the arrival of the Lwo, what is now Acholi-land was inhabited by the Madi and Lango peoples [34]. Frequent wars between the Acholi, on one hand, and the Langi or Madi on the other, forced the non-Lwo societies to flee to their present locations. A few of these underwent cultural assimilation and have now become Lwo. This was the case with MadiKiloc and Atyak Clans of the Acholi. In Palabek (northern part of Acholi-land), the Paracelle clan was successfully assimilated.

Among the non - Lwo immigrants were those of Plain Nilotic origin. The Jo Koro, for instance, came from LangoLok (the Jie) who are Nilo-Hamites. They first lived with the Jule group at Pajule. Their settlement is still known in Pajule as GwengKoro or Koro Ridge up to now. Today the Koro are in the Omoro County of Gulu. They were forced to separate from the Pajule group by famine and harsh treatment at the hands of the sons of Jule. They moved westwards and roamed for some time before settling in their present home in Gulu. By the time of language change during which Lwo became the dominant lingua-franca of Acholi-land, the Koro were already settled at their current site.

Others of the same category are the Adilang, presently in the district of Pader. They broke off from the Dodoth people of Sudan and migrated southwards until they were blocked by the Puranga people. Their Kinsmen who were left among the Dodoth are called the Akilang. The Adilang also claim a relationship with the Galla of Ethiopia. It is possible that they left Ethiopia much earlier, settled in southern Sudan, where the Dodoth, still live for some time, then proceeded to Acholi-land [35]. Today this category of people see themselves as Acholi and are seen by others as such. This arose out of their need to associate with the Acholi for various reasons including security, trade and collective bargain, which is the essence of the theory of constructivism.

Ethnic bond among the Acholi chiefdoms became more concrete in the 18th century in the face of foreign invasion. The Acholi defended their territory collectively in a show of ethnic solidarity. Even before Europeans began to venture into Acholi-land, military alliances were formed against hostile neighbors like the Karimong and Langi. But the greatest ever threat to the existence and survival of the Acholi kingdoms was posed by the slave dealers whom the Acholi named the Kuturia[36]. They first arrived in the late eighteenth century and continued to operate until Sir Samuel Baker finally routed them out in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The slave traders destroyed everything they could lay their hands on in order to subdue the Acholi and capture their most able bodied men and women. Realizing that the Kuturia were armed with more sophisticated weapons, the Acholi resorted to military alliances in order to defend their societies. Hence, the pressures of late 18th and early 19th centuries promoted two more immediately tangible examples of collective functioning and identity beyond the individual chiefdom level. One of them was the emergence of a number of military confederacies and alliances.

A lot has been said about the contributions of Samuel White Baker in ending slave trade in Acholi-land and indeed throughout the Nile valley [37]. What

has not been written about is resistance put by the victims themselves against the much hated slavers. In Paloro, where the first slave station in Acholi-land was built, formerly hostile groups refused to act as porters and combined to attack the Turks. This is in agreement with the theory of constructionism which states that ethnicity shoots to the fore when a group of people are confronted with the same or similar threat. The slave traders threatened the existence of all Acholi chiefdoms regardless of their location or size.

In the general debate on ethnicity in Africa, a purely essentialist or primordial notion of ethnicity has been widely abandoned in favor of an understanding that includes constructivist ideas. Ethnic identity results from differences in a variable set of identity markers such as language, religion, culture and the like but finally ethnic identity is a matter of external and self-ascription[38]. Though being principally subject to manipulation and change, the ethnic identity of individuals does not change on a daily or arbitrary basis and usually remains stable over time. Moreover, if we conceptualize ethnicity as a group phenomenon which means more than a residential neighborhood, we must not equate region and ethnic affiliation. The regional concentration of ethnic groups is a feature of certain, particularly rural areas, but is so far less often than assumed and is apparently a declining feature in Africa[39]. Thus, the assertion that “ethnicity is socially constructed” is commonplace among social scientists and historians, and it is widely supposed that anyone who fails to grasp this fact will not be able to explain or understand ethnic violence.

The Lwo language which is now the lingua-franca of the Acholi was originally non-existent [40]. People of the different Acholi chiefdoms spoke different languages depending on the social origins. Those of Jie/Hamitic origins spoke Nilo-Hamitic languages. Those of Madi background used a central Sudanic group of languages. Today, there are still dialectic differences in the Lwo language as one moves from west Acholi to east Acholi, but the people speak the same language- Lwo contrary to what existed say by 1800. Hence the people who were originally linguistically different have now constructed a unifying language for themselves.

CONCLUSION

Under the theory of constructionism, ethnic membership's criteria are contingent upon the participating members themselves who create and develop ideas conducive to group formation in relation to others. Constructionism emphasizes mutability, freedom and formation of ethnic relations [41]. This was what happened in the case of the Acholi. The creation of an Acholi society and collective identity did not commence with British colonial rule. In other words, it was not imposed from without; the people

who became Acholi saw the need for it. The social order and political culture that came essentially to define an emergent Acholi became widely and firmly during the nineteenth century [42]. These changes were caused by the collective aspirations of the various segmented and non-homogenous societies that eventually became Acholi. The birth of Acholi society was, thus, a purposeful, rational and dialectical social process quite in tandem with the theory of Constructionism.

REFERENCES

1. Rukooko AB; Understanding Ethnicity, the Case of Ankole, Uganda: An Aristotelian Approach. PhD. thesis, Department of Philosophy, Makerere University, Kampala, 1998.
2. Nyasani M Joseph; The Meaning and Implication of Ethnicity. Tarino A. and Manwelo P. (eds), Ethnicity, Conflict and the Future of African States, Nairobi, Paulines Publications-Africa, 2009.
3. Rothchild Joseph; Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework, New York: Columbia, 1981.
4. Adalberto Aguerre Jr, Jonathan H Turner ; American Ethnicity, the Dynamics and Consequences of Discrimination, Third Edition, Boston, McGraw-Hill, 2001.
5. Hobsbawm M; The Nation and Globalisation. Constellation, 1998; 5 (1): 1-9
6. Smith D Anthony; The Ethnic Revival in the Modern World, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
7. Horowitz L Donald ; Ethnic Groups in Conflict. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
8. Geertz Clifford; (Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Africa and Asia. New York: The Free Press, 1967.
9. Malinowski B, Redfield R; Magic, Science and Religion, Boston, Beacon Press, 1948.
10. Atran S; In gods we trust: the evolutionary landscape of religion. Oxford ; New York, Oxford University Press, 2002.
11. Ogot BA; The History of The Southern Lwo. Vol. 1, Migration and Settlement, 1500 – 1900, Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1967.
12. Terence Okello Paito; Luo Origin of Civilisation: Towards a Positive identification of the Ancient Itiyo-Pi-Anu Peoples. 2009. Source: www.luounite.net/2009/04/03/luo-origins-and-history
13. Langlands BW; The Population Geography of Acholi District, Kampala, Makerere University College Library, occasional paper number , 1971;30
14. Llyod Albert B; Uganda to Khartoum, London, Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1908.
15. Samuel White Baker; Ismailia: A Narrative of the Expedition to Central Africa for the Suppression of Slave Trade, London, Macmillan and Co., 1874.

-
16. Ocitti JP; African Indigenous Education as practiced by the Acholi of Uganda, Kampala, East African Educational Bureau, 1973.
 17. Girling FK; The Acholi of Uganda, London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1968.
 18. Fearon, James D, David D Laitin; Explaining Interethnic Cooperation. *American Political Science Review*, 1966; 90 (4):715–35
 19. Torres V; Empirical Studies in Latino/Latina Ethnic Identity. Paper presented at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators National Conference, Baltimore, 1996.
 20. Ott S; The Organizational Culture Perspective, Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1989.
 21. Ibid.
 22. Phinney JS; Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: Review of the Research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 1990; 108: 499–514
 23. Ibid.
 24. Fearon D James, David D Laitin; Explaining Interethnic Cooperation. *American Political Science Review* , 1996;90 (4):715–35.
 25. Ibid.
 26. Freud S; Totem and taboo: resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics. New York, New Republic, 1927.
 27. Weber M; Economy and Society: an outline of interpretive sociology. Berkeley, University of California Press. 1978.
 28. Horowitz Donald L; Ethnic Groups in Conflict. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
 29. Interview with Geturida Lalet aged 75 at Palabek-Kal on 12 March 2012
 30. Interview with Okello Richard at Palabek on 14/3/2012
 31. Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh, et,al, (eds), Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa, Oxford, James Currey Ltd., 2004
 32. Freud S; Totem and taboo: resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics. New York, New Republic, 1927.
 33. Max Weber ; Economy and Society eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischof, vol. 2 Berkeley: University of California Press, 1922.
 34. Interview with Lanek Celestino aged 68 at Palabek Gem on 5/9/2009
 35. Interview with Lukang pa Lawino at Lukung in Kitgum on 7/9/2009
 36. Pelegrini V; Acholi Macon, Gulu, Gulu Catholic Diocese Printers, 1958.
 37. Samuel White Baker; Ismailia: A Narrative of the Expedition to Central Africa for the Suppression of Slave Trade, London, Macmillan and Co., 1874.
 38. Kasfir Nelson Michael; Controlling Ethnicity in Uganda." Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University. 1972.
 39. Asiwaju AI; Partitioned Africans : ethnic relations across Africa's international boundaries, 1884-1984. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985.
 40. Interview with Lanek Okeny Bedober aged 69 at Lakwatomer on 5 February 2012
 41. Chisholm RM; Theory of Knowledge,. 2nd ed., Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972.
 42. Atkinson RR; The Roots of Ethnicity. The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda, Kampala, Fountain Publishers, 1994.