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Historicising Land Conflicts And The Balaalo Factor In Northern Uganda, 1986-2023

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This study examines the historical relationship between land conflicts and Balaalo factor in Northern Uganda from 1986 to 2023. The qualitative research and historical design was adopted in the study. Data was collected using key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with community members, district administrators, non-Balaalo migrants, and Balaalo pastoralists. A sample size of 155 participants was interviewed. These included; the Balaalo (15), non-Balaalo migrants (15), cultural leaders (05), local area politicians (10) as key informants, and the local community members (110) from the three respective districts. The findings reveal a complex interplay of socio-political, economic, and cultural factors shaping land disputes and Balaalo's involvement in the region. The historical land dispossession of Balaalo pastoralists, within and outside Uganda, and the political and economic shifts, triggered their migration and settlement in Northern Uganda. Elite Balaalo, leveraging ethnic, political, and military connections, are key actors in land acquisition and resource exploitation in the region, exacerbating tensions with local communities. This study highlights the need for comprehensive reforms in land governance, community dialogue, livelihood diversification, law enforcement, cultural sensitivity, and sustainable development planning to address underlying causes of land conflicts and promote peaceful coexistence in the region.

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INTRODUCTION

Across rural Sub-Saharan Africa, land has a significant value attached to it and forms the basis for livelihoods that include agriculture, pastoralism, fishing, hunting, and gathering (Kandel, 2016; p.274). In Uganda, a multi-ethnic country, the societies own, value and use land in varying forms as influenced by their cultures. In many cases, land has become politically, economically, and culturally a valuable asset, attracting diverse actors and causing contention in the country. Particularly in Northern Uganda, there have been increased land conflicts, mainly associated with the Balaalo and their regional activities. According to the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, Article 237, and the Land Act of 1998, Chapter 227, “all land in Uganda shall vest in the citizens of Uganda and shall be owned following the land tenure systems— (a) customary; (b) freehold; (c) mailo; and (d) leasehold.” Among the Acholi, the land is owned under the customary tenure system (Akena, 2018). According to the Republic of Uganda, 1998 Land Act, Chapter 227, Clause 1, Sub-section (i), “customary tenure” means a system of land tenure regulated by customary rules that are limited in their operation to a particular description or class of persons the incidents of which are described in section 3. This is described as a system in which parcels of land may be recognized as subdivisions belonging to a person, a family, or a traditional institution; and which are owned in perpetuity. The Acholi land is communally owned by the clan and inherited through the male family lineage (Franca, 2016).

Following the colonial legacy in Uganda of land relations and management, land tenure was shifted from community to individualized ownership. In non-kingdom societies, such as the Acholi, the Lango, and the Iteso, the customary tenure was maintained, and land remained under community ownership. This has continued to influence contemporary land relations and management in

such areas, including Acholi land (Kobusingye, 2020). The Land Reform Decree, of 1975, declared all land belonged to the government, and it had the right to develop it in the public interest. In Acholi land, the government used its prerogative over land to establish the Aswa Lolim Game Reserve and Kilak Controlled Hunting Area (which contains the present Apaa, a land conflict hotspot in Amuru district) (Serwajja, 2015).

Since the 1964 Referendum, and the 1973 and 1992 Government resettlement schemes, pastoral communities loosely referred to in Luganda as ‘Balaalo’, meaning herdsmen, were dispossessed of their ancestral grazing land, rendering them an ethnic and pastoral minority. The Balaalo are nomadic pastoralists who move from one place to another in search of greener pastures. They began to arrive among the Acholi in small groups in 2016 (Mugabe, 2021). The origin of the Balaalo remains contentious, with so many sources linking them to Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Tanzania. The original Balaalo were the group who were dispossessed of their land and suffered social inequalities, leaving them socio-economically disadvantaged and victims of social exclusion wherever they settled (Kanyo, 2015). In the 1960s, the Balaalo were already arriving in Northern Uganda as herdsmen, looking after the cattle of the middle-income Acholi people. In return for their service, they were allowed to have extra milk for their use and sale, and in some cases, small plots of land for small-scale farming.

With the National Resistance Army (NRA) bush war, the original inhabitants of the cattle corridor were displaced. This cattle corridor extends from South-Western to North Eastern Uganda, covering the districts of Kiruhura, Ntungamo, Mbarara, Mpigi, Kiboga, Luwero, Apac, Lira, Soroti, Kumi, Mbale, Moroto, and Kotido and Kaabong. The military and political elite in the NRA/M system, using their state power and

influence began to extensively and intensively acquire land, within this cattle corridor. This further limited and denied the ordinary Balaalo without state power and influence, access to land, and other pastoral resources within the cattle corridor. This triggered a wave of internal migrations of the Balaalo from Western and Central Uganda to Eastern, North Eastern, and Northern Uganda (Nakayi and Kirya, 2017).

Problem statement

With the increasing pressure from local farmers and leaders from the Acholi subregion, on the continued increase of Balalo pastoralists in the area, the legislators of the region have continuously lamented about the growing underdevelopment of the already disadvantaged region (Draku, F. 2023). For example, they have blamed the destruction of their crops by the cattle of the Balalo pastoralists. They have also labeled the Balalo herdsmen as illegal migrants whose animals remain a persistent problem to meaningful farming in the region (Uganda Media Center, 2023). Against this background, the area leaders have so far petitioned the Ugandan Parliament, the Office of the Prime Minister, and the President, in what they term ‘a matter of national importance.’ They further argue that President Museveni himself in his letter to the Prime Minister on November 02, 2021, termed the Balalo pastoralists as “illegal migrants whose animals remain a persistent problem to the farming communities in the north, specifically in the Acholi subregion.” This is similar to the October 24th, 2017 directive by the President, in which the MAAIF [Ministry of Agriculture, Animal, Industry and Fisheries] and the Army were to implement the eviction exercise of the Balaalo in the Northern region (Owiny, T. J. (2021).

Interestingly again, the President in his address on November 03, 2023, in Okidi, Atiak Sub-County in Amuru District, ordered the Balaalo with non-fenced farmland in the greater North to leave the region within three weeks. He strongly stated that; *“Those who have got cows in non-fenced areas must go immediately because this is*

recklessness. Why should you bring cows into an area where you have no control? Therefore, I direct, the Divisional Commander the Regional Police Commander, and the Minister of Northern Uganda to issue orders for these people to move their cows.” (Monitor Reporter, 2023).

Therefore, this study aimed at historicizing the nexus between land conflict and the Balalo factor in Northern Uganda 1986-2023.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using the qualitative research approach and a historical design. The qualitative approach was used to explore community opinions, views, feelings, attitudes, experiences, perceptions, and values concerning the Balaalo and land conflicts in the region. It attempts to answer questions about the Balaalo identity, their activities, and power relations with the local community. The study was conducted in three districts Acholi subregion in Northern Uganda. The districts included Amuru, Gulu, and Nwoya which were purposively selected for experiencing land conflicts arising from the activities of the Balaalo pastoralists. The three districts have reported increasing numbers and activities of the Balaalo and land conflicts. The study participants were purposively drawn from elderly men and women, youth, traditional leaders, the Balaalo and non-Balaalo migrants, district local government leaders, and local council and cultural leaders, as well as community members from the three districts.

A sample size of 155 participants, determined by the saturation level, were interviewed. These included; the Balaalo (15), non-Balaalo migrants (15), cultural leaders (05), local area politicians (10) as key informants, and the local community members (110) from the three respective districts.

Data was collected using key informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), observations, and in-depth one-on-one oral interviews with community members, district administrators, non-Balaalo migrants, and Balaalo pastoralists. A total of three FGDs with ten participants, each conducted in the three

respective districts, comprising of men, women, and youth were held. From the above sample size (155), 110 participants were involved in the one-on-one oral interviews, 15 participants in the key informant interviews, and 30 participants in the FGDs.

The aim was to engage with specific categories of people affected by land conflicts and the Balaalo activities, to explore shared concerns, grievances, and possible solutions. The participant observation method was specifically used to generate data by immersing into the communities experiencing land conflicts and observing their daily life, interactions, and decision-making processes regarding the phenomenon under study.

Because of the sensitivity of the study, confidentiality was highly observed and respondents were identified using codes. For example, Respondent Balaalo (RB), Non-Balaalo (RNB). Data was accordingly grouped, coded and analysed based on the research items and emerging themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Who are the Balaalo?

The Balaalo identity is politically, economically, militarily and socially constructed. It is not a straight jacket, as it means different things to different actors in different spaces. From the preliminary engagements, Balaalo identity was political, military, economic, and social. Some individuals, who necessarily did not have ethnic and social roots with the Balaalo, played the role of agency which associated them with the Balaalo.

Mr. Museveni described the Balaalo herdsmen as “illegal migrants whose animals remain a persistent problem to the farming communities in the North, specifically in the Acholi Sub-region” [Owiny, 2021, November 14].

President Yoweri Museveni issued in his directive ordering the Balaalo out of Northern Uganda described them as people with neither moral right nor justification to do what they are doing in Northern Uganda. He reiterated

“These are cattle owners from Ankole, Rwanda, Congo, etc., who refuse to abandon nomadism allowing their cattle to trample on people's crops and also generate political misunderstandings. Some of the Balaalo being Banyankole or Banyarwanda, the traditional inhabitants of Ankole, the victim communities on account of their indiscipline, erroneously think that the government I lead is the one encouraging them to commit aggression against other communities” [Owiny, Daily Monitor, 2021, November 14]

President Museveni disclosed that the Balaalo were the nomadic pastoralists, the NRM government resettled in Western Uganda when it captured power in 1986 [Owiny, 2021, November 14]. This implies that the Balaalo are political migrants. Similarly, the Balaalo are economic migrants who left Ankole, Rwanda, Congo, and Tanzania, looking for conducive areas to carry out their nomadism. Equally, they are either non-Ugandans from the aforementioned countries or indisciplined Ugandans who had sold the land that was given to them by the NRM government in the 1980's, when they were being resettled.

In the Northern Ugandan context, the respondents' narratives, points to the Balaalo as cattle keepers who are associated with the Bahima Clan and dynasty in the Ankole Sub-region. Generally, this study argues that the Balaalo are the forerunners of the Bahima-Tutsi-Banyamulenge geopolitical conquest of and imperialism in the Great Lakes region.

According to a Balaalo migrant in Oroko in Palaro, Gulu District, using the oral tradition, and collective memory among the Bahima, the Balaalo are cattle keepers who are related to the Bahima of Uganda, Kinyarwanda speaking Banyamulenge living in South-Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Tutsi of Rwanda (RB001). Similarly, this was confirmed by a scholar at Gulu University, who alludes that, ‘historically the Balaalo are closely related to the Bahima of Uganda, Tutsi of Rwanda, and Banyamulenge of Democratic Republic of Congo who are thought to belong to the socio-political

Bahima-Tutsi dynasty in the Great Lakes region of East Africa' (RGU01).

Also, a local Acholi community, the Balaalo are the Tutsi-Bahima whose origin is claimed to be in Rwanda. However, they are believed to have a common root with the Bahima and Balaalo in Uganda. This is attributed to their already-established connections and prolonged stay in the country (KII05).

According to a respondent who is a retired civil servant, formerly working in Nwoya District, the identity of the Balaalo is unclear. The army commanders who owned land and kept animals in Nwoya were considered Balaalo. According to the respondent, there are about six army generals owning land and animals in Nwoya District who are not Balaalo but are considered Balaalo. In some instances, the ordinary cattle keepers working for Generals and non-indigenous cattle owners assumed the identity of the Balaalo. Similarly, the indigenous NRM supporters assumed the Balaalo identity by proxy. Even the LC III and LCV with connections to the state and army general networks, reasoned and acted as Balaalo.

Origin of the Balaalo

In a one-hour interview with an elderly Balaalo informant in Koch Goma, he narrated the historical background of the Balaalo, who now find themselves in Uganda. He noted that;

“Historically, the Balaalo are people from Cameroon and came in a group of the Bantu and settled in Tanzania and others used the belt of Tanzania to enter Uganda through Masaka near River Katonga. Balaalo are a small group of Bantu called Bahima, who originate from Mpororo (a corridor between, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Congo). ‘Mpororo’ is a mix-up of Kinyarwanda and Runyankole languages, which traditionally means ‘the land of peace and harmony. Their main reason was to get water and pasture in lowland areas for their animals. Due to population pressure and tenures, they were forced to new areas like Northern Uganda

with low lands that preserve water to sustain animal life. Most of the land that they have acquired is through renting, for instance, for one to five years. If the agreement with the tenant is good, it can be extended for more years that favor both parties. In cases where the agreement expires or is terminated, and where the government policies on land do not favor them, they are forced to go to new areas, with similar good water and pasture conditions. Also, some decide to sell their animals to markets around Gulu, and other neighboring districts in the region, South Sudan and Congo.”

The above historical background was similar to what most of the Balaalo involved in this study stated. For example, in Gulu District (Oroko Village, Palaro Sub-County), an elder of the Balaalo community gave a similar history about their origin. He further added that;

“What unites us as the Balaalo is the language we speak and the brotherhood we feel and treasure amongst us. So, whenever I find one in any part of Northern Uganda, he or she remains a brother/sister and a friend to me. The Balaalo in Northern Uganda also practice blood-brotherhood, which bonds them in such a distant foreign land. We have even become in-laws in Northern Uganda because we have inter-married. The products of these intermarriages are also now part of us and will live to cherish our culture and tell the same background. Our in-laws, are Balaalo by marriage and assimilation.”

Balaalo phenomena in Acholi land in Northern Uganda

From 1986 when the NRA/M Government came to power, there was a wave of insurgencies, including the Alice Lakwena Holy Spirit Movement and the Joseph Kony Lord's Resistance Movement. The peak was when the Acholi were taken to Internally Displaced Persons Camps – IDPs, as a strategy to contain the LRA rebels between 1996 – 2006. This witnessed Acholi land regaining its vitality, as most land was

vacant, uncultivated, fertile, and unoccupied. With the exploration of oil in the Albertine region, it was discovered that the Northern districts of Amuru and Nwoya had commercial oil deposits and other valuable resources. This triggered a wave of the scramble for and acquisition of land in Nwoya and Amuru. The key actors in these processes were a new breed of Balaalo, '*The elite Balaalo*' who were politically and economically distinct from the '*Ordinary Balaalo*' with whom they only shared ethnicity.

We argue that the Balaalo act as economic imperialists, who continue to curvy land thought to be having natural resources, such as oil. Using their agency and networks with the *elite Balaalo*, the *ordinary Balaalo* began to assume and acquire political, military, and economic influence and power, which gave them access to fertile land in Northern Uganda for grazing, animal keeping, farming, and charcoal burning. With the return of IDPs to their native land, they were displaced by their relatives, who had either remained in the village or returned early from the IDP camps. The displaced group became economically poor, began to rent, and sell land cheaply to the elite Balaalo, and the ordinary Balaalo who were working for the former, and took advantage of the network(s) to acquire land in the Acholi Sub-region.

Balaalo as pastoral nomads

According to a section of respondents, they observed that there were genuine Balaalo, who settled in the Acholi Sub-region in search of water and pasture for their animals. Among these, there were some, who hired their labour to the wealthy Acholi families as cattle keepers. This group of Balaalo were allowed to sell the milk and would be given a calf every year, a plot of land to cultivate in return for their labour. They lived a portage-cliental relationship with their Acholi masters. This category did not exert too much political, social, economic, and military influence in the area, as they mutually co-existed with the indigenous communities. This category has been living in the area even before the NRM came to power, and was also found in Eastern Uganda, and

the West Nile region. They were peaceful and moved to areas where people owned large herds of cattle. This category was typically long-faced cattle keepers, who even to date operate in other parts of Uganda, for example in Kololo military detach in Latoro Sub-county, Nwoya District.

The study also unearthed from the key informants that, when Museveni took over power from Obote II, this category of the Balaalo ran back to Western Uganda, because they felt a new era had come to power, that freely allowed them to carry out their nomadic pastoralism, and in-breeding. Even when they got children, they would send them back home to learn their culture and later return to carry on with nomadic related activities with their families and friends. This is because they hardly intermarried with the locals, unlike the case with the elite Balaalo. However, over the years, those who have stayed for long in the region have bought small plots of land with demarcations, which are not contested.

Balaalo as Economic imperialists

The period 2006 – 2023, has witnessed the increasing entry and activities of state-connected persons and the Balaalo in Northern Uganda. It led to the emergence of a group of political and military elites, who are out to aggrandize wealth through the accumulation of land which has become an enigma of wealth. From the Eastern banks of the Albert Nile, there was sporadic acquisition of land, either through land purchase, trickery, forced eviction, and hire of land. These are Balaalo, whose identity is not disclosed, as they act through third parties, and they are cognizant of the law. In this syndicate of local Acholi politicians [influencers of the process], civil servants [technocrats] and businessmen [middlemen], the Local Council leaders back up the entire process, to legitimize the acquisition of land for the new Balaalo entrants in Acholi Sub-region. This category of the Balaalo has thus exhibited elements of economic imperialism, and migration in search of cheaper land in other regions of the country. Given the historical dispossession of the Ordinary Balaalo of their grazing land by the Elite Balaalo, as well as the

high costs of land in Western Uganda, their homeland, some migrated to Northern Uganda in search of economically viable land for farming and animal rearing. For example, an acre of land in Kigezi costs between Ug shs. 15 to 20 million, while in Acholi sub-region, an equivalent of land (especially in the rural areas under this study) is as low as shs. 500,000.

Some Balaalo have presented themselves as big investors in Acholi land. In the name of investment, they have acquired land under what the Acholi people consider trickery, disguising their identity and using a third person to procure land in Acholi. It is only after some time that the real identity of the investor Balaalo is unearthed.

Balaalo as Local ‘Balaalorised’ Acholi

The study unveiled yet another category of people who are indigenous to the Acholi community, but with strong political, and military connections and networks with the Elite Balaalo. Due to the networks, and way of life of these connected Acholi, they have been acculturated to the Elite Balaalo political, economic, and social way of life, mindsets, adapting to and borrowing ways of grabbing land, accumulating wealth, and gaining political and economic influence like the Elite Balaalo. The study was informed that from another angle, whereas some sections of the Acholi people find no problem with the Balaalo and their activities in the region, others have completely regarded them as a big problem and hindrance to the development of their respective areas. For example, the youth involved in an FGD in Amuru and Nwoya districts, repeatedly with comical statements that they would soon join music based on the inspiration of their local musicians. In particular, they were happy to report that, unlike other musicians who sing for money, Bosmic Otim sings out their real-life problems. Indeed, they played a YouTube audio of the song titled ‘Land of the Acholi,’ which is purely anti-Balaalo, arguing that *“Oil, land, and minerals in Acholi land is a final war’ and that ‘the land of Acholi must be for the Acholi.”*

The youth further contended that the Balaalo are now claiming to be fellow Acholi, hence the term ‘Balaalorised Acholi.’ They claim that the Balaalo (especially men) have intermarried with the native Acholi and thus, have given birth to children who have grown up in the mixture of Acholi and Balaalo cultures. Specifically, these Balaalo men have used marriage as a strategy to gain control over the land to use for both cattle farming and cultivation. Hence, they have assimilated their Acholi in-laws into the Balaalo way of life and connections with the entire Balaalo community. In such a situation, the youth also claim that their area politicians have taken advantage of indulging in double standards to gain their political positionality in the area. The area politicians now find their hands tied, as they have to appease both the native Acholi and their fellow Balaalorised Acholi. For example, one participant (Balaalorised Acholi) lamented that;

“Our leaders have instead betrayed us. The Balaalo are not such a threat as the public is made to believe. The President himself directed that those who have acquired land and fenced it in the area should be allowed to stay. If the President makes such a directive, then why on earth should anyone force all pastoralists to leave the area? These local politicians simply incite the public against us the pastoralists and yet we have established so many connections for them in the country. Whenever they come to us for such connections, they pretend to stand with us, and when they return to the area native voters, especially during campaigns, they use the Balaalo as a campaign slogan. This is total hypocrisy to the entire Balaalo community and the local people of Acholi. They should simply leave us to peacefully co-exist as in-laws, brothers and sisters, since we have now inter-married.”

The Balaalo activities in Acholi land

The study established that the Balaalo are engaged in several activities, which often makes it complex to understand their identity and intentions.

The Balaalo's major activity is the rearing of animals, especially cattle. Some categories have bought and fenced their land within which they rear the cattle. On the other hand, the ordinary Balaalo have a gentleman's agreement in which they pay their contact person to allow them to freely graze the animals for fattening in open land, after which they either make an extension of the agreement (with cash) for a particular period of time that favors both parties.

According to the interviews, some members of the community observed that the ordinary Balaalo employed to keep the elite Balaalo's animals, are often armed with guns. This makes it challenging to know their identity, as they use their connections to forcefully curve more land mainly in Amuru, Nwoya, Gulu and Lamwo Districts. In one-on-one interviews with some of the respondents, they confirmed that for all this long, the real identity of Balaalo is revealed in their activities in areas they settle. They strongly stressed that most of the Balaalo are connected to the state, as well as military connections, explaining why some of them recklessly refer to themselves as 'untouchables.' The community in Lamwo District, for example, acknowledge having given up on putting pressure to the Balaalo to leave the Acholi native land. For example, a male elder from Oroko village, Palaro Sub-County, Gulu District lamented that;

"I find some level of double standards by the government while dealing with the Balaalo issue in Northern Uganda. These people (Balaalo herdsman) secretly have guns and sometimes they even recklessly move freely in the region in search of pastures for their animals. In December 2022, I encountered one in these hills (Oroko Hills) hunting bushmeat with a gun. Before this encounter, we used to hear bullet-like sounds in the hills, and we care less because we thought our neighbors were mining stones in the existing quarry. I was shocked to know that this was the same man we had been sharing a drinking joint with for almost two years now. That is why I question why the Karimojong were forcefully disarmed and yet the Balaalo on the

other hand continue to have guns. Where do they get these guns from, and yet the army and other security bodies are the ones supposed to have these guns?"

Indeed, this finding showed a double standard by the government and its security enforcement bodies, in dealing with the Balaalo phenomenon in the region, because most of the respondents claimed that they even tried to report such cases to the Police and UPDF officials in the region, but they have never received any positive response.

However, another elderly respondent in contrast with the above claim, reported a positive impact of the Balaalo activities in the same area (Oroko village, Palaro Sub-County, Gulu District). He positively stressed that;

"I no longer live in fear like I used to during the LRA insurgency in our area. This whole hilly area was a hiding place for the LRA rebels in the 1990s even up to the early 2000s. We termed it 'a danger zone' because if anyone tried to cross it, especially beyond afternoon hours, you could only hear the news of his or her death in another village. Those who survived death would either return home with wounds or get kidnapped by the rebels. Therefore, I find these people as no big threat, because with my experience of the war, one or two guns in the area are instead a means of protection for us. I even suggest that they should not be evicted because these people are also Ugandans who should be allowed to move and settle anywhere in the country. Others have even intermarried with our local people and so, we need to respect and treat them as in-laws. The only problem is that some of them have large herds of cattle, which has attracted envy from the local people (Acholi), and they also at times freely leave their animals to graze which many people have based on to term them (Balaalo) as bad people."

The study also unearthed another activity and way of life of the Balaalo in the region. Some of the Balaalo involved in this study were open to the

fact that besides cattle rearing, they indeed do a lot of activities in areas they settle. For example, one of the Balaalo youth freely stated that;

“Besides being indigenous pastoralists, some of the Balaalo are also trained military men, some of whom, their parents, relatives, and themselves participated in the deadly Rwanda genocide, but with cattle rearing backgrounds. They also participate in tree cutting, which logs they secretly export to factories in Kampala and some parts of Congo. Normally, they use the Western route from Uganda to Congo and other parts of the world. They also burn charcoal but with a license, and sell it to Kampala, and other developed urban charcoal dwelling centers in the country. The proceeds from charcoal logs, and timber, are used to buy more cattle, buy the land back home, and do other investments.”

One of the Balaalo youth however disagreed with the connections of the Balaalo community with the state, stressing that not all Balalo have links with the state, but indeed, some do have such connections. He added that it depends on one’s strategies and family background to establish such connections. Indeed, this study shares the same view, because even in the case of Ugandans themselves, not all of them have relatives and connections with the government.

Interestingly still, while interviewing the Balaalo about the magical stick that the local people in Acholi land claim has magic, they found it laughable, as there is no such magic as the native people claim. This claim justified the Balaalo view that the native people in areas they settle fear them, most especially whenever they are walking with their grazing sticks (traditionally called ‘enkoni’). Indeed, one native of Oroko Village feared that; *“The Balaalo stick has powers of the Bachwezi spirit, that is why they freely move even at night because they always feel protected.”*

However, as opposed to the view by the native Acholi people about the ‘magical stick’, in the Balaalo culture, it is believed that when someone

gifts you a cow(s), that person automatically gives you a stick as well, help you in grazing the cattle. Some of these sticks are inherited from their ancestors so they attach so much value, morale, and respect to having them at all times. From other sources, it is believed that

Also, about the married Balaalo, those who come with large herds of cattle and intend to stay for long in the region, the study established that these normally come with their women. On the other hand, those with small herds of cattle, tend to get women within the areas they settle and support them with businesses like selling milk and other dairy-related products.”

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the historical analysis of the relationship between land conflict and the Balalo factor in Northern Uganda spanning from 1986 to 2023 reveals a complex interplay of socio-political, economic, and cultural dynamics. Specifically, the findings underscore the deep-rooted nature of land conflicts in the Acholi region, stemming from historical injustices, colonial legacies, and post-independence government land policies. The influx and activities of the Balalo, originally displaced pastoralists from Western and Central Uganda, have significantly impacted land tenure systems, community relations, and local economies in the Acholi sub-region.

From the initial historical dispossession to the contemporary socio-economic and political influence of elite Balaalo, this study underscores the need for comprehensive reforms in land governance, community dialogue, livelihood diversification, law enforcement, cultural sensitivity, and long-term sustainable development planning to address the root causes of conflict and promote peaceful coexistence in the region. Also, the study has revealed the inadequacy of existing land governance mechanisms in addressing the complexities of land disputes, more so in the context of the Balaalo factor. It is also evident that sustainable solutions to land conflicts in the region require a

multi-faceted approach that takes into consideration the historical injustices, the rights of the indigenous communities, and the livelihood needs of the Balaalo herders. Therefore, this study's findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, civil society organizations, and local communities in devising strategies that promote peace, justice, and sustainable resource management, specifically land, in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Land Governance Reforms:** Addressing land governance loopholes and ensuring equitable land distribution is crucial to mitigating conflicts. Strengthening land tenure systems and enforcing land use regulations can promote transparency and fairness in land transactions.
- **Community Dialogue and Conflict Resolution:** Facilitating dialogue between Balalo pastoralists, local communities, and government stakeholders is essential for fostering mutual understanding and resolving conflicts. Community-led conflict resolution mechanisms should be supported to address grievances and promote peaceful coexistence.
- **Livelihood Diversification:** Supporting alternative livelihoods for both Balaalo pastoralists and local communities can reduce competition over land resources. Investing in agricultural extension services, vocational training, and microenterprise development can provide sustainable economic opportunities beyond livestock rearing.
- **Strengthening Law Enforcement:** Enhancing law enforcement capacity to address illegal land acquisitions, environmental degradation, and firearm proliferation is imperative. Upholding the rule of law and holding accountable those involved in criminal activities, regardless of their political or economic status, is essential for restoring trust in governance institutions.
- **Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusion:** Recognizing and respecting the cultural

diversity of Northern Uganda, including the Balalo community, is essential for promoting social cohesion and inclusivity. Emphasizing cultural exchange programs, inter-ethnic dialogue, and promoting cultural heritage preservation can foster greater social harmony.

- **Long-Term Planning and Sustainable Development:** Implementing long-term development strategies that prioritize environmental sustainability, equitable resource allocation, and community participation can address underlying socio-economic disparities and promote resilient communities in Northern Uganda.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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