Long Term Human-Environment Interactions: Understanding Palabek Cultural Landscapes in the Last 2000 Years (Preliminary Findings)

Paper for the MISR Graduate Student Conference 2018

Okeny, Charles Kinyera
Department of History, Archaeology and Heritage Studies
Makerere University.

Introduction

This paper presents significant findings of preliminary archaeological survey in Palabek Sub County, Lamwo district of Northern Uganda. It is part of my PhD project entitled “Long Term Human-Environment Interactions: Understanding Palabek Cultural Landscapes in the Last 2000 Years. Since the inception of archaeological research in Uganda in the 1920s (Posnansky 1967), most of the work has been confined to the west of the country and more recently in the central districts of Uganda (Kiyaga 2006). The focus of these pioneering research was on the monumental landscapes of Bigo bya Mugenyi (Shinnie 1960; Posnansky 1969); Munsa (Lanning 1955; Robertshaw 1997; Lejju. et al. 2003, 2005, 2006); Ntusi (Reid 1994, 1996b, 2013); Nyero rock paintings in eastern Uganda (Posnansky and Nelson 1968; Nakaweesa 2011); reconstruction of cultural sequences (Ashley 2010; Kiyaga-Mulindwa 2004; Tibesasa 2007) and ancient cultural contacts (Kyazike 2013). Much as recent work by historians has established that Acholi people of present day Northern Uganda and Palabek in particular have interacted with their environment for centuries (Amone 2014a, 2014b, 2014d; Atkinson 2010), to date, the history of these landscapes and its people have received very little research attention, probably because of the colonial racist legacy that saw the Acholi as technologically backward (Uganda handbook 1920:206-08), and which assumed that the environment offered little economic potential. In more recent times, archaeological research in the north has also been hindered by war with the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), 1986-2006. This made the area inaccessible at a time when there was a revival of interest in archaeology in southern and western parts of the country. The north saw twenty years of war and it is only in the last few years that it has become safe to move around the region since the LRA have been driven out of the country. This study therefore draws on the work of Balée (2006), who conclude that virtually all landscapes on earth have been modified by long periods of human occupation. The study involved informal discussions with the sub county officials and cultural chiefs, who gave the permission to visit the sites. The aim of this preliminary survey was to establish the
archaeological potential of Palabek in preparation for comprehensive landscape archaeological survey and excavations.

**Location of the Study Area**

The study area is located in Acholiland, also known as Acholi sub-region composing of the present districts of Agago, Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, Lamwo, Nwoya, Omoro and Pader. The project area is in Lamwo district and specifically Palabek, currently divided into Palabek Kal, Palabek Gem and Palabek Ogili (Fig. 1). Modern Acholi districts stretches along much of the northern border of Uganda. Situated on a plateau 3,000 to 4,000 feet (1,025-1,350 meters) above sea level, the districts consist of nearly 11,000 square miles (28,000 square kilometres) of rolling savannah. The physical environment of this area is dominated by two fundamental features. The first is a lightly wooded savannah landscape of scattered trees, bushes, and thick, tough grass that can reach six feet in height; the second, a harsh climate marked by a long dry season and frequently late or reliable rains (Atkinson 2010). Palabek covers an area of 1,862.76 km² and is occupied by approximately 39,016 people belonging to the Acholi community (National Population and Housing Census 2014).

*Figure 1: Location of the Study Area*
Unsystematic archaeological survey was conducted in the villages of Kal A, Kal B, Pamwa and Lawmo of Palabek Kal Sub County. Palabek Gem was only visited for logistical arrangement, while Palabek Ogili was only viewed from a distance of about 100m and few photos taken as the traditional norms of the community towards the site could not allow access without spiritual cleansing. The survey involved pedestrian walks along cleared roadsides and spot checking ploughed gardens and borrow pits. Concentration was later put on Orom Rocks (Gogo) A and B as were pointed by local people as containing ancient settlements of the Palabek people. Much as the vegetation was too thick (Plate 1), deliberate efforts were made to scan the area for archaeological remains. In the end, 2 lithic (Stone Age) sites, 3 Pottery sites and 2 Stone Wall sites were documented. The Stone Walls were located in Pamwa and Orom West villages. All were said to have been settled and utilised by one of the early chiefs of Palabek.

Plate 1: Survey Team Member accessing Pamwa Site through thick Vegetation

Results

Site 1: Stone Age Site
Located in Pamwa village around the home of Mr. Oketayot on 36 N 0456119 UTM 0383401, elevation 933. It is characterised by grinding stones believed to have originated from the ancient times and has been continually used up to present. The raw materials for making the grinding stones is said to have been sourced from the surrounding mountains like Orom which is located close to Pamwa village. The grinding stones are mainly used for processing sorghum, millet, simsim, groundnuts and shear nuts, a technology that has continued up to present day (Plate 2).
Site 2: Pottery Sites

Three pottery sites were recorded; 1 in Pamwa village at 36 N 0456320 UTM 0384217, elevation 964m. and 2 in Orom, on the upper part of the mountain at 36 N 0456969 UTM 0384135, elevation 102m. The scatters in Pamwa are in a ploughed garden decorated in Plaited Grass Roulette (PGR), believed to be a later Iron Age potter that is still in production up to present day. In Orom, the two sites have huge deposits of potsherds in association with grinding stones and daubs, a probable indication of usage inside the house (Plate 3).
Plate 3: Pottery Scatters in Pamwa and Orom West: A- PGR from Pamwa Village; B- Grinding stone in association with pottery; C-In-situ mud wall in association with pottery and D-Huge scatters of pottery on the surface.

Site 3: Architectural Stone Walls

i. Pamwa Architectural Stone Walls

The site is located in Pamwa village on the flat top of mount Orom (Got Orom) at 36 N 0456476 UTM 0384251, elevation 993m. It is characterised by stone walls, with the highest visible point measuring 90cm high. The site is said to have been used by the Padwat clan as a fence of their settlements. The houses of the Chief (Rwot) and his subjects are also said to have been built inside the stone walls. Due to the thickness of vegetation, with tall grass over 6ft, the rest of the other parts of the wall could not be established (Plate 4).
ii. **Orom West Architectural Stone Walls**

The site is located on top of mount Orom in Orom West, Lamwo Parish. The stone wall is circular in shape with two gates in the north (36 N 0456983 UTM 0384146, elevation 1013m) and south (36 N 0456942 UTM 0384139, elevation 1012m), directly facing one another. The two gates measure 42cm high and 50cm in width and the highest visible point of the wall stands at 160cm tall. Inside the wall, lies huge deposits of potsherds, in association with grinding stones and daubs, suggesting human settlement. But just like the Pamwa site, the thick vegetation could not allow clear visibility and examination of the entire area around the wall. The stone wall is said to have been built by the Palabek people but the exact period when it was built is yet to be established through comprehensive interviews, archaeological survey and excavation (Plate 5).
Plate 5: Orom West Architectural Stone Wall: A-the height of the wall; B-crumbled part of the wall; C-northern gate and D-southern gate.

Discussion
From the data presented above, the following tentative patterns of ancient settlement, subsistence and land-use system in Palabek Kal can be deduced: 1). There is a closer link between human settlement and the mountains as evident by settlements on mount Orom and Ogili. The then Palabek people seemed to have preferred mountainous environments because of the fact that the population seems to have been small enough to be supported on the flat top of the mountains. Secondly, the mountain top could have also acted as a security device since one would be able to view all the surroundings from afar. The quartzite rocks from the mountain itself also provided good quality raw materials for the construction of the walls and manufacturing tools such as grinding stones and hunting traps.

2). The land-use system was divided into three main types; first, the settlement areas; secondly, the hunting grounds and thirdly, the fruit gathering grounds. Each clan is believed to have had
their own land with imaginary boundaries from their neighbours. But natural features such as rivers and mountains acted as natural boundaries.

3). From the brief observation and the few informants interviewed, Palabek was once forested with high population of animals such as antelopes, elephants, edible rats, buffalo, kobs, squirrels and wide variety of birds. These animals were widely hunted for food and hunting still continues to this date, though the extent has reduced. The forest also contained fruit and root trees such as figs (*owir*), shear (*yaa*), *acuga*, etc that the Palabek people subsisted on. At a certain period that is yet to be established, the people of Palabek are believed to have engaged in crop cultivation as one of the subsistence strategies to supplement game hunting. Crops like millet, sorghum, simsim and at a later stage groundnuts are said to have composed a great diet of the people of Palabek from the ancient time. These crops are still widely grown up to present. Grinding stones, and pottery recorded in Pamwa and Orom West during survey are evidence of food processing and preparation.

Therefore, human-environment interaction in Palabek Kal in the last 2000 years seems to have been interactive, with the environment supporting human settlements, land-use and subsistence and at the same humans in response probably valued more of environmental sustainability by forbidding some trees and animals from being cut and killed respectively. Up to date, Palabek/Acholi culture does not encourage cutting down shear trees, *kango* and killing of some animals like elephants. Currently, there is a bylaw in the entire Acholiland that encourages killing of anybody found cutting down shear tree.

**Conclusion**

The data recorded in this survey is preliminary with more emphasis on Palabek Kal. Palabek Gem was only visited for logistical arrangement and Palabek Ogili, said to have been the ancient settlements of the Luo as they “migrated” from Sudan could not be accessed because it required spiritual cleansing before it could be accessed. In a nutshell, archaeological survey in Palabek Kal has shone a dime light on the archaeological potential of Palabek in answering the question of the nature of human-environment interaction on the landscapes. Comprehensive oral interviews, survey and excavations is therefore needed in order to get a full picture of the project area.
Acknowledgement

Great thanks to the entire administration of Lamwo District Local Government for giving me a listening ear and allowing me access to the sites. Great thanks also go to Gerda Henkel, the sponsor of my PhD program, my supervisors and above all, Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR), for organising this prestigious Graduate Student Conference (GSC), and giving the chance to present my work.
References


