WARS OF THE PAST AND WAR IN THE PRESENT: THE LORD'S RESISTANCE MOVEMENT/ARMY IN UGANDA

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In 1981 Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) launched a guerrilla war in central Uganda with the objective of replacing Milton Obote's second government. Museveni took up arms arguing that the 1980 elections that brought Obote back to power were rigged. Tito Okello, an army general from Acholiland, northern Uganda, ousted Obote and was head of state for a brief period before Museveni seized power in 1986. Within two years of Museveni's takeover, report Bond and Vincent (2002: 354), 27 different rebel groups were resisting the new government.

Only a few have remained over the years, most notably the Lord's Resistance Movement/Army (LRM/A) rebels. Especially affected by war is Acholiland (Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts) in northern Uganda, where I have conducted anthropological fieldwork for fifteen months, in four phases in 1997–8, 1999–2000, 2002 and 2005. The principal method was participant observation or, better, participant *reflection* (Finnström 2003: 23–35). I spent a great deal of time with a limited number of young adults, many of them displaced to Gulu town, where I was based, and throughout the research I had continuing conversations, rather than formal interviews, with them. These were supplemented by more formal conversations and interviews with other people as well, including older people and various officials. I also travelled extensively, visiting rural camps for internally displaced people.

The LRM/A, headed by Joseph Kony, can be said to be a successor to Alice Lakwena's well-known Holy Spirit Movement, but with time it has incorporated elements from other rebel factions as well (see Doom and Vlassenroot 1999; Finnström 2003, 2005; Van Acker 2004). The LRM/A rebels, with bases in southern Sudan, have resorted to terror warfare, and they have abducted several thousand minors (AI 1997; HRW 1997, 2003). In late 1999 the Ugandan parliament passed a blanket amnesty in an effort to end the war (see ARLPI 2002; RLP 2005b), but the government was later to request the International Criminal Court to intervene (see Allen 2005; Branch 2004; RLP 2005a). In October 2005 the court issued warrants of arrest for the rebel leadership, provoking rebel attacks on international NGOs and Western individuals. Fithen and Richards's note on the Revolutionary

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United Front (RUF) rebels in Sierra Leone also says something about the Ugandan rebels. 'Collapse into fatalistic violence and random killing is a development which might have been foreseen by opponents of the RUF,' they note, 'had they been less busy denying the movement's reasons to exist' (2005: 123).

I have delineated elsewhere the *political* and *historical* grievances behind the war, including the rebels' written manifestos (Finnström 2003; see also Branch 2005). Here I aim at exemplifying war's violation of the local moral world, and the ways in which non-combatant people's experiences of war and violence are domesticated in cosmological terms as strategies of coping. There has been a politicized and at times bitter debate in Uganda about whether or not the LRM/A has the elders' ceremonial warfare blessing. In sketching this debate, I will argue that it has become profoundly embedded in Acholi cosmology; I will not be presenting any conclusive evidence regarding the existence or non-existence of the act of blessing. The fact that the warfare blessing is a live issue is a consequence of the conflict, but it cannot be used as an explanatory model for the conflict's cause. And, obviously, the kind of lived consequence that I will describe is one dimension only of this complex and bitter war.

A warfare blessing cannot be regarded as the mere utterance of words. Rather, a blessing is *performed* within the framework of the local moral world, ideally in front of the ancestral shrines, and as such is not easily retracted. Informants often described the situation as one of 'bad surroundings', *piny marac* in Acholi, but this should not primarily be interpreted as though they are without agency, or that Acholi culture is doomed to ruin. Rather, when people described to me their life with 'bad surroundings', they defined a moral order against violence and atrocity. Their description was an effort to act upon the immediate surroundings, exemplifying the lived and thought creation and recreation of the cosmological order. In other words, in conceptualizing the wider surroundings of the living and the dead and of nature and culture as seriously bad, my informants attempted to comprehend existentially the phenomena of fratricidal violence and cultural and social breakdown. The outside world, however, has tended to blame the local culture.

My focus for this article finds motivation in Leopold's (2000) review of Behrend's analyses of the religious discourse of Alice Lakwena's and Joseph Kony's rebel movements (see notably Behrend 1999a). Leopold concludes the review by saying, 'It is unfortunate that more Acholi civilians were not interviewed to counterbalance the heroic discourse of the fighters themselves, an omission explained by the extraordinarily difficult circumstances in which Behrend had to work' (2000: 471). I hope that I can contribute to filling this gap. The article therefore addresses the more profound consequences of war not in terms of statistics of casualties or rape and torture victims, some of the most final costs of human destruction, but in terms of the war's impact on Acholi cosmology. To be able to comprehend what is going on, people engage their cosmology. But cosmology is not only something from the

past. It is in constant flux, and, more often than we tend to admit, its categories are under stress (Appadurai, 1998: 911). Cosmology, Kapferer suggests, is 'a process whereby events, objects and practices are brought into a compositional unity, are conceived and patterned as existing together, and are in mutual relation' (2002: 20). From this perspective, as Kapferer points out, cosmology is a process of ever-ongoing social contest and human creativity.

After providing a background, I will relate tales of wars in the past to experiences of violent death and war in the present. I will then proceed to interpret the possible warfare blessing – which some informants interpreted as having turned into a curse on Acholiland – as a critical event that benefits from further deliberation. A brief conclusion will emphasize the importance of not using the material at issue here in implicit or explicit efforts to represent war-torn social realities as ethnic and homogeneous, with their meaning set once and for all. For in acknowledging that meanings, even truths, are heterogeneous, specific and contextual, we may be less likely to distort and fix local realities, more alert to those everyday openings and intellectual resources that ordinary people invoke in the effort to change the lived surroundings for the better.

DIMENSIONS OF WAR

Young adult informants differentiated between two dimensions of armed resistance in northern Uganda: the initial, politically motivated insurgency groups and the spiritually motivated groups that emerged slightly later, like Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Forces. The first dimension of the resistance they called 'the army of the earth' (*mony me ngom*) and the second 'the army of the heaven' (*mony me polo*). Allen (1991) and Behrend (1991, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b) have delineated the religious and cosmological aspects of the rebel movements in northern Uganda, while Lamwaka (1998, 2000, 2002) has written the most informed accounts on the politically motivated rebel factions, such as the Uganda People's Democratic Movement/Army (UPDM/A). Nyeko and Lucima (2002) have provided brief profiles of the parties to the conflict, and Onyango-Odongo (1998) has written background to the conflict from a local historian's viewpoint.

There are basically two strands in the virulent debate about the origin of the conflict. One claims that people from northern Uganda initiated the rebellion in an effort to regain the state power they lost when Museveni captured Kampala (see, for example, Gersony 1997: 14). To put it bluntly, two governments led by Ugandans from the north (Obote was from Lango, and Okello was an Acholi) followed in the wake of Amin (of Kakwa origin, from the West Nile region in north-western Uganda). With Museveni's takeover, the presidency was handed over to a Ugandan from the south (Museveni is a Munyankole), and this, it has been suggested, people from the north simply could not accept (see, for example, Ottemoeller 1998).

A complementary and more contextual version pinpoints the realities on the ground in northern Uganda. 'What the opposition groups in the

north and east of the country have in common is not ethnic identity or cultural traditions', the Ugandan historian Omara-Otunnu notes, 'but a history of being only peripherally included in the economic structures and processes of the country' (1995: 230). Soon after the Museveni and NRM/A takeover, killings, rape and other forms of physical abuse aimed at non-combatants became the order of the day in Acholiland, which was foreign territory to the NRM/A soldiers (see, for example, testimonies in Oywa 1995; see also Otunnu 2002; Pirouet 1991). Thousands of suspected rebels were taken into detention. Torture and maltreatment were common, and Amnesty International concluded that 'there has been a consistent pattern of extrajudicial executions by soldiers since the NRM came to power' (1992: 29–30). Many informants claimed, not just rhetorically, that a situation worse than that of the Amin era had developed. An additional experience of the war, the mass looting of cattle, was especially painful in the eyes of middle-aged and elderly Acholi, and elders and other influential members of Acholi society were eventually to be instrumental in the increased recruitment of young people to rebel ranks. Others did not explicitly support the uprising, but according to a standard version I often encountered, informants claimed that they saw no other way of surviving than to join the insurgency groups in one way or another (see also Branch 2005; Brett 1995: 146–50; Onyango-Odongo 1998).

The evolving war has caused an enormous humanitarian catastrophe in northern Uganda. In late 2005, about 90 per cent of the Acholi people, and more than 1.5 million of the total population in northern Uganda, were internally displaced. They live in a chronic state of emergency, as highlighted by a growing bulk of reports (see, for example, ARLPI 2001; CSOPNU 2004; HURIPEC 2003). It has been an intrinsic part of the Ugandan army's counterinsurgency warfare to clear the countryside and concentrate civilians in camps (Finnström 2003: Chapter 5; Dolan 2005). And in this regional war of proxies, the Sudanese government has until recently supported the LRM/A, while the Ugandan government throughout the years has supported the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in Sudan. Since the 2005 peace deal between the SPLM/A and the Sudanese government, the common enemy is now global terrorism and the LRM/A.

COPING WITH VIOLENCE

The Acholi 'have no sultans ... of any consequence', claimed the explorer Speke (1863: 575), one of the first European visitors to present-day northern Uganda. The Acholi soon came to suffer under the racist imperial authority that decentralized clan societies had to obey. In the words of Postlethwaite, a pioneer colonial administrator to the area, Acholi took 'to soldiering like ducks to water' (1947: 71). Postlethwaite confirmed the conclusion made by Grove in one of the first systematic ethnographic descriptions of the Acholi. As Grove wrote, 'War was the constant occupation of the Acholi before the Government took over

their country and usually took the form of night raids on other villages'
(1919: 163). Sometimes, Grove added, 'war was raised however on a
more formal scale', but the reader is left in ignorance as to what he really
meant by the word 'war'. As the First World War started, Postlethwaite
recruited the alleged Acholi warriors to the King's African Rifles.

Missionary accounts supported the image of the Acholi as lacking
proper leadership but still potentially suitable for recruitment to the
armed forces. 'On the whole one would call them a fine race physically,
but not warlike. Probably if they had a leader, they would make a fighting
tribe,' the Anglican missionary Lloyd wrote in 1904 (reprinted in Lloyd
1948: 84). A few years later and in a somewhat harsher tone, Lloyd
again regretted that no centralized authority seemed to exist to govern
the 'warlike instincts' of this potential 'fighting race' (1907: 211).

As the irony of history had it, the colonized subjects, rather than
the oppressive colonialists, were labelled as warlike. In time, Acholi
society was to become the stereotypical and primitive other (Finnström
2003: Chapter 2), though people from north-western Uganda, Idi
Amin's home region, also came to suffer under this historical 'curse', as
Leopold (2005) has shown. The legacy of ethnic divisions along these
north–south lines has been prominently manifested in Uganda's post-
colonial politics (Vincent 1999: 109–10; Finnström 2003: Chapter 3). It
is still common today for people in central Uganda to regard people from
northern Uganda as backward, primitive and warlike. The present war,
obviously, adds to this curse from the past. James Kazini, a non-Acholi
and long-time member of the Ugandan army's high command, illus-
trated this tendency when he blamed all military violence on the Acholi.
'If anything, it is local Acholi soldiers causing the problems. It's the cul-
tural background of the people here: they are very violent. It's genetic,'
he claimed in an interview with Human Rights Watch (1997: 59).

Today, healers and other arbitrators of the Acholi moral world do
their best to handle the psychosocial consequences of war and violent
death. *Cen*, for example, is the spiritual power of people who have
died violently. p'Bitek translates *cen* as 'vengeance ghost' or sometimes
'ghostly vengeance' (1971). Odoki uses the term 'troublesome spirit'
(1997: 40), and Behrend describes it as spirits of people who 'had
died by violence or abroad and received no decent burial and thus,
thirsting for vengeance, sought to afflict their relatives with disease
and misfortune' (1999a: 108–9). In other words, such a spirit force
might return to disturb its killer. It will also disturb the person who
merely found the body of a killed person. People who witness or
otherwise experience the violence of war can be disturbed, with recurring
nightmares and other daily flashbacks that assail their memories. Thus
there is a continuous and destructive challenge to quotidian life. There
is a quantitative dimension to this phenomenon: the more *cen* a person
experiences, the greater its effect. The result is that the person exposed
to it will start behaving asocially, amorally, and eventually in violent and
destructive ways. Perhaps, if a term from Western psychiatry is used,
one can talk about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – always
articulated, however, in the terminology of the local moral world.

Ghostly vengeance will also expand socially, in space and time, and to other people. '*Cen* will not only haunt the killer', my friend Anthony Odiya-Labol explained, 'but the whole clan, for generations. Children produced will be sick, even insane.' Yet with the help of healers (*ajwaki*; singular *ajwaka*) such problems can be solved. They are able to negotiate with and eventually capture *cen* and release the victim from its hold (Finnström 2001). Through ritual practice, the traumatic memory is 'made real' (Young 1995: 8).

Behrend writes that Alice Lakwena, in her warfare mission, preached a wide understanding of *cen*, now generously defined as 'the spirits of enemies killed in war'. She writes:

> While the purification from witchcraft and sorcery followed Christian models by burning the magic charms and by sprinkling and immersing water, i.e. baptism, the elimination of *cen* was a new invention. Running through, chopping up, and burning the clay figures [of enemy soldiers] follows a logic that reflects killing with rifle, *panga*, and fire. The weapons used to kill the original owner of the *cen* were now used to eliminate *cen*, which were killed three times and thus removed once and for all. (Behrend 1999a: 45)

Alice Lakwena was thus able to perform what the elders had failed to achieve, continues Behrend, a purification of the deeds committed by Acholi soldiers in the recent past in central Uganda, notably in the counterinsurgency war against Museveni's guerrillas. Alice Lakwena therefore gained great initial support, Behrend concludes. Most of my young informants, though, who were teenagers at the time Alice Lakwena was leading an insurgency, held that people joined her, and later on Joseph Kony, because, as one young man claimed, they were there as 'means of fighting' when there was 'no one else to join'. My informants remained sceptical about the issue of spiritual purification as the main driving force. Omara-Otunnu proposes a similar conclusion. 'Lakwena was merely a vehicle through which social discontent in the north of Uganda found expression,' he writes. 'She was able to gain tenacious followers who were prepared to risk their lives against all odds because a cross-section of marginalized inhabitants recognized her as a symbol of both their plight and their aspirations' (Omara-Otunnu 1992: 458).

WARS OF THE PAST AND WAR IN THE PRESENT

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that Acholi people have no problem in existentially comprehending the war. The present war, fought with helicopter gunships, tanks, armoured vehicles, machine-guns and landmines, with so many unidentified killers, and with military strategies of mass abduction of minors, the burning of villages, forced mass-displacement, looting of cattle, destruction of crops, and the rape of civilians in a systematic manner, is of course something new to Acholi society. Obviously, the practice of war grossly abuses the non-war moral order. Warfare in the past, as older men and women described it from the tales, was of a different kind, with clearly defined moral rules

regarding the identity of enemies and allies. Women and children could never be legitimate enemy soldiers and consequently were not to be killed at all, though they could be captured and eventually absorbed into a new social setting. In the words of Ladit Arweny, an old man whose home I frequented, 'If a woman displays her breasts, or if she carries a child, she cannot be killed. She can only be collected as a captive, but she is not to be hurt.'

Control of the labour of women and children is a common and cruel form of asset transfer in civil wars in Africa and elsewhere (Turshen 2001). In this respect, the war in northern Uganda is not that different from the tales elders told me of inter-clan feuds and inter-ethnic fighting. In both instances, women and children have been abducted. Today, however, the number of abductions has reached unprecedented levels, and children and women are frequently killed.

These days children and women wear uniforms, carry guns and participate in the war, which makes them legitimate targets of military violence. This is how people explained to me the phenomenon of female fighters. 'These are called modern women. That is another thing,' Ladit Arweny told me as he made a comparison with the non-war moral order. As was common among my informants, he hesitated, however, to conclude that children too could be modern in this sense of the word.

The level of violence today was indeed shocking to most informants. In discussing the high levels of unlawful violence, Ladit Arweny compared the situation in northern Uganda with that of war-torn southern Sudan. During our conversation, I happened to refer to Sharon Hutchinson and Jok Madut Jok's writings on the war in southern Sudan, where, as in northern Uganda, women and children have long been regarded as mobile assets, to be kidnapped against their will. Yet they were never to be killed intentionally. In recent years, however, women and children have become direct targets of military violence (Hutchinson and Jok, 2002: 99). I recounted Hutchinson and Jok's conclusions on the fratricidal violence, in which they bring up the case of Nuer rebel commander Riek Machar who defected to the government side (see Hutchinson 1998, 2001: 314–15; Hutchinson and Jok 2002: 98). Briefly, Machar launched a campaign to persuade his fellow Nuer soldiers that they were free to kill, as enemies, any Nuer (or other southern Sudanese) they happened to encounter. Machar argued that they were fighting a 'government war' in which killings are devoid of social and spiritual risks otherwise generated by intra-ethnic killings. In Hutchinson's words:

> What the Commander was seeking to secure with this revolutionary pronouncement was more than the unquestioning obedience of his troops to kill upon command. Certainly, he, like other southern military leaders, was intent on undermining, if not destroying, any mediating structures standing between himself and the loyalty of his troops, including, when necessary, bonds of family, kin, and community. (Hutchinson 1998: 58–9)

Arweny found the comparison illustrative also for the Acholi situation. Like most of my informants, he acknowledged the difference between

a government war (in Acholi: *lweny pa gamente*) and an inter-clan war (*lweny kaka*). The LRM/A commanders, as is clear from their written statements, use a rhetoric similar to Machar's to motivate their fighters. In its most militant form, such rhetoric obviously clashes with the local moral world.

Even if fratricide is common, the rebels seldom regard their violent practices in such terms. Child rebels are instead encouraged, even forced, to kill adult people. Villagers will naturally beg for their lives when child rebels, who occasionally are even known to them by name and origin, arrive in the homesteads. In an effort to evoke loyalties based on kinship, people commonly plead, 'Oh, my child, do not kill me.' Sometimes the child soldiers persist in their deeds, angered by the plea of relatedness. 'You are not my parents,' they tell the villagers. Still, non-combatant informants were sceptical about Machar's claim to his fellow Nuer that some killings were devoid of any wider, ghostly menace. 'It would be good for Machar to drink the bitter root instead,' that is, to settle and reconcile the unnatural deaths ritually, I was told. Informants also sympathized with those who refused Machar's argument about a government war, instead emphasizing the relatedness between the peoples of south Sudan. 'In other words, soldiers were right in refusing to go and kill [the late John] Garang and his [Dinka] people. They will kill Machar instead, and that will be justified,' Ladit Arweny proposed.

In the past, I was told, a person recognized as a foreigner and enemy ran the risk of being killed in an act called *kwero dano*, the killing of a person you are not supposed to associate with, or, as one elder translated it, 'a traditional enemy'. In legitimate war, most people argued, 'You must kill your enemy before he kills you.' The killed enemy would also acknowledge this, which made ritual redress of the killing possible. To kill an enemy was a sign of bravery, and the killer was celebrated and honoured in a ritual called *lameleket* that neutralized the unrest that followed the killing (see also Girling 1960: 103; Behrend 1999a: 42). Some wild animals – lions, elephants and buffaloes, for example – are defined in a similar manner and ought to be killed; this is called *kwero merok*, not *kwero dano* (*dano* means human being/person). This action too was to be celebrated and settled in a ritual similar to *lameleket*. But to be allowed to go through this ritual retraction, the killer needed to present the mediating elders with convincing evidence for every single killing. Obviously, today this is not easily achieved. In the heat of the battle, how can the source of the deadly bullet possibly be traced? Who laid the landmine? 'What to do? You just cry and then you stop, because there is no evidence,' as one old man said.

IDENTIFYING THE ENEMY WITH THE STICKS OF FIRE

In the past, I was told, the identity of an enemy could only be defined by clan elders in consensus, which led to the acknowledgement of a valid reason for warfare (see also Girling 1960: 104; Behrend 1999a:

39). After this, the leader of the war party was presented with *lapii*, the sticks for making fire, and the war party was summoned and blessed in front of the clan ancestral shrine. The fire-sticks are the symbol of legitimate authority (Crazzolara 1951: 242, 272; Girling 1960: 105; Säfholm 1973: 64). The fighters were also presented with branches of the *oboke olwedo* tree, which is used as a general kind of blessing in Acholi society. And individual elders presented their sons with *laa*, a general blessing of spittle. As the war party is blessed, the enemy is cursed (p'Bitek 1971: 151–3).

Like most people – although we do not all conceptualize our well-wishing as ritual or ceremony – the Acholi perform various kinds of blessings on a daily basis. During fieldwork I met with an old man, Ladit Peter Oola, once a well-known politician in Uganda. He had worked with the district council in the twilight of colonial rule, and on the eve of independence he was among those who initiated the branch of the Uganda People's Congress party in northern Uganda. To recruit followers, he set out on a safari through Acholiland with a bicycle, claiming that he covered some 800 miles or almost 1,300 kilometres of rural roads. Everywhere he went he was quite an attraction. Newborn children were named after him and elders along the roads blessed his mission with the *oboke olwedo* leaves and ritual spitting (*laa*). In another example of blessing, collective hunting, to be successful, always had to be blessed properly. The rightful owner of the hunting grounds blessed the hunting party with *oboke olwedo* leaves. The blessing took place in front of his ancestral shrine (Usher-Wilson 1947: 30–1). In these cases, fire-sticks would not be presented. People told me, however, that if, for example, a roaming lion had killed livestock or people, the expedition sent out to kill the lion was presented with *lapii*.

Joseph Kony, the leader of LRM/A, claims that he received the blessing to fight Museveni's government from his elders (see also testimonies in PVP n.d.: Chapter 3). According to Behrend (1999a: 39), Alice Lakwena, too, claimed to have *lapii*. Here I will limit the discussion to trying to track Kony's claim. According to one version, the then chief Yona Odida of the influential Payira aristocratic clan blessed his nephew, a certain Major Opiya of the Uganda People's Democratic Movement/Army (UPDM/A), the initial 'army of the earth' that mounted resistance to Museveni in the north. Major Opiya was presented with the branches of the *oboke olwedo* tree and spittle (*laa*) but most likely not with the fire-sticks (*lapii*). Chief Odida blessed Major Opiya as an uncle is supposed to bless a nephew about to leave on any kind of mission or safari (see p'Bitek 1971: 146). The blessing took place immediately after the fierce Corner Kilak battles in late 1986 and early 1987. More than a thousand people from both sides died and the rebels eventually withdrew, defeated by the Ugandan army (see Behrend 1999a: 79–81).

Thus, even if blessings were offered to the rebels, as is suggested by the above version, the rebels were not presented with the fire-sticks, and they were thus not given the proper warfare go-ahead legitimized by any collective Acholi leadership. Today the issue of the warfare blessing

of the LRM/A leader Joseph Kony is highly contested. In 1987 Kony
was a spiritual adviser to the UPDM/A rebels, but it is not clear if he
was present when Major Opiya met with chief Odida (Finnström 2001:
257, note 5). Perhaps the present chief of the Payira clan (the grandson
of the man alleged to have been the one who offered the blessing)
provided me with the most likely version:

> Whereas it is true that some of the [rebel] fighters had sent the late Ogoni [of
> the Payira clan] to go and convince Rwot [Chief] Yona Odida to give them
> that blessing, because they were at Cwero at the same area where the Rwot
> was, he told Ogoni to tell the fighters to hold on because it [was] a complex
> matter which would require him to summon clan elders; of which he never
> did until his death in July 1987.... (Rwot David Onen Acana II, July 2000)

It seems that the rebels also agree with this version. In the 1993–4
peace talks, the LRM/A field commander at that time, Komakech
Omona George, claimed that Acholi elders had presented them with
the *oboke olwedo* twigs as a blessing. But when it came to the clearance
for warfare, the sticks for making fire (*lapii*), collectively declared by
Acholi clan leaders, the LRM/A commander was vague. 'Our *lapii* is
God,' he claimed instead, as documented on video. The peace talks
eventually failed and in 1996, when elders tried to initiate new talks,
the rebels killed the two emissaries who went to meet them in the bush.
One of the elders who was killed, Okot Ogoni, had been involved in
the 1987 effort to present the rebels with a proper warfare blessing.
The second victim was Olanya Lagony, a close relative of the LRM/A's
then second-in-command, Otti Lagony. They were killed, informants
suggested, because they disputed the *lapii* of the rebels (see also Angoma
2005: 19).

When discussing the matter with me, Acholi elders stated that
a warfare blessing is a very serious matter that cannot easily be
removed. Often my older informants compared the situation in war-
torn Acholiland with the predicament of the Palestinian people, or with
the Iranian fatwah on Salman Rushdie. These cases must indeed be
the consequence of the Jewish and Muslim versions of *lapii*, elders
hypothesized, because there seems to be no solution at hand at all. The
enmity is too strong and too deeply rooted.

In other words, it seems as though the alleged blessing has turned
against the Acholi as escalating violence and growing mistrust intensify
war in Acholiland. In Acholi thought, powers to heal are also potential
powers to harm, depending on shifting contexts. Indeed, as p'Bitek
(1971: 146) suggests, the blessing is one side of the famous coin, of
which the other is the curse. Most Acholi informants argued that the
many people being killed today are not armed enemies but fellow human
beings. And clan elders also argued emphatically that the many deaths
in Acholiland are violations of any form of blessing, alleged or real,
sanctioned by elders and the ancestors. This is especially evident, older
people said, when it comes to child abductees who, in their exposed
situation, lack proper guidance.

Yet Joseph Kony and other senior rebels claim that the Acholi population have themselves to blame, after a prominent elder in Gulu town allegedly turned the blessing into a curse by ritually displaying his penis while condemning the rebels. His wife is alleged to have displayed her breasts. By these acts, they were asking how the rebels could turn against the parents who had once brought them into life. Imagined kinship was made most real. This older man is alleged to have voiced his frustrations over the increase in violence directed at the civilian population, saying, 'If these children who are in the bush originate from my penis, I curse them' (see also Dolan 2005: 110).

As p'Bitek (1971: 149–50) notes, this is the gravest curse known to the Acholi. As with the warfare blessing, it cannot be retracted easily. Even if it had not been made in this particular instance – something that was contested by many informants – the mere rumours of the curse may well have encouraged the rebels to increase their violence against elders, healers and other arbitrators of Acholi cosmology. With reference to the incident, rebel commander Matata demanded that the elders who intended to mediate in the peace effort in 1993–4, must 'go and cleanse' before rebel leader Joseph Kony would arrive and the talks could be started. 'You are, because I am,' the rebel commander stressed with a touch of vagueness to the elders, as archival video material shows. Still, the message was clear. The elders should not deny the rebels as Peter did with Jesus. They were commanded to acknowledge their involvement in the war, and also to take the issue of *lapii* seriously. Senior rebels were also annoyed by the fact that a prominent Acholi general and former Ugandan President, Tito Okello, had publicly 'talked bitterly' about the rebels in 1993, although he had initially encouraged people to join the armed struggle against Museveni. The rebels were also bitter over the fact that some elders had joined the government in promoting local defence groups, armed with bows and arrows (Finnström 2003: 126–7; Dolan 2005: 36, 110; O'Kadameri 2002).

'THEY LIT THE CANDLE, BUT THEN LEFT FOR LONDON'

More recently Joseph Kony voiced a similar argument when he called a local radio station in northern Uganda. His argument, aired on the radio, is summarized in an unpublished report:

> Kony one day gave this proverb during a Radio Talk show over Radio FM Mega station about a lion and a passerby. It was raining and a young man decides to take shelter in an abandoned hut. Then suddenly, a lion enters the same hut to take shelter and lies at the door step facing outside. The young man had no choice, but to grab the lion's tail and both started to struggle almost the whole day. Fortunately another passerby came around. The young man kindly asked for help since he was already tired. He then handed over the lion's tail to the passerby while he goes to call the villagers to come and kill the lion. Unfortunately the young man went to the village and has never come back. Even the villagers are nowhere to be seen.

The report then proceeds to explain:

Kony considers himself in this conflict as a passerby who has been handed over the lion's tail. He was not the one who started the war. So any strategy in search for a negotiated settlement of the conflict should take cognition of Kony's dilemma. (Omona 2005: 23)

During my fieldwork, young informants in Gulu town took a similar stand, but obviously from a different, non-combatant position. Disappointed with senior politicians and the older generation who had once encouraged young people to join the war against Museveni, a young unmarried male teacher regarded Tito Okello as a sad but typical example of 'the veranda elders' (see also PVP n.d.: 45). In a public speech in Gulu town, the teacher, recalling that an aging Tito Okello blamed young army officers for the violence during the war in central Uganda, asked, 'Now, don't you think that the elders also made the mistakes?' My friend Jimmy Otim, a young man, agreed:

I think Tito's case is one of the ugliest cases I have ever noted. It is one of the most common historical blunders that most of these African leaders make under the pretext of being elders and aged. There is that over-assumption, that an elder knows everything. An elder just knows everything, and whatever he will say, he is final. Whatever becomes a mistake, be it coincidental or a planned mistake, the elders are the very first to blame the young generation about the result which was negative. And that has been some part of politics of Uganda. If you look at the politics from Obote's coming to Tito, the youths were mainly used as objects to destabilize political space. For example, there was the formation of youth wingers, like the UPC [Uganda People's Congress of Milton Obote] youth wing. So, the youths at that time also took things for granted. Still, that was the result of what the elders educated them about. You see? So they would misbehave. But the misbehaviour of these youths during Tito and Obote's time is a result of the leaders themselves, the elders themselves. It was a failure, and the elders are the very first to say, 'Ah, it is your failure.' They never see who cultivated this failure. This has been the major mistake in Ugandan politics. The youths are used, highly used, and because they are poor, they are inadequate, they don't have the resources, so they are easily manipulated. . . . Elders capture power all the time, and they make use of youth in many ways, but all the time not for positive aspects; all the time for something that causes friction in society, social friction in society. (Gulu town, May 2000)

'And this one even caused ethnic conflicts,' Jimmy concluded, again with reference to Tito Okello's military takeover in 1985, 'But it was his failure. What can you do with youth who are hungry and poor?'

Most older informants refuted the idea that any general blessing of war (*lapii*) had been given in the form of the necessary ritual address in front of the ancestral shrines. The elder accused of cursing the rebels equally denied that he ever did so. Still, these events cannot be from the collective memory, and some informants' concern about the matter was profound indeed. Accordingly, the seriousness that older people, especially, attributed to the binding force of the alleged warfare blessing manifests their existential uncertainty and a deeper crisis that may not be immediately comprehensible to an outsider. Even if I was not able to

establish whether the blessing or the curse had actually been performed, I will discuss the issue as a 'critical event' (Das 1995) that benefits from further deliberation.

With reference to politically volatile India, Das describes the consequences of critical events:

> This is that, after the events of which I speak, new modes of action came into being which redefined traditional categories such as codes of purity and honour, the meaning of martyrdom, and the construction of a heroic life. Equally, new forms were acquired by a variety of political actors, such as caste groups, religious communities, women's groups, and the nation as a whole. (Das 1995: 6)

Das mentions the French revolution as a most notable example of a critical event. Likewise, on this general level, the war in northern Uganda is very much a critical event. However, Das's ambition is more humble, as she wishes also to investigate the events that force people to rethink and re-conceptualize life, relations, politics and cultural belonging on a daily basis. An event always involves some kind of crisis as it interrupts routine processes and procedures (Arendt 1970: 7–8). To be able to comprehend what is going on, people engage their cosmology. The issue of the blessing and the curse is a painful ethnographic illustration of war entering not only people's lives but also the wider surroundings and the cosmology.

The classic anthropological discussion of religion and magic may illuminate the complexity of the matter. In his discussion on the power of the 'magic word', Tambiah (1990) draws on the philosopher John Austin's well-known claim that *saying is doing*. Tambiah takes the example of marriage vows. By quoting Malinowski, he links Austin's claim to ethnography:

> Pointing to marriage vows Malinowski said that whether they were treated as sacrament or as mere legal contract, they portray 'the power of words in establishing a permanent human relation'; the average man, he argued, must have 'a deep belief in the sanctity of legal and sacral words and their creative power' if social order is to exist. There is thus 'a very real basis to human belief in the mystic and binding power of words'. (Tambiah 1990: 80)

From this perspective, it follows that the warfare blessing, and the curse that is said to have followed some years later, cannot be seen as the mere utterance of words. Rather they were performed, I suggest, within the framework of the local moral world. This suggestion would explain the otherwise inexplicable escalation of violence directed at non-combatant people – something many older informants saw no other context for understanding. As mentioned, some of the actors who are suspected of having been active in the warfare blessings, or the curse that eventually followed, denied that these events ever took place. In the eyes of other informants, however, the escalation of violence proved that some kind of fundamental imbalance has been haunting the Acholi surroundings of the living and the dead.

In other words, the two-sided phenomenon of the warfare blessing and curse is profoundly embedded in the lived realities in Acholiland. A critical event of this kind essentially combines the political with the sacred in a most unfortunate way. The order of things is greatly disordered. In older people's understanding of the state of affairs, then, the escalation of rebel violence aimed at non-combatants suggests an existential crisis on both private and public levels in society. This is similar to what Hutchinson reports for the war in southern Sudan, which at times is so intense, divisive and fratricidal 'that many Nuer civilians have come to define it as ''a curse from God'' ' (2001: 307).

My aim is not to establish whether or not a warfare blessing, which has possibly turned into a general curse, was performed. As I have already mentioned, the issue is highly contested in Acholiland. Rather I want to highlight that people in the war zone tried to understand the situation of extreme social unrest and gross violence by invoking these phenomena. As an issue of contest and debate, it remains a critical event, in Das's (1995: 6) terminology. In my informants' view – and thus their great concern with the issue, I suggest – such a blessing and curse cannot easily be undone. Yet their frustration was also a statement of hope. With time, the cosmological imbalance can be deciphered, reconciled and thus eventually overcome. The surroundings can transform for the better.

Still, as many informants claimed, any effort to undo the blessings in the midst of strife and ongoing war may easily be counter-productive. According to one version that I collected, elders of the influential Payira clan, of which the late Yona Odida was chief, tried to retract the blessing given to a group of rebels after the fierce Corner Kilak battles. Elders of other clans demanded this. However, the retraction was done secretly, without any impartial witnesses. 'It is a claim, a mere claim,' a non-Payira elder said in his dismissal of the retraction. Even if such retraction had been conducted, sceptical observers questioned the manner in which it might have been done. 'There are still a lot of deaths. If a blessing is incorrectly retracted, it will turn against you. And this is what is now happening! People still die. It was not done well,' the non-Payira elder went on to state. He also argued that if a warfare blessing was given to Joseph Kony in person, it must be retracted in his presence as well, with his acceptance and wholehearted participation.

I could find no account which suggested that a retraction has been performed in the presence of the rebel high command. Yet any attempt to retract any warfare blessing in secret and in the absence of the rebel leader, it was frequently suggested to me, must have angered the rebel high command. This, I propose, may partially explain the rebels' increased mistrust of elders as impartial mediators and peace bringers. Even if the rumours of *lapii* given by the Payira clan to the LRM/A can be questioned on good grounds, it is still likely that the then Payira chief offered his general blessings of well-being to a small group of insurgents after the Corner Kilak defeat. A Payira elder himself confessed his confusion on these matters to me. He admitted that some rebels were presented with *oboke olwedo* and *laa*, but he was less certain about *lapii*,

'It is maybe true, I don't know for sure. . . .' Still, the critical issue of the warfare blessings is hardly something that is exclusive to the influential Payira clan. In the initial phase of the insurgency in northern Uganda, as I have noted, most older people encouraged young men to join rebel ranks. Again the Payira elder: 'This war will take long, because most clans of Acholi gave the *laa* to Kony.' His reference to Kony, in this case, was a general reference to various groups of rebels, including the initial 'army of the earth'; it is only that Kony's LRM/A is the one that remains today.

Young men who are frustrated today with the elders' inability to end the war often stressed this point to me: 'Once, they encouraged us to join, but now they have turned their backs on those who did join.' For young informants, however, the issue of a customary warfare blessing (*lapii*) was less important than the older generation's tendency to put the blame on young people. In particular, young men and women, frustrated with the present state of affairs in Uganda, felt that withdrawal by the 'veranda elders' from giving any moral support to the rebels was also a withdrawal from the political struggle for, as they put it, 'genuine democracy'. These young people blamed the elders, who are expected to be guides in cultural and political matters, not the young. Throughout Uganda's political independence, my friend Jimmy Otim concluded, the older generations have manipulated disadvantaged youth and the younger generations to misbehave. Jimmy did not accept the claim common among elders that today's young people suffer from lack of guidance. According to him, the guidance is there all right, but it is destructive in emphasizing the contested past rather than being constructive and directed towards the future. And my friend Anthony Odiya-Labol aired his frustrations with those who had once initiated the rebellion but later fled the country and ended up in the European diaspora. 'They lit the candle, but then left for London. Now we are left here, and the bush is on fire.'

CONCLUSION (UNFINISHED REALITIES)

In this article, I have outlined some aspects of war's violation of the local cosmology. I have focused especially on *cen*, ghostly vengeance; *lapii*, the sticks for making fire, which symbolize the legitimate warfare declaration; and the discrepancy between today's war and wars of the past as told in the tales. My aim has been to sketch the complex discourse surrounding *lapii* rather than to find the origin of any contemporary *lapii*. If rebel leaders sometimes exploit the authority of elders in justifying their armed resistance, the image of tradition is put to political use by other actors as well. With only a vague and distorted understanding of *lapii*, government officials implicitly and explicitly accuse the Acholi of being rebellious and warlike, and Acholi elders are portrayed as promoters of war. The Acholi are held to be a primitive and violent people who take 'to soldiering like ducks to water', as the pioneer colonial administrator once wrote, or a 'fighting race' with 'warlike

instincts', as an old-time missionary argued. Or – now in contemporary terminology – the Acholi are even said to be genetically violent, as a non-Acholi officer in the Ugandan army claimed. In this way, influential commentators promote ethnicity – and, more specifically, Acholi ethnic identity – as a central explanation for the conflict and its violence. A homogeneous picture is painted. These accusations, one elder concluded, are nothing but political gimmicks – on one side the rebel leader claims to have *lapii*, and on the other side Ugandan government officials claim that Acholi elders came together to bless the uprising against the government. I hope that my article encourages seeing beyond such gimmicks, but also that it indicates the importance of being critically aware that such political gimmicks easily distort local moral worlds. As Schoenbrun notes in an intriguing article on the history of eastern Africa's Great Lakes region:

> Local voices retool the semantics of ethnicity by being specific. Their specificity defeats the manipulation of ethnicity, itself a nexus for power. Failing to hear the subaltern voices, still newer forms of oppression may masquerade as 'ethnic,' and be promulgated as such by intellectuals. (Schoenbrun 1993: 48)

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ABSTRACT

War has ravaged Acholiland in northern Uganda since 1986. The Ugandan army is fighting the Lord's Resistance Movement/Army (LRM/A) rebels. Based on anthropological fieldwork, the article aims at exemplifying the ways in which non-combatant people's experiences of war and violence are domesticated in cosmological terms as strategies of coping, and it relates tales of wars in the past to experiences of violent death and war in the present. There has been a politicized debate in Uganda over whether or not the LRM/A rebels have the elders' ceremonial warfare blessing. In sketching this debate, the article interprets the possible warfare blessing – which some informants interpreted as having turned into a curse on Acholiland – as a critical event that benefits from further deliberation, regardless of its existence or non-existence. It is argued that no warfare blessing can be regarded as the mere utterance of words. Rather, a blessing is *performed* within the framework of the local moral world. It is finally argued that the issue of the warfare blessing is a lived consequence of the conflict, but, nevertheless, cannot be used as an explanatory model for the cause of the conflict.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis 1986, la guerre ravage l'Acholiland, dans le Nord de l'Ouganda. L'armée ougandaise s'y bat contre les rebelles de la LRM/A (Lord's Resistance Movement/Army). S'appuyant sur des travaux anthropologiques de terrain, l'article cherche à exemplifier la manière dont les expériences de la guerre et de la violence par les non-combattants sont domestiquées, en termes cosmologiques, en tant que stratégies de défense, et établit un rapport entre des récits de guerre du passé et des expériences de mort violente et de guerre du présent. Un débat politisé a eu lieu en Ouganda sur la question de savoir si les rebelles de la LRM/A ont reçu la bénédiction officielle des anciens pour se battre. Dans l'esquisse qu'il fait du débat, l'article interprète cette bénédiction éventuelle, que certains informateurs ont interprétée comme s'étant transformée en malédiction appelée sur l'Acholiland, comme un événement critique qui bénéficie de la poursuite du débat, indépendamment de son existence ou non-existence. L'article soutient qu'une simple formulation de mots ne saurait en aucun cas constituer une bénédiction. Une bénédiction serait plutôt *pratiquée* dans le cadre de l'univers moral local. Enfin, l'article affirme que la question de la bénédiction de la guerre est une conséquence vécue du conflit qui peut néanmoins servir de modèle d'explication de la cause du conflit.