



Agrarian Conflicts Across Ugandan Societies: A Complex Struggle

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ABSTRACT

Agrarian conflicts in Uganda are deeply embedded in the nation's historical, social, and economic contexts. Rooted in colonial-era land policies, such as the Mailo land system, these conflicts continue to shape land ownership and agricultural practices, contributing to socio-economic inequalities. This paper examines the causes and consequences of agrarian disputes in Uganda, focusing on land tenure disputes, ethnic and regional conflicts, government policies, population pressures, and the commercialization of agriculture. The study finds that historical land tenure systems, particularly the Mailo system, have created lasting inequalities, while modern governmental policies and population growth exacerbate land-related conflicts. Additionally, the shift towards large-scale commercial agriculture has marginalized smallholder farmers, contributing to social instability. Addressing Uganda's agrarian conflicts requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach to land reform, incorporating stronger governance, sustainable land management, and respect for indigenous rights.

Keyword: Agrarian Conflicts, Land Tenure, Uganda.



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1. Introduction

Agrarianism, which is the idea that an agriculture-based society is the best foundation for a healthy and prosperous society, finds its most fertile ground in Uganda due to its largely rural population and agriculture-oriented economy (Kandel, 2022). However, agrarianism, which informs Uganda's socio-economic and cultural dynamics, is threatened by persistent conflict. Tensions across the country are triggered by several key factors: land tenure, policy initiatives and state policies in many cases, commercialization, and control over economic resources (Coninck et al., 2013).

This paper investigates the underlying agrarian conflicts in Uganda and seeks to explain the historical and structural causes of these conflicts. In pre-colonial societies, land was communally

owned, with local chiefs and clan leaders ensuring equitable access to land for agriculture among kinship groups (Kandel, 2022). Agricultural practices were adapted to suit the climatic and environmental conditions of different regions, allowing different ethnic groups to cultivate crops, raise livestock or engage in fishing activities, depending on their geography (Owaraga, 2016). The system is characterized by its relatively egalitarian nature, as land is considered a collective resource meant to sustain the livelihoods of the entire community.

In contrast, the colonial period introduced fundamental changes to Uganda's agrarian landscape, particularly with the commercialization of agriculture and the introduction of cash crops such as coffee, tea and cotton. Colonial cash crop farming transformed land use from a subsistence model to a capitalist model, thereby exacerbating inequalities (Mwanika et al., 2021). These crops were grown primarily for export to external markets, often at the expense of subsistence agriculture, which was relegated to a secondary priority. The colonial emphasis on cash crops upset the balance of local food production and increased Uganda's dependence on global markets. In addition, colonial policies established overlapping land rights, leading to insecurity and conflict over land ownership, especially as customary land, which makes up 75% of land in Uganda, is not legally recognized (Tatwangire & Holden, 2013).

When compared to the pre-colonial agrarian system, colonial agrarian transformation had major socio-economic consequences. While the pre-colonial system prioritized communal access and local agricultural production to meet subsistence needs, the colonial system created a more hierarchical structure that concentrated land ownership and economic benefits in the hands of a few. Land conflicts in Uganda are rooted in the post-colonial restructuring of property relations that led to increased competition for land, while the emergence of a middle class and elite in regions such as Teso also altered class relations and exacerbated land disputes (Kandel, 2017). These shifts exacerbated social divisions and economic disparities, with large landowners benefiting disproportionately from the commercialization of agriculture.

The legacy of colonial policies reduces the resilience of rural communities to environmental and market shocks, as they become more dependent on monoculture practices and external market demands. Large-scale land acquisitions by companies have mirrored colonial practices, leading to significant displacement of local communities and increased socio-economic inequality (Martiniello, 2019). The legacy of these colonial policies persists in Uganda today, where land tenure inequality remains a key driver of agrarian conflict. Land conflicts are often exacerbated by the use of trespass clauses, which target weaker parties and undermine their property rights (Nakayi, 2023).

2. Research Method

This paper uses a qualitative method by bringing together history, legislation, and case studies of agrarian dispute in Uganda. Some data have been drawn from these sources such as government records, academic journals and reports by organizations that deal with rural instability looking for occurrences and the critical aspects of Ugandan agrarian societies. Additionally, case studies were employed, to explain some agricultural conflict in Uganda, especially the Buganda and Karamoja regions which are the most affected by land conflicts.

3. Results and Discussion

Agrarian conflicts in Uganda are deeply rooted in the nation's historical and social context, with complex causes spanning land tenure disputes, ethnic divisions, government policies, population pressures, and the commercialization of agriculture. These factors have each contributed to creating and perpetuating instability, displacement, and socioeconomic inequality in rural Uganda.

1. Land Tenure Disputes

Land tenure disputes represent a fundamental aspect of agrarian conflict in Uganda, with tensions stemming from the multiple land tenure systems established during the colonial period. The Mailo land system, introduced by British colonial authorities, granted large tracts of land to the Buganda kingdom and its elite, leaving the indigenous population with little to no land security (Green, 2005). Consequently, most land remains concentrated in the hands of a few landowners, while tenants many of whom hold land under customary tenure face eviction threats and lack formalized land rights. Despite legislative attempts like the Land Act of 1998 to rectify these issues, weak governance and ineffective implementation have hindered meaningful reforms, allowing land grabbing by elites to persist. This has led to widespread tenant-landowner disputes, particularly in the Buganda region, where "bibanja" holders, or customary tenants, are especially vulnerable (Quan, 2004).

2. Ethnic and Regional Land Conflicts

Uganda's ethnic diversity has added layers of complexity to agrarian conflicts, as different groups with distinct agricultural practices have historically vied for land access and resources. In northern Uganda, land rights disputes between the Acholi and Langi people are rooted in historical tensions that date back to the colonial period when British administrative policies exacerbated regional and ethnic divisions. The British favored certain regions, such as Buganda, for economic development while marginalizing northern areas, including those inhabited by the Acholi and Langi, which were predominantly used as recruitment grounds for labor and military purposes. These historical inequalities laid the groundwork for grievances that persist to this day. The situation was further aggravated during the insurgency led by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which displaced large populations and

disrupted traditional land tenure systems, leaving communities to return to contested lands and unresolved claims (Acker, 2004).

In the western region, the conflicts between the Bakonzo and Bamba communities and the Batooro people over land in the Rwenzori Mountains have their roots in the colonial and post-colonial periods. During British rule, the Tooro Kingdom was granted authority over the Rwenzori region, often disregarding the territorial and cultural claims of the Bakonzo and Bamba. This historical marginalization led to resentment and, later, the Rwenzururu rebellion in the 1960s, during which the Bakonzo and Bamba sought autonomy and recognition of their land rights. Although the conflict formally ended with the recognition of the Rwenzururu Kingdom, unresolved issues regarding land ownership and ethnic boundaries continue to fuel disputes in the region.

These ethnic tensions are further complicated by government policies that designate certain lands as national parks or conservation areas, restricting local access to resources. For example, in the Rwenzori Mountains, the establishment of protected areas displaced local communities, often without adequate compensation or consultation, which has led to repeated clashes over rights to traditionally communal lands (Dahlberg et al., 2010). Such policies reflect broader historical patterns of land alienation, where external authorities—whether colonial or national—prioritize economic or conservation goals over the rights and needs of indigenous communities.

By considering the historical dimensions of these conflicts, it becomes evident that Uganda's agrarian tensions are not merely contemporary issues but are deeply rooted in colonial legacies, ethnic marginalization, and the uneven distribution of land and resources. These historical injustices are further perpetuated by government policies that designate certain lands as national parks or conservation areas, which restrict local access to resources. Such policies often disregard the historical claims of indigenous communities to traditionally communal lands, leading to new layers of conflict and exacerbating existing grievances (Dahlberg et al., 2010). Addressing these challenges requires not only resolving present disputes but also acknowledging and addressing the historical grievances that continue to shape them.

3. Government Policies and Agrarian Conflict

Government policies aimed at reforming agriculture and land tenure have often exacerbated conflicts rather than resolved them. For instance, the Land Act of 1998, introduced to secure tenant rights and protect customary landowners, has had limited success due to corruption, weak governance, and enforcement challenges. Additionally, the 2013 National Land Policy, intended to streamline land administration and address historical injustices, has faced criticism for its slow implementation and failure to prevent land grabbing. Programs like the Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), launched in 2013 to boost agricultural productivity, have disproportionately benefited political elites and well-connected individuals while neglecting smallholder farmers. Political elites and foreign investors, often with government support, have exploited legal loopholes and systemic weaknesses to acquire vast amounts

of land, contributing to displacement and resentment among rural communities.

Furthermore, Uganda's promotion of large-scale commercial agriculture, such as through the Uganda Vision 2040 framework, has prioritized foreign investment and large-scale agribusiness projects, displacing subsistence farmers who depend on small land plots for survival (Quan, 2004). Consequently, many rural communities feel marginalized in favor of investors, fueling resistance and social instability. Uganda's shift towards large-scale commercial agriculture, which emphasizes foreign investment, has compounded these issues by displacing subsistence farmers who rely on small land plots for survival (Quan, 2004). Consequently, many communities feel sidelined in favor of investors and large-scale agribusiness, which fuels further resistance and social instability.

4. Population Pressure and Environmental Degradation

Uganda's rapid population growth, projected to reach over 100 million by 2050, places immense pressure on land resources, particularly in rural areas reliant on agriculture. As the population increases, so does the demand for arable land, resulting in land fragmentation and environmental degradation, including soil erosion and deforestation. Farmers have had to increasingly cultivate on marginal land, further reducing productivity and exacerbating soil depletion. In ecologically fragile regions such as Mount Elgon and the Albertine Rift, agricultural expansion has led to significant deforestation and triggered landslides, often displacing local communities in the process. Government efforts to evict people from environmentally sensitive areas like national parks have frequently led to violent confrontations, further entrenching agrarian conflicts (Mugagga, 2012).

5. Commercialization of Agriculture and Inequality

The commercialization of agriculture in Uganda has brought about both economic opportunities and increased inequality. While wealthier farmers and agribusinesses benefit from new technologies and high-yield cash crops, smallholder farmers lack the capital to modernize, often leaving them at a disadvantage. This disparity has widened the economic gap between rich and poor farmers, with smallholders becoming increasingly marginalized (Salami et al., 2010). Furthermore, the focus on cash crop cultivation, driven by government policies favoring export-oriented agriculture, has reduced food crop production in some regions. This shift not only increases vulnerability to international market fluctuations but also threatens local food security, exacerbating poverty and agrarian tensions.

Through these cases of land tenure disputes, ethnic and regional conflicts, problematic government policies, population pressure, and unequal agricultural commercialization, Uganda's agrarian issues highlight the need for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to land reform. Addressing these root causes will require substantial policy overhaul, strong governance, and sustainable land management practices that respect the land rights of indigenous populations while balancing economic development with environmental preservation (Iriyani et al., 2024). Without such measures, the deep-seated challenges in Uganda's agrarian landscape are likely to continue, with significant

consequences for rural livelihoods and national stability.

The agrarian conflicts in Uganda are complex and deeply intertwined with historical land policies, social dynamics, and economic pressures. In the Buganda region, where the Mailo land system continues to shape land ownership, the structure traces back to the 1900 Buganda Agreement. This agreement allocated significant land portions to Buganda elites and the Kabaka (the kingdom's ruler) while relegating a majority of indigenous Ugandans to tenant status (Nakayi, 2017). Under this system, elites own vast tracts of land while tenants, who often lack formal ownership rights, face constant risks of eviction and limited economic security. The tenants' vulnerability is exacerbated by increasing pressure from investors and developers keen on transforming land for commercial uses, particularly in real estate and agribusiness sectors.

The Buganda Land Board, responsible for overseeing land matters in this region, has often been criticized for its inadequate support of tenant rights. Reports indicate that land grabbing and forced evictions have escalated in Buganda as developers buy out landlords, displacing large numbers of tenant farmers. Local resistance frequently manifests in protests and demonstrations, met with government force and violence, further entrenching tensions (Shuman et al., 2022). The persistence of these issues highlights how colonial-era land policies have left a legacy of inequality and displacement that continues to affect Uganda's social fabric. Scholars argue that without a significant restructuring of land rights and protections, the Buganda region will remain a site of agrarian conflict, as tenants strive for legal recognition and security against commercial pressures.

In contrast, the Karamoja region experiences different, but equally challenging, agrarian conflicts primarily driven by a clash between pastoralist and agriculturalist land uses. The Karamojong, a pastoralist community that relies on communal grazing lands, have seen their traditional lands increasingly appropriated for agricultural development. Government policies encourage crop cultivation in Karamoja to boost agricultural output; however, this top-down approach disrupts the communal grazing practices essential to the Karamojong's livelihood and cultural identity (Powell, 2010). The scarcity of grazing lands due to agricultural expansion has caused tensions and sometimes violent conflicts between pastoralists and agricultural settlers, as both groups compete for the same limited resources.

These tensions are exacerbated by government initiatives that promote large-scale agriculture, often involving foreign investors. Critics argue that the government prioritizes economic development over indigenous rights, with local pastoralists feeling that their cultural heritage and land rights are being neglected in favor of investor interests. The Karamojong people's sense of exclusion and marginalization is aggravated by the rapid pace of land transformation and the lack of consultation with local communities, who feel pressured to adapt their traditional lifestyles or risk displacement (Powell, 2010). The ongoing conflicts in Karamoja underscore the importance of designing land policies that

accommodate traditional pastoralist practices and involve local stakeholders in decision-making processes.

Uganda's agrarian conflicts thus reveal a complex interplay between historical land policies, economic pressures, and cultural differences. The legacy of colonial land systems, such as the Mailo system in Buganda, has institutionalized inequality, making it difficult for tenant farmers to gain land security. Similarly, in Karamoja, state-driven agricultural policies disrupt traditional land use, causing friction between the government's development goals and the cultural practices of pastoralist communities. Scholars stress that addressing these conflicts requires a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach that balances economic development with respect for indigenous rights and traditions (Wennström, 2024). Only by acknowledging the historical roots and socio-economic complexities of these agrarian conflicts can Uganda hope to foster a more equitable and stable rural landscape.

4. Conclusion

A combination of historical, social, economic, and environmental factors has pushed Uganda into chronic agrarian conflicts which have disrupted peace in the villages. Colonially founded land tenure conflicts still rage and are worsened by inequitable land policy and weak institutions that fail to protect land of the under-privileged. In addition to regional and ethnic conflicts, the region continues to be affected by historical injustices, particularly in the Rwenzori Mountains and northern Uganda.

Some government policies may aim at reforming the land tenure system and the agricultural practices in the region but this have frequently biased the conflicts in the promotion of commercial agriculture and foreign investors at the expense of local farmers. Population increase as well as environmental problems like deforestation and soil erosion have led to land scarcity and resource competition which angered investors and farmers against each other. The demand of land and capital for agribusiness has enabled corporates to thrive while smallholder farmers remain at the periphery, increasing rural inequality and reducing food security.

Addressing Uganda's agrarian conflicts will require a multifaceted approach that includes comprehensive land reform, strengthening of governance and enforcement mechanisms, and prioritizing the land rights of local and indigenous communities. Additionally, promoting sustainable agricultural practices that balance economic development with environmental conservation is crucial to ensuring long-term stability in Uganda's rural areas. Only through these efforts can Uganda hope to mitigate the underlying causes of agrarian conflict and foster a more equitable and sustainable agricultural system.

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