Article

In and Out of Culture

Fieldwork in War-torn Uganda

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Abstract ■ This article aims at exemplifying war's violation of cosmologies as well as of people, and the ways in which experiences of war and violence are domesticated in cosmological terms as strategies of coping. I argue that the diverging experiences of the anthropologist, and of her/his assistants and informants, can fruitfully be communicated through an intercultural understanding of the conflict at issue, and of its local implications. Such a communication can provide us with a framework for dealing with the uncertainties of research in war.
Keywords ■ Acholi ■ lived experience ■ Lord's Resistance Movement/Army (LRM/A, LRA) ■ spirit possession ■ war trauma

A brief background: war in northern Uganda

To put it bluntly, war started in Acholiland in northern Uganda when Yoweri Museveni captured Kampala in 1986. Soldiers and supporters of the government fled northwards, pursued by the Museveni army. Ever since, rebel groups have been fighting the new government in various parts of the country, some of them with clear links to each other (see Finnström, 1999). Today the Kampala region is booming, and Uganda widely regarded as a 'success story' of structural adjustment and economic liberalization. Northern Uganda, however, is a theatre for armed conflict between the Ugandan government and a rebel group called the Lord's Resistance Movement/Army (LRM/A). People say that their area is lagging behind and only partly benefits from the development and alleged prosperity of the country. Indeed, donor agencies are reluctant to invest in the northern region because of the fighting and recurrent periods of insecurity. The Acholi of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts in northern Uganda seem to share a mistrust – created by this uneven development – with the LRM/A rebels. The criticism is outlined in a recent manifesto distributed by the rebels.

> LRM/A recognizes the importance of the World Bank and IMF Structural Adjustment Programs. However, we also recognize that these programs have concentrated on achieving low inflation and deregulating markets to the exclusion of other considerations. The resulting deflationary pressures have undermined prospects for economic recovery, compounding inequalities,

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> undermining the position of women, and failing to protect poor people's access to health and education services. They have contributed to high levels of unemployment and the erosion of social welfare provisions for the poor. Meanwhile market deregulation has brought few benefits for those excluded from markets by virtue of their poverty and lack of productive resources. (Lord's Resistance Movement/Army n.d.: 11)

The manifesto takes a critical stance against 'the New World Order', as it is described by the globalization sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 55–76).[1] Furthermore, the LRM/A claims to be fighting for multi-party politics, a key issue in contemporary Ugandan politics. Most government officials dismiss this and previous rebel manifestos as diaspora creations disconnected from Ugandan realities. However, regardless of the origin of the manifestos, it must be noted that the LRM/A rebels pinpoint the issues relevant to most people in northern Uganda. Despite a programme in accord with public sentiment, however, rebel military violence, devastatingly aimed at the non-fighting population, undermines their local support.

As a consequence of the conflict, large numbers of people have been displaced. Amnesty International (1999: 1, Internet printout pagination) estimates the total number of displaced in Acholiland – today divided into Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts – at some 400,000, or 50 percent of the Acholi population. Another report estimates that about 50,000 have 'fled the terror' in Kitgum and Pader districts, while 15,000 are 'spontaneously displaced' and 75,000 are 'involuntary displaced' in Gulu district (Gersony, 1997: 49; the figures account for the years of 1996 and 1997 only, when Kitgum and Pader districts were one district called Kitgum). Official figures presented to me in Gulu town in late 1997 suggested that 250,000 people are living in or in direct connection with displacement camps in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts. To a higher degree in Gulu district than in Kitgum and Pader, people have been forced to the camps by the Ugandan army. Another way of avoiding fighting is to *alup* – to hide and sleep in the bush or wilderness instead of staying in the village hut when the rebels or the Ugandan army arrive (see also Gersony, 1997: 48). People also walk to urban settings or trading centres, spend the night on some veranda or in a garden, only to return home during daytime. Others choose to remain in town. In periods of high tension, people do this regularly and in large numbers. Gulu town is today estimated to have more than 120,000 inhabitants, compared with some 40,000 before the conflict.

Life in a regional conflict complex

Tonny, 39 years old, is married to four women and has 23 children to care for. He has experienced postcolonial crises in Uganda since the days of Idi Amin (1971–9). Tonny's father passed away in the 1970s. When Amin decided to collect tax from all cattle owners in Uganda, Tonny – being the

only son – had to leave school to raise money in order to take care of his late father's herd. He managed to keep the cows, but eventually he was to experience the same thing as many fellow Acholi cattle owners in the mid- to late 1980s – the Ugandan army looted all his cattle. The mass-looting of cattle is one of the most painful experiences of the war, especially in the eyes of middle-aged and elderly Acholi. Like many others, Tonny argued that he had no other option but to enter the conflict as a collaborator of the rebels. For some years he assisted them with medical drugs and other necessities. In the early 1990s he left his rural area for Gulu town, and thus also broke with the rebels. I had been working with him during my 1997–8 stay in Uganda, and I was now lucky to find him willing to assist me in fieldwork in 1999–00.

During most of 1999 there was a lull in the fighting in northern Uganda. Most rebel units had withdrawn to their bases in southern Sudan. Only a few pockets of rebels remained. This intermission gave people new hope, although they still worried about the future as long as the conflict remained unsettled. It was now possible for Tonny and me to travel to remote places in rural areas. We visited ancestor sites, the ruins of Sir Samuel Baker's fort, numerous displacement camps, and Acholi royal tombs. We even went to a cattle auction in Agoro, the most northern part of Acholiland, bordering the Sudan. Dinka from Sudan came to sell cattle, and Acholi were selling radios, clothes and other stuff. Radios were exchanged for cattle. In contrast to previous auctions, the Dinka, in local eyes synonymous with the rebel group called Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), had left their guns on the Sudanese side of the border. Most of them, however, wore their rebel uniforms.

The Dinka visitors had walked for some 20 days with the cattle they had looted (or, as anthropologists more often put it, 'rustled') from 'the enemy'. In this case, the enemy was simply people who found themselves caught in between. Since they were not explicitly favouring the SPLM/A they had been accused of supporting the Sudanese government and thus turned into legitimate targets in a militarily motivated looting. This is not unique to political violence in Sudan or Uganda. One central dilemma of living with war and conflict, according to Acholi informants, is repeatedly to find oneself labelled 'supporter of the enemy'.

On the journey back from the auction Tonny and I passed the wreck of a lorry, carrying a destroyed anti-aircraft gun, that was left by the side of the road. We later learnt that it once belonged to the SPLM/A. Approximately a year before our visit, there was a period of heavy fighting in the Sudan and the SPLM/A rebels were pushed south by the Sudanese army. As they had many times before, they decided to regroup their forces on Ugandan territory. They entered through Kitgum district (Eastern Acholi), and eventually went back to the Sudan via Gulu district (Western Acholi). They were thereby in a position to counter-attack the Sudanese army from behind. The SPLM/A are often present in Uganda, as the government of

Uganda supports the SPLM/A. And the government of Sudan supports the LRM/A with military hardware and logistics.[2]

During their effort to regroup in northern Uganda, the SPLM/A lorry was ambushed by the LRM/A. This ambush was not like the arbitrary killings that Ugandan and international media most often write about when it comes to the conflict in northern Uganda. Rather, and as people I spoke to maintained, this wreck stood as a symbol of internationally orchestrated violence on a local scene. The area proved to be a regional war complex in which 'neighbouring countries experience internal or interstate conflicts' and where there are '*significant links between the conflicts*' (Wallensteen and Sollenberg, 1998: 623, italics added). Ugandan rebels with bases in the Sudan had attacked Sudanese rebels on a mission in Uganda.

Encountering the spirits of the dead

The memory of the ambush was still vivid among people in Kitgum district when we visited the scene more than one year later. The fighting had been fierce, and some 40 people had died. Bodies were abandoned to rot in the sun. For several months the smell in the area was unbearable, we were told. Still, skeletons and parts of skeletons were scattered on the ground.

Initially I saw the place as being like any historical war site. The sun was hot, the dry spell had made the surrounding bush dry and sterile, and the lorry had long since rusted. Shells, cases of fired ammunition and pieces of arms were spread in and around the lorry wreck. Everything was silent, and the LRM/A had not been in the area for several months. Yet I felt uncomfortable walking among the remains of unburied men and women. I knew that the unburied should not be left in the bush, according to Acholi beliefs. A temporary burial is requested until relatives or others can gather and conduct a proper one. Temporarily, some grass could be placed on the body, a gesture accompanied by a verbal declaration of innocence –'I was not the one who killed you'. This is expected to calm the spirit of the deceased, but could hardly have been accomplished at the scene of the ambush. Survivors had fled, and when the Ugandan army arrived together with SPLM/A reinforcements, the LRM/A had withdrawn. The Ugandan army then sealed the area for the time it took for the bodies to decompose. Carelessly, most bodies were thrown some few metres into the bush. It happens now and then that the Ugandan army leaves dead bodies to rot on purpose, as warnings, so that potential rebel supporters appreciate the dangers of opposing the government. Roads are frequently closed and the explanation given most often is that a 'rebel presence' has been reported in the area.

I noticed that Tonny shared my uneasiness. He wanted us to leave the wreck as soon as possible. He was annoyed when I picked up a rusty shell, and told me to drop it and immediately prepare to take off. I hurried to

take some snaps, and went back to the motorbike. Some miles further south we passed a group of SPLM/A rebels. Their army jeep had broken down, and some of them were resting in the shade under a tree, their weaponry unloaded on the roadside. Two of them worked on the dead engine. We felt uncomfortable but continued without troubles and we also slipped through the final roadblocks of the Uganda army – one of us being a *muno* (Westerner) – on the road to Kitgum town. The relative calm made the soldiers relaxed. SPLM/A rebels could pass freely as well, but vehicles carrying local people were stopped, and most often the travellers were forced to unload all their luggage in the Ugandan army's alleged search for rebel guns.

Later, as the fieldwork proceeded, I was able to understand Tonny's uneasiness at the site of the burnt lorry better. He took me to his old mother, a diviner and healer (*ajwaka*, plural: *ajwaki*) with a life-long experience of the spiritual world. She said that we had exposed ourselves to *cen* at the scene of the ambush. *Cen*, she explained, are the spirits of people who died violently. The late Okot p'Bitek (1980), an Acholi and anthropologist, translates *cen* as 'vengeance ghost' or sometimes 'ghostly vengeance'. So the scene of the ambush was a place of great unrest, inhabited by roaming spirits of the dead. According to Acholi beliefs, the spirit of a killed person might return to disturb its killer. If you have 'killed too many people', as Tonny put it, this will have a profound and malevolent influence on your behaviour. He used the metaphor of butchery: 'If you slaughter cows all day, you will end up dreaming about it.' In addition, the spirit of the one who died violently will also disturb the person who found the body. And someone who merely witnesses a killing can be subject to the same kind of disturbance. *Cen* can also decide whom to disturb, which does not necessarily have to be someone directly or even indirectly involved in violent actions. Nightmares and symptoms of what I would call 'trauma' will be the result. There is a quantitative dimension to this – the more *cen* you experience, the greater its effect. The result is that the exposed person will start behaving asocially, amorally, and eventually in violent and destructive ways. Yet, with the help of healers such problems can be solved. They are able to negotiate with, and eventually capture *cen*, and release the victim from its hold.

The healing session is a public event that involves the local community and relatives of the exposed victim. Apart from the healer (or healers) in charge of the divination and communication with the spirits, there will be a male drummer and an unspecified number of women singing various *jogi* songs (songs for the spirits). Clan elders are also consulted, and curious children gather to follow the session, which is not only one of individual healing but also a process of socialization in which the victim is incorporated and reconciled with the community of both living and dead. And the children gradually build up their own understanding of cosmology, morality, unlawful violence and healing. 'It may be supposed, indeed, that

attendance at [seances] has an important formative influence on the growth of witchcraft-beliefs in the minds of children, for children make a point of attending them and taking part in them as spectators and chorus,' Evans-Pritchard (1937: 154) once wrote with reference to the Azande. He continued: 'This is the first occasion on which they demonstrate their belief, and it is more dramatically and more publicly affirmed at these seances than in any other situations.'

Maybe my role as researcher made me a child in this context, because the Acholi cosmological explanation about *cen* and the possible and dangerous exposure at the scene of the ambush gave me, although initially an outsider, a framework to understand my own worries about staying and moving around in a war zone. As an anthropologist with a special interest in cosmology I found personal relief in collecting ethnographic data on *cen*. And I discovered that Tonny was most eager to assist me in this aspect of the research.

The escalating spiral of violence

Even though the healers handle violent death and its psycho-social consequences, it would be naive to suggest that Acholi people have no problem in interpreting contemporary war experiences through culture and cosmology. Children who have grown up among the rebels in the bush, for example, may not easily be receptive to the efforts of healers and other promoters of local moral worlds. Warfare in the past, as elderly men described it, was of a different kind, with clearly defined moral rules regarding the identity of enemies and allies.[3] In the past, a person recognized as foreigner and enemy ran the risk of being killed in an act called *kwero dano* (the killing of a person who you are not supposed to associate with, or, as one elder translated it, 'a traditional enemy'). To kill an enemy was a sign of bravery, and the killer was celebrated and honoured in a ritual (*lameleket*) that neutralized the unrest caused by *cen* or other spiritual forces.[4]

However, the identity of an enemy could only be defined by clan elders, by consensus, which led to the acknowledgement of a valid reason for warfare. The leader of the war party was thereafter blessed with *lapii* (sticks for making fire) in front of the clan ancestral shrine. Other fighters were given *laa* (general blessing by spitting) and *oboke olwedo* (leaves for any kind of blessing) by their elder relatives.

Joseph Kony, the leader of LRM/A and an Acholi by birth, claims to have *lapii* from the Acholi elders. According to one version, a certain Major Opiya of a previous rebel group in northern Uganda (the UPDM/A, Uganda People's Democratic Movement/Army) was blessed by his mother's brother, the then Chief Yona Odida of the Payira clan – one of Acholi's biggest and most influential clans. Major Opiya was blessed with *oboke olwedo* and *laa* but not with *lapii*. Yona Odida blessed Opiya as an uncle

is supposed to bless his nephew about to leave for any kind of mission or safari.[5] The blessing took place immediately after the fierce Corner Kilak battles in late 1986 and early 1987. More than 1,000 people from both sides died, and the rebels eventually withdrew, defeated by the Ugandan army (see Behrend, 1999: 79ff).

If rebel leaders sometimes exploit the authority of elders and local knowledge, the image of tradition is politically used by other actors as well. With only a vague and distorted understanding of *lapii*, government officials implicitly and explicitly blame the Acholi for being rebellious. Acholi elders are portrayed as promoters of war, and Acholi culture as primitive and violent. In this way the government promotes ethnicity as a central explanation of the conflict.

Most Acholi argue that the many people killed today are not armed enemies but fellow human beings. Clan elders argue that the killings are violations of any form of *lapii*, alleged or real. This is especially evident, Acholi elders say, when it comes to child abductees who, in their exposed situation, lack proper cultural guidance. According to an elder I frequently visited, the absence of correct guidance is the major threat to Acholi culture: 'I think these children in the bush are out of culture now.'

I have stressed that the increase in atrocities committed by the rebels since the beginning of the 1990s has alienated the rebel movement from the local population. But to separate cause from effect is not always an easy task. Many lack confidence in the Ugandan army as well, as its passivity and misconduct prevails. The discipline of the Ugandan army is deteriorating, and fatal shootings by soldiers at local discos, as well as night robberies and thuggery, have increased in the late 1990s. The violence committed against the civil population can also be related to local government officials' attempts to set up home guard troops and local defence units (LDUs) in the rural areas in the early 1990s. Even today, rural youth, as young as 10 years old, are recruited to the LDUs, especially the former rebel abductees, marginalized by civil society. As members of the LDUs they are offered a uniform, a powerful weapon and a small salary. Some are recruited by force. The LDUs operate in close cooperation with the Ugandan army and they are thus expected to confront the rebels.

The home guard troops in the early 1990s were poorly equipped. A compulsory order from the government's local representatives urged all men to carry *pangas*, spears, or bows and arrows, while every woman was forced to carry at least a knife. Around Gulu municipality, roadblocks were set up, and people who ignored the order were not allowed to pass. Sometimes the market in Gulu town was closed, and people were forced to join demonstrations and chant slogans against the rebels. As suggested by Richards (1998), people of such home guard units or forced demonstrations are turned into legitimate targets of rebel military violence (see also Behrend, 1998: 117; Gersony, 1997: 31).

Lived memories

After some days in Kitgum town, Tonny and I continued our ride back to Gulu, leaving the ambushed lorry and the SPLM/A jeep behind. In Gulu town we received the information that the LRM/A rebels had increased their presence all over Acholiland. More rebel units had crossed from the bases in southern Sudan. Tonny remarked and I copied in my notebook: 'When I hear this thing, I feel sick. Because I don't know how to dodge this war for another ten years. This will finish the whole of Acholi.'

Again, the war was a vivid aspect of life in Gulu town. Buses and lorries travelling north were often withheld by the authorities, and the Kampala buses were delayed every day at army roadblocks. The Gulu–Kitgum road was frequently closed. This development evoked memories of past experiences of war and violence among town people. Memories of previous rebel or army attacks were activated in people's minds when more recent incidents and clashes were reported from rural areas or the suburbs of Gulu town. Werbner writes with reference to collective as well as individual memories, that 'intractable traces of the past are felt on people's bodies, known in their landscapes, landmarks and souvenirs, and perceived as the tough moral fabric of their social relations – sometimes the stifling, utterly unwelcome fabric' (Werbner, 1998: 2f).

Memory may be expressed in ordinary conversations, like one occasion when I talked with my friend Komakech about the previous night's stormy weather. Komakech is an unmarried man in his mid-20s. One night during my 1997–8 stay in Gulu there was an unexpected thunderstorm. Quite naturally, when the noise woke me up, I first thought of rebels and fighting. My sleepy and distorted thinking was affected by interviews conducted the day before. For a few seconds, I was terrified, but I soon realized that it was nothing but thunder. However, the next day when Komakech and I were talking about the previous night's thunder, he told me he had been afraid all through the night. Komakech had soon realized that it was nothing but a thunderstorm. Yet his mind was assailed by the memory of his experiences of rebel violence, something that made him scared and upset. As Jackson's (1998: 171) phenomenological anthropology suggests, Komakech associated the storm with malevolent and uncontrolled outside influences. The thunder functioned as a metaphor for Komakech's troubled state of mind. He recalled an incident some years back when he was out of town doing petty trade. Rebels arrived, and Komakech immediately left everything and escaped the scene. He also recalled the more recent memory of rebels roaming around Gulu, even entering town to kill, abduct, steal and loot. During the night of the thunder he re-lived these past experiences, which made the night of the thunderstorm seem endless.

Although there were many differences in our respective experiences, they could be communicated through the thunder as metaphor. Both of us associated to violent experiences, only mine were few and more easily

discarded because they blended with rather nostalgic memories of bad weather back home. The example refers to lived experiences when the metaphor functions as an 'evoker' and mediator that effectively discloses and communicates the interdependence of body and mind, of self and world, in accordance with Jackson (1996: 9). Moreover, it provides a medium for interpersonal communication.

Looking for ways to share diverging experiences

In early 2000, rebels occasionally sneaked in to Gulu town during the dark hours. As before, shooting would wake people up in the middle of the night. Most mornings, when Tonny came to my place for a cup of coffee and some final planning of the coming day's work, he had gathered information about the rebels' presence in the near surroundings of Gulu town, or about ambushes along the roads. If we had heard shooting during the previous night, we tried to find out what had happened. During these 'coffee-breaks' we constantly revised our programmes and tried to refine our methods. The numerous bicycle repairmen along rural roads became our main sources of information regarding rebel movements. Their customers had often travelled far, and the repairmen's stands became the natural points where information was shared.

As time went by, and as my stay in the war zone made the dangers somewhat less surreal, it became important to handle my own anxiety in order to carry out fieldwork as planned. Behrend, an anthropologist who completed her research in war-torn Gulu some few years before my arrival, writes that researchers always can rely on their methodology as 'a favoured means of reducing anxiety' (Behrend, 1999: 8). Tonny and I became very close through discussions about methodology and gaps that needed to be filled in our material, as well as through the travelling together. His claim that I was his junior clan brother felt genuine and was important to me. And my ambition to include him within scholarly intersubjectivity was also genuine. After all – as Behrend puts it – 'one is not taking the path alone' (Behrend, 1999: 8).

To have a sense of control, fictive or real, eased my mind (and I imagine also Tonny's), and hard work from early morning to late afternoon gave us less time for brooding about what could possibly happen if everything went totally wrong. Still, in the end the only thing to do was to put our destinies in the 'hands of God', as Tonny put it. And, even though sceptical when it comes to God's involvement in my personal life, I neither agreed to nor contested his touch of fatalism. Yet he and other Acholi informants had offered me their knowledge about Acholi cosmology, and my anthropological obsession to bring order to my interpretations of this cosmology was also of a therapeutic character. I was able to domesticate my own worries and uncertainties about the war in terms of *cen* and other local concepts.

This article has attempted to show that the sharing of diverging experiences between anthropologist and informants – a kind of intercultural communication – might be a fruitful aspect in terms of psychological endurance of fieldwork in war. As a complement to the more conventional contextualization of a research focus in historical, cultural and socio-political terms, the sharing of experiences also works as a tool of intersubjectivity in the endeavour to represent and demystify the other. This is perhaps not very new. It is only another application of the old anthropological chant of 'participant observation' which, nevertheless, needs to be re-construed in the context of war and violent conflict.

Notes

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1 Bauman does not refer to Uganda in his book. But interestingly enough, he quotes rebels in Chiapas, Mexico (Bauman, 1998: 66) when he tries to put his finger on the frustrations in the 'periphery' regarding today's 'process of world-wide *restratification*' (Bauman, 1998: 70, italics in original) which seems to benefit the very few only.
2 In late 1999 the Carter Center facilitated a 'peace-deal' between Uganda and Sudan, signed by Presidents Museveni and El-Bashir respectively. The fourth paragraph reads as follows: 'We agree not to harbor, sponsor, or give military or logistical support to any rebel groups, opposition groups, or hostile elements from each others' territories.' Obviously, both governments neglect this paragraph.
3 Acholi society is a patrilineal clan society. Elected patrilineal clan elders are respectable persons in the community. They are called *ludito kaka* (*ladit* in singular which means elder; *kaka* is clan). The *ludito kaka* assist and guide the clan chiefs, the *rwodi moo* (*rwodi* is the plural of *rwot* which means chief; *moo* means oil). The *rwodi moo* are annointed heirs to the chieftaincy or hereditary (patrilineal) chiefs, of royal descent. They are annointed with shea nut oil as a sign of royalty and are not supposed to be personally involved in politics or blood affairs. Instead they send their councillors, the clan elders, on such missions.
4 It was believed that the killer and the spirit of the killed agreed to the act of killing as long as the ritual was properly conducted. In legitimate

war, most elders argued, ‘You must kill your enemy before he kills you’, and also your enemy would acknowledge this. Furthermore, some wild animals are defined in a similar manner and ought to be killed, for example lions, elephants and buffaloes. It is then called *kwero merok*, not *kwero dano* (literally *dano* means human being/person). This action, too, is to be celebrated and settled in a ritual similar to *lameleket*.

5 There is also a story of a certain Major Apia, also of the UPDA but different from Major Opiya, who died in the same area (Cwero) as Opiya did. Both are said to have died during the first half of 1987, adding to the confusion. But Opiya is the one who is said to have come with some few men from the fighting in Corner Kilak. Interesting to add, however, Major Apia commanded a unit called the Black Battalion in which Joseph Kony, the leader of the present LRM/A rebels, was a spiritual mobilizer.

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