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Not Yet Connected:

Anxieties of Rural Electrification

Kirsten Milo Nielsen

Introduction

In 2019 at a trading centre in northern Uganda which had been electrified through the national grid five years earlier, I was interviewing Onyango, a man in his mid-forties whose house was among those that had not yet been connected. Since I had already experienced the grid to be highly unreliable, causing difficulties for those who ran businesses reliant on the availability of electricity, I was trying to make a case for solar panels as an alternative. Onyango was a primary school teacher, but he and his wife ran a small restaurant on the side to make ends meet. They already owned a 100-watt solar panel for lighting and phone charging. When I asked if they had considered upgrading the solar panel instead of getting connected to the grid, Onyango answered that they would keep the solar panel as a backup and perhaps buy a bigger battery, but he still wanted to pursue grid connection.

The conversation continued like that for a little while – me arguing for solar and him arguing for the grid – until he finally contended: "The place is now developing. Why should I not be developed?" He had said this in a raised voice and was seemingly upset, so I feared that I had gone too far and what had been driven by an honest concern about the effects of the unreliable grid had turned into me directly questioning his choices and entitlement. Yet, recalling this conversation later allowed me to reflect on how infrastructure developments can generate anxieties in certain contexts.

In this article, I argue that Onyango's expression of anxiety during our conversation emerges from a broader experience of watching others hook up to the grid while his own prospects of connection looked less certain. It shows that energy vulnerability is deeply relational (Cross 2019) and pinned upon the promises of centralized infrastructures despite their unreliability, associated risks and the availability of alternatives, such as solar (PV) modules in this case.

Infrastructural Vulnerabilities in Northern Uganda

While infrastructures are usually associated with modernity, progress and the general improvement of life, anthropologists have noted how infrastructural development can contribute to the production of sites of vulnerability (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018). In Lalogi, a trading centre in northern Uganda with a population of around 1,300, people initially imagined that the availability of grid electricity, facilitated through Uganda's state-led rural electrification programme, would bring economic opportunities and make life easier. These hopes and imaginaries emerged in the aftermath of twenty years of violent conflict that ravaged the region from 1986 to 2006, and which left it with an "infrastructure deficit" compared to the rest of the country (UNDP 2015: 123). Similar to the ways in which anthropologists have described electrification's symbolic value in other contexts (Winther and Wilhite 2015), people in Lalogi saw the arrival of the grid as a sign of modernization, development and national inclusion. They envisaged opening businesses, being relieved of strenuous labour and getting access to better healthcare. However, what they actually received was a punctuated supply of electricity that only partially fulfilled these hopes and imaginaries. Caused by a self-reinforcing combination of infrastructural breakdowns and lack of maintenance, exacerbated by the economically precarious situation of the distributor (Nielsen and Eriksen 2022), power cuts came to be expected. But their occurrence and duration remained unpredictable, sometimes lasting for hours, at other times several days and even continuing for weeks on end.

One particular cause of unreliable electricity supply was so-called *pole magoro*[1] (Eng./Ach. for 'weak poles'). You did not have to travel far outside of the trading centre before encountering the first pole leaning dangerously over the road. The electricity cooperative blamed this on traditional farming practices, notably burning the fields after harvest, which would then ignite the wooden electricity poles. There were indeed poles along the line that were visibly burnt; however, locals claimed that it was due to wild bush fires, and that the practice of burning the fields in a controlled manner would in fact prevent such incidents. They instead complained that the state had erected poor-quality poles that put people in danger. As the owner of a convenience store remarked:

[1] The local language in Lalogi is Acholi Luo but many of my interlocutors were fluent in English. Thus, using English loanwords was common when speaking Acholi Luo.

"The poles that these people planted, they are very weak. They can anytime break and cause death because when the pole falls down when there is power in it, it can kill!" In early 2019, a stretch of the line fell and electrocuted a cow that was passing below. This was a sole incident, but nonetheless a clear sign of electricity's lethal potential.

↑ A broken electricity pole that has been provisionally repaired leans dangerously over a field.
Photo: Kirsten Milo Nielsen, 2019.

← A lineman working to replace a faulty electricity pole.
Photo: Kirsten Milo Nielsen, 2019.

During my fieldwork, I focused specifically on small-scale business owners, most of whom were young men. Electrification had paved the way for new types of work and business ventures in Lalogi, including welding workshops, printing and copying services, and electrified grinding machines. But their dependence on the grid made them vulnerable. When the power went off, business owners were forced to close their shops. Those who ran small restaurants were less dependent on electricity, but prolonged power cuts resulted in losses for them, too, when food stored in refrigerators or freezers turned bad. Unreliable electricity also made it difficult to plan new investments. As the owner of a casino – a room with two slot machines – told me: "I was thinking of starting another business here, but as I see the power is not constant it is affecting my plan." Electrification in Lalogi thus presents a case ripe with potential triggers of anxiety, from the overhanging danger of weak poles and wires to the uncertainty involved in running a small business in the context of unreliable electricity supply. Yet, it was during my interview with Onyango that I first witnessed the expression of anxiety as an embodied experience of distress and underlying worry about the future (Tyrer 1999) in relation to the electricity grid.

Pouring groundnuts into an electric grinding machine. Businesses in Lalogi that rely solely on grid electricity are vulnerable to power cuts. Photo: Kirsten Milo Nielsen, 2019.

Real Power versus Solar Power

The main barrier to getting connected in Lalogi is the price of wiring one's house. The exact cost depends on the size of the dwelling, the number of sockets and lightbulb holders, and the deal that one is able to strike with the electrician doing the wiring. In practice, this means that many low-income households are not connected even where the grid is available. In Lalogi, approximately half of the buildings were connected in 2019, without taking into account traditional huts that are also a common type of dwelling but which are not suitable for grid connection. Like Onyango and his family, many households and businesses without grid electricity used solar power, which became widely available and affordable in northern Uganda at around the same time as the grid was constructed. Those who had obtained grid connection used solar panels or diesel generators as backups when the grid went down, which enabled them to extend their hours with access to electricity.

Onyango was not interested in upgrading his solar panel as an alternative to pursuing grid connection. His view reflects the general attitude among people I spoke to in Lalogi, where connection was widely desired and grid electricity labelled "real power" - in comparison to solar panels and gadgets such as lamps and radios that were referred to simply as "solar". Among aid donors, NGOs and private companies, decentralized solar technologies have been promoted as a means for people in places like Lalogi to leapfrog into the post-fossil-fuel power future, simultaneously addressing uneven patterns of energy access and the demand for low-carbon energy transitions (Cross and Murray 2018; Ulsrud 2020). However, people in Lalogi saw solar first and foremost as an inferior, temporary solution only to be used as the primary source of electricity until they could afford to be hooked up to the grid. Their preference for grid electricity reflects Dean's (2022) ethnographic observations in Zanzibar. There, after the initial excitement about solar modules dissipated, solar power was viewed as "a stigmatized technology of the poor" and understood in terms of waiting, anticipation and exile (Dean 2022: 64).

Solar (PV) panels leaning against a telecom provider booth next to power lines forming part of the grid.
Photo: Kirsten Milo Nielsen, 2019.

A Sunny Money solar-powered lamp. Photo: Kirsten Milo Nielsen, 2019.

While electrification is always uneven, creating exclusion as well as connection (Cross 2019), it is striking that in a context where the infrastructure poses both danger and uncertainty for those running small businesses, and with alternatives such as solar modules widely available, grid connection is still highly desired. Based on the ethnographic example presented, I have demonstrated that here it is the experience of not being connected to the unreliable infrastructure and the uncertainty of whether one will be able to get connected in the future that generates anxiety, thereby underscoring the strong symbolic value attached to centralized infrastructures even when they do not work as intended.

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