

A History of Prostitution in Acholi-Land, Northern Uganda, 1911 to 2011



History

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ABSTRACT

Although the Acholi people of Northern Uganda are culturally very strict on morals, prostitution has become one of the vices that the urban populace has to contend with. This paper traces the rise and development of prostitution in Acholiland over the last one hundred years. I interviewed respondents from several regions in Acholiland. The majority of the respondents were from Gulu and Kitgum Towns and the sprouting town boards where prostitution occurs. Prostitutes, cultural leaders, elders and the youth were asked to fill out a questionnaire which would take about 20 min. I offered to read the questions and write in the answers for those who appeared hesitant or had difficulty in reading. Answers were triangulated. The conclusions are that prostitution never existed among the Acholi until the beginning of the twentieth century when they were colonized by Britain.

Introduction

Prostitution, the world's oldest profession, is not as old among the Acholi people of northern Uganda. The trade only became a reality among the Acholi in about 1910 when the first urban center, Gulu, emerged as an administrative headquarters of the British colonial government for the Northern Province of Uganda. The British invasion forces had employed large number of Nubian soldiers, many of whom did not have wives.

The English word "Prostitute" is derived from a Latin verb "prostituta" which means "to offer up for sale" (Perkins and Lovejoy, 2007). It does not have an equivalent in Lwo, the language of the Acholi. Prostitution is the offer of sex for material or socio-political benefits. It is a multibillion dollar business that employs millions of women worldwide. It has unusual features of being well paid despite the low skill requirement, is labor intensive, and, one might add, female dominated (Edlund and Korn, 2002). There are few cases of male prostitutes all over the world, they engage in prostitution for the same reasons as their female counterparts do.

Payment for prostitution need not be in terms of money. It may be in terms of privilege, power, food, clothing, almost any form of exchangeable value. These exchangeable commodities exist in any complex society, no matter what the system of political control, because the specialized producers must mutually exchange their surpluses. At the same time there is, in any society, a system of privilege, authority, and dominance. Some have rights, belongings, and talents that others lack (Kingsley, 1937). This disparity causes prostitution to flourish.

Other names for prostitutes are hooker, whore, ho, street walker, sex worker, escort or malaya in Swahili. Prostitution has been organized according to similar principles across different times and cultures. At the bottom we find street prostitution, followed by brothels, bars, and clubs. Call girls and escort agencies occupy the middle to high slots and kept women the top ranks. Higher-end prostitutes are better looking, younger, and healthier; charge more per client; and spend more time with each. All these types exist in today's Acholi urban society.

The Armed Forces

Prostitutes have long plied their trades to the military in many cultures. Among the Acholi the first cases of prostitution were heard when the British colonial forces took over the administration of Gulu. This process was gradual. In 1899 a collectorate or "Boma" was opened at Nimule for the administration of the Acholi and other communities of northern Uganda and the Southern Sudan. In 1906, the administrative post that had been opened at Nimule was shifted to the foot of Mt Keyo in the middle of Acholi-land.

In 1910, Gulu was opened as an administrative headquarters for west Acholi. The following year, Kitgum was opened to administer the Acholi east of River Acwa. For both Gulu and Kitgum, the Nubian soldiers who accompanied the British colonialists were

hungry for women. They soon began to entice the elusive Acholi women with money. This process increased when thousands of Acholi men were recruited to serve in the two world wars. The returned soldiers had seen the practice elsewhere in Africa and Asia and continued with it back home in the two towns. There were stories of KAR soldiers returning to Acholiland but remaining in Gulu and Kitgum Towns in the care of prostitutes without reaching the villages where their wives lived. Some claimed to have lost taste for their wives! Such men had been buying sex in the southern region of Uganda where the first KAR barracks were located including Jinja, Bombo and Masaka Towns. The Acholi word "Cukoleke" for nickers or pants originated from Luganda, the Language of Baganda, "sokoleke" meaning "wait please". The KAR men returned from the war in 1918 with high libido. One would be in a hurry to sleep with a prostitute. The slat would say "sokoleke" as she removes the nicker. Since Acholi women were not using nickers that time, the guys didn't also know what it was and began to call the thing that delays them "sokoleke". With time, this was modeled to "cokoleke" because, Lwo, the language of the Acholi, does not have the alphabet "s". Some of them bought "sokoleke" from Indian shops in Kampala and took them to their wives.

More barracks were opened in the midst of the Acholi in Gulu, Kitgum, Madiopei and Byabya. This was because of the love for the military service that Acholi lads had exhibited. Throughout the colonial and post-colonial period up to the fall of Iddi Amin, soldiers remained the chief client and perpetrators of prostitution in Acholiland.

In 1979, Tanzania invaded Uganda and ousted Iddi Amin with about 45,000 soldiers supported by a group of Uganda exiles (Daniel, 2001). None of them came with a wife or married while in Uganda. They became good clients of the harlots. Their story was no different from those of the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), the National Resistance Army (NRA) and the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF) soldiers. A retired soldier NRA said to me that all over the world, soldiers are governed by the three Ws of war, wine and women and that wherever there is a large concentration of the armed forces, there will always be prostitutes.

Urbanisation and Prostitution

Prostitution means promiscuous sexual intercourse for hire whether in money or kind with a prostitute. There are three important elements in Prostitution: Firstly – promiscuity, that is change of client from time to time; Secondly – the acceptance of payment in money for the use of the body for sexual relations; Thirdly – Physical nature of the sexual union (Sharanappa, 2014). All these became possible when the Acholi economy was merged with the world catalyst system.

Early European travellers in Acholiland including John Hannington Speke, James Grant and Sir Samuel Baker reported a strict moral code of conduct. There was no promiscuity of any type and neither polyandry nor prostitution was known. The

institution of marriage was highly respected. In the previous section, I mentioned the role of soldiers in promoting prostitution. Apart from soldiers, the rise of urban centers in Acholiland namely Kitgum and Gulu Towns meant that other categories of employees and employers also emerged. First, these were colonial administrative centers in which civil servants lived and still live. The Administrators, Clerks, Secretaries, Masons, Carpenters etc. who worked in these towns were mainly migrant laborers. There were few women to serve these marauding men sexually, and in any case the men could not be committed to any of the women since they had left their wives at home. The migrant workers preferred casual sex and in the process encouraged prostitution.

Whereas women depended on their husbands in the traditional Acholi society for the provision of basic needs, the urban women were able to survive on their own. The traditional Acholi man performed hunting, farming, bark cloth manufacture, animal grazing etc. on which the family depended. In such situation, every woman needed a man and vice versa for survival. The urban woman was employed formally or informally. They were independent and enjoyed a better standard of living. Their better status attracted more women to the towns. Those who could not be employed legally survived on brewing local beer or engaged in prostitution. The squalid residential places that developed in both Kitgum and Gulu Towns had many prostitutes. In Gulu, they were found in a place called "Vanguard". Tanzanian soldiers named this place "Kuma road" because of the large number of harlots that operated there. "Kuma" is a Swahili noun for some body part of a woman. Up to today, there is "K" road in Gulu town. And in Kitgum, *Bol Odyak* (B.O.) existed. "Bol odyak" can loosely be translated as "the rod has gotten wet". Ms Anek Dora, an old woman living in Ayul, a suburb of Kitgum town sung to me a song which she said was very popular in the town in the 1960 and 1970s. This song is about [bol odyak and it goes, in part, as follows:](#)

Nyankole obolo opoko piny laro bol odyak...
 Bol odyak gang pa mon, wanga i laro bol odyak...
 Ah, B. O. paco mon keken, ayeliyee...
 This is:
 The Ankole man dropped his guard and rushed to bol odyak
 Bol odyak, the brothel, one must rush to bol odyak
 Ah, B. O. the brothel, ayeliyee

The Ankole are Bantu people who live seven hundred kilometers away in western Uganda. Those who are cattle keepers always carry guards used to keep their milk. Their mention in this song points to the presence of migrant workers in Kitgum town. I do not know why they are singled out among the many people who visited B. O. Today, B. O. still exists in Kitgum Town, but the place has been renamed "West Ward".

The period of insurgency

A new stage in the development of prostitution in northern Uganda was set in 1986 when several rebel groups emerged to challenge the newly established government of President Yoweri Museveni. Many people were forced to migrate to towns where there was relative security.

According to Branch (2008), throughout most of the 21-year civil war in northern Uganda, Gulu town has been a relative oasis of calm and security in the midst of the violence and upheaval that have wracked the rest of Acholiland. Although it has been a centre of internal displacement since 1996, holding over 130,000 people in a space meant for fewer than 40,000, those living there mostly see it as a temporary time of trial that will be left behind once the war ends and people move back to their villages and homesteads in the countryside. The same can be said about Kitgum Town some 110 kms northeast of Gulu.

At the peak of the LRA war the entire population of Acholiland was forced to live in internally displaced persons' camps (IDPs). It was extremely risky to move even one hundred meters out of the camps and for this reason, no farming could take place. People were forced to look for alternative means to earn money and buy food, women took the lead. In the opinion of one district official:

The war has pushed many people into camps; even children have been born and grown up without proper guidance. You can see the camp environment which exposes children to immorality at an early age due to lack of privacy and some are lured into sex using small gifts (Rujumba and Kwiringira, 2010).

The small gifts in exchange for sex included food items, clothes or scholastic materials for students in primary and secondary schools. In many ways, this contributed to heightened HIV infection, early pregnancy and school dropouts besides the escalating number of prostitutes in Acholiland.

Conclusion

Like in most of Africa, prostitution was unheard of in the pre-colonial Acholi society. The introduction of western systems of government, the introduction of capitalism and years of marginalization, deprivation, encampment and insecurity condemned young Acholi women to prostitution.

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