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Social struggles in Uganda's Acholiland: understanding responses and resistance to Amuru sugar works

Giuliano Martiniello

On Wednesday 18 April 2012, between 80 and 100 women from Amuru District in northern Uganda stripped naked in a protest to block their eviction from land they claim is rightfully theirs. They did this in front of representatives of the Local District Board and surveyors of the sugar company Madhvani Group, the firm seeking land in the area for sugarcane growing. By resisting dispossession and challenging state violence, small-scale poor peasants reiterated the political salience of rural social struggles and highlighted the significance of land and agrarian questions. By placing social struggles over control, access and use of land and existing social relations – property and labour regimes – at the core of social analysis, this paper aims to contribute to further understanding both the character of contemporary land grabs and the nature of peasant resistance. It argues that escalating rural social protests manifested in both everyday, hidden practices of resistance and moments of open, militant contestation are aimed at (re)establishing and securing access to means of social reproduction. Yet these struggles cumulatively embody claims of land sovereignty and autonomy *vis-à-vis* capitalist markets and state.

Keywords: land grabbing; land enclosures; social struggles; resistance; Acholi; Uganda

Introduction

On Wednesday 18 April 2012, more than 100 people resisted eviction from land they claimed to be rightfully theirs in Amuru District in northern Uganda, close to the border with South Sudan. Women stripped naked before representatives of the Local District Board and surveyors of the Madhvani Group, the firm seeking 40,000 ha of land in the area for a new commercial sugarcane estate. By resisting dispossession and challenging state violence, poor rural communities in Uganda and elsewhere remind us of the political salience of rural social struggles. The event illuminates crucial aspects of peasants' agency, brings to the fore the present dynamics of national and global political economy and highlights the role of the state in current land acquisitions and agrarian transformation.

The Amuru Sugar Works project, initiated in 2007–2008 but stalled at inception, was planned to create employment for 7000–8000 people and additionally to provide livelihoods from sugarcane cultivation to 7000–10000 outgrower farmers, according to Madhvani (Madhvani 2012). The latter would be housed in labour camps with 10 ha each: 8 ha under sugarcane and 2 ha for food crops. The investor, Madhvani Group, which is a Ugandan company, would supply equipment to clear, plough and furrow the land as well as distribute treated cane seeds and give technical advice on agricultural matters. The proposed project would have displaced approximately 20,000 people (Penytoo,

interview 16 May 2012), almost all family farmers, around the village of Lakang in this economically depressed region on the periphery, both politically and economically, of Uganda. The overwhelming majority of small-scale rural producers rejected the proposed enclosure of their land, and refused to be incorporated as either outgrower farmers or agricultural labourers.

Large-scale capitalist enclosures that activists labelled as ‘land grabbing’ (La Via Campesina 2011), and others see as a ‘development opportunity’ (FAO, IFAD, UNCATD and WB 2010), spread globally in the wake of the global commodities crisis of 2007–2008. As capital’s response to declining profitability rates in the context of inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing food, financial, energy and ecological crises, vast tracts of land and other natural resources have been acquired in the global South through a variety of coercive mechanisms (Borras and Franco 2012). The African continent has been the geographical epicentre of these processes as an estimated 60 percent of total land acquisitions are located in Sub-Saharan Africa (White et al. 2012, 620). In the case of Uganda, large-scale commercial deals concluded between 2008 and 2010 represent 14.6 percent of the country’s agricultural land (Friis and Reenberg 2010, 12). Here, the current wave of capitalist enclosures has taken multiple forms: land acquisitions for food and bio-fuel production for export by Trans-National Corporations (TNCs), ranching schemes set up by national capitalists, land enclosures driven by Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) carbon capture schemes and forestry creation, demarcations of conservation areas and game reserves for tourist purposes, and acquisitions especially in oil- and mineral-rich regions by high-ranking government and military officials.

The re-drawn geography of corporate-driven sugarcane production in Southern and Eastern Africa is developing to the detriment of locally oriented food production systems. The push for sugar, and related energy and biofuel production, seems to follow trends of oligopolistic control of agriculture and its enhanced interpenetration with finance capital (Hall 2011; Richardson 2010). The configuration of new sets of economic and political relationships appears to be also related to global contextual trends as the anticipation of food security and new forms of resource extraction for fuel security (Borras et al. 2011, 627–628). The increased corporate control of the international food regime and its approximation to a food-for-fuel regime (McMichael 2009) also represented major drivers of the consolidation of agri-business power in the region.

The emerging scholarship on land grabs paid only scant attention to the way politics from below is constituted by and in the agency of agrarian subjects and how it affects the trajectories of agrarian change (Clapp 2014; Fairbairn 2014; Zoomers 2010). Notwithstanding a rich tradition in peasant and agrarian studies (Brass 1991; Hobsbawm 1973; Isaacman 1990), the analysis of rural social protests and political reactions from below to land grabs has not undergone the same ‘rush’ and interest. Political repression by state apparatuses tends to silence instances of contestation, but the forms of resistance are also frequently difficult to apprehend, as the character of rural social struggles is sometimes subterranean (see Scott 1985). Furthermore, mainstream characterizations of African countryside as *tabula rasa*, i.e. as empty spaces endowed with natural resources that need to be brought within the orbit of capitalist markets, reiterate a fictitious representation of peasants as simple commodity producers who are passive victims waiting to be rescued by philanthropic interventions and modernizing forces of the capitalist market (De Soto 2000; World Bank 2011).

Yet peasants have made their presence felt on the political scene by engaging in a multitude of different forms of struggle *vis-à-vis* externally posed threats and attempts at surplus extraction by state and accumulating classes (Scott 1975; Williams 1976). Social analyses

from different disciplinary perspectives focused on rural politics explored the significance of peasant political actions in revolutionary struggles of the twentieth century (Shanin 1971; Wolf 1969) and national liberation anti-colonial movements in Africa (Davidson 1974; Fanon 1967). Other enquiries uncovered the relevance of the study of peasant consciousness in the study of peasant politics (Ranger 1985). Yet there is wide disagreement among scholars about the forms of resistance and political attitudes of peasants. To Fanon (1967), peasants represented the quintessence of the revolutionary subject. Scott (1975) defined their actions as mainly oriented to 'minimize risks'. The literature further bifurcates into those who became interested in the study of social revolts as moments that revealed the existence of a separate political domain which elite domination and hegemony have been unable to supersede or suppress (Arnold 1984; Guha 1983), and those who maintained that peasants' agency and dissent was largely manifest in low-intensity, everyday, hidden practices of resistance of a non-confrontational nature (Scott 1985). Land struggles are more likely to embody 'uneasy and erratic, contradictory and shifting alliances of different class elements and tendencies than to express the interests of some unambiguous and unitary class subject' (Bernstein 2009, 253). However, recent critical agrarian scholarship has returned to unpacking land struggles, motivated in part by the need to understand the stubborn persistence of peasants and small farmers in the face of a developmental model geared towards their extinction (Desmarais 2007, 195; Moyo 2008; Van der Ploeg 2008).

In order to explore these questions, I follow Kerkvliet's (2009) suggestion to move the perimeter of the study of politics beyond the institutional terrain of conventional politics towards everyday peasant politics, which is constituted at different multi-layered levels (household, community, village). If politics as he suggests is the terrain of struggle 'over norms and rules regarding authority over control, allocation, production and use of natural resources and the value and ideas underlying those activities', then every peasant politics incorporates the tensions deriving from people 'embracing, complying with or contesting them' (Kerkvliet 2009, 232). Drawing upon Isaacman (1990, 3), this paper focuses on the struggles over labour process and property regimes as key entry points to understanding how power is negotiated and executed in the countryside, and what avenues for social dissent exist.

This paper places social struggles over control, access and use of land and existing social relations – land property and labour regimes – at the core of its analysis, and aims to contribute to further understanding both of the character of contemporary land grabs and of the nature of resistance.

The paper explores the relation between land dispossession and rural social struggles, and the implications of these for the trajectories of agrarian change in Northern Uganda, by raising a set of interrelated research questions: how are enclosures implemented and resisted? How do they differentially affect social groups? Who are the agents of resistance? How do they organize their *praxis* of resistance? And how does all this affect trajectories of social change?

Understanding the constitutive processes of land dispossession, its discourses and practices, will help to display wider class conflicts manifested in political, economic and ideological forms. This is furthermore important in the context of post-conflict resettlement after 20 years of forced internment of almost the totality of the Acholi population in internally displaced people (IDP) camps. With the aim to contribute to re-politicizing existing debates over land, this paper argues that looking at the geo-politics of capital at the global scale is only one side of the coin that has to be supplemented with a simultaneous analysis of the social implications of land enclosures from the perspective of everyday peasant politics.

Genealogy of struggles for sovereignty and relative autonomy in Acholiland

Acholi peasants have a long history of interpenetration and relative autonomy *vis-à-vis* market and state forces, which precedes colonialism. Unravelling this history is essential to understanding the long-term practices that emerged as a sign of contestation or defiance of the established authority, and influenced the responses from below to contemporary land enclosures. Anthropological and linguistic studies support the idea that Acholi people are descendants of Nilotic-speaking ancestors and that their presence in today's northern Uganda is the outcome of a gradual but constant infiltration from Sudan starting around 1700 (Girling 1960, 12–14). Explanations of the causes of what Girling termed the 'Shilluk migration' have not been elaborated. A possible and suggestive hypothesis links the migration to profound changes in the systems of land tenure and growing appropriation of peasant surplus occurring in Northern Sudan, which fell under the Turco-Egyptian rule in 1821. The state initiated the control of large tracts of land previously held by peasants, imposed forced agricultural labour, established a new land tax policy and promoted private property in land (Zeleva 1997, 120). The growth of agricultural slavery and land confiscation was met by desertions and mass migrations by peasants who exerted their right to escape or exit adverse political conditions as a tactic to evade state control and rule (Zeleva 1997, 135).

The area today inhabited by Acholi people was at the crossroads of many distinguished political and economic influences in the mid-nineteenth century. From the North, there were the Arabic slave raiders and traders, who emanated from centralized state structures of the Sudanic states; from the South, there were the Swahili merchants who extended exchange networks from the Sultanate of Oman (Girling 1960; Mamdani 1976; Mukherjee 1956). In response to politico-economic and ecological factors and to constant threats coming from outside, regular movement became a necessary aspect of production (Mamdani 1976, 20). Simple herding and shifting cultivation satisfied this necessity. Constant movement also led to the dispersal of families, resulting in decentralized and segmental social units. War and defence were at the core of the social organization of the village unit. Age classes of Acholi males from 15 years upwards formed the fighting organization of the people and were organized on a territorial basis (Girling 1960, 75). Mukherjee termed them 'military democracies' in the light of the segmented and acephalous character of their political organization (1956, 77).

The practice of shifting cultivation, which is still predominant in Acholiland today, demanded mobility of populations. Any village had the liberty to occupy uncultivated land or land where cultivation had been abandoned. Security of tenure was therefore guaranteed by the permanent use of land. Such forms of occupation, however, did not imply permanent ownership but granted the usufruct for determinate periods (Parsons 1960, 13; Mafeje 2003). Through customary land tenure regimes, people also were guaranteed grazing rights, hunting rights, water rights and rights over ant-hills and shea butter-nut trees (Parsons 1960, 14). These complex and nested regimes of land rights combined and articulated both the individual and the collective rights in non-conflictual ways.

Colonial enterprise aimed to push peasants to produce cotton in order to pay taxes and other kind of fees, and afford the imported European consumer goods that penetrated the colonial economy. Yet Acholiland was marginal in many ways to the early British colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. As a dry, geographically remote and sparsely populated area located far to the north of the country, it seemed of little interest to the commercial appetites of the colony. The new colony became in fact structured upon the economic and political centrality of the Buganda kingdom in the South, which became the pivot of

indirect rule and bifurcated despotism (Mamdani 1976, 1996). A nation of agriculturalists and stockbreeders, Acholi show propensity neither to cash-crop production nor to labour migration into the Southern region where economic activities were concentrated (Atkinson 2010, 5). In 1920–1921, 81,000 pounds of lint were produced in Uganda, of which 85 percent were grown in the Southern regions (Mamdani 1976, 47). Land availability and the absence of individualized land tenure gave comparative stability to the ‘traditional’ socio-economic order (Girling 1960, 183).

Following Scott’s characterization of forms of resistance in geographically remote peripheries, we interpret these localized, social, economic and cultural practices as deliberate efforts by people to withdraw from state control (2009, 51) and claim land sovereignty. The location of the Acholi at a distance from the control of more powerful and centralized kingdoms of Southern Uganda, living at the margins of trade routes, the simplification of social structure and means of subsistence, shifting cultivation and continuous mobility, far from being signs of primitivism or backwardness, can rather be interpreted as dynamic elements and adaptations to evade state capture (see Scott 2009, 30).

The Lamogi rebellion of 1911 is an instance of the ‘art of not being governed’. Provoked by British colonial restrictions on the possession of firearms (Adimola 1954, 169) but in the context of resistance to the imposition of taxes, forced labour and land requisitions (Mamdani 1976; Tosh 1978; Vincent 1977), the event itself and subsequent repression are alive in the memory of Acholi people and their world-views. I interpret this as a moment in the more complex and long-term confrontation with external political and economic forces, to maintain political and economic sovereignty and autonomy over a specific geographical territory and social group. Similarly, the forced introduction of cotton into the area in the late 1930s by colonial authorities was met with substantial opposition (Leys 1967; Tosh 1978). Its net effect was the creation of a minority of ‘progressive’ medium- and large-scale commercial cotton farmers, often combining this with salaried employment. Yet commercial farming never took off in Acholiland (Leys 1967, 50; Mamdani 1976, 46), an area that colonial officials perceived as backward (Branch 2011, 50) and which successive governments after independence have continued to treat as peripheral to the national economy and polity, while also a terrain for extractive enterprises (Atkinson 2010; Branch 2011).

By replicating and widening the efforts of the colonial state, the post-colonial state developed means to extract surplus produce from peasants through taxes and the establishment of marketing boards, which monopolized the purchase of cash crops in the countryside (below market price) and their sale on international markets. Compounding this was the erosion of customary land tenure, consolidated with Idi Amin’s Land Reform Act of 1975, which claimed all land to be state-owned and aimed to turn peasants into the state’s tenants (Mamdani 1987). Initiated in the years of neoliberal restructuring of agriculture during the late 1980s, the state’s efforts to increase the ‘legibility’¹ (see Scott 1998) of the countryside were aimed at enhancing the registration and formalization of land, facilitating its titling and transfer, improving small-holders’ integration in agricultural commodity chains and consolidating agri-business. State-led development projects promoted the standardization and simplification of rural spaces, facilitating their decryption and subsequent control. According to Mamdani (2012), the 1998 Land Act’s aim of recognizing customary land tenure must be seen as the latest phase in the modern state’s endeavour to colonize society. The identification and mapping of land under customary forms of

¹The term refers to the quality of being clear enough to be read.

tenure through geographical information systems (GIS) and digitalized cadastral services is not aimed at protecting customary rights but at extending state control over people and territory, and eventually eliminating or converting these rights. As Mitchell (2007, 29) notes, the creation of formal legal title is a mechanism for transferring properties from poorer urban and rural classes to more affluent ones, and concentrating ownership in fewer hands. While just 17 percent of land in Uganda is held under freehold (World Bank 2012), the state is expanding its efforts to consolidate its fiscal basis, enhancing territorial control over reluctant northern populations and actively promoting the formation of a class of politically connected businessmen (Mamdani 2012). The imposition of a new definition of property formidably biased in favour of landowners, which was aimed at eradicating agrarian use rights not juridically defined, generated exclusive and individualized access to land undermining other communal/cooperative/collective forms of land tenure (see Thompson 1971). The reduction of international agricultural prices, and the progressive measures of liberalization and deregulation of the agricultural economy, spurred many small-scale peasants in Uganda and Tanzania to retreat into food crops for local exchange, like cow and pigeon peas, cassava, sorghum, legumes and sesame (Daviron and Gibbon 2002, 152).

Twenty years of war in the northern regions against the Lord's Resistance Army led by Joseph Kony and other insurgent groups of rebels (terminated in 2006) was characterized first by counter-insurgency military tactics, then by forced encampment of rural populations, displacement and dispossession and flows of food aid (see Branch 2011). During the same period, state violence ravaged the northern countryside, first by means of deportation and encampment of rural populations in IDP camps, then by means of unlawful land annexation of land by political and military elites. The new strategy by Museveni's government included sudden and violent forced displacement of the entire rural population of western Acholiland, estimated at approximately 2 million. In 1996, the government gave a 48-hour ultimatum to the population to abandon their homes and assemble at designated trading posts, after which the army began bombing villages, burning huts and granaries and killing civilians who refused to comply (Branch 2013, 3153). People in the camps were highly dependent on relief aid and suffered from severe lack of protection, being at the mercy of both government troops and rebels. The forced interruption of agricultural production created the basis for the development of a humanitarian industry: by 2003 over 100 relief organizations were working in northern Uganda, and by 2007 USD 200 million were annually spent in the camps (Branch 2013, 3156; UNOCHA 2005).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by 2012 almost 95 percent of the camps' inhabitants had left (UNHCR 2012). Yet the long-term forced internment, dependence on food aid and extreme poverty generated by war created the pre-conditions for systematic land dispossession through both the state and market. On the one hand, individuals with political connections and enough wealth were able to manipulate state institutions and use state repressive power to dispossess peasants. Indeed, exploiting people's absence from their homes during the war, the government funded the formation of the Amuru District Commercial Farmers Association, led by a group of high-ranking military officials and Members of Parliament (MPs) who lobbied for the preferential allocation of 20,000 ha and huge sums of public funds (Atkinson 2008). On the other hand, there are those who are giving up land because of desperate poverty faced by much of the rural population. As a consequence, the wave of land enclosures that targeted the Amuru district is paving the way for the creation of a surplus population of the dispossessed (see Li 2010). The consequences of violent displacement affected Gulu's population, the closest town to the Amuru District, which dramatically increased

from below 40,000 people in the early 1990s to over 150,000 in the last few years (Branch 2013, 3160). The proportion of people living below the poverty line in Gulu and surrounding environments increased to 69 percent in 2009/2010 (Gulu Municipal Council 2011).

Yet in Amuru, the majority of people access land through inheritance (87 percent) and hold it in customary tenure (98 percent), and certificates of customary ownership amount only to 1.4 percent and freehold property to 0.4 percent of property arrangements (Ravnborg et al. 2013, 18–22). Land and agricultural commercialization don't seem to be proceeding as in the rest of the country. Access to labour power is secured by household members (or through kin) and through *awak*² at times of clearance and harvest, and only very rarely through hiring within the community. Labour income is used mainly to satisfy the consumption and reproductive needs of the household, plus to fund *ceremonial* and *replacement* activities (see Wolf 1966). Acholi peasant households in Amuru tend to sell 10–20 percent of their agricultural production (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2010) and use the remaining part for different forms of productive consumption at household and village levels. Small-scale cultivators in Kololo-Lakang take their produce by bicycle or motorbike to the nearest market in Amuru, 45 km away. Seeds are generally accessed thanks to the careful selection of women, who at harvest time dedicate knowledge and energy in order to clean and store them. After marriage, women bring with them seeds from the father's household to begin cultivation.

The degree of commercialization of agriculture and commodification of subsistence is very minimal. In Acholi, moreover, 80 percent of the population practices shifting cultivation (Atkinson 2012). With an average availability of 2 ha per household, peasant households manage the cycle of agricultural production according to social norms based in cultural repertoires and moral economies, by planting combinations of food crops such as finger millet, pigeon, cowpeas and chickpeas, sesame, sorghum and cassava. Conjunctly, rice and maize are grown with a commercial intent. Yet involvement within national markets in Amuru is among the lowest of the country. The low degree of monetization of economic relationships and the low mobility of factors of production provide a form of resistance to capitalist commoditization (Friedmann 1980). This does not mean that peasants can retreat in complete isolation from negative external pressures. The same notion of 'peasant' bears an understanding of embedded relations into powerful and exploitative political, social and economic networks. Peasants are still subject to the extractive mechanisms of uneven exchange with local merchants and middlemen and through very low farm-gate prices. However, they still maintain their sovereignty over the mobilization of labour and use of land, as well as deciding which channels to use to market their agricultural surplus. Informal markets, petty trade, simple commodity production, forms of bartering within the community, links of reciprocity and mutuality, and labour cooperation all represent obstacles to generalized commoditization of social reproduction (see Polanyi 1957).

Resistance to penetration of capitalist social relations therefore begins with the mechanisms used by households to pursue economic self-provisioning and relatively autonomous social reproduction. In a context of increasing marginality, dependence and subordination, it is at the core of the creation and development of a self-controlled and self-managed resource base. This in turn allows for forms of co-production of humanity and living nature to improve the process of co-production, enlarge autonomy and thus reduce dependency (Van der Ploeg 2008, 23). Village organization and cohesion, maintained through a set of rituals, customs, marriages and reciprocity with neighbours, and

²Community labour groups.

kinship groups, allowed for limited penetration of market imperatives, as social reproduction could be enhanced through non-market practices.

Land enclosures in Amuru: the power of state and capital

This paper analyses the recent attempt by the Ugandan state to alienate 40,000 ha of land in Acholiland for the establishment of a sugarcane plantation and processing factory run by the Madhvani Group, the largest sugar company in the country. The Madhvani Group has a long history of presence in the country since the 1930s when, after having obtained 800 ha of land from the Busoga kingdom and the colonial government, it established the Kakira Sugar Factory. The Indian elite with interests in commercial activities became a partner, together with the African petty bourgeoisie, of the colonial government in the enterprise of developing a cash-crop economy (Mamdani 1976). The Madhvani Group is today an empire in East Africa with interest in sugar, energy, insurance, floriculture and construction.

Empirical research in the area around the Kakira Sugar Factory highlighted the social implications of sugarcane cultivation especially in terms of food insecurity, indebtedness and land loss (see Kafuko 2005). Similarly in the Kigali District in Rwanda, where in 1997 the state leased 3100 ha to Madhvani Group, a study concluded that the majority of interviewed households experienced increasing rates of dependence on, and indebtedness to, Madhvani (Veldman and Lankhorst 2011). In both cases the company, with monopolistic powers, was able to determine non-negotiable prices and decide when the cane is ripe, and prevented outgrowers from being present when the harvest was weighed (Veldman and Lankhorst 2011, 8; see also Tibakuno 2000). These developments in eastern Africa reiterate the question of adverse incorporation of small-scale petty commodity producers into vertically organized global commodity chains elsewhere on the continent (see Oya 2012; Little and Watts 1994).

The process of enclosure and the ongoing contestation it generated constitute an advantageous entry point for social enquiry of escalating processes of dispossession, commoditization and resistance. The case epitomizes the converging pressures and typical features of land grabs. Seen from the angle of global capital expansion (financial and agri-business) and penetration into previously un-captured resources, territories and populations, the deal follows a larger trend in the continent oriented towards reviving and expanding industrial agriculture in Africa. The pattern alters not only tenure relations but also patterns of land use, and is based on the conversion of large tracts of land, mostly peasant-owned, into large-scale, mono-crop, highly mechanized and chemically-intensive plantations, often in combination with outgrowers or contract schemes.

Behind the label 'private-public partnership', the state is profoundly involved and invested in the Amuru Sugar project. Not only did it deploy its usual arsenal of violence and bribery in an effort to evict local inhabitants and secure land for the company but, with promises of infrastructural development, wealth creation, rural employment, outgrower schemes and energy security, the Ugandan government actively promoted this and similar projects, propagating the view that 'every sugar plantation is an oil-field' (Child 2009, 249).

Amuru district, an area known for fertile and vast land, and low population density, has been the epicentre of land enclosures in the immediate aftermath of the war. In 2008, exploiting the absence of people who had been interned in IDP camps, the Land District Board fraudulently allocated 10,000 ha to the general Julius Oketta and 1,000 ha to Harriet Aber, the reputed girlfriend of Salim Saleh, president Yoweri Museveni's brother

(High Court of Uganda 2008). In Apaa village, in 2011–2012, the creation of a conservation area and game reserve for tourist purposes over an area of 20,000 ha took precedence over the rights of local populations (Lenhart 2013). In order to facilitate the flow of commodities and connect the area to regional markets, Uganda's government has invested in improved transport infrastructure to connect Gulu to Juba in South Sudan. In 2012 it granted a commission to China Henan Industrial Corporation Group, a large-scale parastatal enterprise, as part of the wider bilateral cooperation between the two countries (New Vision, 2012).

The origins of the story at the core of this paper started when the Madhvani Group of Companies applied for 40,000 ha of land in Amuru for a sugarcane plantation and factory during the eighth tenure of Uganda Parliament (2007–2008). The Madhvani Group has been an important funder of the electoral campaign of President Museveni. So the deal was part of a political exchange which consolidated the patronage networks of the existing regime and the politics of land capture. The plan aimed to provide employment to 7000–8000 outgrowers (and approximately 8000 agricultural labourers) and to boost Uganda's sugarcane production and foreign exchange earnings. The project presumed that Madhvani would supply equipment to clear, plough and furrow the land as well as distribute treated cane seeds and give technical advice on agricultural matters. Outgrowers would eventually pay unspecified rents on the 10 ha and housing costs. With an overall cost of USD 100 million, the plan, we are told by its promoters, will bring enormous development within 100 km of the factory and will improve the livelihood of individuals in Amuru (Wesonga 2015). The average salary proposed for people in charge of cane cutting is estimated at about 50,000–60,000 Ugandan shillings (USD 20–24; Komakech, interview May 16, 2012).

When the Madhvani application reached the Office of the erstwhile Chairperson of the District Land Board (DLB) in 2008, the latter decided to lease 10,000 ha of land in Lakang and Kololo villages in Amuru Sub-county, instead of 40,000 ha. Yet the land was customarily owned by the people of Lamogi. Therefore, in the same year, Amuru leaders (clan leaders and MPs) sought redress by taking the Amuru DLB to the Gulu High Court. They claimed that the land had been unlawfully allocated to Madhvani as it did not belong to the state. The first judgement in the High Court of Gulu in April 2008 declared the land to be customarily owned as hunting and growing grounds on the basis of archival research (High Court of Uganda 2008; Ojok, interview May 13, 2012). The legal avenue of contestation was initiated by more affluent people who insisted on negotiations with state authorities. Yet interviews with local residents showed that the majority of poor peasants mistrusted the legal avenue as it was expensive and it did not provide any guarantee that the state would respect that obligation. In late 2008, in the attempt to persuade local communities about the positive impacts of the project, politicians, elders and opinion leaders were taken to Kakira Sugar Works in Busoga (Serwajja 2014), the area that has the highest concentration of land under sugarcane cultivation in the country.

After the first legal victory by Lakang-Kololo communities, the state appealed the verdict. In the second round of judgment at the High Court of Gulu in February 2012, Judge Musane, who presided over the matter, ruled that the land in the Lakang-Kololo area was not held under customary tenure (High Court of Uganda 2008). According to the Hon. Gilbert Olanya, member of Parliament for Kilak County in Amuru district, after a quick site visit of the land that the Amuru DLB proposed to lease, the judge declared all the settlements to be relatively new, reiterating the idea that the land was not used for agricultural purposes and was therefore public land under the custody of the DLB (Olanya, interview 14 June 2012). Yet during my first visit to Lakang-Kololo communities in March 2012, I observed the existence of numerous huts and plots under cultivation.

Peasants interviewed on this subject considered the remaining part of the land as grazing and hunting grounds (though cattle had been massively stolen by the Ugandan army and rebel groups during the war), and to cater for the necessities of next generations (personal communication, 6 March 2012). In other words the judge's 'terra nullius' perspective failed to account for the context of post-conflict resettlement, while simultaneously missing the multiple patterns of land uses of Acholi peasant communities.

Local communities sought legal redress in the Court of Appeal, but the case has not been heard since then. In the light of mounting opposition to the deal, the government secured the support of key institutions which aligned with the state: the Resident District Commissioner as the head of security, Local Councils (LCV), District Land Board and MPs for Acholi (Ojok, interview 13 May 2012). Youth interviewed in the communities of Lakang further claimed that local council officials attempted to bribe the young members of the communities in an attempt to divide the cohesion of the community and implement the deal.

Contesting dispossession, resisting displacement

In the face of combined pressures from the state, foreign investors and accumulating classes, peasant populations in Amuru have responded in a variety of ways to threats of dispossession and displacement. These take many forms: small-scale (women) agricultural producers attacking the Amuru Sugar Works caravan of surveyors and technicians and Resident District Commissioner attempting to enter the area in Lakang; people in Paboo breaking down fences put down by the Uganda Police Defence Force; and persistent skirmishes with game wardens and rangers of the Uganda Wildlife Authority around conservation areas in Apaa (Serwajja 2014). Among the tactics aimed at defending or regaining access to land and other resources are cultivation of food crops inside protected areas, marginal or 'nomadic' agriculture, recalcitrant pastoralists' movements inside fenced areas and widespread contestation over enclosed *commons* such as water sources, ponds, wild fruits, medicinal herbs and plants. Beside covert and non-confrontational struggles, more militant forms of dissent took place in the case of neighbouring rural communities in Kololo and Lakang, which resurrected sustained forms of local organization, mobilization and inter-community solidarity (Community Meeting, 20 June 2012).

In order to prevent the initiation of surveying and registration works necessary for the instalment of the sugar plantation by Amuru Sugar Works, on 18 April 2012, local people organized a demonstration of non-violent protest, physically blockading the area to prevent Madhvani representatives and local councillors, escorted by soldiers, from entering the area designated for the sugar estate. Approximately 100 women took the lead of protest while men, mostly youths, occupied the second row with spears to avoid direct confrontation. Besides challenging the intruders, women undressed themselves as a sign of anger and displeasure but also an exhortation to respect moral obligations towards women in their reproductive and nurturing capacity. These acts of resistance manifested at interconnected levels, both material and symbolic. In particular, undressing themselves and showing their breasts in front of state officials and Madhvani representatives was meant to convey a very confrontational message: if you bring sugar here, our breasts will have no milk to feed ourselves. Women's practices in this sense brought to the fore the moral question through the mobilization of cultural symbolism.

In a focus group with women, shortly after the protest, one subsistence farmer said: 'We are determined to be killed for this land' (Women Focus Group, 2 May 2012). Another woman, a rice and maize farmer involved in petty commodity production, interviewed

on this matter argued: ‘the problem is the war still – the government kept us in the camps and now it wants to kick us off our ancestral land. Government has no place to put people’ (Women Focus Group, 2 May 2012). Such discourses highlight the centrality of women in land struggles, especially in a context like northern Uganda where insecurity is the norm, and maintaining the possibility to access and use land can make a difference between life and death (see Federici 2004, 49).

The overall effect of the protest was to prevent the Resident District Commissioner and the Madhvani representatives from entering the area and initiating land surveying. Tensions mounted between the police and local residents but did not degenerate into open clashes. The convoy with the RDC and Madhvani officials left the area followed by screams of jubilation among the protesters (personal communication, 3 May 2012).

In order to overtake the impasse, the President himself travelled twice to Amuru in the aftermath of the protest and in May in order to convince the people about the portrayed benefits of the project using discourses of national development and modernization. Simultaneously, the state increased the militarization of social spaces by regularly patrolling the area, occupying the locally managed school, checking movements in and out of the area, and threatening interested journalists and sympathetic researchers (Lakang Primary School Teachers, interview 15 May 2012). Yet it continued to take local politicians, MPs, and clan and religious leaders to visit sites of alleged ‘success’ projects such as the Kalangala Palm Oil Project and Kakira Sugar Works (Serwajja 2014).

As an organized response to protracted state coercion which followed the protest, local communities of Lakang and Kololo held regular meetings on a monthly basis involving the participation of all social segments – elders, men, women and youth – as well as neighbouring communities and clans (Community Meeting, 20 June 2012). Organized by the local Rwot Kweri of Lakang, literally the chief of the hoe, collective assemblies, which I had the privilege to observe during one year of fieldwork in the area, represented in this context the political space *par excellence*, framed from below where claims of land sovereignty emerged. Meetings were held in Kololo, on the premises of the local market where women used to sell their agricultural produce. In these spaces both men and women, elders, and clan leaders – ‘peasant intellectuals’ to say it with Feierman (1990) – developed localized narratives of resistance, dealing with interpretations of actors and power dynamics involved, framing tactics of permanent watchfulness and alert, and considering constraints and opportunities of different forms of political contestation (Community Meeting, 18 May 2012). It is in this context that the decision to continue to contest and oppose the deal was taken, and where claims to land sovereignty were elaborated. The right to survival and to social reproduction were the key questions that concerned the participants in the assemblies. The overwhelming majority of Lakang villagers, however, opposed the idea of individually selling land, which is alien to the customary land-tenure system, and opted for a path of contestation (Community Meeting, 18 May 2012). According to the former district speaker of Amuru, a tiny minority of local residents who pushed for the option of selling or leasing the land to the investors took part in other meetings in Gulu at the instigation of Local District councillors and Members of Parliament, with the intent of promoting the project and explaining the benefits it would bring (Lakony, interview 14 May 2012). In fact, there existed a minority of the members of the Kololo and Lakang communities who paraded a win-win scenario. In other words the land deal ended up causing intra-family land wrangles due to alleged benefits from such investment (Opio, interview 12 February 2013). This portrait of rural social struggles exposes the fractures of competing social interests existing in rural communities, and their eventual re-composition or

de-composition. Moreover, it highlights the uneven and differential impact of land deals upon different social groups.

Yet these kinds of struggles represented a qualitative leap from the mostly subterranean character of rural struggles as these intended to reach a wider audience, i.e. neighbouring communities, sympathetic non-governmental organizations (NGOs), engaged journalists and researchers, and other civil society organizations.

In one of these assemblies, a male peasant noted:

Government says land does not belong to us after we came back from camps. They sent the army, the police, and game reserves rangers. They are fighting us. This has become the norm. They killed seven people in Apaa and arrested many more; they burned people's huts and destroyed crops in the gardens. We have not been treated as human beings but as animals (Community Meeting, 18 May 2012).

Another peasant at the meeting put this set of dominant forces in historical and political perspective:

President Museveni allowed the interest of Madhvani and yet this is our ancestral land. Museveni took our cattle during the war and gave guns to the Karamojong. Now he wants our land. Where would we go? (Community Meeting, 18 May 2012).

These statements give a sense of both the extent of the protracted effort in capturing peasants' resources by the state and its permanent use of violence as a means of depredation and looting. These representations are furthermore useful to understand the effects of war on rural populations and its implications on the structure of control, access and use of land. Both war and post-conflict reconstruction have provided opportunities for the state and state-connected elite to expand their control of land and other natural resources (mainly oil) in Amuru. The expansion of state intervention and institutions in rural affairs further cemented the politics of land capture and the use of land for political patronage. Yet the overall effect of grassroots practices and forms of mobilization has been to impede the implementation of the project by delegitimising state-inspired development projects.

One of the immediate mobilizing factors that shaped responses and resistance in the Amuru Sugar case was the state's non-recognition of clan authority over land. Community members and clan leaders claimed since the beginning of debates on the deal not to have been informed of government's intention to allocate land to Madhvani, nor to have been invited to discuss the terms of the agreement (Penytoo, interview 16 May 2012). It is not surprising therefore that clan leaders are becoming catalysts for struggles of resistance and contestation as they are still widely considered the paramount authority in land matters. In this sense, traditional authorities on the ground in northern Uganda have become a vector of contestation of unrepresentative, 'invented' and co-opted paramount authorities. This is indicative of the multi-layered character of traditional authorities and the tensions that inhabit the 'customary' (Mamdani 1996).

Why was this instance of rural social protest successful in preventing land dispossession and displacement in Lakang and Kololo communities? I identify five reasons behind its success, albeit likely to be temporary. First is the capacity to maintain unity in the face of mounting pressures from within and without to fragment its constituent parts. In particular the ability of peasant intellectuals (Feierman 1990) to articulate views and narratives that framed a common platform of multi-class interests proved to be important. Second is the successful utilization of inter-elite rivalry and cleavages within structures of authority

(state and traditional authorities) and the ability to reach the wider public arena and mobilize other sympathetic sections of civil society, exploiting the possibilities of the political opportunity framework (see Borrás and Franco 2013). Third is the combined utilization of non-violent tactics (peaceful protests) and militant forms of struggle (permanent social mobilization of communities, high level of alert and protection of territories by preventing other investors from visiting the area). Fourth is the extent of rural protests throughout the country which challenged the legitimacy of state action. Fifth is the remoteness of the area which might have stimulated what Scott (1975) refers to as ‘geographical resistance’—that is, remote locations represent areas which present problems of rule and control to the state.

Resistance was successful in delaying the project but state and capital have recently regrouped and are trying to revive the project through a new strategy. In fact, under pressure from Madhvani Group the state is trying once again to disrupt the cohesion of the community in an attempt to implement the project. In January 2015, the same clan leaders and MPs who during the tenure of the eighth parliament had sued the government were seen in Rakitura (President Museveni’s countryside residence) for the signing of an agreement to avail 10,000 ha of land to the investor in return for compensation to all affected members (Atube, interview 14 January 2015).

Yet whereas an agreement has been signed between government and those who purport to be the trustees of the communities’ land owners, the terms of the deed of settlement need to be communicated to the community members (Veremoi 2015). Moreover the mandate of the signatories is questionable as there is no evidence that the communities have delegated to the signatories the power to decide on these matters (Olanya, interview January 2015). It seems, therefore, that government carefully and cunningly selected the communities’ representatives, excluding from the negotiation those leaders who opposed the deal. This sort of manipulation is a *dèja vu*: a continuation of the tactics of divide-and-rule and cooptation.

Preparations are in high gear to get the work of the land valuer started. A decisive meeting is planned for late March 2015 which should bring together representatives of the Madhvani Group, central government officials and the rural communities, to negotiate and agree upon the terms of reference (scope of the lease offer, responsibility of the investor, responsibility of the beneficiary community, compensation and resettlement and priorities for corporate social responsibility). (Olanya, interview 16 January 2015)

These testimonies provide important insights in this case study. On the one hand, the state seems to have been pushed by local mobilizations to abandon the terrain of violence and coercion and initiate a path of negotiation and compromise. The question of compensation has been integrated in the negotiations for the first time, and this has to be seen as a success emerging from the protracted process of contestation. Whether or not the communities will accept the new terms of the deal or will initiate a new wave of struggles cannot be predicted. Far from being passive victims, peasants and their practices and agencies profoundly shaped the character of struggles over land and affected the spectrum of political possibilities and opportunities.

Conclusions

By analysing forms of rural social protest, and the motivations and rationales behind practices of resistance, this paper argues that persistent rural social struggles in Amuru district embody not only different elements of what Borrás and Franco (2013) define as struggles

against dispossession, exploitation, concentration and centralization, but also struggles for autonomy and sovereignty (Van der Ploeg 2008; Scott 2009). More open manifestations of dissent, although stimulated by the threat of dispossession or displacement, cannot in fact be mechanically related to it. The paper maintains instead that the current wave of local struggles against land dispossession and displacement is the culminating moment of the wider and longer praxis of everyday peasant resistance. It calls for a recuperation of historicity to unveil how everyday social practices and struggles shape, and are in turn shaped by, socio-historical dynamics of capital accumulation, dispossession and commoditization. Peasant everyday politics represents therefore a crucial domain of analysis for understanding the norms and practices that surround issues of control, access and use of land (Kerkvliet 2009).

These insights into the agricultural social reproduction strategies of Acholi peasants illuminate the dual character of contemporary social struggles, which manifest both political and socio-economic strategies. Though social struggles can be expressed through protests and land occupations, they are also manifest in the everyday efforts at the household level to ensure social reproduction and the improvement of available resources through constant adaptations in a context of increased politico-economic and ecological pressures. In between the two moments of resistance (protest and court case), other moments – hidden or open, daily or occasional – work as a continuum of social struggles whose form alters as conditions change.

As a result of war and land alienation, rural households in Amuru are under increased pressures for land privatization, agricultural commercialization and modernization. That the villagers in Kololo and Lakang took recourse to more manifest forms of militant or symbolic resistance signals that the largely subterranean forms of struggle, those located in the household reproductive strategies, are approaching a crisis point which does not allow them to be effective against new challenges that emerge. Such overt and collective acts of defiance normally come only after a protracted struggle on a different terrain or simultaneously. The revival of land struggles in Uganda at large brings to the fore the centrality of land and agrarian questions in the strategies of social reproduction of rural households. These localized struggles do not detract from the significance of broad-based transnational agrarian movements; rather they draw attention to the diverse geographies, patterns of commoditization and practices of resistance in processes of enclosure, and the necessary synergies between different *loci* of social struggles at both local and global levels.

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