

Connections to Sudan Felt in the Acholi Region of Uganda

In July 2023, I had the opportunity to join the Northern Uganda Farmers' Livelihood Improvement Project as a distribution expert for one month. My main responsibility in this project was to strengthen the vegetable marketing strategy for farmers based on the findings of the vegetable distribution research conducted in the previous phase of the project. Since my student days, I have visited several times in the dry areas along the middle and lower Nile river, including Egypt and Sudan. However, Uganda—rich in water and greenery, and home to Lake Victoria, the source of the Nile River—was an unfamiliar region for me, making it a new and exciting challenge.

As it was my first time working in the field, I visited vegetable markets and farmers in all project target districts of the Acholi sub-region. The landscape, with its rivers, wetlands, and lush green lands seen from the car window, felt like an entirely new world for me. Despite the unfamiliar geography and climate of the Acholi region, its food culture and the coexistence of diverse ethnic groups often reminded me of Kassala State in Eastern Sudan (Kassala), where I stayed as a Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer. In this paper, I would like to elaborate on the connections with Kassala, particularly in terms of staple foods and languages.

Firstly, this section explores staple foods. The Acholi, the main ethnic group in the region, migrated from the Nile Valley in present-day South Sudan around the 16th century and gradually spread. Traditionally, the Acholi have grown sorghum, finger millet and other grains as staple cereals, and their stiff porridge called “Karo” is commonly consumed in northern Uganda. In general, stiff porridge is widely consumed in sub-Saharan and East African regions. In Kassala, a stiff porridge made from sorghum and pearl millet, called “Asida” is also eaten. There are similarities between the ingredients used to make these stiff porridges and the staple food choices in both regions.

Cooking bananas (plantains/green bananas) are one of the staple foods in the Hausa communities in Kassala but are not a major staple in the Acholi region. Posho, a stiff porridge made from maize flour (similar to Ugali and Shima), is eaten in the Acholi region but was not seen in Kassala. The ingredients of stiff porridge is



Left: Acholi stiff porridge (Karo)
Right: Kassala stiff porridge (Asida)

likely to vary based on factors such as dietary preferences, precipitation and climatic conditions. Flatbreads and crepe-like breads, called “Gurasa” and “Kisra”, are eaten in Kassala, mainly by ethnic Arabs. In the Acholi region, chapati, a type of flatbread, is available, but it does not seem to be a staple food. The boundary between maize flour-based stiff porridge and bread may lie in this region.

Secondly, I sensed a subtle influence of Arab culture on the African continent. During my several-week stay in the Acholi region, I met a few Arabic speakers. Since the Acholi region is close to South Sudan, encountering people who speak the Sudanese colloquial Arabic dialect—widely spoken throughout Sudan—felt like an experience that reduced the psychological distance. Further conversation revealed that an Arabic Juba dialect exists in South Sudan, and in their view, the Sudanese dialect is recognized as being in the category of the Khartoum dialect. I did not expect to encounter a new area of Arabic in Uganda.

Although my stay was short, my perception of the Acholi region as a distant area upstream of the Nile has somewhat diminished. I now look forward to uncovering new connections on future visits.

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