

## Chapter 6

# Belonging

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### **The Land Conflict at Ogul: Ethnicity and Neighbourliness**

'Fighting has broken out between Langi and Acholi people in Lela Ogul – people are slashing each other with machetes!' It was November 2013 when Ben heard from a friend about a dialogue meeting gone badly wrong in Kotomor sub-county of Agago District. In an attempt to deal with land conflicts and increasing tensions between the two ethnic groups, the Resident District Commissioner and the District Police Commander had called for both sides to meet at Lela Ogul, an area where Langi and Acholi farmers had cultivated fields side by side for generations. Instead of dialogue, the meeting culminated in bloodshed. The recent history of the area suggests some background for the violent confrontation at Ogul.

The district as a whole is considered part of the Acholi sub-region, but the part bordering on Otuke District (Lango sub-region) has many Langi residents. During the war, they were in the same Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps as their Acholi neighbours. When the camps were closed and people returned to their rural homes, cultivation in Ogul resumed without incident for the first two years. Then in 2009 the Agago district sub-counties were divided, and Kotomor was created as a new sub-county. Its population was mainly Langi-speaking, so the new administrative boundary was seen as an ethnic boundary and disputed as such.

Not long after the establishment of Kotomor as a new sub-county, there was disagreement between two men: Kitenya from the Acholi side and Agong from the new Langi-dominated Kotomor sub-county. Agong alleged that Kitenya ma-

liciously ploughed up his groundnut garden and reported Kitenya to police. It was found that Kitenya was doing the first ploughing of his sesame garden, which bordered Agong's groundnut garden. As the oxen turned at the edge of Kitenya's sesame field, they would uproot some groundnut plants from Agong's adjoining garden. Police confirmed that Kitenya's action was not intentional and recommended that the matter be settled by the leaders of the relevant sub-counties. The two were reconciled in a unique way. The leaders recommended that each accept food and drink and spend a night in the home of the other. Kitenya enjoyed the hospitality in Agong's place, but when time came for Agong to reciprocate by visiting Kitenya, he was advised against it. Agong was a 'born again' Christian, and his fellow church members warned him that Kitenya would drink waragi (hard liquor), which is against Agong's Christian faith, so it was better to avoid the home altogether. Despite that difference, the two made peace and continued to cultivate their sesame and groundnut fields side by side.

Yet in the process of settling this dispute, another issue cropped up – the sub-county border. The Langi alleged that their border ends at Agago River, not the current location next to Kitenya's home. This implied that Kitenya was actually in Kotomor sub-county. The people of the nearby Acholi-dominated village claimed that this was one more example of Langi attempts to encroach on their land, which lies well inside the new Kotomor sub-county around Ogul. A seemingly banal quarrel between two neighbouring farmers kicked off years of land wrangles. It took on political and ethnic undertones that grew to consume two sub-counties and threatened peaceful coexistence between the Langi and Acholi communities. Agago district local government, NGOs and traditional leaders undertook many initiatives aiming to resolve the conflicts, but none of these interventions yielded durable solutions; instead more violent conflicts erupted.

Appeal was made to the President of Uganda himself. In 2010, when he was on his country visit to Lira District in Lango sub-region, the interim chairman of Kotomor wrote a letter to the President. He asked him urgently to intervene on the boundary dispute between Kotomor and adjoining sub-counties, which was causing violent conflicts between Acholi and Langi. The letter, copied to the Agago district authorities, asserted that the boundary of Kotomor was at Agago River. It alleged that Acholi had chased away Langi people from their land and that 120 households had been displaced to Kotomor sub-county headquarters. In response, the President sent the Minister for Local Government to Kotomor to deal with the situation. The Minister found that things were tense, but there was no displacement as alleged in the Chairperson's letter. Nevertheless, the letter caused panic, suspicion and anxiety among both Acholi and Langi. Mistrust was rife.

In this atmosphere, things came to a head in Ogul. The place is also known as Lela Ogul, (Ogul meaning 'flat stone') because of its rock platform with a hole where water collects. People and animals use it in the dry season, and when

it dries up a rain ritual is performed by an Acholi elder from a nearby village in Lukwangole Parish. There is no source of drinking water in the area, so no one lives there permanently, but people from the nearby villages grow food crops on adjacent fields. On one side, the population is predominantly Acholi; on the other, it is mainly Langi. The farmers of Ogul were from both communities, mainly from Acwiko village on the Langi side in Kotomor sub-county and Lukwangole Parish on the Acholi side in Patongo sub-county. Conflicts broke out as they began to re-assert claims on their fields. When the LC3 chairperson of Acholi-dominated Patongo sub-county went to Ogul to assess the situation, the chairperson of Langi-dominated Kotomor reportedly called the Agago District Police Commander and accused his Acholi counterpart of moving with a gun to intimidate the Langi. The Gombolola Internal Security Officer (GISO) investigated the allegation and found no gun.

Reports about the land conflicts between Acholi and Langi went to the Agago District leadership, who convened a first dialogue meeting. On that occasion, Ogul farmers from the Acholi side claimed that they belonged to (meaning they were descended from) twelve great grandparents who farmed in Ogul many years ago. Langi claimed that their ancestors, who had worked on land in Ogul since the 1930s, were also about twelve in number. It was agreed that only twelve representatives from each side should turn up for the next meeting, not the entire sub-county population. Meanwhile, farmers from both sides continued to use the disputed land, and more conflicts ensued. In November 2013, the Resident District Commissioner announced over the radio the next dialogue meeting, to be held in Lela Ogul itself.

On the day of the meeting, the Acholi participants claimed that their Langi counterparts had brought in reinforcements from neighbouring Lango districts. This angered the Acholi, who reasoned that Langi seemed to have a hidden agenda. They accused the Langi of encroaching on land that had long been used by Acholi. Both sides gave presentations on the history of the area, but before a round of reactions, fighting broke out, and several people on both sides were hacked with machetes. It was clear the meeting was a total fiasco.

It was at this point that Ben heard about the troubles and decided to follow developments at Ogul. It was a tricky situation for a researcher. Mistrust was so intense that Ben could not openly move from one side to the other. It would have been most direct for him to travel from the Acholi side, where he lives, to Kotomor. Instead, he took a roundabout route by way of Lira, the capital of the Langi sub-region. Ben is a native Acholi speaker, but his grandmother was from Lango, and he could also speak Langi. Moreover, he had a friend whose family lives in Acwiko village near Ogul on the Langi side. That family was deeply involved in the conflict; the father was an elder of the area and was injured in the fighting at the failed second dialogue meeting. Ben had good contacts as well in Lukwangole, the parish near Ogul on the Acholi side. He visited both, but at

first did not reveal that he was talking to both sides. Only after he had built trust did he explain that his research required him to understand both points of view.

Ogul itself was hardly accessible for either Langi or Acholi unless they moved as a group. Langi alleged that Acholi youth were hiding in the bush to attack them. Reportedly, in December 2013, Acholi from Lukwangole had built thirty-eight huts north-east of Lela Ogul with the purpose of monitoring encroachment on their land by the Langi. Meanwhile, the district increased surveillance of the area by deploying the police in Acwiko village on the Langi side, about 3 kilometres from Ogul.

On 7 February 2014, the Langi people (mainly from Acwiko village) allegedly mobilized, burnt those thirty-eight huts and also destroyed some cassava. Although this act of aggression was reported to police, no arrests took place. Both communities expressed their lack of trust in the ability and will of their leaders to resolve the stalemate. Lukwangole people recalled that Agago district authorities stopped the use of Ogul land in 2012 until the disputes were resolved, only to learn in the fall of the dry season that Langi actually cultivated sesame and cassava and nobody stopped them.

On Easter Monday 6 April 2015, an unspecified number of community members from Lukwangole Parish, Patongo sub-county, violently attacked people of Acwiko village in Kotomor sub-county. The attack was a response to the suspected abduction of an older man from Lukwangole by a group of Langi who found him digging with two young men in the disputed land. The two young men managed to escape, leaving behind the elder whom the Langi took to an unknown destination. Worried about his fate, the people from Lukwangole side mobilized in large numbers, armed with spears, bows and arrows, and machetes, to 'rescue' him. Upon reaching Acwiko village, the group started burning huts and granaries and beating up people. After a while, the police and the army jointly rushed to Acwiko to resolve the situation. A total of twenty-four suspects from both sides (fifteen from Lukwangole) were arrested and detained at Patongo central police station.

The raid in Acwiko village led to the death of a 3-year-old boy, who was stabbed in the neck and died shortly after admission to Kalongo Hospital; fifteen others (mainly women and children) were injured, and a lot of property was destroyed. In this stand-off, communication between Acholi and Langi from the two areas ceased, and fear of revenge attacks was high in Lukwangole. There was blame on the district leadership for persistent failure and on Acholi former politicians from the area, who were suspected of fuelling violence in order to take over land from Langi. Local NGOs went to Acwiko village to document the magnitude of the damage, and more army and police were deployed in both Acwiko and Lukwangole. No solution to the land conflict was in sight.

In this situation of leadership void, Hon. Justice Owiny Dollo, the High Court Judge in Uganda who hails from Patongo sub-county, returned home and

mobilized both Acholi and Langi for talks with the aim of peacefully resolving the conflict. Dollo expressed disappointment at such violent conflict between the two communities that had lived together for generations. He also refuted the allegations that land conflicts reflected hostility between Acholi and Langi, as there were more conflicts among the Acholi themselves in many other places.

Justice Dollo denied the accusation that he was behind the conflict and wanted to take over the land to mine minerals or to open a ranch in Ogul. Some leaders in Agago district had reportedly circulated the allegations to get political mileage. It was also alleged that Dollo bought local waragi and gumboots and promised people of Lukwangole a hefty amount of money if anyone managed to hack the Langi of Acwiko village when they went to dig in Ogul. The Hon. Justice ignored the falsehoods and went ahead to mediate the conflicts.

The two communities expressed support for the plea made by Dollo, who proposed to work with elders of high integrity to mediate the conflict. Names of elders from both sides were put forward and approved or disapproved by both. Twelve people from each side were nominated to form the mediation team, and Dollo contacted them individually. He also proposed that a lawyer from the side of Lango be brought on board to help in building trust in the mediation team. A priest from Patongo Catholic parish provided spiritual guidance.

Another task was the selection of representatives of disputants from both sides. Again, twelve people were proposed, but this was not to include the so-called *lutino camp*, 'children of the camps', who grew up not knowing the situation before the war and the history of land use around Lela Ogul. Each side had a leader to present its issues. Three follow-up meetings to plan mediation were held at Owiny Dollo's place in Patongo, attended by all the twenty-four representatives of the conflicting parties. The district leadership, the army and the District Police Commander attended the meetings. A local NGO called Passion for Community Transformation provided drinks, meals and secretarial services to the mediation team.

The meetings, including site visits to the disputed land, were largely informed and guided by stories and recollections from Mzee Kamilo Okot Imato ingolo Biteng. Then in his 90s, Kamilo was the only surviving person in the area who had worked with parish chiefs and *rwodi kweri* (Chiefs of the Hoe at village level) in guiding farmers and demarcating boundaries between Acholi and Langi for cotton growing during colonial administration. He narrated the history of the area, confirming that the Langi and Acholi communities had lived harmoniously together in former times. Despite the administrative division of land between Acholi and Langi, people continued to acquire land from both sides by buying, renting and borrowing. In all these arrangements, conflicts never erupted. Kamilo took the mediation team and the representatives of Lukwangole and Acwiko villages to the land he had been using since colonial times. He showed them evidence of activities that had taken place in the area, such as sites for heaping

potatoes by the people of Lukwangole. The mango trees were planted by Acholi of long ago, showing that the land belonged to them as they belonged to the land. The Langi could point to the tamarind trees planted by their ancestors. People had intermarried across ethnic lines. As some noted, this continued to the present day. One man from Acwiko on the Langi side said that he would not be harmed in the conflict because he had an Acholi wife.

Mzee Kamilo also told of the rain ceremonies at Ogul rock (Lela Ogul). Both sides agreed they were carried out by the family of Mzee Raphael Owor, already in his 90s. ‘They belong to this land because they did the ritual.’ Ben had earlier interviewed this old man, so he knew that Mzee Raphael was the only surviving son of the late Ngaa Koko Rom. Mzee Raphael claimed that his father was the one who gave land in Ogul to his Lango friend around 1939. The first-comer’s mystical entitlement to control rain was implied in a story Ben heard from Mzee Raphael, which the Langi from Acwiko also confirmed. Wanting to enact control over Ogul, a Langi elder carried out the rain ritual; thereafter, lightning struck dead four of his bulls, demonstrating that he had no right to do the ritual.

The mediation team later met in Lela Ogul to hear specific disputes between land claimants. The land conflict between one Layika from Lukwangole and Owor from Kotomor side was singled out and discussed in-depth. Both claimed that their fathers owned the same piece of land. After a lengthy discussion, the two agreed to divide the land equally. Layika and Owor hugged each other and promised to finish up the process of dividing the land without having to involve everybody. The meeting was adjourned to the next day.

All the boundaries of farms in Ogul area were to be inspected. Rwot Okori Layika (88 years), who was county chief under the colonial government and chairperson of the mediation team, led the walk along the boundaries. Being of advanced age, Rwot was rolled on a bicycle along the land boundaries. Dollo called the land claimants and told each of them to stand on their gardens. Two disputants, Yacinto and Odongo, were given special attention; people were asked to walk along their contested boundaries to ascertain the truth. After nearly a half-day of walking, the mediation team managed to resolve the boundary issue between Yacinto and Odongo. It was resolved that all conflicts should be solved in the same way by negotiation between the individuals involved. Anybody making new claims to land in Ogul was to be looked at as a problem causer and should be stopped by both communities.

In his concluding remarks, Mzee Okori Layika emphasized that ‘everyone gathered here should prioritize peace and reconciliation above all else. The people of Agago have historically lived without discrimination. As a song goes . . . *Wan jo agago wacamo kalara warubu kinyige* . . . meaning there is no discrimination in Agago. Hence everybody is welcomed to coexist harmoniously.’ The RDC of Agago district was tasked with monitoring the security situation as the two communities implemented the mediation agreement.

When Ben visited the area six months later, he found that the resolutions of the mediation team were still holding. Although there were instances of alleged encroachment, hostilities had ceased, and Langi and Acholi had resumed relationships. People from Acholi-dominated Lukwangole village were attending the market in Langi-dominated Kotomor. There was a plan to engage lawyers from both sides to compute the costs of damaged properties before *mato oput*, the ceremony of reconciliation after a killing, could be arranged.

### **Of What Is This a Case?**

On the face of it, the conflicts in Ogul were based on ethnic oppositions. The division between Acholi and Langi was administratively set in 1959 when the colonial authorities drew a boundary between them. Tensions have flared up and waned over the years, partly due to land issues and partly due to national political conjunctures, including the fact that Milton Obote, from Lango, was twice president of Uganda. Seemingly, the Ogul story is a specific case of a general pattern of ethnic conflicts over land reported from many African countries (Boone 2017). However, it is also a concrete example of more abstract issues concerning the concept of belonging. It suggests that belonging is multiple and that dimensions of belonging are situational. And it shows that multiple attachments are played out in practice, even performed, illustrating the different forms that belonging can take. In Ogul, ethnic belonging was mobilized to the point of violence. But other forms of belonging were also brought into play: political belonging to the nation and to its administrative categories, neighbourhood attachments and belonging through descent and marriage. Even religious attachments had a brief role to play when they prevented Agong from visiting the home of his erstwhile opponent Kitenya.

In this chapter, we review some concepts of belonging in relation to land. Then we move to a discussion of the inclusive and exclusive dimensions of belonging as they are brought to bear on land access. Finally, we take up the practices of attachment to people and land as they emerged in our research and as they have been considered in studies from elsewhere.

### **The Meaning of Belonging**

Belonging has at least two common meanings in English. One denotes membership, being a part of, having affinity with, as when people belong to families, workplaces and nations. The other meaning is often written in the plural, belongings, and it denotes property, objects that are owned; it implies a subject-object relationship (Cockburn et al. 2018: 6). Agong belonged to the Langi ethnic group and his groundnut field belonged to him. That said, much analysis of property unpicks ownership relations in ways that blur the distinction. If prop-

erty rights are bundles of entitlements embedded in a multiplicity of social relations (see Chapter 1 on Multiplicity), then belongings are closely linked to belonging or attachment to groups or persons.

If we think in terms of bundles, then ‘ownership’ and ‘belonging’ must be disaggregated and specified. What kinds of entitlement are involved? The problem is revealed in attempts at translation: in Acholi, the word *won* is rendered ‘owner’ in English, just as with similar words in Ugandan Bantu languages. One can speak of the owner of the ceremony (the sponsor), the owner of the girl (her father or husband), the owner of the pregnancy (the genitor) and of course the owner of the land. Often ‘owner’ might better be termed ‘the one responsible for’ or ‘the keeper’, as the relevant word in Teso and Akarimojong denotes (see Chapter 2). In the same way, belonging in the sense of being a part of some group, category or place is often more or less, rather than either/or. Geschiere (2009: 86) wrote of the ‘half-hearted belonging of the external elites’; in Chapter 8 we discuss such external elites as ‘inside/outside’. As has already been seen, belonging is situational; the farmers of Ogul belonged to a common neighbourhood on some occasions and to opposing ethnic groups on others.

Belonging can be understood as attachment, the term Shipton (2009) used in his book subtitled *Ideologies of Attachment in Africa*. This helps to remind us that belonging is not only about membership in a group or category but also about links to another individual; for example, to a friend who offers the use of a piece of land. As we suggested in our discussion of embeddedness (Chapter 1 on Multiplicity), attachments are asserted and can be questioned. They must be practised in order to gain strength. Because belonging is multiple, performing one dimension of belonging may diminish the significance of another potential kind of belonging. This was the strategy of the Honourable Justice Dollo. By dealing with conflicts as disputes between individual farmers, he emphasized neighbourly belonging over ethnic affinity and avoided a large-scale clash with heavy political and economic costs.

The distinction between belonging as ‘attachment to’ and belonging as ‘being owned by’ tends to break down in interesting ways. Cockburn and colleagues (2018: 6) write: ‘In many cases, people and things mediate belonging. This is the case when people belong to one another through what belongs to them, as when they live together in a house or village, or work together in the same workplace (e.g., Edwards and Strathern 2000).’ The farmers of Ogul belonged to a community of neighbours by virtue of the fields that belonged to them as individuals or families. In a similar vein, Lentz confirms the common rural African principle that belonging gives access to land but recognizes also that owning land is a symbol of belonging (Lentz 2013: 4–5). As Lund (2011: 74) puts it: ‘Citizenship and belonging can be avenues to secure property, and property may bolster claims of belonging and citizenship.’ Here again, the double meaning of belonging merges in the one point that land, people and belonging must be considered together.



Or, as Shipton (2009: 110–11) writes: ‘People do not just own or inherit land, in an East African way of seeing things; they also belong to it. Belonging to land is part and parcel of belonging to other people – in groups, networks, or open categories.’ Our TrustLand colleague Quentin Gausset raised the question: ‘Does land belong to people or do people belong to land?’ The answer must be both, potentially; we will suggest that both are achievements that must be worked at. This kind of work is most relevant in rural contexts, where people are concerned to confirm continuing claims on ancestral land even if they are not continuously residing on it.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion**

The creation of Kotomor as a new sub-county seems to have enhanced consciousness of ethnic belonging. While the old sub-county comprised both Acholi and Langi, the new one was bounded so as to be almost exclusively Langi. The dynamics are similar to those that have emerged around the creation of new districts: ‘far from alleviating ethnic tension and spurring development, it is clear that the creation of new districts has led, in many cases, to increased levels of ethnic conflict’ (Green 2010). Researchers have pointed to the connection between decentralization, the creation of new administrative boundaries, opportunities for local elites, ethnic belonging and land conflicts (Green 2008; Geschiere 2009; Sjögren 2015). In the case of Ogul, the conflicts between individual farmers escalated into ethnic conflicts that were related to the boundaries of the new sub-county. Belonging as Acholi or Langi took on a local territorial dimension within Agago District.

The increased emphasis on ethnicity is a prime example of what Peters (2009: 1321) calls ‘narrowing definitions of belonging’. In Ogul, new administrative boundaries were related to a greater exclusiveness based on ethnicity. Other factors too are commonly at work in narrowing definitions of belonging. The growing value of land, shortage of land and increased concerns about the security of land can all mean that belonging and thus entitlements are more exclusively defined. In the West African forest belt, conflicts between landowners and immigrants have taken on ethnic tones, with land for perennial crops like coffee and cocoa becoming increasingly monetized as land laws were changed and as national governments became increasingly involved. Yet the dimensions of belonging at play are never only ethnic. Kinship has always been important as is adherence to one or another earth shrine (Lund 2008; Chauveau and Colin 2010; Lentz 2013). Perhaps it is not so much that definitions of belonging are narrowing as that one kind of belonging is given more weight than others in certain situations. It is important to consider what kinds of authority and legitimacy are deployed to underwrite a claim to belonging.

Autochthony is one such argument for legitimacy and authority over land. Indeed, to be autochthonous is to be ‘a self of the soil’, according to the Greek roots of the word. Throughout the world, autochthony is deployed as the most authentic and legitimate form of belonging. To be an original of a place or, more accurately, to have been there first seems to imply a primordial connection to land that takes precedence over other claims (Geschiere 2009: 2).<sup>1</sup> The relations between autochthons and allogènes, first-comers and latecomers, hosts and guests, indigenous and strangers, have been widely studied, especially as they relate to ethnicity (Boone 2017). Where migrants have gained access to land, often with the consent of those who were already in the area, the superior entitlements of the autochthons are often acknowledged by gifts or payments. The institution of the *tutorat* in Ivory Coast is a well-documented example of the patron-client relation between ‘sons of the soil’, who were there first, and migrants, who came from elsewhere to farm the land (Chauveau and Colin 2010).

Although widespread immigration is not so common in northern Uganda, the argument of autochthony certainly has weight, as we saw in the need to establish ‘original owners of land’ in Chapter 2. It is not only buyers who need to identify original owners but also those who wish to use land for a period. In Kaabong district, the Ik people were granted their own county in 2016 called ‘Ik County’, to signify that this land belongs to the Ik, according to the MP from the area. Most districts, counties and sub-counties in Uganda are given place names rather than ethnic names, but this was taken as an exceptional case, according to the MP, because of the special status of the Ik as indigenous people.<sup>2</sup> The name ‘Ik County’ and being considered ‘indigenous’ to the land means that the Ik, who are often considered of lower rank by surrounding ethnic groups, regard themselves as having authority to grant access to the territory. Two of the neighbouring groups, the Dodoth from Uganda and the Turkana from Kenya, are herders, who come to Ik County almost every year during the dry season to graze and water their animals in the lush Ik mountains when the Rift Valley turns too hot and dry. When the herders come, they are not only supposed to contact officials but also get in contact with the Ik owners or ‘keepers of the land’ to ask permission to stay, graze and water their animals. The Ik hosts are often reluctant to give their permission and say that they only ‘half-trust’ the guest herders, because even if the herders are friendly and offer goods for trading when they arrive, when they return home towards the rainy season, they often plunder Ik villages on the way (Gade, Willerslev and Meinert 2015). Yet, in the end, access is almost always granted by the Ik through this intimate friend-enemy relationship with the neighbouring groups. More serious problems arose when Dodoth herders had settled permanently in Ik County. This called for a large community meeting involving district as well as military leaders, and after long negotiations the Dodoth settlers were turned away based on autochthonous reasoning.

In the Ogul case, as in many others we heard, someone had given land to a friend from another clan or ethnic group long ago. The descendants of that friend had remained and multiplied, so that clan or ethnic belonging was mixed within a locality. Accounts of welcoming a friend or affine emphasize that some people were there first and were in a position to offer land to others. The role of the family of first-comers in performing rituals for the land confirms their special relationship to the place. As Ben's interlocutor put it: 'They belonged to the land because they did the ritual.' All over the Acholi sub-region, we heard stories of 'previously welcomed people' who had settled by invitation in an area dominated by members of another clan. When land becomes contentious for one or another reason, those who came later might be dismissed by some as not really belonging, of not having claims as strong as those who were there before (Adol 2021: 204–26). Yet continuous use of the land over many years compensates for later arrival, as was the case in Ogul. Yes, the Langi families came later, but the land had been given to them, and they had farmed it since the late 1930s. Continuous use without objection is recognized by Ugandan statutory law as entitlement (at least in the cases of freehold and Mailo land), but our impression is that another principle lies behind acceptance: the Langi belonged to the land because they had put themselves into it in the form of labour; their claims were based on a 'labor theory of property' (Lentz 2013: 211). And all the farmers of Ogul belonged to one another by virtue of what belonged to each.

Among the related Luo people of western Kenya, there is a similar contrast between belongers and strangers. A *wuon lowo* (master of the land) or *jalowo* (person of the land) is superior to a *jadak* (squatter, settler, visitor) by virtue of being a first-comer (Shipton 2009: 115). Not only are the land claims of Luo autochthons stronger, but their social status is higher; as in parts of West Africa they are accorded special respect, while late-coming *jodak* are assigned humiliating or polluting tasks. Yet this is not a caste relationship; marriages between belongers and settlers are common, as was the case in Ogul. Thus, cross-cutting ties are created, and one kind of belonging with its exclusiveness is balanced by the inclusiveness of another personal attachment.

Arguments of autochthony often relate to the rights of categories of people vis-à-vis other categories, whether ethnic or descent groups. However, at an individual level, claims to land are most commonly made on the basis of personal attachments to intimate others in the form of consanguinity or affinity. As we have seen in the foregoing chapters, belonging or attachment to other people mediates access to land. In Chapter 4, Daniel and his four brothers belonged to their mother, and she was attached to her brother, the one who married from her bridewealth. Through these attachments, they built houses and grew crops on his land. Atim and Awor and their sisters all belonged to their father, and therefore, as Atim said to her older sister, 'Do not think that this land belongs to you only. Our father's property must belong to all of us.' The intimate governance of

land follows from the way that access is mediated through personal, often close, attachments.

Much as belonging in the sense of being attached to a place through people sounds positive, inclusion almost always implies exclusion in some form. Not only are some people belongers while others are not; even among belongers, some people belong more than others. Therefore, they maintain, their land claims are stronger. As Geschiere (2009) argued, there are perils to belonging in that it has a segmentary character. Distinctions are continually made concerning degrees of belonging. In Acholi, where the ideology of patriliney is strong, recognized paternal descent seems to be given greater weight than before in access to land. The term ‘patrilineal fundamentalism’ (Whyte et al. 2013: 294) is meant to capture the absolute significance given to agnatic belonging to the exclusion of other forms of attachment that might also mediate claims to land. Daniel and his brothers worried about their land access should their mother’s brother, or more likely his sons, become strict patrilinealists. Attempts to dismiss the claims of ‘formerly welcomed people’ on the basis that they are not clan members are another example of patrilineal fundamentalism. Belonging through marriage is perilous as well. Separation and divorce have long been common in Acholi society (Grove 1919; Foster 1955–1959;<sup>3</sup> Girling 1960); in the wake of the war and encampment, when partnerships were not formalized, access to land through affinity became more uncertain. Given the perils of belonging, we must attend to the ways in which people seek to strengthen attachments that provide links to land.

### **Practising Attachments**

Belonging is not simply a matter of attachment to a person or category. It must be practised. In some instances, it is explicitly performed as when Layika and Owor hugged each other after negotiating about their boundaries or when Agong and Kitenya were instructed to spend a night at each other’s home to affirm their attachment as friends and neighbours. One of the most common and significant performances of belonging is burial and the funeral celebrations surrounding it. As we saw in Chapter 4 on Generations, burying parents and grandparents on ancestral land is an important component of generational relations to land. More than that, committing a corpse to the earth establishes belonging to the land quite literally. Geschiere (2009: 30) calls the funeral at home ‘. . . one of autochthony’s major rituals, a veritable test of where one “really” belongs. . . an occasion to link “soil” and “body” in all sorts of naturalizing ways.’ Interment makes of the deceased a ‘self of the soil’. In line with increasing concern about belonging and land in Cameroon, Geschiere suggests that burial ‘at home’ is becoming more significant, also for groups who did not necessarily practise it in former times. Shipton (2009: 96) as well as Geissler and Prince (2010) make the

same argument for Luo people of western Kenya, suggesting that burial as the performance of belonging to a specific piece of land is increasingly important.

In Ik county in northern Uganda, burial practices and places have changed significantly since the 1960s. Before the 1966–1968 drought, Ik people used to bury the dead in the valleys, near streams, where the spirits were believed to hide. Through this burial practice, the attachment and belonging was to the territory in general. After the drought, people moved further up in the mountains, and transporting corpses to the valleys became difficult. Furthermore, missionaries visited and encouraged the Ik to bury their dead near the villages rather than in the bush. After the 1990s, the UPDF established detachments in the county and encouraged Ik families to bury their dead inside villages and homes as in other parts of northern Uganda (Meinert, Willerslev and Seebach 2017: 44), and consequently the attachment practices to land were further localized.

The burial of adult women is often more problematic than that of men. A woman should be buried at her husband's home on the land to which she gained access through marriage. But as we have seen, it is not always clear whether, or the extent to which, a woman was married. She may end up being buried at the home of her parents or brothers. Or she may be buried on the land where her children live, as in the case of Atim and Awor, who, together with their older sister, cemented their mother's grave to underscore that she belonged to the land and the land belonged to them. Marking the grave more permanently was a tactic on the part of the sisters, who wanted to reinforce their claim. But we should not think of burial only as instrumental. Burying a mother is infused with emotional attachment aside from considerations about land claims. In Susan Whyte's study of women's burials and belonging in eastern Uganda, burying a woman at the home of her children and their father was common even if he had never formalized the marriage with her. While 'arguments of culture' assert that a man may not bury his partner unless he has married her, there are countervailing 'arguments of affection' based on the principle that mothers belong to their children: 'We have a belief that children want to care for the grave and say "Mommy is buried here"' (Whyte 2005: 162). Mothers belong to their children, and having their mother's grave on their land is a powerful confirmation that the children belong to the land as the land belongs to them.

Aside from the explicit performances of belonging, such as burial or declaring reconciliation after a conflict, belonging is practised in mundane ways. It is realized when you are shown where to make a garden or build a house, when you borrow some fields for a season, or when you are given permission to dig clay for bricks. To be included as a user of land is to have an attachment to persons or groups. It is to be part of other people, and it confirms such belonging in a concrete material manner. Land entitlements that are embedded in social relations (as opposed to the ideal type of disembedded freehold) always involve some kind of belonging or attachment, usually to intimate others. Just as eating together or

staying together creates relatedness (Carsten 2000), so sharing land is a way of practising belonging. Not only are attachments practised through access to land but accessing and using land shapes attachments. We have already mentioned that the farmers of Ogul created neighbourhood belonging through cultivating side by side. Shaping attachment through using land, one way or another, is particularly noticeable where a connection is somewhat fragile or there is doubt about someone's belonging. In Chapter 5 on Gender, we saw how women cultivated attachments by cultivating land: Awor farmed on the land of her former husband, thus confirming the belonging of her sons, who should use that land someday.

Attachments are practised in the activities of using the land: clearing bush, planting, weeding, harvesting, grazing, building, burying, quarrying. Even collecting firewood is usually an activity that demonstrates a kind of belonging, if only to the neighbourhood. In these activities, people leave marks on the land that can serve as evidence of use and thus of claims to land. More than that, they can be understood as ways in which people belong to land. They invest themselves by putting their labour into the land; we can say that they embody the land by their intimate work with it. Just as land transactions are embodied by seeing and walking the property (Chapter 2 on Transactions), land itself is embodied through transforming it. In the end, people belong to the land when they are buried in it. And in belonging to a given piece of land, they also belong to other people.

Attachments carry emotional loads from the past and expectations about the future. So, the practice of accessing and using land through attachments is not purely utilitarian, and conflicts over land are seldom only about land. Belonging is about feelings of recognition; attachments have affective dimensions of appreciation. That is why being excluded from using land can be hurtful beyond the practical concerns. Adol (2021) recounts the case of Jeje, whom he met during his fieldwork. Jeje's mother left her husband and came back to her parents with Jeje when he was just a year old. Jeje grew up with his mother's father, 'like a father to him'. He never went to his genitor's home and never tried to claim land there, knowing that the land was small and his father's other children were already struggling over it. The only parental home he knew during the 38 years of his life was that of his mother. As an adult, he buried two of his children there. But when a third child died, his mother's half-brothers directed him to bury her at the home of his 'real' father, adding that he should even plan to bury his mother there some day, since her bridewealth had not been returned and thus her marriage had not formally been dissolved. Nor would they allow him to use the land to build a house. Jeje and his mother were angry and hurt. By refusing to let him bury or build on the land, the uncles were also denying that he belonged. Jeje bought land nearby and declared he was cutting off close relations with his uncles.

The practice of belonging in specific situations is a matter of using the land and simultaneously strengthening or weakening relationships. Yet in every specific situation, social relations and practices of belonging are shaped by configurations of power and influence. In the case of Jeje, his position was weakened by the fact that his mother's father and her full brother had died. His mother herself declared that her half-brothers would not have been able to force Jeje off the land had her closest brother still been alive. In another case, which shows the strength of a land claimant, Adol writes of a widow whose land was being encroached by relatives of the man who had given her late husband land. They claimed she did not belong (her husband was of another clan). The original donor and his son, who would have stood by the gift of land, had died. Her position was weakened by these 'missing links', just as Jeje's was. But the widow had five sons, well-educated and employed in the Acholi sub-region. The resources they put into bringing the case to the Magistrates' court, and the respect they and their mother held in the neighbourhood, tipped the outcome in her favour.

Practices of belonging are carried out by actors whose past and present behaviours are evaluated by others. The widow with five sons had been a good neighbour; people were well-disposed towards her. Most of the cases we came to know were coloured by impressions of the actors' characters as revealed by past actions and general disposition towards others. The vignette about Broken Graves that opened Part II on Intimate Governance illustrates how important behaviour can be in practising belonging. The assertive demands of the young Oyo, his disrespectful objection to his patron's farming activity, and the outrageous act of destroying graves all together led to his exclusion from the land and the family.

The contrary and valued practices are those that promote social harmony, *ber bedo*. Maintaining attachments through respectful dialogue and negotiation, in land issues as in other matters, facilitates the civility that allows everyday life to run smoothly. The widow in Ben's case won her claim to the land given to her late husband. But she allocated two gardens to her opponents in the interest of compromise, thus taking a step towards the re-establishment of harmony. As we saw in the story of Ogul, peaceful co-existence requires emphasizing a dimension of belonging that is inclusive enough. The elders called upon people as Ogul farmers, not as Acholi or Langi. But they also limited that belonging by declaring that no new claims to land in Ogul would be allowed.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered the meanings of belonging in relation to land. We have discussed principles of belonging – categorical identification with an ethnic group, autochthony as an argument in favour of first-comer groups, relational attachment to consanguines and affines, and the everyday attachments to neighbours. We suggested that belonging had to be practised by using land

through performances such as burial or more commonly through the everyday activities of cultivation, harvesting, grazing animals, collecting firewood and using the soil for house building. Throughout we have shown how belonging mediates access to land and how using the land affects belonging. We have been primarily concerned with land that has been entrusted through inheritance, devolution, borrowing and gifting. The practices of land use involved were rural – mainly subsistence activities. Our reflections on belonging are most germane to these kinds of land claims and uses. The purchase of land, whether formal or informal, and its use for commerce and development raise other issues to which we now turn. But even in imagining development, notions of belonging and belongings are relevant.

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## Notes

1. Of course, it is not always the case that autochthons have a superior status, as we know from the situations of indigenous people around the world. But they are almost always considered to have a primordial, almost mystical attachment to the land.
2. Together with the Batwa and the Benet, the Ik are considered indigenous people of Uganda by organizations who work for indigenous people. In the national Constitution and the Land Act, these groups are not recognized as indigenous people, probably because this would grant them special rights to potential underground resources.
3. Foster, Paula Hirsch. 1955–1959. Field Notes. Deposited in Foster Archive, African Studies Library. Boston University.

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