

## **AGORO CULTURAL HERITAGE SITE**

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Report prepared for the Initiative for Sustainable Development in Africa and the Coalition for Archaeological Synthesis, 2023

### **Introduction**

Agoro is a cultural heritage site (on the national list) located on Agoro Hill in Lamwo district, northern Uganda. The site consists of a series of house platforms and dry stone walls of up to fifty metres in length and two metres in height. At the highest part of the site, there appears to be an open area with regulated access, which suggest a public space for meetings and decision-making. Other associated sites include; Ladinga Statue, which is believed to have been made by the Arabs; Agoro footprints on the rock, believed to be of the Turkish; Buru Kwera, where the British burnt all the guns from the chief of Agoro; Agoro caves, believed to repel any object thrown in it; and Luturuturu, where Idi Amin built his state house among others. Even with the limited information the site would appear to be a population centre linked to processes of political centralisation amongst Acholi communities in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Unfortunately, there has been limited archaeology undertaken in northern Uganda as a whole so, there are few sites with which comparisons may be drawn.

### **The Peopling of Agoro**

According to Atkinson (2010, p. 254-255), polities established in the Agoro mountains marked the furthest extension north of the chiefdom formation on the Bunyoro/Paluo model. But their emergence did not lead to the same degree of social and cultural homogeneity in the mountains as in most parts of north-central Uganda. The reasons for this seem to have stemmed mainly from the physical nature of the Agoro range, the most massive and rugged in all of Acholi. Such terrain may explain the unusually high level of social isolation and independence, evidenced in the two main ways. The first was the number of separate dialects, or even languages, spoken in the mountains into the present century. The second was the existence of a number of Agoro lineages that seem to have always remained outside any polity.

Four Agoro chiefdoms have been established, though it is unclear when they were founded or even what they were called. Only one had a ruling lineage ambiguously identified as indigenous to the mountains. The most likely name of this chiefdom was Longorone. Longorone chiefdom (*kal*) are remembered to have been rainmakers and may have had as many as seven associated *lobong* lineages. The one chief (*rwot*) list collected for the chiefdom is obviously skeletal, containing only four names with no associated traditions. A second Agoro chiefdom was Popoka, with two or three possible *lobong*. The royal lineage of the third Agoro chiefdom referred to simply as Agoro, has uncontested traditions of Central Sudanic origins; it is even called Baar of Pobaar *kal*. Extant traditions of the chiefdom contain the only Agoro reference to a royal drum and the only Agoro chief (*rwot*) list of any length, though no names have traditions attached to them before the second

half of the nineteenth century. Evidence of the fourth chiefdom is the weakest of all. One source expressly identifies such a chiefdom, stating that its chiefs (*rwodi*) were rainmakers and naming its ruling lineage as Lamogi. But two other sources identify this ancient and widely used Central Sudanic name only as an Agoro lineage, with no indication that it was a royal lineage of an Agoro chiefdom (Atkinson, 2010).

### **Settlement History of Agoro (Based on the 2015 Interview with the Agoro Community)**

Agoro people are believed to have come from South Sudan in a place called Shilluk. They began migrating from Shilluk and first settled in Lupulungi, then Lugire in South Sudan, and later settled on Agoro hill, at a place called Ludyang Dyang in northern Uganda, about 10km from the border of South Sudan. Currently, the place is in Agoro subcounty, Lamwo district. The Agoro people were led by chief (*rwot*) Lagorone whose clan is Lorone presently dominant in Agoro. It was also believed that other clans of Agoro followed *rwot* Lagorone when the British took over control from the Arabs in 1918.

From 1850-1860, the Arabs under the reign of Ali invaded Agoro community and camped in Tumanun in collaboration with *rwot* Lagorone for slave trade and barter trade activities. During the reign of the Arabs, there were a lot of inter-tribal wars, slave trade activities, and scramble for territories and the chief of Agoro had to prepare and protect his people and by doing so, *rwot* Lagorone acquired a lot of arms and ammunition from the Arabs.

In 1898, the British came to Agoro community and found out that *rwot Lagorone* was collaborating with the Arabs and he was arrested with the help of Semei Kakungulu and Musa. His son Lukwilili who succeeded him resisted the British rules and camped on top of Langiya hill with a special drum called *Lalweny* for alerting his people in case of any attack by the British. In 1918 after the British had defeated *rwot* Lukwilili and forced all the people to climb down from the top of Agoro hill and camped them down on the foot of Agoro hill. The British then removed all the guns from Agoro people and burnt them in Buru Kwera. In 1919 all Agoro people were relocated to Paluga by the British and stayed there for a period of nine years, not until after the British had seen that the Agoro people were willing to accept their rule. They were then allowed to come back in 1923 and settled on the foot of Agoro hill under the leadership of *rwot* Yonacan who was seconded by the British.

It was believed that, the Agoro people built the piled of rocks to control erosion and defensive security during the reign of *rwot* Lukwilili, *rwot* Anawu and *rwot* Owuna. The pile of the stones was referred as *pyen lyec* by the Pobaar clan.

### **Government of Uganda's Involvement in Agoro Heritage Site**

The involvement of the government of Uganda through Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities in the conservation and preservation of Agoro heritage site is constitutional. The 1995 Constitution under Nation Objectives and Directive Principles of the policy XXV imposes an obligation on the State to Promote and Preserve cultural practices which enhance the dignity and

well-being of Ugandans. This is also recognized in the 3rd National Development Plan which acknowledges the intrinsic value of culture and the importance of cultural identity as a form of capital with a potential to move Ugandans out of poverty.

The concern from the government of Uganda to the heritage site of Agoro started in 2010 when the Acholi Chiefdom administration contacted the Department of Museums and Monuments (DMMs) under the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities to guide in the documentation of heritage sites in Acholi subregion for conservation and tourism promotion. It is through this mission that Dismas Ongwen was chosen to represent the DMMs in the activities. Accordingly, he and the team visited the Agoro site in 2010 and formally recorded the site for the first time. Their report indicated a great need for the conservation and preservation of the site. The DMMs in response enlisted the site on the national heritage list of Uganda. In 2015, a research team from Uganda Museum and a surveyor from the British Institute in Eastern Africa led by Dismas Ongwen conducted further documentation of Agoro heritage site with the intention to record and map the Agoro landscape using modern technology such as total station and GIS software. Furthermore, the DMMs has conducted several community engagements with the aim of sensitising the community on the need to conserve and preserve Agoro heritage site. The most recent attempts have been in September 2021 and November 2021 in which the discussion on the gazettelement of the site was key. The government's efforts towards the conservation and preservation of the site seemed to have awakened the curiosity of the community.

### **Community Response to Government's Involvement in the Site**

The terrible population displacement that has occurred in northern Uganda due to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict has had great consequences for the retention and creation of social memory with historical attachments to place and land being severely compromised. Since 1986, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) increased violent attacks on Uganda government forces and civilians in Acholi Sub-region. As a result, nearly 95 percent of the ethnic Acholi population in the sub-region were displaced from their original home villages to Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps. The government lifted the restrictions on freedom of movement for IDPs of Acholi Sub-region in 2006. However, protection concerns prevailed among IDPs. Since April 2007, peace negotiations between the Government of Uganda (GOU) and LRA significantly improved security in northern Uganda. This situation encouraged IDPs to move closer to home villages. In 2008, the return process of IDPs was accelerated by moving out from IDP camps to transit sites. For the case of Agoro, the current trading centre of Agoro was one of the IDP camps in northern Uganda (Plate 1 below). The population in the IDP camps of Acholi Sub-region used to be 1,347,396 in 2006 at its peak. While in July 2011, about 55,400 lived in the IDP camps and transit sites in Acholi Sub-region, the population in the IDP camps decreased rapidly. Approximately 96% of IDPs have already settled in original villages at present.

Essentially in Agoro today, there appear to be limited memories of who may have lived on the site. Hence, in Agoro and northern Uganda more generally, historical silences of the past are creating

continued silences in the present (Reid, 2016). This also could be due to the Agoro heritage site being located in a very poor part of northern Uganda almost at the border of Southern Sudan where poverty has increased greatly in the past 20 years when the region was under LRA insurgency. With the return of peace, the local people are utilizing all available materials to make money. Urbanization has increased the demands for construction materials such as rocks and the stone walls are being pulled down and crushed for sale. Stonewall rocks that are loose and easy to quarry are the first to be taken from the ruins (Plate 2 below). Since the abandonment of the original usage of the site, the surrounding community of Agoro has shown little interest in its conservation. For example, there has been no care in terms of bush clearing, thereby protecting the site from annual bushfire rampants in northern Uganda.

The coming in of the government to preserve the site has awakened the interest of the community from a different angle, hence creating conflicts between the two;

- i). First, the community thinks that gazetting the site will make them lose control and benefit from the site;
- ii). Secondly, the community also thinks that the government may be planning to grab their land for different purposes, and;
- iii). Thirdly, there is fear that their views and concerns may never be incorporated in the management system of the site.
- iv). Relatedly, the potential of the site had also attracted ownership claim from another clan. This was however resolved in the November 2021 DMMs' engagements with the community.

The lack of understanding of the government's intention on the site and the community's limited understanding of the importance of the site and the need for preservation has caused the community to continue quarrying rocks for building from the heritage site. This action is affecting the integrity of the site and may lead to total destruction of the site. It is on this basis that there is a need for research and greater collaboration to understand the conflict, its roots and how it can be resolved.



*Plate 1: Photograph of Settlement at Agoro Foot Hill taken in 2015. Some of these Homesteads include the IDPs*



*Plate 2: Evidence of Rock Quarrying at Agoro Site*

## **References**

- Atkinson, R. (2010). *The Roots of Ethnicity. Origins of the Acholi in Uganda before 1800* (2nd ed.). Fountain Publisher.
- Reid, A. (2016). Constructing History in Uganda. *Journal of African History*, 57.2, 195–207.

