

“A Reason Not to Belong”: Political Decentralization, Intercommunal Relations, and Changing Identities in Northeastern Uganda

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Abstract: Abim district, located in Uganda’s Karamoja region, is one of the scores of new administrative units created under the country’s decentralization policy. The establishment of Abim district in 2006, following decades of conflict in northern Uganda, was accompanied by changes in ethnic identity within local communities of Ethur farmers. Based on oral history fieldwork in Abim, Meyerson documents these changes in sociopolitical identification among the Ethur. In doing so, he demonstrates how political decentralization has become a venue for the combination of international discourses of indigenous rights, national notions of ethnic citizenship, and grassroots histories of intercommunal relations.

Résumé : Le district d’Abim, situé dans la région ougandaise de Karamoja, est l’une des nombreuses nouvelles unités administratives créées dans le cadre de la politique de décentralisation du pays. La création du district d’Abim en 2006, après des décennies de conflit dans le nord de l’Ouganda, s’est accompagnée de changements dans l’identité ethnique au sein des communautés locales d’agriculteurs d’Ethur. Basé sur le travail de terrain de l’histoire orale à Abim, Meyerson documente ces changements dans l’identification sociopolitique parmi les Ethur. Ce faisant, il démontre comment la décentralisation politique est devenue un lieu de combinaison des discours internationaux sur les droits des autochtones, des notions nationales de citoyenneté ethnique et des histoires populaires des relations intercommunautaires.

African Studies Review, Volume 66, Number 2 (June 2023), pp. 394–416

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doi:10.1017/asr.2022.128

Resumo : O distrito de Abim, situado na região ugandesa de Karamoja, é uma das novas unidades administrativas criadas no âmbito da política de descentralização que tem sido levada a cabo no país. Após décadas de conflito no norte do Uganda, o estabelecimento do distrito de Abim em 2006 foi acompanhado de mudanças na identidade étnica das comunidades locais de agricultores da etnia *ethur*. Partindo de um trabalho de campo no domínio da história oral, Meyerson regista as mudanças verificadas na identificação sociopolítica entre a população *ethur*. Desta forma, demonstra o modo como a descentralização política se tornou o palco de uma conjugação de discursos internacionais sobre direitos indígenas, conceitos nacionais de cidadania étnica e histórias populares em torno das relações intercomunitárias.

Keywords: Uganda; Karamoja; decentralization; conflict; identity; Ethur; ethnicity; indigeneity

(Received 29 September 2021 – Revised 22 August 2022 – Accepted 02 September 2022)

Introduction

In 2006, a mountainous corner of northeastern Uganda's Karamoja region was granted district status as part of the ruling National Resistance Movement's (NRM) policy of political decentralization, or the transfer of certain powers from the national government to subnational units. The new Abim district was carved out of Kotido, a larger district that had covered much of northern Karamoja, and its boundaries roughly adhere to the outlines of the Labwor and Nyakwae Hills, twin ranges of craggy peaks that lie on the western edge of the Karamoja Plateau.¹ Abim district is primarily inhabited by the JoAbwor and JoAkwa, communities of Lwo-speaking agro-pastoralists who number about 108,000. After enduring nearly thirty years of regional conflict, residents greeted the establishment of Abim district with great fanfare.

Along with the creation of the new district came a new marker of sociopolitical identification in Labwor and Nyakwae: Ethur. The Ethur signifier has become shorthand for the autochthones of Abim district, and although the older labels of JoAbwor and JoAkwa remain relevant, both have been subsumed within the new category of Ethur. Yet how could a new ethnonym gain such widespread acceptance in such a short period of time, with ordinary Abim district residents proudly asserting their Ethur identity in their daily lives and in the context of local competitions over land, jobs, and political representation?

One answer to this question can be found in the violence of the 1980s and 1990s in northern Uganda, which represented a moment of historical rupture that called into question existing norms of social, political, and economic relations across the region. Intercommunal alliances and networks of economic cooperation were severely damaged, setting the stage for a new form of sociopolitical identification rooted in exclusive notions of ethnicity and

oriented more toward the state than longstanding local patterns of relations. The implementation of the NRM government's decentralization policy afforded residents an administrative framework for the reimagining of their moral, cultural, and political worldviews, and of the systems of sociopolitical identification that went along with them. The new "Ethur" ethnonym that has grown in popularity in Abim district since 2006 encapsulates a new approach to intercommunal relations in the region, one which differs in several significant ways from the worldview connoted by more longstanding local ethnonyms such as JoAbwor and JoAkwa.

The JoAbwor and JoAkwa identities have a long history in Abim district, representing categories that encompassed the members of the heterogeneous clans and lineage groups who inhabited Labwor and Nyakwae, respectively. The JoAbwor and JoAkwa ethnonyms connote a worldview in which segmentary, relational modes of interaction and affiliation remain relevant in daily life. Examples of approaches to social, political, and economic relations rooted in these longstanding norms include strong ties between clan and family members across the boundaries of ethnicity, local age set and initiation systems, communal land tenure, and intercommunal institutions of mutual aid.

The Ethur signifier, on the other hand, which encompasses both JoAbwor and JoAkwa people as residents of the ethnopolitical constituency of Abim district, indicates a reorientation toward a "statist" epistemology. This epistemology encompasses discourses of ethnic citizenship that have long been crucial to securing political and economic entitlements within the Ugandan state, as well as discourses of indigenous and minority rights arising from international projects of activism and aid. This reorientation was accelerated by the establishment of Abim district, which provided the geographical and political parameters for an exclusive worldview tied to discourses of identity politics. Within this worldview, political personhood and respectability are inextricably intertwined with group identities recognized by the state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as with moral norms informed by notions of "modernity" and "development." The popularization of the Ethur signifier following the creation of Abim district constituted an effort by both ordinary and elite Ethur people to reimagine the moral foundations of local ideas of ethnicity after decades of violence. The Ethur identity has been constructed within a moral framework of state participation, emphasizing "modern" values such as Western education, in conscious contrast to the more community-based notions of collective morality prevalent in Karamojong pastoralist communities to the east.

The progressive positioning of the Ethur identity in contrast to Karamojong pastoralists is intriguing, given the influence of discourses of global indigenous rights—or, as Ronald Niezen (2003) terms it, "indigenism"—on both elite and grassroots understandings of "Ethurness." In Africa, marginalized communities perceived as living "traditional" lifestyles, such as pastoralists and foragers, have been most readily incorporated into the international indigenous movement (Ndahinda 2011; Igoe 2006; Hodgson

2011). Spurred by the traumatic violence of the 1980s and 1990s, some Ethur actors—particularly elites competing for economic opportunity and political influence, but also ordinary people struggling to access crucial services—have woven together the international discourses of “indigenism” employed by many NGOs and national discourses of autochthony foundational to the Ugandan state. Thus, the Ethur worldview represents an adaptation to changing notions of citizenship in Museveni-era Uganda, where global discourses of indigeneity and human rights that arose in the 1990s have joined colonially-produced ideas of autochthony in determining which ethnopolitical constituencies deserve access to public goods.

Yet the rise of the Ethur signifier and the worldview it connotes has not simply been a replacement of the older JoAbwor and JoAkwa identities with a new one. Rather, both sets of signifiers and their accompanying worldviews remain relevant in the daily lives of Abim district’s residents. Existing in a state of juxtaposition and interaction within the collective and individual consciousnesses of Abim district residents, these worldviews remain hotly contested, both as certain political actors seek to promote “Ethurness” and as the Ethur and JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldviews constantly influence each other. In this way, while they are defined by certain characteristics, no single definition of the Ethur and JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldviews is the same, with everyone in Abim district struggling to define what it means to be a member of the sociopolitical community of Abim district for themselves and for their neighbors.

Each of the “worldviews” being discussed in this study may be viewed as a sociopolitical toolkit containing a variety of institutions and interpretive lenses, including the ethnonyms of JoAbwor, JoAkwa, and Ethur. People in Abim district have drawn upon these toolkits as needed to suit changing circumstances in Karamoja and in Uganda as a whole. The creation of Abim district, within the broader context of Ugandan and international discourses of identity politics, has both helped create the Ethur worldview and granted its toolkit particular sociopolitical and economic utility, and many in Abim have thus begun to make use of it, while still relying on the institutions and interpretive lenses of the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview when convenient or necessary.

Scholars have long debated the role of ethnicity in shaping ideas of citizenship, belonging, and power in the African state. Mahmood Mamdani’s (2002a, 2002b) body of work has been particularly important in elucidating the connections between “native” ancestry and citizenship rights in contemporary Africa, which date back to colonial systems of indirect rule. Some scholars, such as Jonathon Glassman (2011) and Bruce Hall (2011), have challenged Mamdani, maintaining that racialized divisions existed in some African societies long before the arrival of Europeans. Another robust discourse has arisen among scholars who attribute contemporary conflicts surrounding autochthony on the African continent to the disruptions of post-Cold War neoliberalism.² Examined together, these bodies of scholarship illuminate a cluster of sociopolitical phenomena that can be glossed as

“indigeneity” or “autochthony”: debates over first-comer status and citizenship, over who is an *autochthone* and who an *étranger*.

This is not the only definition of “indigeneity” that has produced a significant body of scholarship on Africa. The international indigenous rights movement has had a significant impact on Africa, with many communities across the continent becoming targets of programs designed to foster “development” and safeguard “traditional” cultures, or otherwise casting themselves as indigenous in order to access political and economic advantages. Following fierce anthropological debates surrounding the utility of indigeneity as a category of analysis (Kuper 2003; Kenrick & Lewis 2004), scholars of Africa have taken sides, with some rejecting discourses of indigenous rights as unsuitable to the African context (Feyissa & Zeleke 2015; Ndahinda 2011; Igoe 2006) and others arguing that the decisions of African communities to position themselves as indigenous are simply adaptations to the harsh realities and expectations of global neoliberalism (Pelican 2015; Hodgson 2011).

The case of the Ethur of Abim district demonstrates how these two distinct conceptions of indigeneity—colonial notions of ethnic citizenship and ideas of indigenism dating back to the rise of human rights discourses in the 1990s—have converged in African states. While ideas of ethnic citizenship dating back to the colonial era have always shaped postcolonial Ugandan politics, the increased importance of NGOs to service delivery across Africa following the Cold War has enabled ethnopolitical constituencies to employ discourses of indigenous rights to secure public goods that may have been out of reach within the national arena of identity politics. Furthermore, while many scholars have examined how decentralization has fueled autochthony debates by strengthening patronage networks and exacerbating intercommunal tensions, this article highlights how decentralization has become a venue within which ethnic communities can utilize both notions of indigeneity to secure economic and political advantages.³

Decentralization has been particularly suited to the combination of these discourses, since its popularization across Africa in the 1990s was linked to increased NGO activity and the rise of indigenous rights rhetoric facilitated by post-Cold War liberalization. Most importantly, the emergence of the Ethur worldview demonstrates the profound influence that local histories of intercommunal relations have on real-world manifestations of these two discourses of indigeneity, for outside of Karamoja’s recent history of conflict and marginalization from the state, these discourses would have little meaning.

This article is based on oral history research conducted across Kotido and Abim districts in 2018 and 2019. A total of 145 interviews were conducted, with 61 interviews taking place in Kotido and 84 taking place in Abim. These interviews were semi-structured and took the form of both focus groups and one-on-one discussions, depending on the preferences of my interlocutors. I employed an oral history methodology that Katherine Bowie (2018) describes as “pointillism,” or the use of numerous oral testimonies to produce

reliable reconstructions of “palimpsests of the past.” Since the Ethur ethnonym initially arose within the upper socioeconomic strata of Abim district, I conducted numerous interviews with local elites, but I also interviewed many ordinary residents of Abim, to ascertain the resonance of the Ethur worldview at the grassroots level. Ugandan newspapers and records held by the Uganda National Archives yielded scattered insights into the motivations of Ethur elites and the relations between Ethur people and the Ugandan state.

Historical Rupture in Labwor and Nyakwae

The JoAbwor and JoAkwa communities that predominate today in Abim were shaped by waves of migration, beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although the JoAbwor and JoAkwa constituted corporate sociopolitical units, life in Labwor and Nyakwae was centered around lineages and clans, bound together by a variety of reciprocal obligations (Herring 1974). While both the JoAkwa and JoAbwor spoke a Lwo language called Leb Thur, they shared no sense of sociopolitical unity and occasionally found themselves at odds. Despite differences in language and livelihood, the JoAbwor and JoAkwa perceived no ethnic differences between themselves and the neighboring Karamojong pastoralists, with the JoAbwor considering themselves one with the Jie and the JoAkwa seeing themselves as part of the Bokora, historic rivals of the Jie (Wayland 1931).

Under colonial rule, the primarily agricultural JoAkwa and JoAbwor took to Western education and the cultivation of cotton more readily than the neighboring communities of pastoralists (Moroto District Government Records 1961a; Ethur elder, interview, Angwee, June 2018). Thus, although they inhabited a remote region far from the concerns of the colonial administration, the JoAbwor and JoAkwa experienced slightly greater integration into the colonial state than did their pastoral neighbors, whom the British viewed at best as incompatible with the ideals of “modernity” that colonial rule sought to foster, and at worst as a threat to the stability of the Uganda Protectorate.

In the early years of Uganda’s independence, the colonial status quo largely remained in place in Karamoja, although intergroup tensions had begun brewing in the late colonial period, thanks to an uptick in Jie and Bokora raids on JoAbwor and JoAkwa communities and divisions introduced by British policy (Moroto District Government Records 1961b, 1963). Nonetheless, it was the ouster of Idi Amin in 1979 that truly inaugurated the period of violent historical rupture that heightened the changes in sociopolitical identification in Labwor and Nyakwae which are analyzed below. With the collapse of state authority in 1979, pastoral communities acquired automatic weapons on an unprecedented scale and intergroup violence escalated, contributing to the devastating Karamoja Famine of 1980.⁴ The horror of the famine caused an increase in raiding throughout northeastern Uganda, with desperate armed Karamojong herdsman plundering food and livestock from agrarian communities along Karamoja’s western boundary. Their

longstanding ties with Karamojong groups did not spare the JoAbwor and JoAkwa. As one Ethur elder explained, “They would come to this side to raid food itself and livestock for their own survival...We also fell without food, because most of our food was raided” (interview, Abim Town, May 2018).⁵

Karamojong raids in Labwor and Nyakwae continued until the early years of the new millennium, when the NRM government ramped up its military disarmament operations in Karamoja. These raids, which were the work of bandits operating without the sanction of traditional Karamojong councils of elders, created an atmosphere of fear and caused many JoAbwor and JoAkwa people to lose trust in members of neighboring communities and in the institutions that had once bound them together (Jie elder, interview, Kanawat, April 2018). “[Jie] started terrorizing us over here,” said an Ethur elder, encapsulating this sense of betrayal, “forgetting that we and the Jie had once been brothers who used to stay together” (interview, Katabok, June 2018).

The violence of the 1980s was compounded by militias in the Acholi and Lango regions, which were organized and supported by the second regime of Milton Obote (1980–85) and the short-lived government of Tito Okello Lutwa (1985–86). These militias established roadblocks to prevent people from Karamoja from entering their communities and launched attacks on JoAbwor, JoAkwa, and Jie villages and kraals in Karamoja. JoAbwor and JoAkwa communities—poorly armed and numerically insignificant—were thus hard-pressed on two fronts. As an Ethur religious leader put it, “There’s a saying that, when two elephants fight, it’s the grass who suffers. We became the grass underneath the Acholi and the Jie people while they were fighting” (interview, Abim Town, June 2018). This clash of elephants scattered the grass to the winds, as many JoAbwor and JoAkwa people were displaced from their villages and forced into congested towns and settlements at the feet of the hills. Much like the experience of violence itself, this widespread displacement represented a rupture in established norms of land tenure and sociocultural relations between and within communities. The breakdown of intercommunal relations between the JoAbwor, JoAkwa, and their neighbors was succinctly expressed by one Ethur woman: “*Our brothers*,” she began, referring to Jie and Bokora raiders with scathing sarcasm, “they are just disasters in our lives” (interview, Golgotha, June 2018).

Yet even following the years of violence, many of the institutions and modes of intercommunal interaction that define the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview have remained relevant in the lives of Abim district residents and their neighbors. For instance, despite linguistic differences and the antipathy that has arisen in recent years, many JoAkwa and JoAbwor people continue to believe that they are inextricably linked to their respective Bokora and Jie neighbors, with many in both Kotido and Abim districts—especially elders—continuing to affirm that the two communities constitute “one people.”⁶ Each dry season, Jie women travel to JoAbwor and JoAkwa communities to assist their hosts with the harvest in exchange for a portion of the yield, a custom known as *agwer*. Similarly, Jie and Bokora herdsmen travel to Labwor and Nyakwae during the dry season in search of water and pasture, a process

that is facilitated by their enduring friendships with their counterparts in Abim district (Jie kraal leader, interview, Najoo, April 2018). Even during the hungry days of 1980, JoAbwor and JoAkwa often found common cause with their Jie and Bokora counterparts, granting refuge to starving friends and relatives, traveling together to the less hard-hit regions of Lango, Teso, and Acholi in search of food, and safeguarding their livestock in communal kraals.⁷

However, the resilience of these intercommunal ties could not reverse the changes initiated by the violence. Many scholars have discussed how intercommunal conflict can create moments of social, cultural, and political rupture, in which the norms that ordered life can be eroded to the point of near irrelevance. Such moments of crisis can serve as fertile soil for newly imagined conceptions of ethnic, national, or racial selfhood, whether through the activism of ideologues or the desire of ordinary people to establish stronger boundaries between themselves and supposedly dangerous ethnic Others.⁸ In Abim district, the historical rupture created by the years of violence in northeastern Uganda did not signal the demise of older social, political, and cultural norms, encapsulated by the ethnic signifiers of "JoAbwor" and "JoAkwa." Rather, it allowed for the rise of a new worldview and its accompanying signifier of "Ethur," and for an uneasy coexistence and contestation between the two worldviews.

Origins of the Ethur Worldview

The elite class of Labwor and Nyakwae was particularly aware of the inadequacy of the JoAbwor and JoAkwa identities within Uganda's national landscape of identity politics and political patronage. For those JoAbwor and JoAkwa who had sought their fortunes beyond Karamoja since Uganda's independence, it was clear that relational modes of identification were incommensurable with the struggle to secure economic opportunities and political recognition for themselves and their communities. The generation of educated elites from Labwor and Nyakwae whose formative years in the 1960s and 1970s were defined by mass political mobilization along ethnic lines would acutely feel the epistemological challenges that the realities of Ugandan politics posed to the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview. Yet the violence of the 1980s and 1990s represented a final straw, underscoring the necessity of establishing a new moral and sociopolitical order in Labwor and Nyakwae after years of marginalization from national and regional politics.

Even as children attending school in other regions of Uganda, JoAbwor and JoAkwa elites noticed how their communities' small populations and relational forms of identification did not translate into the sociopolitical capital associated with membership in one of Uganda's larger, recognized ethnopolitical constituencies. "When we went to secondary school, nobody knew Ethur, nobody knew Labwor," one 64-year-old Abim resident recalled. "You must say you are a Karamojong, but you knew you are not, because you don't speak Ngakarimjong... We did not attract very positive treatment from

other people. They didn't know much about us; we were too few" (Ethur woman, interview, Angwee, May 2018).

The associations drawn between the JoAbwor and JoAkwa and the Karamojong were particularly galling to many from Labwor and Nyakwae, due to widespread perceptions across Uganda of the Karamojong as irredeemably backward. Implicit in these objections to being lumped in with the Karamojong are concerns over what John Iliffe terms *respectability*: "a right to respect that individuals believed they possessed but could only enjoy if it was admitted by others" (2005). Not only were the unique linguistic and cultural characteristics of the JoAbwor and JoAkwa ignored on the national level, but they were assumed to be no different from the Karamojong, despite the efforts of elites from Labwor and Nyakwae to participate in the Ugandan state. Government officials sensed concerns over respectability among the JoAbwor as far back as 1968: "Dissatisfaction has been sensed among the Acholi/Labwor in Karamoja district, who say that all important administrative posts in the district are taken by the Karamojongs in other counties, and that they are looked on as alien. This seeming discrimination is what is prompting them to urge for a return to Acholi district, where they would be accepted without prejudice" (Moroto District Government Records 1968).

JoAbwor anxieties over their inability to belong within any of Uganda's larger ethnopolitical constituencies only grew as the years passed and the importance of identity politics in postcolonial Uganda became clearer. Yet on occasion, the liminal position occupied by the JoAbwor and JoAkwa helped them weather the political storms that tore through Uganda in its early years as an independent state. During the 1970s, as Idi Amin waged a campaign of persecution against northern Uganda's Lwo communities, who were suspected of supporting Amin's deposed rival Milton Obote, the Lwo-speaking JoAbwor and JoAkwa found themselves in danger of being taken for enemies of the regime. To avoid the scrutiny of government forces, some JoAbwor people took advantage of their cross-cultural fluency by identifying as Karamojong. One JoAbwor elder, who was serving in the army when Amin took power, adopted a telltale Ngakarimojong pseudonym to deflect suspicion because, "That dictator didn't like those of us whose names began with an 'O'" (i.e., Lwo speakers; interview, Awach, June 2018). Similarly, a group of Jjie elders recalled, "Amin hated the Lwo speakers and he was killing them. What saved the [JoAbwor] during that time was that they decided to align themselves with the Karamojong. Even though their names began with the letter 'O', they would add an 'L', like the Karamojong" (interview, Panyangara Center, April 2018).

While the ability to keep a low profile and blend in with their Karamojong neighbors may have helped them survive Amin's rule, the violence of the 1980s convinced elites that political visibility and influence were more important to safeguarding the aspirations—and lives—of the JoAbwor and JoAkwa. At that time, Ongom Dominic was a county chief in Labwor County, the section of Kotido district that encompassed Labwor and Nyakwae. Seeking to negotiate an end to attacks by government-backed Acholi militias on his

constituents, Ongom reached out to his colleagues in Acholi to organize a peace meeting. “I wanted a mediation between us and the Acholi to figure out what was happening. This government was not ours, even though we speak the same language as the Acholi. That was the only thing I wanted to discuss with them, but they said they would kill me” (interview, Katabok, June 2018). Interestingly, the phrase “the government was not ours” was echoed by another Ethur elder as he discussed these attacks by Acholi and Langi militias. “Militias in the regions that surrounded us could...come in government military vehicles,” the elder recalled, “to rape, loot, kill and go back home. Because, they claimed that the government was theirs, not ours” (interview, Golgotha, June 2018). The use of this phrase by both elders demonstrates that JoAbwor and JoAkwa elites attributed the victimization of their communities in the early 1980s to their marginalization from Uganda’s arena of identity politics. This loss of faith in the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview and the institutions in which it was rooted paved the way for the rise of a new worldview, based on an exclusive ethnopolitical category and oriented toward the state rather than northeastern Uganda’s regional tapestry of mutual obligation.

JoAbwor elites therefore set out to remedy this problem in the 1990s. Leading the charge was one of Uganda’s leading intellectuals, Omwony Ojwok, who rose to prominence through his activism against the Amin regime and would go on to serve in top positions in the Museveni government. Omwony knew that a new sociopolitical signifier would be crucial to unifying the disparate JoAbwor and JoAkwa communities of the erstwhile Labwor County. Luckily, such a signifier was readily available in both the oral traditions of the JoAbwor and the writings of anthropologists. Some residents of Abim district stated that “Ethur” arose as a nickname that neighbors imposed on the people of the area as a result of a particular semantic quirk—they pronounced the Lwo word for “our home” as *thurwa*, rather than the Lango *tua* (Ethur elder, interview, Abim Town, April 2018; Ethur shopkeeper, interview, Abim Town, May 2018; Ethur teacher, interview, Abim Town, June 2018). Ralph Herring’s PhD dissertation, which was distributed in Labwor and Nyakwae and may have influenced Omwony, identifies the Ethur moniker as having originated among the Abwor Lwo migrants of the sixteenth century, referring to a legendary female ancestor named Thuri (Herring 1974).

However they settled on “Ethur,” Omwony and his colleagues began lobbying for the inclusion of the Ethur in Uganda’s new constitution, drafted in 1995 under Museveni’s NRM government, as one of the country’s officially recognized ethnic minority groups. These efforts were ultimately successful, prompting celebrations among Ethur elites for the honor that had been restored to their community. According one elder, “They influenced the honoring of this community as Ethur...They gave them tribal status because before, they didn’t have anything to call a tribe” (interview, Abim Town, June 2018). By working to include the Ethur in the 1995 constitution, Omwony was also making a pragmatic move to establish his constituents as ethnic citizens

of Uganda and ensure their continued access to public goods, since Ugandans belonging to ethnic groups not recognized as indigenous in the Third Schedule of the constitution have sometimes struggled to access basic services (Musinguzi 2021).

For the elite class of Labwor County, promoting the Ethur identity was also a way of appealing to international discourses of indigenism. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Labwor County, like the rest of northern Uganda, was plagued by the ongoing Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency and livestock raiding by pastoralists in Karamoja. An increasing number of local and international NGOs began operating in the region to provide services to local communities (Tripp 2010). Just as regionalism had shaped how the Ugandan state provided services to its citizens since the colonial period, NGOs tended to direct their attention toward particular "trouble spots," which often corresponded with regional or ethnic constituencies—such as the Acholi or the Karamojong (Branch 2011; Eaton 2008). Many elites in Labwor County felt that the needs of their communities, which had been victimized by Karamojong raids and occasional LRA incursions, were being ignored by both the Ugandan government and international donors. In a 2002 editorial, Owilli Jackson Ocimil, executive secretary of the Ethur Association of Kampala, lamented, "Labwor constituency is home to the Ethur people (Jo'Abwor) whose lives have been put at risk by neighbouring tribes... Unlike other districts and constituencies, Labwor... doesn't benefit from any projects, neither does it have Non-Governmental Organisations" (Ocimil 2002a). In 2018, one Ethur elder complained, "The Acholi have benefited from what we call recovery programs... Here, we founded something called EWACA, that is, Ethur War Claimants Association... but we have never seen anything" (interview, Abim Town, 2018).

While the people of Labwor County may have lacked numbers and notoriety, international discourses of indigenous and minority rights provided another avenue for courting the attention of international NGOs. Many NGOs operating in northern Uganda sought to base their post-conflict reconciliation initiatives in "indigenous" institutions (Quinn 2006). Ethur elites therefore set about establishing a framework of community-based organizations (CBOs) and "traditional" institutions that would mark them as a distinct "indigenous minority group" deserving of support. Omwony Ojwok was instrumental in the revitalization of the *Othem Abiro*, or Seven Hearths—the autonomous coalitions of clans central to precolonial JoAbwor society—which some elites in Labwor County hoped would grant them access to international funds being directed toward peacebuilding initiatives in northern Uganda. As one elder stated, "When Omwony Ojwok came back from exile, he restored the *Othem Abiro*... We have applied for donations from various NGOs and government agencies... If we had the funds, we would be conducting various meetings for restoring peace with the neighboring districts" (interview, Awach, 2018). In another editorial, Owilli Jackson Ocimil listed CBOs based in Labwor County and called upon donors to provide

them with funding to address the neglect of Ethur interests in favor of those of the Jie, the dominant ethnic group in Kotido district (Ocimil 2002b).

The expansion of the NRM government's decentralization policy in 1997 offered political entrepreneurs in Labwor County the chance to delineate the boundaries of "Ethurness" through the creation of an administrative unit. Decentralization enabled them to combine the three discursive elements that shaped the Ethur worldview; a district inscribed with the Ethur identity would establish its residents as true ethnic citizens of Uganda, identify them as members of an indigenous minority group deserving of development aid, and address the resentments that had arisen from the previous two decades of conflict in northeastern Uganda by emphasizing the distinctiveness of the Ethur from neighboring groups such as the Acholi and Jie. "How will these marginalized ethnic groups be exposed?" an Ethur politician asked rhetorically. "By granting them a district. Service delivery would go straight to their district, and their cultural identity would be exposed, because when we talk about culture, we can talk about district, and we can talk about tribe" (interview, Abim Town, 2018).

The economic benefits of a new district were also significant, especially for local elites. Since 1997, Omwony Ojwok, an MP representing Labwor County, had been promising his constituents a district of their own, a promise accompanied by the prospects of well-paying government jobs for elites and greater control over local service delivery and security personnel (Ethur politician, interview, Abim Town, May 2018). The 2006 creation of Abim district therefore demonstrates the close connection between Uganda's decentralization policy, its landscape of identity politics, and international discourses of minority rights, with districts sometimes created to establish political parameters for minority ethnic identities in order to secure local votes, cater to local and international concerns about cultural rights, expand patronage networks, and manage sectarian conflicts.

Thus, within a relatively short span of time, the Ethur signifier had made its way into Uganda's constitution, and Abim district had been created in recognition of the cultural and political distinctness of the Ethur. In an even shorter span of time, the Ethur signifier has gone from a little-known term in Labwor and Nyakwae to a deeply resonant indicator of sociopolitical identification. Along with the creation of Abim district, 2006 also witnessed the popularization of the Ethur identity in the district through the parliamentary election campaigns that took place the same year. According to many Abim residents, the term "Ethur" had not previously been prominent in the local vernacular. One elder described it as "a completely new phenomenon," and another Abim resident admitted that "some of us don't understand what 'Thur' means" (Ethur elder, interview, Abim Town, May 2018; Ethur shopkeeper, interview, May 2018). In the 2006 elections, Omwony sought to maximize his support in JoAbwor and JoAkwa communities alike, and he saw the Ethur identity as a unifying factor that could cut across divides between the two communities. According to one JoAkwa elder, Omwony worked to push the Ethur identity to the forefront of local discourse in order

to “unite the Nyakwae and those of Labwor... ‘Ethur’ means we are people who understand one another” (interview, Kobulin, July 2018).

The Ethur Worldview: Reimagining the Moral Order of Abim District

The creation of Abim district and the introduction of the Ethur signifier were the results of the activism of a small group of elites from Labwor and Nyakwae, for whom the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview had lost its sociopolitical utility and affective resonance. Yet the rapid spread of the Ethur signifier among the residents of Abim district stems as much from legacies of intercommunal violence at the grassroots level as from the rhetoric of elite ideologues. The breakdown of the sociopolitical networks and moral norms that had long structured the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview during the violence of the 1980s and 1990s left the people of Labwor and Nyakwae casting about for a new moral lens through which to interpret their own collective identity and their relationships with other ethnic communities and the Ugandan state. The Ethur worldview thus reflects the fears and aspirations of the people of Abim district, highlighting their attempts to distance themselves from the violence and marginalization of the past and enter a future defined by the values of “modernization.”

The Ethur worldview has been shaped by an impetus to distinguish “the Ethur” from neighboring ethnic communities, particularly Karamojong groups such as the Jie and Bokora. The drive to establish a distinction between the Ethur of Abim district and their Karamojong neighbors to the east arises from both the violence that has marred relations between the two communities in recent years and colonial prejudices that cast the Karamojong as backward and violent. The centrality of “modern,” “progressive” values such as Western education and religion to the moral framework of Ethur identity therefore stands in contrast to established norms in Karamojong communities, for whom such values remained culturally and economically superfluous until relatively recently (Knighton 2005). Many Ethur have therefore seen education as a barrier between them and their supposedly backward Karamojong neighbors. According to a group of Ethur women, “We embraced education very well. The Jie had a negative attitude towards education, because their interest was to continue with cattle rustling” (interview, Aringo Bom West, June 2018).

The confluence of Western religion and education as morally constitutive elements of the Ethur worldview is particularly evident in two projects undertaken by Ethur elites: the codification of the Leb Thur language and the translation of the Christian Bible into Leb Thur. One Ethur teacher became involved in efforts to codify Leb Thur because “one of the key factors as far as ethnicity is concerned is language. If you are able to retain your language and develop it, then it is easy for you to be identified” (interview, Abim Town, June 2018). An Anglican minister took on a leadership role in the project to translate the Bible into Leb Thur for much the same reasons, explaining that the need for a Leb Thur Bible was not solely religious. “It is

important for the local people,” he said, “so that they remain free in the sense of governance, so that they can do things in a way that they see is proper in relation to the traditional way of the life of the Ethur...They need to be truly independent in every sense of the word” (interview, Kiru, June 2018).

For elite Ethur intellectuals, such projects demonstrate the cultural and religious “progressivism” of the Ethur, accentuating the distinction between them and their neighbors and signalling their collective respectability on the Ugandan political stage. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, these projects contribute to the delineation of the Ethur as a distinct, unified ethnic whole by establishing a written basis for an ethnonationalist consciousness. As Derek Peterson writes, this cultural standardization facilitates participation by ethnic groups in a political and economic system, refined under President Museveni’s rule, which “disposes people to regard themselves as members of bounded, separable, and antagonistic communities” (2016:790). Furthermore, the assertion of group identities through the standardization of language and the production of literary works has long been a crucial element to the growth of nationalist consciousness.⁹

The importance of standardizing group identity for securing a place in the contested terrain of Ugandan identity politics is evident in another project undertaken by Ethur elites: the establishment of a state-recognized Ethur kingship in Abim district. Although traditional kingdoms had been outlawed under Obote and Amin, Museveni reinstated them after assuming power in 1986. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of great upheaval in northeastern Uganda, the JoAbwor *Othem Abiro* had united behind a single leader, Aryon, for the sake of mutual military and economic assistance (Herring 1974). Aryon had borrowed certain trappings of royalty, such as a royal drum, from the Acholi chiefdoms to the west, but his rule was based on the consensus of clan-based structures of authority, and he could not truly be said to have been the progenitor of a royal dynasty. Nevertheless, Ethur monarchists have weaved a complex historical narrative around Aryon and his descendants, which has questionable basis in historical fact but all the qualities of a rousing ethnonationalist origin story (Ethur religious leader, interview, Abim Town, June 2018; Ethur elder, interview, Awach, June 2018).

Attempts to establish a “traditional” kingship represent a bid to historicize the rigid distinctions between the Ethur and their neighbors and to participate in Uganda’s “heritage economy,” in which local power structures modeled on the Buganda-style institutions that spread throughout Uganda during colonial rule have become crucial markers of the unity of a particular ethnic group and of the status of its members as ethnic citizens of Uganda (Peterson 2016; Ethur elder, Abim Town, June 2018). In a manner similar to the situation in Uganda’s southwestern Rwenzori region, proponents of the Ethur kingship view its “restoration” as a way of further emphasizing Abim’s Ethur ethnic character in the eyes of the state and, in doing so, of exerting greater control over the district’s land and political resources (Sseremba 2021; JoAkwa elder, interview, Kobulin, July 2018). The codification of Ethur

culture has also allowed Ethur elites to establish partnerships with NGOs such as the UNESCO-funded Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda, which provides support for the Ethur Community Museum, a project spearheaded by Adong Florence Omwony, the wife of the late Omwony Ojwok (Lubega 2018).

The impulse to differentiate the Ethur from their neighbors is deeply felt at both the elite and grassroots levels, and with Abim district constituting the Ethur *patria*, the Ethur worldview has manifested in debates surrounding the politics of land and settlement in Abim (Peterson 2012). Since Abim district was created in 2006, it has been embroiled in boundary disputes with nearly all of its neighboring districts. These disputes reflect both administrative confusion over the exact location of boundaries and attempts to establish ethnic claims over farmland and pasture depopulated by past violence. After the guns fell silent in Karamoja toward the end of the 2000s, people from a variety of ethnic groups in northeastern Uganda began venturing out from their cramped villages, towns, and IDP camps to settle and cultivate in areas on the margins of Abim district. This influx of ethnic “foreigners” has consolidated and sharpened the emergent Ethur identity, in which obligations to members of one’s own strictly bounded ethnic bloc transcend older reciprocal bonds tying the Ethur to wider networks of neighbors.

The misgivings arising from the settlement of members of other ethnic groups in Abim district stem largely from fear—of the loss of land and economic opportunities, of demographic erasure, and of violence. Some Ethur, especially educated young people who aspire to positions in the district administration, worry that migration from other ethnic constituencies will hamper their ambitions. “There are members of these other tribes who come to Abim and dominate those offices,” an Ethur youth complained, “even though the children of the place should be taken as first priority” (interview, Aywello, July 2018). For the subsistence farmers who constitute the majority of Abim’s population, however, land scarcity is the primary economic concern conjured by migration into the district (Ethur farmer, interview, Aremo, July 2018). One Ethur elder clearly articulated the connections between these economic anxieties and the fears of violence and erasure that animate the Ethur worldview. “We feel that when their number supersedes the number of the Ethur, our political capabilities will be damaged,” he explained. “If they still consider our people a minority and they pour in in full force, it will cause genocide for us” (interview, Golgotha, June 2018).

These worries have only amplified fears of marginalization from the Ugandan state. Ethur farmers in southern Abim, which has witnessed violent clashes over land between Ethur farmers and Iteso migrants, perceived their Iteso rivals of colluding with the Ugandan government to assert control over lands that rightfully belong to the Ethur of Abim district. “The government is...giving the Iteso the opportunity to take over the land,” an Ethur farmer angrily complained. “When they come and attack our people, the government doesn’t react, yet when we go to retaliate, the government comes to

intervene with force...That means we are not part of the government!” (interview, Aremo, July 2018). This farmer’s statement is an expression of the fears that gave rise to the Ethur worldview: that the Ethur, whether due to their associations with marginal ethnic constituencies such as the Karamojong or to their minority status, “are not part of the government,” and that they will continue to be neglected and victimized by larger groups aligned with the state unless they stridently proclaim their distinctness from neighboring communities.¹⁰

Yet the vociferous self-differentiation that characterizes the Ethur worldview does not stem solely from fear of violence or demographic erasure, but also from “a sense of nationalism and pride in your existence as a human being” (Ethur politician, interview, Abim Town, May 2018). People across Abim district stated that they took greater pride in identifying themselves as Ethur than as JoAbwor or Ugandan.¹¹ This indicates that, despite having appeared relatively recently, the Ethur worldview has helped the people of Abim make sense of their tumultuous shared history and of their present, in which Abim district represents a framework for a unified ethnopolitical bloc. For many Ethur people, the separation from neighboring ethnic communities imagined in the Ethur worldview and realized in the borders of Abim district represents hope for a safer and more prosperous future after a violent past. As one Ethur woman stated, “Since the district status was granted we are very free, since everything is being controlled by the Abim people here, leaving the other people with their different behaviors back there in Jie. We feel independent” (interview, Aringo Bom West, June 2018). The implications of this “independence” (*loc ken*, in Leb Thur)—a phrasing echoed by other Ethur interviewees—include greater access to jobs and control over land, political representation and recognition at the local and national levels, and a sense of pride and safety stemming from separation from neighboring communities (Ethur youth, Katimongor, June 2018).

Many ordinary Ethur have also noticed that the “independence” granted by the establishment of Abim district has come with greater recognition of the Ethur as a distinct ethnic constituency and minority group by the state and international NGOs. “The creation of Abim district has eased our communication with...NGOs in the area,” a group of farmers stated, “and whenever they come around they leave us with development aid” (interview, Bar Otukeyi, June 2018). A group of Ethur women added perceptively, “When there is anything coming from the government or some other organization, it requires you to be in a group, and then you will taste something” (interview, Achangali, June 2018). While they may not be as well versed in the language of indigenism or ethnic citizenship as their elite counterparts, ordinary people in Abim district have clearly grasped the connections between ethnic distinctiveness and services provided by the state and NGOs, as well as the importance of districts created under the decentralization policy to establishing that distinctiveness.

Pride in the Ethur worldview sometimes goes hand in hand with hostility toward neighboring communities—especially Karamojong pastoralists, who

are perceived as a threat. Many ordinary people across Abim district voiced their staunch opposition to the entry of Jie and Bokora herdsmen into Abim district during the dry season, arguing that the pastoralists should be forced to stay on “their side” of the district boundary.¹² One Jie kraal leader attributed this hostility to the creation of Abim district: “The [Ethur] despise the Jie since they got their district” (interview, Kanawat, April 2018). Some Jie women who traveled to Abim for *agwer* reported verbal and physical abuse at the hands of their Ethur host communities (interview, Napumpum, May 2018). These Jie women complained that their hosts had labeled them *elok* (sing. *alok*), an anti-Karamojong slur that has come into common parlance in recent years (Bokora journalist, interview, Abim Town, June 2018; Jie elder, interview, Lokitelaebu, April 2018). Some say the term comes from the Lwo verb *loko*, meaning “to change,” and refers to the supposed tendency of migratory Karamojong herdsmen to adopt a friendly approach when they first arrive in Ethur communities, which quickly disappears toward the end of the dry season, when these very herdsmen steal the livestock of their hosts.¹³ Some Jie attribute the increased use of *elok* to the creation of Abim district, after which it became a label for identifying unwanted outsiders. As one Jie farmer stated, “During that time, those people started referring to us as ‘*alok, alok,*’ and saying that they didn’t want *elok* in their district” (interview, Moru a Lokwangat, April 2018).

Continued Contestations Between the JoAbwor/JoAkwa and Ethur Worldviews

At the grassroots level, older ideas of segmentary, relational sociopolitical organization, as encapsulated by the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview, remain relevant to this day, resulting in contestations over what it means to be Ethur and a resident of Abim district. For instance, the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview continues to manifest itself in grassroots systems of land tenure, jostling uncomfortably against notions of Ethur dominance over Abim district’s resources, which are more entrenched among elites. The influx of migrants from other ethnic groups into peripheral areas of Abim district since the return of peace to northeastern Uganda has been a source of great concern to both the common people and elites in Abim. Yet for many ordinary Ethur farmers, the settlement of ethnic “strangers” such as the Iteso in and of itself is not the source of greatest concern. Rather, it is the failure of some of these settlers to adhere to local norms of land tenure that is most galling for Ethur residents of southern Abim. Although little data exists regarding precolonial land tenure in Abim, traditional systems of land tenure across northeastern Uganda generally adhered to the same model, with the allocation of agricultural land being governed by clan-based councils of elders, and uncleared pastureland and hunting grounds being considered accessible to all.¹⁴

The groups of Iteso migrants who began arriving in southern Abim in the late 2000s followed these traditional protocols, for many of them had roots in parts of Abim such as Adea and Nyarikidi extending back to the late colonial

period (Moroto District Government Records 1958). Yet they soon began selling plots of land to their friends and relatives fleeing land shortages in Teso without seeking permission from local structures of traditional authority. It was this circumvention of local norms of land tenure, along with concerns over land shortages, that inflamed the tempers of many Ethur farmers against these Iteso migrants. Ethur farmers also worry about the notions of land tenure brought by migrants from the Teso region, where the large-scale cultivation of cotton during the colonial period gave rise to private systems of land tenure (Jones 2009). “If neighbors like the Iteso come here and become even half of the population,” a group of Ethur women worried, “they will begin imposing their other practices...We look at this grass as something free of charge. So when your goat encroaches on somebody’s plot of land to graze there, it will require payment in return.” These women also stated that they would be more amenable to migrants from other regions settling in Abim if those migrants agreed to “adopt the culture and mode of initiation of this place” (interview, Achangali, June 2018), indicating continued belief in older, fluid notions of ethnic identity rooted in institutions such as age sets.

Clearly, for many ordinary people in southern Abim district, the norms and institutions that define the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview remain relevant for ordering aspects of socioeconomic relations, such as the allocation of land and the integration of newcomers. For Ethur elites, the adherence of ordinary farmers to older notions of land tenure is vexing, conflicting with the goal of consolidating the demographic majority and economic superiority of the Ethur in Abim district. “The root cause of the land disputes in Abim district is the type of heart that the people of Abim have,” said a local religious leader. “They still believe in bringing the people of other districts to be part of their clan” (interview, Abim Town, June 2018). In the context of these land disputes, the resilience of the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview at the grassroots level constitutes a direct threat to the political and economic interests of Ethur elites, who are concerned with maintaining their grip on patronage networks in Abim district. In contrast, the subsistence farmers inhabiting multiethnic settlements on the margins of Abim district are more interested in working to secure their individual and collective survival than in ethnic identity politics. As one Ethur woman in the settlement of Kotidany, located on the border between Abim and Kotido districts, stated, “We feel there should not be any boundary. People should just stay together and survive in peace” (interview, Kotidany, April 2018). Thus, in the case of disputes over land and district boundaries, the contestations between the JoAbwor/JoAkwa and Ethur worldviews have taken on a class dimension, with each worldview representing a different set of economic interests.

Another point of conflict between the JoAbwor/JoAkwa and Ethur worldviews is the debate over whether the JoAkwa can truly be considered Ethur, which also highlights contestations between elements of the Ethur identity. Examples of the codified versions of Ethur history and culture used to legitimize the Ethur identity in the eyes of the state and NGOs—the *Othem*

Abiro and the monarchy centered around the lineage of Aryon—are based on JoAbwor history, complicating the position of the JoAkwa within the Ethur identity (Ethur religious leader, interview, Abim Town, June 2018). Yet the unitary project of Abim district requires the Ethur identity to include the JoAkwa, and many Ethur testimonies indicate that the distinction between Ethur and JoAkwa is cultural, with few disputing that Abim’s inhabitants constitute one political unit. “The JoAkwa are considered Ethur, but their culture differs,” explained one elder, “but via governance, they are within Labwor” (interview, Abim Town, May 2018). Precolonial divisions between the JoAbwor and JoAkwa stemming from their respective affiliations with the rival Jie and Bokora are at the heart of the ambiguous position of the JoAkwa under the “Ethur” banner, especially given the JoAbwor normative framework of the Ethur identity. “The JoAkwa...remain Bokora by ethnicity,” an Ethur politician stated, “but because their dialect is similar...they were brought to be part of the Ethur” (interview, Abuk, July 2018). These questions of belonging have circulated in JoAbwor and JoAkwa communities since the British colonial government transferred the latter to the administrative unit of Labwor County, the antecedent of Abim district, in 1957 (JoAkwa elder, interview, Kobulin, July 2018). The uncertain position of the JoAkwa within the Ethur worldview thus demonstrates not only how conceptions of identity rooted in deeper histories of intercommunal relations continue to influence identities produced by postcolonial politics, but also how this uneasy coexistence can challenge the parameters of these newer identities.

Conclusion

The spread of the Ethur worldview in the wake of the creation of Abim district in 2006 demonstrates how national policies such as decentralization have both responded to and catalyzed international discourses of indigenous rights, national questions of autochthony, and local sectarian animosities. Uganda’s decentralization policy was informed by the very concerns over ethnic citizenship and international discourses of indigeneity that shaped early notions of the Ethur identity among local elites. The creation of Abim district thus provided a space for these ideologies to play on elite and grassroots animosities against neighboring groups whose members had victimized the Ethur in years past, established the Ethur as ethnic citizens of Uganda and as a distinct indigenous minority group, and provided the administrative framework for a more exclusive sense of belonging. As a local politician succinctly put it, “The creation of Abim district was to concretize [Ethur] culture, and it gave them a reason not to belong to the wider Karamojong” (interview, Abim Town, May 2018).

Yet as much as the Ethur worldview and the creation of Abim district represent “reasons not to belong,” the continued vitality of aspects of the JoAbwor/JoAkwa worldview shows that, in contexts such as northeastern Uganda, exclusive notions of identity can coexist, if uneasily, with relational modes of belonging stemming from the region’s history of segmentary

sociopolitical organization. In Abim and across Uganda, new administrative units created under decentralization have served as political arenas for these debates about identity, belonging, and the moral norms that govern social relations, sometimes solidifying existing systems of sociopolitical identification, and sometime giving rise to new ones.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to my MA supervisors at Makerere University, Dr. Pamela Khanakwa and Dr. Charlotte Mafumbo, and to the African History faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for their guidance and feedback. Special thanks go to Owilli Jacob and Apio Winifred in Abim and to Kapel Jimmy and Lomuria Michael in Kotido for their invaluable contributions to this research, as well as to all the Ethur and Jie people who shared their perspectives with me. All arguments and mistakes contained herein are entirely my own.

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Notes

1. For a map of the Karamoja region circa 2022, displaying Abim district and its neighbors, see <https://reliefweb.int/map/uganda/uganda-karamoja-sub-region-reference-map-01082022>.
2. Adunbi 2013; Banegas 2006; Geschiere & Jackson 2006; Lonsdale 2008; Fourchard & Segatti 2015.
3. Green 2008, 2010; Sjogren 2015; Manyak & Katono 2010; Schelnberger 2008.
4. Mirzeler & Young 2000; Mkutu 2008; Gray 2000; Okudi 1992.
5. The names of all interlocutors have been omitted or replaced with pseudonyms.
6. Ethur elder, interview, Agile, July 2018; Ongom Dominic; Jie elders, interview, Lokocil, April 2018; Jie kraal leader, interview, Najoo, April 2018.
7. Ethur women, interview, Katimongor, June 2018; JoAkwa elder, interview, Rogom, June 2018; Jie elder, interview, Loonei, March 2018; Jie elders, interview, Lokocil, April 2018.
8. Glassman 2011; Mamdani 2002b; Brennan 2012, 159–60.
9. Anderson 1983: 67–82; Brennan 2012:118–58; Iliffe 2005:209–11; Reid 2017:27–28.
10. For more on land conflicts in Abim district, see Ugandan media coverage, including Nakandi 2020; Ariong 2016; Emwamu 2016; Onyango 2016.
11. Ethur women, interview, Aringo Bom West, June 2018; Ethur youth, interview, Katimongor, June 2018; Ethur women, interview, Katimongor, June 2018; Ethur women, interview, Achangali, June 2018; Ethur men, interview, Aremo, June 2018.
12. Ethur women, interview, Aringo Bom West, June 2018; Ethur youth, interview, Katimongor, June 2018; Ethur women, interview, Katimongor, June 2018; Ethur women, interview, Achangali, June 2018; Ethur women, interview, Adea, June 2018; Ethur youth, interview, Aywello, July 2018.
13. Webster et al. (1973) trace the term back to precolonial Teso, when local Iteso farmers referred to migratory Karamojong hunters as *Elok* (from the verb *akilok*, to hunt).
14. Gulliver 1955:10, 31; Opyene 1993, Uga-58-O69.