Chapter 5

Gender

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Atim and Awor: Sisters in Love and War

On a hot afternoon in February 2014, Atim sat quietly sipping a mug of water in the shade of her hut in Pader Town, a small urban centre that had been turned into an IDP camp during the war. Wandering around, Julaina, her research assistant Alice and her co-supervisor Hanne were looking for the fastest opportunity to get some shelter from the scorching sun; they were also looking for a woman to talk to about women's livelihood strategies in post-conflict northern Uganda, the topic of Julaina's Ph.D. project. Atim welcomed the researchers and asked them to join her in the shade. She also willingly started telling them about her life. She explained that she lived with her two sons (13 and 12 years old), who were still in school, and that her sister, Awor, and her five sons lived next to her. Atim also told them that she had two adult daughters (20 and 17 years old) and a son living elsewhere. The land where she was currently living was her late father's land, where she had grown up before she married and moved to her husband's home in Olam. Just before the war began, however, she divorced her husband and returned to her father's home. Her clan brothers had helped to bring her back home because her husband was violent and also, they argued, he had not completed paying bridewealth to the family.

During the interview, orange-red dust along with a few blue, black and white plastic bags strewn along the dirt roads were suddenly lifted into a whirlwind around the homestead. Atim and Alice continued talking while they both instinctively started shooing the whirlwind away with their hands. Julaina and

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Hanne looked at each other puzzled and then started laughing: 'What are you doing?' Julaina asked 'Chasing away the *lapiru*', they said. In Acholi, the word *lapiru* refers to a whirlwind that is believed to have an evil spirit in it. While continuing their talk about the hardships of life, the two women discretely warded off 'the evil' whenever it started circling around the homestead.

Atim, 48, told the researchers that she had six sisters and no brothers. Her parents had both died during the war and left the land to them. Three of her sisters were still alive, two of them married and living elsewhere. She lived with Awor, her youngest sister, who separated from her husband during the war. The two sisters had been living well together, but a neighbour was trying to chase them off their land with the help of their clan brothers. These clan brothers and the neighbour claimed that women do not own land according to Acholi custom. The men argued that the two women should return to their husbands' homes, reconcile with them, and thereby gain access to their land. The case had been taken to the LC1 court but at that time was still unsettled.

Atim gave the impression of a woman living in dire conditions, relying on several small-scale businesses such as selling water. She paid 1,000 shillings per month (approx. USD 0.3) for access to a borehole, which was about 300 meters from her home. She would collect about five jerrycans a day and sell them for 300 shillings in the town during the dry season, and 200 shillings in the rainy season. She had also borrowed some land at a distance from her home where she planted potatoes and cassava, crops that can stay for long in the garden without her going to tend them regularly. Sometimes she tried to make bricks and had her children help her. She and Awor helped each other in times of sickness, but they did not trust each other with money. 'In money issues, there are no relatives [to help],' she said, but in any case, she also usually spent the money right away when she had any.

Julaina and Alice went to Atim's home several times after that first meeting, but for some time they were not successful in finding her. They only managed to find her at home again in March 2015. She said: 'I know that you have been checking on me and not finding me at home, but it is because I am doing this business that takes me up to Lira.' In Lira, a neighbouring district, she bought smoked fish that she sold at the main market in Pader. She was happy to see Alice and Julaina again. She called Alice 'my daughter' and told her that she felt relieved when the researchers came and talked to her about her land issues.

The conflict with the neighbour and clan brothers had been resolved. Clan elders who were the allies of the neighbour had told the clan brothers: 'Leave these women alone', which they did. Instead Atim was now fighting with her sister, Awor. Awor had tried to stop Atim's son from constructing his hut on the land. This prompted Atim to think that Awor was telling her that her son's future was not on that land. 'So, my problem now is that I do not know where I am going to put my boys. If they were girls, they would get married and go away,'

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Atim said. 'I am not feeling so secure because I am staying with someone who is just pretending to love me, but I do not know what she is thinking in her heart.' The clan elders had been called once more to settle the issue between the sisters. They told them to stay peacefully together, and one elder cautioned them using a well-known Acholi proverb about a mother who had two children. She served them food on one plate, hoping that they would share it equally. The problem was that one of the children was greedy and ate very fast, and the other child suffered for it. The only choice that mother had was to divide the food equally on two separate plates. Likewise, the elders warned that if the two sisters did not live together peacefully on the land, then the next time they were called to settle a problem, they would divide the land equally between the two of them, not forgetting the share of the other two sisters who did not live there.

The sisters promised to try to live well together, and then the clan members warned them about another impending threat to their land. The Town Council was coming up with new plans for developing the town, which all the residents and landowners had to comply with in the very near future or else risk losing their land. The new plans included plotting and registering land as well as tearing down temporary structures, including grass-thatched houses, and putting up permanent structures. Atim pointed to the grass-thatched houses in her compound, including a new temporary structure that she had just constructed. She did not have money to put up the so-called permanent structures that the Town Council was demanding.

After the clan meeting, Atim together with her sister Awor and their elder sister who lived in Soroti had a discussion about how to safeguard their land. The sisters came up with a plan. They decided to cement their mother's grave that had previously been a mound of dirt behind one of Atim's huts. The elder sister, who was somewhat well off, provided all the materials and paid labourers to cement their mother's grave in an attempt to identify the land as theirs. In January 2016, during the TrustLand Project annual workshop, Julaina presented Atim's case and was told by one of the members of local government in Gulu (who was invited to the workshop) that graves within the town may not be accepted by the Town Council, and that the sisters would face problems in the future if they relied on this grave as evidence of their land ownership. They may even be asked to remove it at some point.

During their visit in March 2015, the researchers also learnt new information about Atim's family. Her three children from her first marriage were living with their father. Her two teenage sons staying with her were from a second 'marriage' (to a man with whom she had cohabited during the war).

In February 2016, exactly two years after their first meeting, Atim informed Julaina and Alice that the problem between herself and her sister Awor had escalated. Awor's son attacked Atim (he claimed he was sent by his mother), and Awor had referred to Atim as being a witch. Atim contacted the police and the

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LC1 chairman, but they never came to her rescue. She then decided to contact the clan members again. With the aid of his mobile phone, the clan leader quickly gathered a number of young clan brothers. At the clan meeting, Awor's son asked to be forgiven for what he had done to Atim and told the clan that he had attempted to kill her because he just wanted his mother Awor to have some peace.

After listening to both sides, the clan elders had advised both sisters to move away from the land because it was clear that they could not live together peacefully. Awor moved away almost immediately. Before Pader became a district, when land there was still cheap, she had bought a small piece of land. Atim, however, did not move. She was not against moving but needed support and had appealed to her clan brothers to find her some land somewhere and build her a house. 'I would open my teeth to smile, but I really had problems. I would go to bed at night, but I would not sleep,' she said.

During the interview, Julaina and Alice both had the impression that Atim was doing much better than when they had first met her. She looked stronger and less tired than before. She was very open, would crack jokes and talked about her *awaro*, a small retail business between Lira and Pader districts. At the end of their visit, she gave Julaina and Alice quite a lot of groundnuts and lapena (pigeon peas) to share between them. Even when they tried to object to the large quantities, she told them sternly that children do not refuse what their mother gives them when they come to visit her.

The researcher's frequent visits, even when they did not find her at home, meant a great deal to Atim and made her open up more. She started giving information that she had previously been withholding from them. She told them that her second husband – the father of the two youngest boys – was a soldier who went to Somalia to fight and did not come back. Atim had no idea where he was; his phone had been switched off, but she did not think that he was dead. He had probably just abandoned them. She told the researchers that the land on which she lived – and which she had always referred to as her father's land – was actually land that belonged to her father's clan brother. More precisely: her father's brother was a government worker and was 'given' this land by a friend. When Atim's father died, his clan brother inherited her mother, so Atim and her sisters grew up on this land.

When her father's brother died, the son of the man who had 'given' the land to her father's brother tried to reclaim it. The LC was involved. They concluded that the trees and the graves on the land were evidence that Atim's family had stayed on the land for a long time and therefore owned the land. A compromise was made. The original owner's son took back part of the land that didn't include Atim's homestead, the graves and the trees. But for this reason, Atim cannot sell the land. This land is still governed under customary rules of tenure, hence Atim's involvement of clan members whenever there is a problem with the land. But at

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the same time, being situated in the heart of Pader Town, it has a different set of formal rules of land tenure under the Town Council.

The researchers also learnt that the older sister who lived in Soroti (who organized for their mother's grave to be cemented) now seemed to be conniving with clan brothers in trying to claim ownership of the land. This sister felt that she had invested a lot in the land, not only cementing their mother's grave but also giving financial support whenever meetings were called to resolve conflicts over the land. She thought that she should be given rights over the land because Atim and Awor were fighting constantly and she was herself in a better financial position to develop the land (for example by building permanent structures).

In March 2016, Alice made a return visit to see Atim and talked to her briefly. She was told that the clan members had not yet come to evict her from the land, but her elder sister who lived in Soroti had asked why she had not yet left. When she got the call from her elder sister, Atim had gone to seek advice from their clan leader who had told her to first stay on the land as they sorted things out but reminded her that she could not stay indefinitely. To Atim, this meant that the clan leader was siding with her elder sister. Atim told Alice about the time she argued with her elder sister about the ownership of the land. Her sister had said: 'This land was going to be taken from us by the son of the man who gave it to our father's clan brother. I am the one who went to court and recovered it.' Atim had then replied: 'When you went to court, did you then tell the court that you owned this land?' Her sister had gone silent, so Atim continued: 'Do not think that this land belongs to you only. Our father's property belongs to all of us, but it is only that we could not all go to stand in court, which is why we asked you to stand on our behalf. We did not say that you should own the land.' Atim believed that her sister hated her for saying this so boldly and that she had therefore become the ally of Awor, who had for a long time been trying to chase Atim off the land.

Atim told Alice that she and Awor were now completely estranged. They were doing the same small business in Pader market but would 'sit with their backs to each other' as if they were not sisters. Julaina had been keeping in touch with Alice by phone and asked her to do her best to track down Awor, especially if she was at the market. Alice did manage to find Awor, who agreed to take Alice to her home.

According to Awor, the conflict between the sisters was not so much about land but about their lack of respect for each other as sisters. As the youngest sister, she said, she should have been the one to look after their late father's homestead. In Acholi culture, she said, it is the youngest child who inherits the homestead. This was the first time that the researchers had heard that it was not the youngest son but the youngest child who should inherit the homestead.

Awor now stayed on the small plot that she had purchased during the war, but she still had access to gardens at her former husband's home because she was taking care of their children. She said:

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> Even if I have separated with my husband, I still go to his land to dig because I need to secure land for my children since they are all boys. That was the land I was using before going to the camp. The moment you leave it redundant, other relatives will occupy it, and it will be very hard to recover it.

She added that: 'For me I am happy here, so I leave all those matters with the other land in the hands of the elders.' She did not know what Atim was planning to do:

> Personally I cannot go to ask her, but I think she does not have a place to go, because her husband took all the children. If she had come back to her father's place with the children, then she could now have gone to claim land at her husband's home in the name of her children.

Of What Is This a Case?

In this chapter, we focus on the changing relationships between men, women and land. We show that gender, as a lens for studying land, can help us challenge notions of 'rights' and 'ownership' and hence get a better grasp of the complex land tenure systems in Acholi today (see Nakayi 2013; Kobusingye, Van Leeuwen and Van Dijk 2016 for discussions on complex land tenure systems in Acholi society). Scrutinizing land conflicts from the point of view of gender relations furthermore helps us catch sight of some of the important changes that took place in Acholi society during and after the war.

Many debates on customary land and women's land rights in Sub-Saharan Africa focus on gender-differentiated access to land. It has been noted that women undertake more than 75 per cent of agricultural work and yet own less than 10 per cent of the land (Behrman, Meinzen-Dick and Quisumbing 2012). Women's embeddedness in the household without autonomous access to property is often highlighted (Nussbaum 1999). In patrilineal societies, women's relationship to land is shaped by kinship structures and virilocal marriage practices. Women derive their rights to land through male relations, first their father or brothers and later (ideally) the husband, therefore making the social costs of challenging male authority over property high (Khadiagala 2002; Awumbila and Tsikata 2010). Men have the primary rights (to transfer, bequeath or dispose), and women only have secondary rights of use of land (Rose 2002; Whitehead and Tsikata 2003; Paradza 2011). Women are often portrayed as victims of uncertainty and instability in their difficulty securing access to land in the case of polygyny, divorce or death of a husband (Joireman 2008).

All in all, women are usually represented as vulnerable in terms of rights to land, in Sub-Saharan Africa generally, and in post-conflict northern Uganda in

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particular. The case of Atim and Awor shows us that women who lack links to male relatives, in particular husbands and fathers, are indeed faced with challenges. But their case also shows us that they work hard to secure land for themselves and their children using a broad range of strategies. In the process of doing so, conflicts arise not only between men and women but amongst women themselves. We will argue that the case of Atim and Awor is a concrete instance of a more abstract principle: that the cultivation of relationships is a means to access land. Here and in other cases, there are various 'unconventional' ways in which women create links to others to obtain resources and to access land. These kinds of strategies are part of the complex land tenure systems in Acholi society today (Göttsches 2013).

Changing Gender Relations

The displacement period marked a dramatic change in the social landscape in northern Uganda. Relations between men and women, youth and elders became fraught with new kinds of tensions and contradictions (Mergelsberg 2012). The process of return and reintegration has furthermore been challenged by population growth, weak governance systems, commoditization of land and an increasing failure of the customary tenure system to accommodate landless people. Northern Uganda has witnessed an increase in the number of widows, orphans and single mothers and created new types of partnership or 'male-female alliances', many female-headed households and ultimately an increasing number of people, in particular women, no longer embedded in the patrilineal kinship structure who are ultimately 'landless'.

Patrilineal kinship and land tenure systems are known from all over Sub-Saharan Africa and have frequently been described by anthropologists, Girling (1960) being the most commonly referred to in relation to the Acholi. In societies based on patrilineal kinship systems, a daughter is expected to leave her natal home and join her husband's family. She and her children will access land through her husband. Before marrying, she cultivates gardens with the household at her natal home. A young man is given his own piece of land after he marries and establishes his own household. Women obtain full access to their husbands' land as their position shifts from clan wives to mothers of clan children. A widow will look after her husband's estate, holding it in trust for her children until they are grown. It is culturally accepted and even expected that a woman who divorces or separates from her husband will find refuge at her natal home, where her brothers will give her land on which to farm and nurture her children, until they, ideally, return to their father's home. In the past, wives of a household possessed ownership rights in food crops under the general authority of the household head, who in turn possessed ownership rights to cattle and cash crops – for example, cotton (Girling 1960).

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The patrilineal kinship ideology is accompanied by a particular view on male and female roles, as described by both Girling and later Dolan, who interviewed people (both men and women) in the camps on their notions of male and female roles. According to Dolan's informants, the woman is subordinate to the man, and a wife is the property of the husband. She loses her own clan identity on marriage but does not fully assume the clan identity of her husband and is viewed as an outsider not to be trusted, at least not until much later when she has grown children (Girling 1960: 193; Finnström 2008).

As Dolan (2009: 196) points out, socialization into masculinity begins at a very early age, but its full achievement is impossible without making the transition to adulthood by way of marriage. It is not sufficient to be an economic provider. A man must be a married provider, and marriage cannot take place without payment of bridewealth. Men are taught that they should aspire to and judge themselves by this transition to adulthood through marriage, and both state and society judge and assess them against it (Dolan 2009: 196). Marriage through the payment of bridewealth was, however, practically impossible during the years of encampment, and as a result many people were 'ambiguously' married or simply co-habiting. According to Girling (1960: 167), there have always been men who were too poor to pay bridewealth, but during and after the war it was the case for the vast majority of men (Finnström 2008; Dolan 2009: 199). During the war, most men were prevented from fulfilling expectations of them, both as married men and as providers. Many men simply disappeared and left women to manage on their own. Whyte and colleagues (2013) discuss the missing links of inhabitants in former camps turned into trading centres after the conflict had ended. Many of those who had remained in the former camps had no relatives with land to return to, and many of them were women with children, who had lost husbands or partners, who were 'ambiguously married' and had not become incorporated into their husband's lineage, or who were now rejected by them and had no brothers or fathers with land to which they could return. They remained 'internally displaced', stuck in a no-man's land between fathers and husbands. The same may be said of Awor and Atim, who remained in Pader even after the war. The land on which they lived had belonged to a clan brother of their father, but they had both settled on their husbands' land before the war. Their husbands were still alive but had become irresponsible and badly behaved during the war, and they had no desire (or possibility) to return to them.

Social ties suffered in various ways during the war and the years of encampment, but of particular importance for this chapter is the fact that those years also changed the relationship and power balance between men and women considerably. Dolan shows how the dynamics of violation and debilitation caused a sense of humiliation and a collapse of masculinity. Unable to live up to the model of an adult man being a married provider, which involved relationships of power over women and youth, and neither offered nor allowed to develop any recognized

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alternative, they experienced a social and often physical impotence. In the face of this collapse of their own masculinity, some resorted to acts of violence – against themselves, through alcohol abuse and suicide, but also against others, through domestic violence, mob justice or by joining armed forces, whether government or rebel (2009: 191). Awor bought a small plot of land during the war, when her husband started mistreating her, and Atim also left her first husband during the war due to his mistreatment. Her second 'husband' abandoned her and their two sons. She did not know why, nor where he was, but she heard that he may have joined armed forces.

Women were often victims of the violence of men, but they were also, even more than was the case for men, subject to an array of supportive interventions in northern Uganda during and after the conflict (see Branch 2011). While men saw their authority and status within Acholi society wane, women saw theirs rise in the camps. Because many men had died, joined armed organizations, abandoned their wives, or turned to alcohol abuse, women were left with the primary responsibility of providing for their families. Food rations and non-food item distributions were inadequate, so women were faced with the need to earn money to feed their families and to buy basics such as soap and clothes.

Displacement caused significant physical hardship and suffering for women, but it also brought women together in new ways. Before displacement, women lived in relatively isolated family homesteads. As a middle-aged woman in Gulu Town reported to Branch: 'we [women] were very far apart in the village. We did not have groups or come together like we do now' (Branch 2011: 138). Combined with resources provided by government and international agencies, the camps created the context in which women could forge new forms of association, mostly for economic empowerment, such as loan schemes, but also for cultural activities. These groups became spaces for women to come together and discuss problems (ibid.). Women gained access to loans both individually and collectively. They could run small businesses and retain possession over produce and save the money. They achieved new education through training by NGOs and government on health and other issues. Much of it was part of the struggle to feed the family in the camps, but many women saw these developments as positive. Alongside all this, discourses on women's rights became increasingly strong (ibid.: 139). Women's organizations started presenting a vision of peace, built not on normalization but on the demand for increasing political and social inclusion of women (ibid.). Branch also reports widespread accusations by men that women's rights are to blame for increased domestic violence (ibid.: 141), and he notes that women whom he interviewed during encampment and in the early phases of resettlement declared their hope that their husbands would accept their new economic and political roles back in the village but recognized that this might not be the case (ibid.: 174).

Dolan reminds us to be wary of the stereotypes of men as idle heavy drinkers with no economic initiative. Some men have moved into what were previously

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regarded as women's areas of activity. Male groups have sought to create some economic enterprise against all odds, and other men in humble ways take on menial tasks for the sake of their family's survival (Dolan 2009: 204). But in other ways, gender relations *have* changed. Obika's work (2021), which will be discussed below, shows that women have indeed brought their experience from the years of encampment with them and continue to make use of their new networks and of a broad range of livelihood strategies whether they resettled in the village or remained in trading centres. The 'missing links' did not turn out to be as disastrous for women as anticipated. One of the things they had learned in camps was indeed how to make other kinds of links.

Who Owns Land? Claims and Counterclaims

Since Ester Boserup's publication of *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970), women have often been at the centre of analysis, but they have usually been portrayed as holding powerless positions in terms of land (see Nussbaum 1999). Uganda has been praised for having taken critical steps towards improving women's property rights, including the 1995 Constitution, which is said to be one of the most gender-neutral both in content and language with regard to property rights in Sub-Saharan Africa, including land rights (Joireman 2007; Rugadya in Doss et al. 2012). However, even if women's land rights are protected under statutory law, they may not be guaranteed under customary law and cultural practices. Customary systems often allow for certain flexibility, for various forms of access, and for movement of land between different users (Ossome 2014). However, Peters (2004, 2009) warns us to be wary of discourses on this 'flexibility', which often hide realities of unequal power relations. In the case of Atim and Awor, they both claimed land that they referred to as their father's land but which it was later revealed was given (or even lent) to their father (actually their father's clan brother, who inherited their mother) by his friend. The clan elders did not contest their claim to the land until the two sisters started fighting each other, both trying to secure land for their sons whose fathers were absent. Only then, according to Atim, did the clan elders team up with the oldest sister of Atim and Awor to support her in trying to claim ownership.

In another case from Obika's fieldwork, two widowed women, Akech and Apiyo, who were neighbours but not related, had ended up in a conflict over land that they both claimed a right over through the notion of 'first-comer' (see Lentz 2005 and Chapter 6, this volume, for a discussion of first-comers). Their husbands, who had both died during the war, had been friends. One of them had been a first-comer to the land but had at some stage invited his friend to stay on the land, and then the war came. Both women argued for their husband's status as first-comer, their stories contradicting each other. Both had sons, but Apiyo's was present on the land and supported her to build a case against Akech, whereas

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Akech's son was not. Unfortunately for his mother, once he returned, Akech's son's express interest was in selling off the land for a project of his elsewhere. If he had succeeded in doing so, this might have brought an end to the conflict but also jeopardized his mother's attempt to secure land for him and his children. Obika (2021) found that young men often expressed very little interest in staying on family land that was under contestation. Instead, they tried to reason with or convince their elders (particularly mothers) to buy land (where possible) or just move elsewhere.

To understand the impact of both statutory and customary law and gendered power relations, we need to look at these micro-level negotiations over access and use of land. Being married does not necessarily guarantee access to land or security of tenure, and being a single mother does not necessarily translate into tenure insecurity. A common way of phrasing women's relationship to land in Acholi is: 'Women do not own land.' Even though this is true, in reality (as we have seen in previous chapters) neither do men when it comes to customary ancestral land. Land is held in trust by clans on behalf of multiple users, claimants and rights' holders (Adoko and Levine 2005; Hopwood 2015). The concept of 'ownership' does not translate neatly into Acholi, as we saw in Chapter 2, and we lose sight of gendered power relations and what is happening on the ground if we translate various forms of land tenure and negotiations over these into 'one-dimensional' ownership debates (Shipton and Goheen 1992).

A lot of work has already been done on gender and land in Africa, including: land tenure reforms (Yngstrom 2002; Manji 2003; Jirira and Halimana 2008) and the role of law (Manji 2001); large-scale land grabs (Chu 2011; Behrman, Meinzen-Dick and Quisumbing 2012); land rights (Yngstrom 2002; Whitehead and Tsikata 2003); inequalities in customary land tenure systems (Peters 2004; Ossome 2014); and labour and capital accumulation (Berry 1989; Tsikata 2010). Very little research has, however, been done on small-scale land grabs and conflicts between kith and kin and neighbours. Women's lesser access to certain spaces has been studied extensively, but less attention has been given to how they navigate those limited spaces to their own benefit. Hopwood (2015: 389–90) suggests that instead of looking at *rights*, we should pay closer attention to the dynamic flow of *claims* and counterclaims that are being made in the name of custom. Claims are, for example, made in the name of custom for returning to one's father's land, for securing land for one's children, through the cementing of a grave, or through claims of being a first-comer. In other words, we need to pay attention not only to customary law and ownership, but also to how men and women manage, use and access land and how also women may place their mark on land for several years and generations.

Ribot and Peluso (2003: 153) define access as 'the ability to benefit from things – including material objects, persons, institutions and symbols', which in this context suggests that women's access to land is different to, but not neces-

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sarily less than, that of men. Neither men nor women constitute homogenous categories. There is a big difference between 'the ability to benefit from things' as a young newly married woman, a widow with grown children, a divorced woman who has returned to her brother's home, or a single woman who is a head of household and managing on her own. Obika (2021) found that few young, newly married women claimed to be involved in any kind of decisions concerning land or land conflict, whereas most middle-aged and older women were often directly involved in land governance and conflicts over land, as victims or (in the view of others) as perpetrators, or as witnesses due to their long experience cultivating land in the area, with different and sometimes similar experiences to their male counterparts. As mentioned above, young men also tend to shy away from land conflicts. Where ownership of the land is in doubt and young men's (e.g. uterine nephews) possibilities for continuity on the land is uncertain, they tend to look for projects of their own, as we see in the case of Akech's son.

Ossome suggests that women's claims to land are stronger and more diverse than usually presented, their strength lying precisely in the social embeddedness that has otherwise often been seen as the reason for women's lack of rights (Ossome 2014). Based on her fieldwork in Acholi, Obika (2021) likewise demonstrates the diversity of women's land claims (and counterclaims) within a socially embedded customary tenure system and how women are able to negotiate, manoeuvre and find pathways to land access in various ways, exactly because they are good at 'cultivating' not only land but also relationships, benefiting as well from the plurality of institutions involved in conflict resolution (see Chapter 3 on Conflicts). We will now move on to discuss this.

How to Cultivate Relationships around Land

A woman once told Holly Porter, who did research on rape in northern Uganda, that the image of a man being powerful is a 'myth'. The power of a man, this woman insisted, is embedded in his relatives, particularly his mother. Despite the narrative of the powerful and proud African man who suppresses his wife, beats his children and determines his destiny, individual men, like women, Porter reminds us, have very little freedom to make independent decisions. They must submit to the wishes of their relatives (Porter 2017: 42). Obika (2021) argues that 'cultivating' relationships in order to 'hold' land takes as much work and effort, if not more, than cultivating the land – preparing, ploughing and planting, weeding and harvesting. And women often put more effort into it than do men.

Akech, for example, whose conflict with her neighbour Apiyo was referred to above, had several fields that she had cultivated when she was younger but not anymore due to old age and physical weakness. Instead, she had given it to

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her daughters, who used part of it to plant their crops to supplement what they produced from the land they had at their marital homes. She also gave some fields to a friend who had requested her to let him grow his *simsim* on the land that she was not currently using. She agreed to help him because he too may have had his own challenges of accessing land at his ancestral home, but also, this was a way of preventing others from grabbing it and a way of garnering support from others when contesting her claim over the land before various legal and social fora (Obika et al. 2018). She was cultivating relationships using her land and maintaining access through other people's support. She may not officially have been the 'owner' of the land, but she was the one who proved able to control it. In the case of Atim and Awor, we may say that it was their lack of ability to 'cultivate' their own relationship that ultimately had them ordered off their father's land. If they had managed to stay on good terms the clan elders would have left the land for them, even though they were constantly reminded that they were 'daughters who had returned home'. Again, it was a question, not of 'customary law' but of the women's ability to 'cultivate' relationships. Women with many sons, powerful friends, a savings scheme and a well-functioning women's group and other social networks stand a good chance of putting up a fight for their land.

Just as there is seasonality to the cultivation of land, so is there to the cultivation of relationships. During the planting season, fields became defined plots of bounded land and hence of conflicts with relatives and neighbours. During the dry season, fields ceased to exist, in a way, and the land became an unbounded mass. The dry season was a time for carrying out repairs of huts and granaries – and also of relationships. An exception was that domestic violence seemed to increase after harvest, since some men would attempt to sell off the harvest for their personal use. During the dry season, more women went back to their natal homes (or were sent back due to conflicts with husbands), but it did not stop them from working. Many were engaged in small businesses and saving schemes at their natal home, cultivating their relationships there but returning to their husband and his land once the planting season returned. The process of accessing land was for many of them not linear but cyclical, and displacement, we may say, is not always about discontinuity and separation but also about continuity and seasonality, both in rural areas and in town, where some activities also decline during heavy agricultural seasons.

Megan Göttsches (2013), who carried out a study of widows and livelihood in northern Uganda, also found that access to land through friends, neighbours and women's groups was common. She refers to these non-traditional forms of land tenure as 'complex tenure', a term that we adopt to capture the multi-pronged informal pathways taken by women to gain and safeguard access to land and pursue various livelihood strategies in addition to the cultivation of crops on the customary land of husbands, fathers and brothers. In this, women and youth resemble one another, as shown in Chapter 4 on Generations.

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Complex Tenure: Livelihood and Land

Most women in rural districts in northern Uganda still depend on land, but their effort to safeguard their land, or at least their access to land, is inextricably tied to their other livelihood strategies. What we begin to see is a pattern of women who move within and between residences (natal, marital and others) to safeguard not only their own but also their children's access to land. Awor moved between her former husband's land, the plot she had purchased herself during the war and (at least in the beginning of Obika's fieldwork) her father's land. She also did small-scale business in the market of Pader Town. Atim had fewer plots of land to move between, though she did at some stage borrow land to cultivate. She had a broad range of livelihood strategies in addition to cultivating her friend's land. She had a small-scale business selling water and later, also, dried fish.

Women's livelihood strategies changed during and after the war and encampment, with many women now doing what used to be considered men's work. As Angee, a woman in her forties told Obika,

> a woman has many things she should do in the home: cooking, farming, smearing the floor of her hut [with cow dung or mud], taking care of visitors, and welcoming people. But these days women do many other things in addition to this. They burn bricks, make granaries and make charcoal, all of which used to be the work of men.

Angee told Obika, as did many other women, that when the war started men became drunkards. If women had remained in the home as they usually did before the war, children would have been neglected and would have slept hungry. Today, she added, some men continue to misbehave, and even the payment of school fees has become women's responsibility. Other women mentioned their participation in stone quarrying, in small non-agricultural businesses, and even about their participation in setting traps and hunting wild animals, which they would then sell on markets. They also talked of renting and borrowing land instead of, or in addition to, cultivating the land of husbands or kin, something that is often overlooked in the literature. It is important to note that even though women clearly experience carrying the largest responsibilities for the well-being of the family, many men are faced with the same challenges of accessing land in various places and having to combine farming with other kinds of livelihood strategies.

Navigating Trust and Access: The Fabric of Intimate Governance

We have suggested that cultivating relationships is an important part of gaining and maintaining access to customary land in post-war Acholi. Manoeuvring and weaving pathways is part of everyday life for men and women alike, in a context

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where access to land is not a given and belonging to a certain piece of land is, for many, uncertain. Cultivating relationships necessarily raises a question about land access: whom do I trust? As we saw in the case of Atim, Awor and their elder sister, trust and mistrust flowed back and forth between them. Sometimes they were forming alliances and at other times they were living as intimate enemies (Theidon 2006), eventually accusing each other of witchcraft. As Geschiere (2013) suggests, intimacy and trust are relational and often go together with witchcraft or accusations thereof. Obika (2021) found that witchcraft accusations are often intertwined with land conflicts being fought among people closely related (Heald 1989; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998) and are referred to as the 'dark side of kinship' (Leistner 2014).

We suggest that the constant tensions, pushing and pulling, claims and counterclaims between sisters, brothers, elders and youth, neighbours and kith and kin – these intimate allies/enemies – are the very fabric on which the negotiation and contestation of customary land is built. We have found that whom one trusts today is not necessarily an ally tomorrow, a situation that has come to resemble what Meinert (2015) refers to as 'tricky trust'. Neither security of access nor trust is absolute. It is not a matter of either/or but of more or less, and security requires a continuing effort through the cultivation of relationships. Cultivating relationships is a process of building and increasing trust, which in turn increases one's guarantee of holding on to one's land or at the very least having access to it.

Conclusion

A substantial part of the academic literature on Africa has focused on the vulnerability and victimhood of women after prolonged violent conflict. Without dismissing the mounting evidence of suffering and hardship of women during the conflict in northern Uganda, it also seems to be the case, as Göttsches (2013) has argued, that violent reshuffling of society during and after armed conflict may create novel opportunities, where the current and former gender balance can be re-addressed and renegotiated (see also Denov and Gervais 2007; Utas 2005). It also seems that the cultivation of relationships is crucial to the continued process of safeguarding land – and that women often put more effort into the cultivation of relationships than men do. Our cases have focused on women, not to dismiss men's experiences of land tenure insecurity but to highlight how different categories of women are able to navigate small spaces of land access, precisely because they are relegated to access land through men under customary rules and norms.

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