

Faith in public culture: Churches in post-conflict Northern Uganda

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Through an ethnographic study of Christian faith communities in post-conflict Northern Uganda, this study aims to find ways for conceptualising the relationship between Christianity and public culture. It draws inspiration from Englund (2011), who calls for detailed empirical research as a path for moving on towards more nuanced understandings of religion and politics. It is the contention of this study that understanding of the role of churches in Northern Ugandan, and more generally in African society, is essential also for a more general understanding of politics and development in Africa.

The preliminary research questions this study aims to answer include:

- 1. What public roles do Christian churches play in Northern Uganda?**
- 2. Why do churches engage –or refrain from engaging– in the public sphere in the ways they do?**
- 3. How is the legitimacy of churches' public roles negotiated in churches; in relation to Ugandan and Northern Ugandan society at large; and in relation to the national and global flows and networks to which churches belong?**

While this study aims to make an insightful contribution to theoretical academic debates about religion and politics in Africa and in post-conflict societies, it adopts a theoretically open-ended approach to the topic. Three strands of theoretical discussion will be weaved together with a rich body of ethnographic data so as to allow for analytical insight and the development of more penetrating research questions. These interlinked theoretical discussions can broadly be grouped under first, the study of African politics; second, anthropological and other social scientific studies of Christianity in Africa, and third, African political theology.

Previous high-quality research on Northern Uganda will assist in contextualising the current study. Much of the literature on conflict- and post-conflict Northern Uganda (including the researcher's MSocSc thesis) has focused on how external interventions have reduced the potential for meaningful political participation by Acholi citizens. Commencing from an alternative viewpoint, this research seeks to understand what may be *emerging* from the depoliticised landscape of post-conflict Northern Uganda. In focusing on the role of Christian churches in Northern Uganda, the study also aims to explore an aspect of Acholi society and of the Northern Ugandan conflict/post-conflict dynamic that has to date been largely overlooked in academic research. As this study takes the view that how churches relate to politics is in important ways connected to their theological self-understandings, this study is also, to some extent, an exploration in the ontology of faith communities.

The study will be based on 8 months' ethnographic fieldwork in Kitgum district in Northern Uganda. Through extended participant observation in the life of Christian congregations in the region, and interviews with relevant knowledgeable informants, the study seeks to provide "thick description" of the research topic. An initial mapping of the key institutions, processes, power dynamics and conflicts in the case study site will be followed by careful selection of certain institutions and/or processes for further in-depth analysis.

The study is supervised by Professor Jeremy Gould from the University of Jyväskylä and Professor Mika Vähäkangas from Lund University. Fieldwork will be carried out from August 2012 to April 2013, and the dissertation will be defended in 2015. Research expenses are covered by a variety of Finnish and Nordic funding sources.