



# Rural Radicalism and the Tactic of Third-Party Leverage: How Acholi Peasants Drew a UN Agency into Their Struggle against Land-Grabbing by the Ugandan State

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes a 2018 protest instigated by rural activists in northern Uganda, who chose to contest violent state-driven evictions by peacefully occupying a UN compound in the urban center of Gulu. With their contribution to this ASR forum on rural radicalism, Laing and Weschler argue that in militarized contexts such as Uganda, remote geographies present rural political actors pursuing radical goals with certain advantages but also unique challenges. The case they examine demonstrates

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the capacity of rural activists to draw on rural-urban ties and a tactic they have dubbed “third-party leverage” to imaginatively circumvent such constraints.

**Résumé :** Cet article analyse une manifestation organisée en 2018 à l’instigation de militants ruraux dans le nord de l’Ouganda, qui ont choisi de contester les expulsions violentes menées par l’État en occupant pacifiquement un complexe de l’ONU dans le centre urbain de Gulu. Avec leur contribution à ce forum ASR sur le radicalisme rural, Laing et Weschler soutiennent que dans des contextes militarisés tels que l’Ouganda, les zones géographiques éloignées présentent aux acteurs politiques ruraux poursuivant des objectifs radicaux certains avantages, mais aussi des défis uniques. Le cas examiné démontre la capacité des activistes ruraux à tirer parti des liens entre les zones rurales et urbaines et une tactique qu’ils ont surnommée « l’influence d’un tiers » pour contourner de manière imaginative ces contraintes.

**Resumo :** O presente artigo analisa uma manifestação ocorrida em 2018 e instigada por ativistas rurais no norte do Uganda, os quais decidiram contestar as expulsões forçadas e violentas levadas a cabo pelo Estado contra os arrendatários de terras. Com este fim, ocuparam pacificamente as instalações da ONU no centro urbano de Gulu. No seu contributo para este fórum de debate da African Studies Review sobre o radicalismo rural, Laing e Weschler defendem que, em contextos militarizados como o do Uganda, é nas geografias remotas que se encontram atores políticos rurais com objetivos radicais, os quais detêm algumas vantagens mas também enfrentam desafios únicos. O caso aqui analisado pelos autores revela a capacidade dos ativistas rurais para tirarem partido dos laços entre rural e urbano e o seu recurso a uma tática que apelidaram de “third-party leverage” (“alavancagem em terceiros”) de forma a contornar criativamente esses desafios.

**Keywords:** Acholi; northern Uganda; land rights; resistance; third-party leverage; nonviolence; rural radicalism; state violence; human rights; UN

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## Introduction

Increasingly, rural activists across the globe have cultivated urban allies, disrupted urban space, and engaged with national and international actors to advance struggles in the countryside. Reflecting their refrain “you make agrarian reform in the countryside, but win it in the city,” since the 1990s, Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement, for instance, has complemented its core strategy of coordinating rural land occupations by building ties with urban movements and holding protests in the capital to challenge state neoliberal policies (Karriem 2012:142; Wolford 2010). Between 2020 and 2022, hundreds of thousands of Indian farmers descended on Delhi, establishing vast “protest camps” along key highways, driving tractors into city streets, and forcefully shutting down malls, gas stations, government offices, and corporate grain silos (Baviskar & Levien 2021; Narula 2022). By disrupting city life, they compelled the Indian government to repeal new laws

deregulating agricultural markets. Across the African continent, localized groups resisting state-driven, large-scale expropriations of land in the name of conservation, investment, and development have developed alliances with NGOs, transnational peasant movements, and international bodies (e.g., Temper 2018; Bussotti & Nhaueleque 2022).<sup>1</sup>

In light of such trends, scholars have begun to pay greater attention to the links between Africa's rural and urban political spheres (Kniknie & Büscher 2023), challenging perspectives which viewed the city and the countryside as distinct, "bifurcated" domains of struggle (e.g., Mamdani 1996:17). While scholars of rebel movements and urban riots examine how such mobilizations draw on political registers, identities, and recruiting strategies that "bridge rural and urban spaces" (Köhler & Schritt 2023:69; Balolage & Bushenyula 2023), a rapidly expanding body of literature on responses "from below" to land-grabbing (Borras & Franco 2013; Hall et al. 2015) observes how rural protesters contesting land deals interact with urban civil society and international actors (Prause & Le Billon 2021). This approach, we suggest, moves beyond research that portrays remote geographies as "natural" havens for rural resistance (Weiss 1967; Scott 1985; Martiniello 2015) and recent analysis that depicts the "urbanization" of political protest (Golooba-Mutebi & Sjögren 2017; Raleigh 2015), to explore how rural activists bring resistance into the urban sphere, circumventing remoteness while navigating links to urban actors and sites of power.

Building on such approaches, this article analyzes a case in which rural peasants in northern Uganda contesting state-driven land evictions executed a dramatic protest in an urban space, targeting an international actor. In July 2018, 234 protesters from the remote rural area of Apaa along the Albert Nile in Uganda's Acholi region traveled over a hundred kilometers of rough roads to the prominent urban center of Gulu. Deceiving a security guard, they infiltrated the walled compound of the local Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN-OHCHR) to stage an occupation; the protesters erected tarpaulin tents and cooking areas, and refused to depart until UN staff acted upon their demands to pressure the Ugandan government to end violent evictions in the name of conservation and investment. The protest, which lasted 35 days, took place against the backdrop of the local population's decade-long struggle to defend customary land claims against state expropriation. While residents of Apaa have contested state power in various ways, from litigation to blocking rural roads, the 2018 occupation was the first direct action staged outside of Apaa in an urban setting (and the first to target a non-state actor). As such, it presents a useful case to consider how rural actors use engagement with urban actors and spaces to overcome their constricted options for confronting the state.

To examine the OHCHR occupation, we draw on participant observation of the protest as it unfolded in 2018, supplemented by ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted in Amuru and Gulu Districts from 2019 to 2022. It is critical to acknowledge that we initially experienced the occupation not as researchers, but as supporters and onlookers drawn into the

orbit of the protest as a result of our prior work on issues of land rights in the Acholi region. Tessa Laing supported Akaa protesters with her experience as a community organizer, while Weschler maintained constant contact from New York, both with Laing and with a local activist who joined the occupation. Because we were not acting as researchers in the moment, we likely missed opportunities to ask key protest organizers, government officials, and UN staff questions that would have, in retrospect, been valuable to our analysis in this article. Nevertheless, our close observation of the planning, execution, and aftermath of the protest (including events such as community strategy sessions, meetings with supporting NGOs, and informal discussions with parties involved) enabled us to gain a window into the self-articulated perspectives and experiences of Akaa's rural activists. At times, we acted as *de facto* intermediaries with UN officials who proved reluctant to engage with the protesters themselves; this provided a unique perspective on the way the targeted institution responded, and on the shifting dynamics between the protesters, UN staff, and government actors.

This article reflects a re-examination of the Akaa protesters' UN occupation through the lens of our subsequent research. Within six months of the protest, each of us embarked on PhD projects that provided fresh insights into the events we witnessed in 2018. To supplement our earlier observations of the protest, accordingly, we draw on Sara Weschler's ethnographic fieldwork in several western Acholi communities and archival research regarding colonial-era forced displacements in western Acholiland, and on Laing's three years of participant observation of the Akaa struggle in particular.

The article proceeds in two main sections. The first, divided into two parts, orientates our study within broader literatures, examining resistance across rural-urban divides and introducing a novel concept we call "third-party leverage." The second examines the case study of the UN-OHCHR protest in northern Uganda. This second section is divided into four further subsections. The first of these contextualizes the protesters' action, outlining the broader struggle waged by Akaa inhabitants and the historic cycles of forced displacement that underpin their radical contestation of the government's authority over their land. The second subsection examines how activists and community leaders experience and navigate the remote, isolated nature of Akaa's geography, drawing attention to the role of urban-rural alliances. The third section considers how the tactic of "third-party leverage" enabled the protesters to advance their struggle, while the fourth considers the limitations of the protest.

In militarized contexts such as Uganda, remote geographies present rural activists seeking to contest state power with certain advantages, along with unique challenges. The Akaa protesters' occupation of the UN-OHCHR facility demonstrated the capacity of rural actors to draw on rural-urban ties and the tactic of "third-party leverage" to imaginatively circumvent such constraints, despite the limitations inherent in targeting an international party which proved more beholden to the Ugandan state than the activists had initially conceived.

## Framing Rural Radicalism: Rural Activists and Urban Allies

The African countryside has often been envisioned as a haven for violent radicalism. From the 1960s, scholars emphasized the role of peasants in armed uprisings against colonial rule (Fanon 1963; Weiss 1967) and explored rebellions emerging in rural areas (Crummey 1986). More recently, scholars have described armed insurgencies prevalent in the 1980s and 90s across Africa as “typically rural” in character (Golooba-Mutebi & Sjögren 2017:24). Rebel movements, it is argued, characteristically require a rural support base through which to recruit, capture resources, and evade state power. Reflecting “ethno-regional” divisions forged during the colonial period, such movements often seek constituencies in their rural area of origin, drawing on ethnic or regionally-framed grievances (Makandawire 2002). In Uganda, dozens of insurgencies have followed this pattern, hence the popular Ugandan idiom of “taking to the bush” to fight the government (Golooba-Mutebi & Sjögren 2017:23). Remote, rural areas, lying beyond the full control of the state, have accordingly been cast as the natural stronghold of such uprisings.

Following similar logics in the other direction, scholars have also portrayed Africa’s rural sphere as a strategic environment for more clandestine, everyday forms of resistance, from foot-dragging to encroachment (Scott 1985; Kerkvliet 1986). Peasants are understood as struggling for autonomy from state control by retreating into a “moral economy” of subsistence and reciprocity (Scott 1976). Rural dwellers may accordingly attempt to evade state oppression, rather than pose a direct challenge risking costly retaliation. Remote peripheries where it is particularly difficult for the state to exert authority are portrayed as ideal locales for such forms of struggle (Scott 2009).

Contemporary analyses of overt, non-violent political protest in Africa, however, often ignore the rural sphere. While researchers have indeed examined the role of rural protesters in African independence movements, scholarship over many decades has cast political protest in post-colonial Africa as an urban phenomenon (Sanchez 2022:229–30), positing a general shift in African political contestation from rural uprisings to urban street protests (Golooba-Mutebi & Sjögren 2017; Kniknie & Büscher 2023). This assumption persists in more recent studies. Adam Harris and Erin Hern (2019:1183), for example, present “being urban” as the first in their list of factors predisposing citizens of African countries to engage in political protest.

That protests are more common in urban contexts is perhaps unsurprising. From a political opportunities perspective, inhabitants of remote rural areas operate within a setting that narrows their “repertoire of contention” (Tilly 1993). The same circumstances that offer rural dwellers avenues for evading state power can also restrict such populations’ opportunities to effectively confront the state. Moreover, even when African rural communities have the option to engage in political protest, the risks may be prohibitive. As Darin Christensen (2018) has shown, while African governments are more

inclined to suppress urban protest, their suppression of rural protests is more likely to be lethal.

Nevertheless, contentious political mobilization in rural Africa has also risen since the 1980s. Though seemingly less “radical” than armed insurgencies waged over political authority (Bolin et al. 2024), rural mobilizations confronting new forms of large-scale land expropriation also form a key part of the broader picture of rural radicalism explored in this issue. The worldwide food and energy crises of 2007–2008, which sparked the so-called “global land grab” (Borras et al. 2011), intensified the commodification of African land, unleashing a wave of expropriation driven by foreign and domestic investors, corporations, and states themselves (German 2023:52–53), a phenomenon which scholars increasingly analyze within longer patterns of capitalist “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2005). These processes include, for example, new enclosures of communal land for extraction and agribusiness and the expansion of protected areas for eco-tourism and carbon-offsetting (Fairhead et al. 2012). Recent literature reveals a variety of political responses “from below” to such expropriation (Borras & Franco 2013; Hall et al. 2015), from negotiation of better terms of incorporation in land deals (Mamonova 2015) to resistance movements employing confrontational tactics, and disruptive—sometimes violent—forms of protest (Cavanagh & Benjaminsen 2015; Prause & Le Billon 2021). Such struggles are rarely “radical” in the sense of seeking to entirely uproot (Latin: *radix*, *radices*) existing regimes or orders. They nevertheless seek to disrupt fundamental relations of power that strike at the root of a given community’s existence and, when successful, can radically disrupt trajectories of capitalist accumulation by dispossession.

Recent studies of agrarian contestations “from below” highlight the extent to which rural struggles engage with allies from the urban, or even international, sphere. Research has shown how rural actors combatting land expropriation often seek assistance from political figures and urban civil society (Larder 2015). They may also find their causes taken up by transnational advocacy networks (Temper 2018; Bussotti & Nhaueleque 2022). Through such support, rural activists can, for example, travel to urban spaces to lodge court cases or demonstrate outside political offices or corporate headquarters. Such trends underscore the importance of viewing urban and rural politics not as distinct arenas, but as interconnected spheres, linked in much the same way that rural and urban economies and livelihoods have been shown to be (Foeken & Owuor 2001; Sakketa 2023). Building on Sam Kniknie and Karen Büscher’s (2023) insights about links between urban and rural forms of violent political contestation in Africa, we posit that, increasingly, the continent’s urban and rural non-violent political struggles are similarly intertwined.

As such, the specific ways in which rural activists enlist external allies and navigate urban sites of power require particular attention. Studies have demonstrated that support from urban social justice movements can facilitate rural political action in agrarian struggles (for example, Engels 2023). Similarly, scholars have argued that transnational agrarian movements such

as La Via Campesina can build the capacity of rural protesters and elevate their struggles to the global arena (for example, Bussotti & Nhaueleque 2022). Such transnational groups, however, may also intervene unbidden, using local struggles to promote their own agendas (Temper 2018). Alliances with external support networks can, moreover, disrupt the internal dynamics of resisting groups, with flows of NGO funding, for instance, precipitating infighting (Rizvi 2019; Prause & Le Billion 2021:1109). Engagement with civil society can also lead to what Aziz Choudry (2012) calls the “NGOisation” of struggles, wherein external allies steer local actors toward depoliticized, conventional tactics, thus dampening radical impulses among groups predisposed to more confrontational resistance. This article seeks to nuance this picture by highlighting a case in which rural activists leveraged civil society organizations from the nearest urban center to advance their own ends, using the funding and resources they received to stage a contentious protest targeting international actors that exceeded any political expression their urban allies were willing to risk.

In analyzing these dynamics, we draw on the notion of “political society,” coined by Partha Chatterjee and adapted by Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly (2015) in their exploration of urban protest across the African continent. Political society is characterized as the stratum of the urban population that relates to the state without the “formal legal or political arrangements” that protect members of “civil society” such as trade unionists, politicians, and religious leaders. Unmediated by formal structures, political society’s relationship to state power tends to oscillate “between neglect and direct violence, between extra-legality and illegality.” This stratum’s political aspirations, the authors argue, are often characterized by a “radical need to transform the very condition of life” (Branch & Mampilly 2015:20–21).

We find the distinction between civil and political society productive, but seek to extend Branch and Mampilly’s urban-focused conception of the latter category to the rural sphere. The rural poor, we suggest, may experience a similar urgency in the conditions of their day-to-day lives, and contend with a similarly “unmediated” relationship to state power (Branch & Mampilly 2015). While Herbert Weiss (1967) posited that rural populations were more likely than their urban counterparts to espouse radical aims, we suspect urban and rural political society are similarly predisposed to radical struggle. Rural actors in Africa, however, generally operate within a context of restricted political opportunity. An expansion of “political society” to encompass both urban and rural populations, then, must also consider how these groups’ opportunities to engage in contentious politics differ, exploring the particular challenges rural political society actors face, and examining the creative strategies they devise to circumvent them.

### *Third-Party Leverage*

When rural dwellers catapult their struggles to urban sites of power, they face choices regarding the target of their advocacy or direct action. While scholars

have often viewed the central state as the sole target of social movements and contentious political action (McCarthy & Zald 1977; Van Dyke et al. 2004), recent literature has begun to pay more attention to the dynamics of mobilizations targeting non-state institutions, from corporations to international organizations (Mertes 2015; Jasper & King 2020). Sometimes the main perpetrators of an injustice, such institutions can be the primary targets of direct actions. Other times they may be targeted as a proxy, standing in for wider systems of oppression in which they are complicit (Walker et al. 2008:45, 48). Since the late 1980s, for instance, local groups across Latin America, Africa, and Asia have engaged in “alter-globalization” direct actions against international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) to contest their role in advancing neoliberal reforms that advantage multinational corporations (e.g., Mertes 2015:94–95). In recent years, protest groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have repeatedly waged violent attacks on the bases of UN peacekeepers to attempt to drive them from the country, contending that the UN mission has not only failed to protect civilians but exacerbated conflict (Kniknie 2022).

By contrast, our concept of “third-party leverage” refers to a separate form of proxy targeting in which a dissenting group gains leverage over an institution or authority, compelling it to negotiate with an ultimate target (often the state) on their behalf. This tactic is distinct from related forms of proxy targeting in two key ways. First, rather than targeting a party implicated in the injustice they seek to address, in the tactic of third-party leverage, protesters target a potential external ally. Second, the tactic of “third-party leverage” extends beyond mere pleas or requests for assistance, advocacy, or even mass demonstrations.

Dissenting groups often petition external “third parties,” whether domestic or international, for support in demanding change from their own state. In international relations theory, the “boomerang effect” model (Keck & Sikkink 1998) describes how local groups build alliances with international actors to create external pressure on their governments “from above.” Since the 1990s, for example, dozens of self-determination movements—notably Biafra in Nigeria—have aligned themselves with the international community and petitioned the UN, requesting support (see Sandig & Granzow 2018). UN headquarters also frequently feature as sites of more contentious mass demonstrations. In 2021, for example, Ugandan opposition-supporters protested outside UN offices in New York, calling on the international community to hold Uganda’s ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party accountable for rights violations (Bahati & Wandera 2021); in 2023, protesters demonstrated outside a UN office in Kyiv calling for sanctions against Russia (Balachuk 2023). While such petitions and demonstrations may elicit support or exert pressure, they fall short of gaining “leverage” over a third party. Rather, they resemble a form of “rightful resistance” (O’Brien & Li 2006), in which dissenters operate within or “near the boundary of authorized channels” through political pressure or nonviolent action, appealing to the purported values, norms, or rhetoric of their



target (O'Brien 2013:1051).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, third-party leverage imposes sufficient “disruption” (Luders 2006) to compel an institution to engage a repressive state on protesters’ behalf.

As such, the tactic of third-party leverage is likely to involve “confrontational” (Van Dyke et al. 2004) or “disruptive” (Tarrow 1993) actions such as blockades, occupations, or sit-ins. While considerable research explores how such tactical repertoires can influence state actors or other complicit institutional targets (McAdam 1983; Walker et al. 2008), we were unable to identify scholarly analysis of cases in which protesters disrupt external “third-party” institutions to leverage them against a state. Scattered news reports and activist accounts, however, suggest that protest groups have indeed employed this tactic; in 1993, for example, Kurdish activists occupied a UN building in Sydney, demanding that the UN and the Australian government exert pressure on the Turkish regime over violations against the Kurdish population (Karadjis 1993). In 1999, Kurdish protesters seized embassies and occupied consulates across 21 different countries, expressing similar demands (CNN 1999). Ugandan activists attempted (but failed) to occupy a UN building in Kampala in order to push UN officials to sanction the Ugandan regime for torturing political opposition figures in 2016.<sup>3</sup> In 2022, activists in Thailand pushed past police barriers to occupy the road of the UN Economic and Social Commissioners offices to demand support for their efforts combating the Thai government’s restrictions on NGO activity (The Nation 2022). Unfortunately, details of such cases are lacking: it remains unclear why the activists involved opted to target such international third parties, how their targets responded, and why their actions succeeded or failed.

Below, we expand upon our concept of “third-party leverage” by examining how rural protesters disrupted the operations of a local UN-OHCHR office in northern Uganda, compelling UN officials to engage the Ugandan state on their behalf. Our analysis proposes three key dynamics of “third-party leverage” for development by future case studies or comparative research. First, similar to dynamics described in the “boomerang effect” model (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), dissenting groups opt to engage in third-party leverage in circumstances in which they face a sharp or sudden increase in state repression, leading them to avoid targeting the central state itself. Our second proposal is that third-party leverage is more likely to prove effective when the dissenting group strikes a balance between transgressive disruption and respect for the target institution’s “core values” (O'Brien & Li 2006:4). While the “disruption costs” (Luders 2006) imposed must be high enough to prompt the target to make concessions, an action perceived as too violent or antithetical to the institutions’ ethos may lead them to disengage or even allow state suppression. As explored in our case study below, northern Ugandan peasants disrupted the UN office’s functioning, while also appealing to its values of non-violence and human rights protection. Finally, we propose that the success of third-party leverage also depends upon the relationship between the third-party institution and the perpetrator of the targeted injustice—usually the state. Institutions that are valuable to the state

may be better positioned to apply pressure, while those with weaker standing may prove unwilling, or unable, to intervene.

### The Roots of Rural Radicalism in Apaa

Located at the far western edge of the Acholi region, along the right bank of the Albert Nile, Apaa is home to over 26,000 people dispersed across an area of 1,000 square kilometers. Although post-conflict recovery efforts in the wake of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war have eroded certain urban-rural divides in northern Uganda (Branch 2013), remote settings such as Apaa remain distinctly rural. Lying along the fringes of the already peripheral district of Amuru, Apaa is cut off from electrification and all but the most rudimentary roads. For most locals, travel to the nearest town, Amuru, can take hours, while reaching Gulu, the closest urban center, is a day-long undertaking. Although Apaa residents have become increasingly connected to wider markets via a bi-weekly market day, the majority still depend heavily on subsistence farming, drawing on local lands for most aspects of their livelihoods.

State attempts to expropriate these lands, ostensibly for investment in conservation-tourism, stem from wider patterns of enclosure in the region, accelerated most recently by the LRA war and a series of concomitant forced displacements. In 1996, during the height of the conflict in northern Uganda, the Ugandan government began forcing Acholi rural populations into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps (Finnström 2008; Branch 2011; Lamwaka 2016). While the countryside lay fallow for the subsequent decade, powerful investors, politicians, and military personnel staked claims to vast tracts of land (Sjögren 2015). In Amuru District, for example, individuals with regime connections appropriated large areas for plantations and cattle ranching, while the Madhvani Group acquired over 10,000 hectares of land to use for sugar production (Atkinson & Owor 2013; Martiniello 2017). While facilitated by the wartime absence of populations, these enclosures also fit within wider patterns of land expropriation and accumulation by dispossession that have been observed across East Africa (Cotula et al. 2014; Kareem 2018). As security improved and populations were instructed to return home from 2006 onward, a plethora of conflicts over land surfaced, not only among families and clans, but also between local government administrative units and between wider communities and state-backed investors (Sjögren 2014, 2015; Hopwood & Atkinson 2015).

The struggle for Apaa has multiple dimensions (Kobusingye et al. 2017). While Acholi populations were still displaced in camps, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) took steps to formally establish the "East Madi Wildlife Reserve" over an area of 831 square kilometers, invoking the area's historic precedent as a conservation zone. The legal gazettelement of the reserve relied on the consent of Adjumani District local government, which claims that Apaa falls within their jurisdiction. These actors subsequently developed a partnership with a South African tourism company to manage the area as a

hunting park (Serwajja 2014). Even as such business negotiations unfolded, thousands of Acholi peasants began resettling the area, asserting their historic rights and insisting that Apaa remained their customary land. Their return was supported by Amuru District leadership, which claims Apaa lies within their administrative area, thus falling outside the wildlife reserve. The conflict between Acholi peasants and UWA over Apaa is therefore underpinned by an inter-district boundary dispute. As Adjumani District is largely populated by Madi, while Amuru District is predominantly Acholi, the conflict has increasingly also taken on ethnic overtones (Kobusingye et al. 2017).

Like many large-scale land disputes across the continent, the struggle over Apaa land is also rooted in longer histories of forced relocation and state enclosures for conservation. The entire population of the western Acholi region, including Apaa, was forcibly displaced by British officials beginning in 1913 (Atkinson & Owor 2013). This mass relocation, which was later consolidated by converting the resulting depopulated areas into restricted nature reserves, was originally justified as a sleeping sickness control measure. It simultaneously, however, served British interests of concentrating populations for administrative and economic ends (Postlethwaite 1947; Girling 1960; Weschler 2016). Indeed, one local intellectual makes the case that the forced relocation of Acholis was designed to “kill the communal way of life” that had historically existed on collectively owned and managed clan lands—a key step, he argues, in introducing capitalism to the region.<sup>4</sup>

While it is fashionable to assert that land was not an issue of concern for Acholis prior to the LRA war, numerous oral accounts—and a close reading of the historical record—tell a different story. During fieldwork in Acholiland in the mid-1950s, for example, the anthropologist Paula Hirsch Foster encountered anxiety, resentment, and even despair over the loss of ancestral lands (Lagace 2016). Today meanwhile, elders in western Acholi often recall their own elders risking imprisonment during the colonial period to make clandestine use of their historic clan lands in restricted areas—efforts which are indeed recorded in the exasperated correspondence of numerous colonial officials.<sup>5</sup>

Elders in Apaa emphasize that despite evictions by both colonial and post-colonial administrations, their families repeatedly resettled their ancestral lands, reestablishing communities and reverting to customary forms of land use in the area, as intermittent periods of degazettement permitted. That the sense of historical continuity filters down to younger generations is evidenced, for example, by the comments of a 41-year-old resident of Apaa who proclaimed, to great applause during a community meeting in the months after the UN protest, that with East Madi Wildlife reserve, “[President Yoweri] Museveni is trying to do what even the British couldn’t fully manage here. But we won’t let him.”<sup>6</sup>

Although Uganda’s 1998 Land Law famously recognizes customary rights as a valid form of land tenure, such rights are afforded scant legal protection in practice. Critically, moreover, in the case of Apaa, state actors dismiss the very existence of customary land rights, arguing that colonial-era

forced displacements in western Acholi, and the subsequent establishment of nature reserves in the area, nullify any ancestral claims communities may hope to make there.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, generations of Apaa residents have refused to relinquish their customary claims, thus demonstrating a radical resolve over multiple decades. The radicalism here is not one of trying to uproot existing orders to replace them with something new. Rather, it is a radicalism of rootedness, of tenaciously clinging to certain shared ideas of historic belonging—even in the face of overwhelming pressure to abandon them; a refusal to be uprooted, not only from the land, but also from communities and relationships that land sustains.

Since 2010, the Acholi communities that resettled Apaa after the war have been subjected to waves of state-driven eviction and abuse at the hands of UWA and the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF). A particularly brutal operation sanctioned by the Cabinet in 2012 left 6,000 people homeless, over 25 youth imprisoned, two residents dead, and many injured (Kobusingye et al. 2017:462). While the South African tourism company publicly withdrew its investment in the area in 2015 (Otto 2015), violent state attempts to evict populations and erect boundary demarcations locating Apaa within Adjumani District continued. In mid-2017, a series of confrontations seemingly between Acholi residents of Apaa and neighboring Madi communities culminated in violence (Kobusingye et al. 2017). While the media portrayed the clash as an ethnic land feud, Acholi activists from the area insist Apaa residents were attacked not by Madi civilians, but by state agents in a veiled attempt to displace the locals.<sup>8</sup>

For more than a decade, violent, regime-driven attempts to evict communities from Apaa have been met with diverse modes of resistance. Over the years, residents have targeted the vehicles of UWA rangers by erecting roadblocks and puncturing tires. On rare occasions when state officials have visited the area, Apaa's occupants have attempted to block their entry and staged public demonstrations. Throughout, they have also practiced "guerilla agriculture" (Cavanagh & Benjaminsen 2015), openly planting crops to signal to state authorities that "*Kany pe ngom pa lee; kany tye ngom pa dano*" [The land here isn't for animals; the land here is for humans].<sup>9</sup>

The five-week-long UN occupation protest upon which we focus emerged in response to a fresh, sustained wave of destruction in Apaa between late 2017 and mid-2018. During this time, state security agents burned at least 844 homes, leaving over 2,000 homeless. Residents reported sensing that such operations would continue until every homestead was demolished. Any hope of stemming them would, they felt, require a significant expansion of the Apaa dissidents' tactical repertoire.

### *Navigating Remoteness*

In a recent study of resistance to large-scale land expropriation in Amuru, northern Uganda, Giuliano Martiniello (2015:657) argues that a range of

practices—from collective farming to militant protest—reflect a long history of rural peasant’s “deliberate efforts” to “withdraw from state control.” Echoing authors who have portrayed rural landscapes as the “natural” abode of rebels and dissidents (Scott 1985, 2009; Peluso & Vandergeest 2011) Martiniello lists “geographical remoteness” as a significant factor facilitating peasant struggles in areas such as Apaa (2015:665) by helping “to galvanize and unite the resistance” and posing “significant challenges for state rule and surveillance” (2017:11). While raising valid points, this approach tends to romanticize rural struggle, casting peasants as uniformly vested in defending their autonomy (cf. Isaacman 1990:21), while simultaneously overlooking both the distinct geographical challenges rural activists face and the socio-political entanglement of urban and rural spheres.

Closer analysis of the Apaa case challenges such portrayals of rural resistance. First, peasant resistance in Apaa reflects a struggle for citizenship and inclusion, rather than sovereignty and autonomy. Certainly, practices such as subsistence, informal exchange, and rotational group farming (Martiniello 2015:659) have enabled Apaa’s peasant farmers to sustain themselves in a context of absent state services and limited opportunities to engage in commercial agriculture. Yet village leaders, elders, and activists in Apaa have clearly framed their political actions as a struggle for state recognition of their customary land claims and integration into state administrative structures on their own terms. Reflecting this goal, one Apaa resident once lamented to Weschler, “Why do these people treat us like we are not citizens of this country? I would ask the government to treat us as citizens....”<sup>10</sup> In a multitude of petitions directed at state actors, Apaa leaders have demanded the (re)erection of electoral polling stations, the reopening of Apaa’s government Health Center, inclusion in government vaccination and agricultural programs, and meetings with state officials. During the UN occupation, Apaa protesters also specifically called on the OHCHR to hold the Ugandan government accountable to respecting their rights as citizens.

The lived experiences of the Apaa activists also counter romanticized visions of rural struggle by illuminating the unique challenges of waging resistance from remote locales (see also Li 2007; Chau 2019). Undoubtedly, remote geographies present rural dissidents with certain tactical advantages (Martiniello 2015; Kniknie & Büscher 2023:15). The vast, rugged terrain of Apaa, largely inaccessible by motor vehicle, for example, has hindered the state’s eviction operations, which must be largely carried out on foot. Apaa’s occupants have capitalized on such geographic realities, thwarting evictions by hiding in the bush and erecting makeshift shelters. Yet in 2018, the absence of cell-phone reception and electricity and the substantial distances and poor roads—both between Apaa’s internal villages and leading to any external urban centers—posed daily challenges. Organizing an inter-village strategy meeting, for instance, required days of mobilization; in order to communicate with urban-based allies or reporters, residents often had to walk for hours, then position themselves by particular trees or anthills to access cell-phone networks.<sup>11</sup> For activists to attend court hearings or to type,

print, and present a complaint to a human rights body in town could take days and involve prohibitive travel costs.

The geographic isolation of Apaa has also restricted local political society's opportunities to expose and challenge state abuses. Urban dwellers in Kampala may take to the streets (Branch & Mampilly 2015), while poorly paid plantation workers can strike or retaliate by burning crops or sabotaging machinery (Owor & Dieterle 2018; Kafeero 2018). In Apaa, however, a lack of obvious localized targets has often obliged peasant organizers to wait for the rare occasions when state representatives are present to conduct demonstrations. In 2015, peasants in Apaa captured the media's attention when thousands blocked the road and, in an act of grave cultural significance, elderly women stripped naked, shaming the government officials who had traveled to demarcate the District boundary (Abonga et al. 2020). State actors have appeared increasingly reluctant to visit Apaa, aware that their presence provides an opportunity for such dramatic protest. Meanwhile, as Apaa organizers recount, before the 2018 protest, the alternative of transporting their direct actions to a distant urban stage was considered logistically unfeasible.

Nevertheless, despite the challenges posed by the area's remoteness, it is also critical to recognize the ways in which Apaa is connected to urban actors and civil society. Many Apaa households have extended families based in Gulu, while Apaa's business community has developed strong links with trader associations from Gulu and Paboo township. Apaa's leaders are closely connected to Acholi opposition politicians, who have championed Apaa's struggle in Parliament and supported Apaa residents to open court cases in Gulu's High Court in 2011 (see Serwajja 2014) and in 2017, procuring temporary injunctions against further evictions. While both cases remain unresolved and the injunctions were eventually disregarded by the state, such legal action, along with the Apaa organizers' frequent memoranda and appeals to urban civil society organizations, have generated significant external support for their struggle. The Apaa activists' "naked protest" of 2015 further captivated civil society actors in Gulu; although Acholi's "traditional" Paramount Chief, David Onen Acana, condemned the demonstration as an "embarrassment" (Latigo 2015), many NGOs, religious leaders, and politicians responded by conducting solidarity visits, raising awareness (see HUR-IFO 2015), and advocating on Apaa activists' behalf. Such interactions laid the groundwork for the rural-urban alliances that would eventually enable Apaa dissidents to transport a major protest to the urban stage of Gulu.

In early to mid-2018, Apaa activists recall feeling devoid of choices as armed state soldiers perpetrated waves of violent eviction operations that barely penetrated local news, unfolding hidden from public view. In a bid to expand their strategic options, Apaa leaders reactivated ties with Solidarity Uganda (SU), a network of experienced local activists that supports grass-roots movements, which in turn connected them to a larger NGO. At the request of Apaa's political society leaders, SU activists provided a list of potential urban protest targets. When local organizers selected the UN-OHCHR office in Gulu, SU helped them develop a detailed plan to

infiltrate its security system. Collaborative planning sessions drew together Apaa leaders' experience in secretly mobilizing protesters with external activists' insights on avoiding state surveillance in town. While Apaa's core community activists marshaled firewood and dried beans, the larger NGO funded large trucks to transport 234 protesters over one hundred kilometers of ragged road to Gulu town and pledged ongoing bulk supplies. As the protest unfolded, many of the Apaa organizers' pre-existing urban contacts responded with support. A religious leader provided a covert base in Gulu from which Apaa protesters could infiltrate the UN compound; a protester's Gulu-based relatives loaned industrial-sized cooking pots; and Paboo and Gulu's market vendors associations, small churches, individuals, and NGOs in Gulu provided a flood of blankets and food supplies, enabling Apaa protesters to sustain the occupation for over a month.

In this case, the rural protesters' access to an urban stage relied on a fairly distinctive form of collaboration between rural political society (Apaa's activists) and urban civil society actors. As Branch and Mampilly explore (2015:138–41), civil society, which operates under considerable scrutiny in Uganda, has often proven unwilling to openly support or engage in political dissent or “transgressive” actions (cf. Child 2009). In this case, however, rural activists from Apaa managed to obtain NGO funding, resources, and moral support to execute a transgressive action that exceeded Gulu-based civil society actors' typical modes of political engagement. In large part, this achievement stemmed from the Apaa protesters' ability to execute the occupation without the overt, hands-on involvement of the Gulu-based NGOs. It also reflected the intermediary role SU local activists played in providing tactical advice, assisting protesters to handle NGO funds, and mediating internal disputes that arose over NGO resources. Reflecting its atypical willingness to openly support transgressive actions, SU publicly recognized a local activist who supported the Apaa protesters as its 2018 “community organizer of the year.”<sup>12</sup> Such flexible, locally embedded yet urban-connected activists provided a critical link between rural political society and civil society groups, which aim to engage in social movement-building in principle, but in practice gravitate toward less risky activities such as hotel-based workshops, polite advocacy, and consultations.

While Apaa's remote geography poses a myriad of obstacles to ongoing efforts to contest state-driven land expropriation, in 2018, Apaa protesters circumvented such challenges by building on existing rural-urban, political-civil society alliances to execute a direct action on an urban stage. Below, turning to the broader outcomes of the occupation, we consider the dynamics that shaped the OHCHR's response, and weigh the achievements of the protest against its limitations.

### *Leveraging the UN-OHCHR*

Violence against UN compounds is not unheard of, and the UN system is no stranger to the phenomenon of vulnerable populations seeking protection

on its premises. South Sudanese civilians, for example, repeatedly sheltered in UN compounds during their country's recent civil war (*UN News* 2013; Leithead 2014). It is perhaps unsurprising then, that agency staff initially struggled to comprehend the Akaa protesters' demonstration at the OHCHR's Gulu office, which early media reports framed as an instance of desperate civilians "fleeing" regime violence and "storm[ing]" a UN compound for protection (Allimadi 2018a). The Akaa protesters' peaceful takeover of the OHCHR premises, however, was neither a violent expression of frustration, nor an act of despair, but rather a calculated attempt at third-party leverage. As one in-country official acknowledged several days into the protest, "We [the OHCHR] have never seen anything like this."<sup>13</sup>

The Akaa residents' struggle has unfolded in a context of restricted opportunities for nonviolent resistance. Since the late 1980s, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni has systematically militarized the state (Epstein 2017; Kagoro 2015), thereby limiting Ugandan "citizens' ability to exercise political voice" (Abonga et al. 2020:119). Due to generally weak government structures, citizens in Uganda's northern region primarily experience the presence of the state via erratic encounters with various security forces (Tapscott 2017). This dynamic is particularly acute in Akaa, where the government has progressively withdrawn services, blocked Acholi politicians from visiting constituents, and removed polling stations (Makumbi & Owiny 2019), all while residents continue to face armed attacks from UWA and harassment by UPDF soldiers stationed at nearby roadblocks. Ostensibly justified by the area's status as a wildlife reserve, such measures also ensure that residents are cut off from civic avenues to bring pressure upon their government. Inhabitants of Akaa thus remain vulnerable to government violence, while also being kept at a distance from non-militarized facets of the state, and therefore facing especially narrowed options for political expression.

Given these circumstances, the protesters chose to circumvent the state and instead disruptively coerce a third party to apply pressure on their behalf. This bid for third-party leverage resembled, but also exceeded the bounds of, standard forms of "rightful resistance" (O'Brien & Li 2006). Typically, rightful resistance presupposes the presence of powerful potential allies within a given regime, and employs accepted methods of political expression to enlist such allies in holding specific state actors accountable to the regime's purported "core values" (O'Brien & Li 2006:4). By mid-2018, however, multiple factors conspired to make such an approach untenable in Akaa. "Acceptable" modes of expression such as NGO advocacy were insufficient to stem the ongoing systematic attacks. Intercession by opposition Members of Parliament (MPs), meanwhile, proved futile in the face of force sanctioned by higher levels of the Ugandan regime. In the moment, local leaders reported sensing that direct action within Akaa would entail prohibitive risk while yielding minimal results. Targeting an international body tasked with the defense of human rights, however, presented an opportunity to bring a more powerful, sympathetic actor into play on the population's behalf.



Thus, a group whose position was too radical, and whose standing was too tenuous, to allow for an effective act of rightful resistance within the Ugandan system, decided instead to pressure an international authority with whose “core values” they hoped their demands would resonate. Their direct action transgressed the modes of protest acceptable to the Ugandan state; yet by specifically occupying an office of the UN’s primary human rights organ, protesters positioned themselves within a context in which they believed that their disruptive, yet nonviolent, act would be treated as a legitimate mode of political expression. As such, they unwittingly fashioned a novel, transgressive form of rightful resistance through which they sought to check the abuses of their own state by engaging the (perceived) ideals and higher authority of the global community.

Upon infiltrating the OHCHR compound in Gulu, demonstrators used their disruptive presence to present the organization with a decision dilemma, cornering staff into a choice between calling in Ugandan police to forcibly remove them or allowing the protest to unfold on UN premises. Summoning police risked violating OHCHR principles by making staff complicit in what would likely devolve into a violent crackdown. Allowing the 234 civilians to remain camped in the compound, on the other hand, granted protesters considerable leverage, forcing the organization to consider the demonstrators’ demands. Recognizing the dire implications of the first option, staff reluctantly acquiesced to the second. The protesters thus used a “transgressive nonviolent direct action” (Schock 2015:494) to both compel the OHCHR to shield them from state force and to push the organization into negotiations with the government on their behalf.

The radical nature of this act was not lost on the state itself, which deployed security agents outside the OHCHR and launched an investigation into the protesters within hours of their arrival. It was clear, also, to the activists’ urban civil society allies who, in keeping with their more moderate political positions, either maintained total anonymity, or else distanced themselves from the political aspects of the protest by framing any visible support as humanitarian assistance to a group in distress.

At the outset of the occupation, aiming to draw international attention to state abuses in Apaa and generate pressure on the Ugandan government, the protesters addressed a set of written demands to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Among other points, they called on him to facilitate meetings between foreign embassies and Apaa representatives, and to influence Uganda’s government to halt evictions and degazette Apaa lands. In the event that the government failed to respond, the occupiers specified that the OHCHR should “urge key foreign Embassies and donors to make public statements condemning state abuses in Apaa and withhold funding.”<sup>14</sup>

As we will discuss in more depth below, throughout the occupation, protesters found the OHCHR more reluctant to intercede on their behalf than they had hoped. The presence of 234 protesters encamped on its grounds in Gulu nevertheless compelled the OHCHR to focus unprecedented attention on Apaa.<sup>15</sup> Four weeks into the occupation, protest leaders

were informed that meetings between OHCHR officials and regime representatives in Kampala had resulted in an army directive against further evictions in Apaa, and verbal reassurances that the UPDF's human rights officer would address local complaints. The acting UN Resident Coordinator in Kampala also pledged "mid-term" educational and health support to Apaa (Owiny 2018). That said, these assurances were made in private, without written corroboration.

The occupation also enabled Apaa's activists to build broader alliances. Although the UN-OHCHR refused to facilitate contact between the protesters and foreign embassies, the occupation sparked media attention and solidarity among civil society actors that ultimately did facilitate such a connection. When new allies arranged transport for four Apaa demonstrators to Kampala, the high profile of the occupation prompted several foreign ambassadors to agree to meetings. Among these, both the United States' ambassador and the ambassador of the European Union promised to raise the issue of Apaa with President Museveni in person. On the same trip, the four protesters also met the Speaker of the Parliament of Uganda and officers from Uganda's Land Commission of Inquiry, which committed to formally investigating state abuses in Apaa. Thus, the occupation attracted the attention of foreign governments and opened avenues of engagement with the Ugandan government that had previously been beyond Apaa residents' reach.

The protest, therefore, broadly shifted the landscape of the Apaa struggle in the activists' favor. On August 16, 2018, when the group finally decamped after 35 days in the OHCHR compound, hundreds gathered to welcome them home in Apaa amid dancing and ululation. After months of sustained, violent evictions hidden from public sight, the protesters' direct action had not only taken the plight of Apaa into the national spotlight, but even brought it into international view. Such unprecedented scrutiny likely contributed to the Ugandan government's apparent decision not to resume officially sanctioned, systematic eviction operations between 2018 and 2023.

### ***Confronting Geopolitical Realities on the Grounds of the UN-OHCHR***

The occupation's accomplishments notwithstanding, the OHCHR itself proved a less powerful (or less amenable) third-party ally than protesters had expected. Reflecting enduring stereotypes about rural African communities, OHCHR staff in Uganda repeatedly overlooked the agency of the peasant protesters who occupied their premises. From day one, assuming the protest was mobilized by Acholi political opposition elites, staff summoned local Members of Parliament and urged them to end the demonstration. Even after the self-mobilized nature of the occupation became clear, OHCHR employees continued to dismiss the protesters as its primary agents, instead deliberating on the situation in closed-door consultations with district officials and MPs. On the occasions when they did engage protesters directly, staff alternated between cajoling and berating demonstrators to leave.<sup>16</sup>

Convinced that the protesters were reliant on external direction, the UN-OHCHR progressively restricted the group's contact with outsiders, blocking visitors, and confiscating key leaders' phones. The protesters, we observed, grew frustrated by the UN's dismissal of their capacity to represent themselves. Ironically, though, the experience of the occupation also slowly revealed to them that the UN-OHCHR itself lacked agency.

Third-party leverage, we posit, is most likely to succeed when the would-be ally institution has strong standing with the state. In the Apaa case, though, the OHCHR's response to the occupation was fundamentally shaped by the organization's dependence on the Ugandan government's goodwill. As the demonstrators gradually learned, the OHCHR may only operate in Uganda with state permission. At the time of the occupation, moreover, the OHCHR's memorandum of understanding with the government of Uganda was set to expire in approximately six months. Staff were therefore particularly reluctant to take any position that might jeopardize their standing in the country.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the five-week occupation, UN-OHCHR employees refused to apply any public pressure on the Ugandan government and avoided demonstrating sympathy for the protesters' cause. In the only official public statement released during the occupation, the OHCHR emphasized that it had no prior knowledge of the protest, and highlighted its efforts to convince the demonstrators to leave.<sup>18</sup> To avoid appearing complicit, staff obstructed media coverage of the occupation, and for weeks told protesters nothing about ongoing closed-door meetings with state actors. In a further show of deference to the Ugandan state, the OHCHR's only on-the-record comment about the occupation was a call for a "Government-led dialogue to identify long-term solutions" (Allimadi 2018b).

The OHCHR's reluctance to challenge the government arguably reflects international actors' broader complicity in Ugandan state abuses. The regime's capacity to deploy armed personnel for violent evictions in Apaa is facilitated by ties with the international community. By positioning Uganda as a strategic ally in a volatile region and curating the country's image as a neoliberal success story, Museveni has nurtured valuable relationships with the West, thus steering tens of billions of dollars toward his regime (Epstein 2017). Significant parts of such aid are diverted from development projects into Museveni's militarization agenda, with the tacit approval of donors (Branch 2011: 83–84; Atkinson 2019). Thus, when Ugandan state forces perpetrate human rights abuses, the international community effectively foots the bill, a fact that demonstrators confronted in their call for the OHCHR to pressure embassies to suspend funding if government abuses in Apaa continued. Such demands, however, overestimated the OHCHR's clout. Not only is the OHCHR unable to dictate the funding decisions of UN member states; in this case, staff also sensed that any attempt at such intercession could damage the OHCHR's fragile relationship with the Ugandan regime.

The occupation thus exposed the UN's compromised position vis-à-vis the state. When planning the occupation, organizers had expressed hopes

that the UN held some sway over the Ugandan government. As events unfolded, however, they observed that the UN-OHCHR was beholden to the regime, a fact that undermined the power dynamics protesters had sought to leverage when contesting their government's authority.<sup>19</sup> Key organizers from Apaa consequently adjusted their view of the UN-OHCHR as a target of direct action, tempering former appraisals of what could be expected from international organizations.

In the aftermath of the occupation, wider political society in Apaa reflected extensively on the experience. Realizing that sweeping intervention from international actors was unlikely, some expressed impatience with non-violent struggle. Others insisted that, the OHCHR's lackluster response notwithstanding, the occupation had compelled the state to abandon systematic evictions.<sup>20</sup>

Five years after the occupation, the conflict in Apaa remains unresolved. The government of Uganda continues to assert the area's status as part of a wildlife reserve, while local communities, defending their customary land claims, remain settled throughout the area. Though a high-profile "government-led dialogue" on Apaa did ensue after the occupation concluded, Apaa residents were excluded from the discussions, which were weighted in favor of government interests.<sup>21</sup> The education and health support promised by the UN never materialized, and locals have seen no direct engagement from the OHCHR since the occupation. That said, although sporadic state attacks resumed in 2019, they have never since reached the systematic intensity communities saw prior to the protest. Residents of Apaa thus remain in an uneasy stalemate, still under threat, but holding their ground.

The 2018 occupation protest, however, expanded the Apaa protesters' tactical repertoire. On February 15, 2023, Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja announced that final and total evictions from Apaa would begin in 90 days (Monitor Team 2023). Fearing a dire escalation of state violence, and knowing that President Museveni was due to give a speech in Gulu the following week, Apaa residents mobilized to send 33 community members back to the city for another protest. This time, organizers did not bother with international actors. They did, however, revisit their tactic of third-party leverage, now occupying the offices of Ker Kal Kwaro, the state-sanctioned cultural leadership of the Acholi. Protesters presented Paramount Chief David Onen Acana with three black coffins inscribed with the word "Apaa,"—signifying, they explained, that they were "prepared to die" for their home.

Although lacking in statutory powers, Ker Kal Kwaro wields considerable influence in the Acholi region, a fact that has long allowed Paramount Chief Acana to position himself as a valuable ally to the Museveni regime. As such, Acana in fact proved a surprisingly effective target for third-party leverage. Yielding to pressure from the protesters, he engaged Museveni directly on the matter of Apaa. Remarkably, at his urging, President Museveni proceeded to convene with the protesters for an hours-long, closed-door meeting, during which he appeared to rescind Prime Minister Nabbanja's announcement, in

favor of a judicial inquiry to decide on the next steps (Dokotho & Owiny 2023). Although far from a decisive victory, this nevertheless staves off imminent expulsion, thus constituting a significant reprieve for the inhabitants of Apaa.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to the protesters, on another side of town, staff at the OHCHR compound were again confronting a crisis. Less than three weeks earlier, the Museveni regime had announced plans to terminate its memorandum of understanding with the agency (Okiror 2023). While the OHCHR's submissive stance toward the government, so clearly on display throughout the Apaa activists' occupation in 2018, had won it a few more years on the ground, the institution was to be expelled from Uganda after all. Ironically, amid mounting authoritarianism in Uganda, it was the deferential UN agency, rather than Apaa's peasant community, that now faced imminent eviction.

## Conclusion

Analysis of this single protest waged by peasant activists contesting dispossession in northern Uganda reveals much about the spatialized political dynamics of agrarian struggles and the entanglement of rural, urban, and international spheres. In contrast to romanticized portrayals of rural struggle, the Apaa case underscores that rural dissidents may seek inclusion in state structures, rather than autonomy; while rural geographies can enable rural actors to evade state eviction, remoteness also poses obstacles to civic engagement, curtailing opportunities to contest or disrupt state violence. In Apaa, despite physical isolation, poor roads, and communication barriers, rural dwellers remain connected to urban spaces and actors via local politics, market relations, familial ties, and relationships with civil society players forged through prior cycles of contention. Such links can enable rural activists to creatively circumvent the limited options for political expression associated with isolated spaces, where the state is often encountered only through militarized interventions.

Through our case study of the OHCHR protest, we have sought to contribute to scholarly discussions examining the role of urban civil society and international actors in responses “from below” to state-driven land expropriation. While some scholars cast NGOs and transnational movements as saviors able to “elevate” rural struggles to the international sphere (Temper 2018; Prause & Le Billon 2021) and others emphasize their tendency to channel political society toward non-confrontational approaches (Choudry 2012; Rizvi 2019), we demonstrate how rural radicals may also leverage NGO resources toward more transgressive tactics, and compel—rather than request—international institutions to intervene on their behalf.

Finally, the UN-OHCHR occupation presents an example of the tactic we conceptualize as “third-party leverage.” In this case, rural activists facing a sudden escalation of state violence opted to sidestep the constraints of Uganda's restricted political space by gaining leverage over an international

third party and endeavoring to compel it to challenge the Ugandan state's process of violent evictions. To the extent that this tactic succeeded in prompting UN officials to engage the Ugandan state, we argue that it did so, because it was sufficiently disruptive to the institution's daily operation, while still aligning with its core values of human rights and non-violence. Although the tactic of third-party leverage succeeded in ending the wave of systematic state evictions in 2018, it failed to result in a clear or conclusive victory. In large part, this reflected the UN-OHCHR's reliance upon the Ugandan government, and thus its limited capacity to exert influence, the efficacy of third-party leverage being largely dependent on the nature of the proxy target's relationship to the state.

The 2018 occupation fell short of its ultimate goal, yet expanded the Apaa protesters' repertoire of contention, enabling them to consider a wider range of urban spaces and non-state targets. This was evidenced, several years later, in their "coffin" protest, in which they leveraged an Acholi cultural leader to gain access to Uganda's president, thus winning their community critical time to continue the struggle for its customary lands.

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## Notes

1. In 2020, for example, a peasant movement in Mozambique managed to resist a national agricultural development project by drawing on international allies to pressure the Japanese government, the state's key partner in the endeavor (Bussotti & Nhauelque 2022).
2. O'Brien and Li's (2006) theories of rightful resistance apply to protesters attempting to persuade regime actors within their own state. Here, we extend the notion to an international context.

3. Personal communication with activists involved, 2023.
4. Interview with Reverend Willy Olango, Gulu, May 24, 2022.
5. See, for example, Charles Pitman, "Typescripts relating to tsetse control: 'Bunyoro and Gulu game and tsetse safaris'" 1929. Z. MSS PIT/D42. Natural History Museum Archive (London).
6. Pwunu Dyang, Apaa, March 14, 2019.
7. See, for example, the rhetoric of Justice Wilson Musene, quoted in Atkinson and Owor (2013).
8. Apaa community leaders have previously asserted that their original conflict is with the government, not their Madi neighbors. Mounting ethnic tensions in the area, they argued, are not organic but rather seeded by external politicians with connections to the regime (Community meeting, Pwunu Dyang, March 15, 2019). Their claims are broadly backed up by the findings of a 2020 Parliamentary report (Parliament of Uganda 2020). That said, ethnic strife in Apaa sporadically intensifies—sometimes to devastating effect (as, for example, in a series of civilian clashes in late 2023 that left a total of ten people dead). The precise origins of such Madi-Acholi tensions, and their mounting implications for the future of the Apaa conflict, are partially addressed by Kobusingye et al. (2017) and are also discussed in Laing's PhD thesis (2023). They are an important area for further study but fall outside of the purview of this article.
9. Community meeting, Pwunu Dyang, Apaa, March 14, 2019.
10. Community meeting, Pwunu Dyang, Apaa, March 15, 2019.
11. In 2018 there was almost no mobile network access in Apaa. Several years later however, a new booster tower in the region extended network to a handful of Apaa's villages, improving communication.
12. See: <https://solidarityuganda.org/solidarity-uganda-awards/>.
13. Personal communication, July 2018.
14. Letter on file with authors.
15. The OHCHR's only discernible previous engagement with government abuses in Apaa had been one paragraph on the issue in a 39-page report from 2013.
16. Two weeks in, when the pit-latrines were being filled up, OHCHR staff blocked local civil society groups from arranging to have it emptied, seemingly to speed the protesters' exit. It took four days and the intervention of a local MP before the OHCHR relented (Laing & Weschler 2018).
17. Personal communications with OHCHR staff, July 2018.
18. The statement describes Apaa inhabitant's grievances simply as "related to forced evictions and other alleged human rights violations." Far from implicating state forces in the protesters' plight, the document in fact explicitly thanks "law enforcement agencies on site" for "managing the situation in line with human rights principles." (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2018).
19. During a discussion in Apaa seven months after the occupation, one young man, still struggling to process why the protest did not bring about a definitive end to state abuses, wondered aloud as to why the Ugandan regime seemed more powerful than an organ of the global governance system. "Is Museveni the President of Uganda," he asked, "or of the entire world?" (community meeting, Pwunu Dyang, Apaa, March 14, 2019).
20. Community meetings, Pwunu Dyang, Apaa, March 2019.
21. For more, see Weschler & Laing (2019).

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