

Facts about the field of study

- Most people in the Acholi sub-region depend partly or fully on subsistence farming
- More than 90 percent of land in rural northern Uganda is held informally and accessed through family relations
- During 1986-2006, the northern regions of Uganda witnessed a violent and devastating war, where the majority of people were forced to leave their land and move into camps for internally displaced people
- In the peace process following the mass displacement, land wrangles of different kinds have challenged the return process
- Legally, both informal and formal land tenure is recognized in the Constitution of Uganda

Facts about the empirical basis of the dissertation

The study is based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Acholiland, northern Uganda. By living with her interlocutors during part of the fieldwork and following the land wrangles they faced, participating in everyday life as well as court hearings and mediation meetings, Mette Lind Kusk has gained insights into land wrangle dynamics through participant observation, qualitative interviews, focus groups as well as archival studies.

About Mette Lind Kusk

Mette Lind Kusk is an ethnographer. She produced her PhD dissertation at the Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University, where she has been part of the Anthropology, Global Studies and the Study of Religion research programme and the collaborative TrustLand project. Her research focus is on land wrangles in post-war northern Uganda.

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ON UNCERTAIN GROUND: INTIMATE WRANGLES OVER LAND AND BELONGING IN NORTHERN UGANDA

PhD thesis by Mette Lind Kusk

ON UNCERTAIN GROUND: INTIMATE WRANGLES OVER LAND AND BELONGING IN NORTHERN UGANDA

Summary of the main points of PhD dissertation “On Uncertain Ground: Intimate Wrangles over Land and Belonging in Northern Uganda” by Mette Lind Kusk, Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University.

The dissertation focuses on how people in the Acholi sub-region of northern Uganda handle the existential uncertainties generated, when somebody close to them challenges their access to vital land and when they interact with unpredictable and untrustworthy authorities in an effort to solve the wrangles.

Land as an existential matter

The dissertation emphasizes the manifold meanings and utmost importance of land for people in post-war northern Uganda by terming land an existential matter. This is in an effort to avoid reducing land to being either an economic asset, a cultural resource, or a social centre of belonging for the living and the dead. Rather, land can be, and often is, of economic, cultural, and social resource at once and thus, a vital matter for human existence in this context.

The potentials people ascribe to land change as wrangles play out

An important point in the dissertation is that the potentials people ascribe to land changes as events unfold. Fear of harmful events coming one's way due to enmity over land can render previously familiar land dangerous and threatening. This can in turn make people sell off or mortgage land, which they previously viewed as valuable beyond monetary terms. In this way, the dissertation pinpoints connections between local experiences of enmity over land and processes of land commodification.

Land wrangles are tough-lived

Land wrangles in post-war northern Uganda are tough-lived and not as easily solved as other studies suggest. By dwelling not only on how the wrangles make themselves felt during instants of explicit clashes and negotiations, but also on the ways in which they are felt through uncanny absences of social interaction between the involved parties, the dissertation highlights the subtle but persistent and threatening presence of wrangles in everyday life.

Institutions and authorities are reticent and unpredictable

When people approach the formal courts and other authorities to seek support in handling their land wrangles, they are often met by reticence from the authorities who tell them to 'solve the matter from home'. While authorities disown local land wrangles most of the time, however, they interfere brutally and arbitrarily in these matters at other times, carrying out evictions and imprisonments. This makes interactions with powerful institutions profoundly unpredictable and uncertain for ordinary people.

On Uncertain Ground

The wrangles followed in this study remain unsolved. Even though many land wrangles stay inconclusive, the degree of uncertainty and open-endedness varies widely for different actors. While some have the resources required to rebel against an unpredictable court system or resist intimate enmity, others face profound poverty and social exclusion. This is counterproductive to creating and maintaining overall stability and peace in the region.

Questions to pursue further

The study raises a number of questions, which deserve further scrutiny and which is of relevance in other contexts where land relations are changing and where legal bodies respond inconsistently, such as: if a new group of landless people are emerging, what alternative means of livelihoods do they have? If the formal courts add to existential uncertainties connected to land wrangles rather than reduce them, what can be done to change this?