

Gendered War and Rumors of Saddam Hussein in Uganda

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SUMMARY *This article discusses the role of rumors in everyday Acholi life in war-torn northern Uganda. These rumors concern various health threats such as HIV and Ebola. The rumors are closely associated with the forces of domination that are alleged to destroy female sexuality and women's reproductive health and, by extension, Acholi humanity. Moreover, the rumors are stories that say something profound about lived entrapments and political asymmetries in Uganda and beyond. [Keywords: rumors, war, gender, health, Uganda]*

In this article, I explore rumors as interpretive and indeed very real commentaries on wartime violence, gender hierarchies, and various health threats such as HIV and Ebola. My focus is on the Acholi in northern Uganda who struggle to find directionality in the shadows of a bitter civil war, and how they experience war and construct meaning as they live in intersection with the wider world. Rumors are central to propaganda machineries in all war settings, I argue. They are stories that link the personal with the political and the local with the national and even the global. Rumors figure strongly in the social memory of war-torn Acholiland, deepening the idea that the Acholi are being subjected to a slow genocide, which is staged by the central government and other outside powers, including the international community.

Sometimes my Acholi friends suggested that the hidden agenda was to have the war continue by every means, a war that for so many years has been good business for rebels, high-ranking army officers, and humanitarian aid workers, but ultimately was believed to be the end of the Acholi people. From an anthropological perspective, I argue, it does not suffice to list various wartime rumors and to conclude that "Acholiland is rife with conspiracy theories" or that "Acholi themselves have lapsed into an acceptance tantamount to complicity" (Cheney 2007:208). Such a conclusion, I propose, risks adding to the exoticism that is only too common in reporting on the war in northern Uganda and wars elsewhere in Africa (see Finnström 2008:169–174).

Acholiland has been ravaged by war since 1986, with the Lord's Resistance Army/Movement (LRA/M) and other groups fighting the Ugandan government. Throughout the years of war, the LRA/M's human rights abuse record has been horrendous, as a virtual flood of human rights reports, many easily accessible from the Internet, has shown. Among other things, the LRA/M has abducted tens of thousands of minors. In other words, the LRA/M has made

itself notorious throughout the world for its war crimes and crimes against humanity, and its leaders are wanted by the International Criminal Court. In addition, in the shadow of all this, and throughout the years of war, the Ugandan army "has committed crimes against civilians with near total impunity" (Human Rights Watch 2005:2).

The war has indeed developed into a global war; even if it is fought on local grounds (see Finnström 2008). The U.S. government included the LRA/M on its post-9/11 list of terrorist groups when the Ugandan government joined the global war on terror. The massive influx of international humanitarian aid has ended up being deeply entangled with the realpolitik of war as has the International Criminal Court.

Reproductive Health in Times of War

In Acholiland, rumors about HIV and Ebola are closely associated with the forces of domination that are alleged to destroy female sexuality and women's reproductive health and, by extension, the wider social and moral surroundings. Such rumors thus say something profound about lived realities. With respect to HIV, for example, the rumors emphasize something that few would deny—that the epidemic threatens the future of not only the Acholi, but large parts of Africa as well.

Few if any epidemics or other collective health threats are apolitical. Rather, as the Acholi exposed to epidemics try to comprehend and cope with the human crisis that follows, the epidemics become embedded in local cosmologies and gender hierarchies of everyday life. The Acholi ideology of social organization is oriented to patrilineal descent with decentralized and exogamous social groupings called *kaka*. The human body comes to function as an evocative metaphor that communicates the interdependence between epidemics and the sociopolitical order. In particular, the metaphorical openness of the female body and its reproductive functions makes it a powerful symbol in Acholiland and elsewhere in Africa. In his account on gendered violence in the Rwandan genocide, Taylor writes that women, perhaps more than men, were targets of the violence, because "women are often socially situated at the limen between groups" (1999a:43). He builds the analysis on Mary Douglas's work. "In a patrilineal system of descent," Douglas writes, "wives are the door of entry to the group" (1966:126). Thus, Tutsi women who had sexual relationships with Hutu men could be regarded as "cultural gatekeepers" and "liminal beings," because in their exposed situation they came to possess "the capacity of undermining the categories 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi' altogether" (Taylor 1999a:43). Hutu men's rape of Tutsi women, particularly during the prelude to the genocide, prepared the terrain for the coming genocide. In both practice and discourse rape undermined the Tutsi category and reified Hutu racism. It came to shape the violence.

This has also been reported, for example, from the war in former Yugoslavia, and it can be argued that rape in war manifests superior masculinity of the perpetrator, the subordinated femininity of the victim, and the deprived masculinity of the male enemy. Such violent acts are thus also acts of communication, with the female body as the locus of tension.

Sexual violence and rape have also become common in war-torn northern Uganda. Although the rebels eventually came to rape and exploit women sexually, in the beginning of the war people attributed these activities to the government troops. These are the words of Sabina, age 36, a former rebel abductee:

The [worst thing about] the [government] soldiers was having forced sex with women one after the other. Men and women were collected during what they called a "screening exercise to flush out" the rebels from the community. The men and women were put in separate groups. Then in the evening the NRA [government] soldiers started fucking the women in the compound. One woman could be fucked by up to six men; and this went on for three days. I saw these things with my own eyes, but I was lucky it never happened to me. [Oywa 1995:99]

When hearing Sabina's story, a senior government representative told her that women not only encouraged the rebels to continue their armed resistance, but also spread HIV. He said that the women should avoid contamination by HIV. Sabina said:

This annoyed me and I asked him, "How do we avoid getting infected with the AIDS virus? According to me it is the government which is intentionally spreading the AIDS virus by raping women when they go for firewood. Is raping one of the government weapons to fight the women? All these sufferings are being inflicted upon us because of our children's misbehaviour." [Oywa 1995:99]

The women's children to whom Sabina referred were of course the rebels, labeled so by the government representative. When he asked Sabina to prove that government soldiers and not rebels committed the gang rapes, Sabina responded, "I told him it was true because I saw a helicopter bring them food; the rebels never owned a helicopter!" (Oywa 1995:99; see also Dolan 2002:72–74).

In my informants' stories on gendered violence against the noncombatant population, it is women's role in human and cultural reproduction that is at stake. Of course, my aim here is not to replicate the Western idea of men as cultural producers and women as reproducers of human life, an idea introduced to anthropology in the 1970s and severely criticized ever since. Rather, I want to exemplify how such gendered divisions are reified by social unrest and wartime violence, just as ethnic divides are (see also Dolan 2002). In presenting my argument, I will describe some local beliefs about femininity and masculinity in relation to morality as mediated by my informants.

Controlled Men and Crying Women

The possible presence of HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases is often associated with a dubious and liminal moral status in northern Uganda as in many other places in the world. In the prewar or even precolonial context, several diseases and epidemics have been interpreted as the coming of alien forces from outside Acholiland (p'Bitek 1971:114–120). In Acholi thought, women, to a greater extent than men, are exposed to these kinds of associations. For example, women are said to be more easily possessed by various spiritual

forces (Allen 1991:386, 389; Behrend 1995:67). In the perspective of most Acholi, a woman is married into her husband's patrilineage and its wider social group (*kaka*). This makes her an outsider, a link to the outside, at least initially, until full bridewealth has been provided to her father's family and his extended *kaka* and she can thereby obtain a formal position in her new social context as a married woman. Usually, bridewealth is provided only in bits and pieces, over a long period, increasingly so because of wartime hardships. A newly married woman may even be dangerous, something that Acholi women of childbearing age in general are held to be: "She may be a sorcerer/poisoner. She is unpredictable, her loyalties are unclear, she is a threat to her husband's sisters living at home and to other wives and their children" (Allen 1994:131).

Today most Ugandans do not dispute the existence of the virus that leads to AIDS. However, in Acholiland a common conclusion is still that HIV and other forces of destruction, like ghostly vengeance (*cen*) and painful and violent memories, influence women more often than men. This, it must again be stressed, is nothing unique to the Acholi. Rather, the conclusion is analogous to the deep-rooted and male-biased idea in Western history of women as impulsive, prone to hysteria, and irrational, or, to put it simply, of women as the weaker of the two sexes.

To associate the spread of HIV with an alleged female openness is not a conclusion made on biological grounds, although medical research does show that women run a higher risk than men of being contaminated by HIV through unprotected heterosexual intercourse. More important, and in line with the argument that I want to propose, womanhood, manhood, and the hierarchy of the genders are naturalized through social practice, in Acholiland just as everywhere else. "Men are more able to resist," I was told by a young man. "Women are weak," he added. His male friend agreed, and they illustrated their standpoint by referring to funerals, in which women are allowed to cry and publicly express their agony while men are discouraged from doing so. The funeral of Amos Sempa Alayi, a former rebel and fieldwork associate of mine who died when he was hit by a speeding motorcycle, illustrated their argument. The Christian priest opened his sermon by appealing to the people not to cry in frenzy, as several women had done when they arrived. "Let us not mourn in the traditional way," the priest said. "We must do it according to the Church. . . . If not, by sunset we will be embarrassed."

Some young men assisted the priest. Silently but firmly they took aside women whose uncontrolled anguish interrupted the sermon and the many speeches at the funeral. The young men escorted the women with a certain degree of pride. "I always keep self-control," one of the young men told me. In this context, womanhood was, more than manhood, intimately associated with Acholi cosmology and the local moral world. Manhood was associated with Christianity, even modernity.

HIV, Ebola, and Saddam Hussein in Uganda

It is commonly recognized that, wherever they go, soldiers in Africa and elsewhere often engage in sexual relations with local women. When the Ugandan army withdrew from Congo after several years there, more than two

thousand children fathered by Ugandan soldiers were left behind with their mothers, according to a report in the October 1, 2002, *New Vision*, a Ugandan daily newspaper (Muhanga 2002). Some of the soldiers who were sent to northern Uganda to counter the rebels there brought Congolese women with them, making the situation of these exposed women even more vulnerable. In addition, because of wartime displacement, an increasing number of young Acholi women choose the immediate but most often short-term safety of having a soldier boyfriend in the Ugandan army—and yet other women are being raped by the soldiers.

According to my informants, especially the young unmarried men in search of future wives, the situation conveys a special message, in which the female body functions as a sign of communication. As Sabina's story has already indicated, one powerful rumor holds that HIV-infected Ugandan army soldiers from outside Acholiland approach local girls with the purpose of spreading the virus.

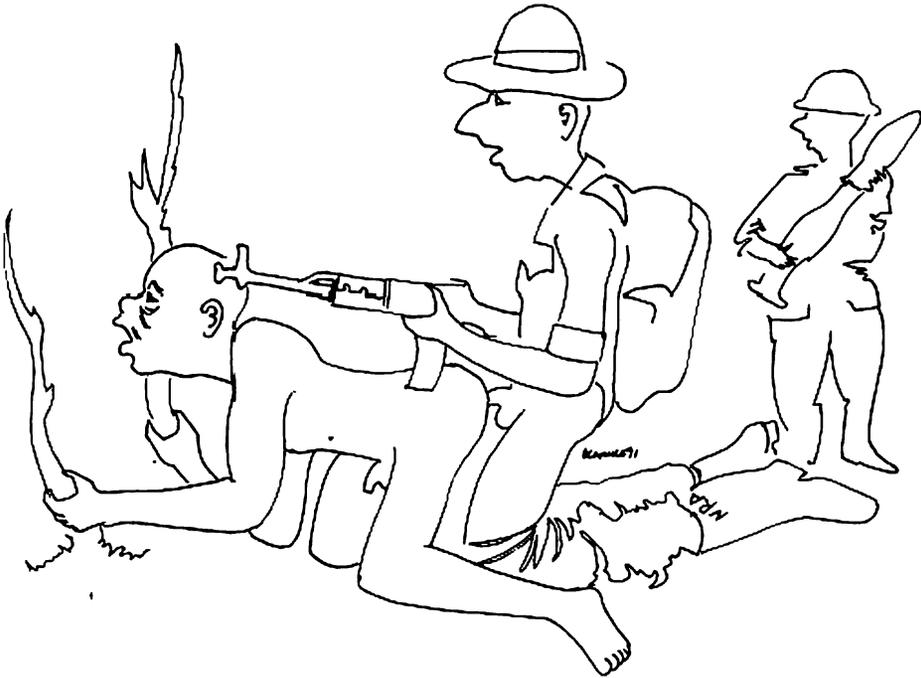
"Terror moves silently beneath the skin, embodying the violence of the state," Kirsch (2002:63) writes with reference to similar rumors of new health threats in politically volatile West Papua, New Guinea. In Uganda, the rumors express resistance to the central government and its army, but paradoxically, they confirm rather than confront the political order. Rumors entrap people and color their experiences of violence. They manifest themselves within a political discourse of domination and contest. In other words, the rumoring is aimed at resisting domination by giving people the means of assuming the right to interpret the lived reality. Yet the discourse of domination and resistance has a hegemonic measure to it, as the rumoring is formulated in terms understandable only within the very same discourse or political framework. It is in the context of the symbolic realm that people are constituted and constitute themselves. Equally, when fixed meanings are dominantly imposed, alternative meanings will feed on a dialogue with the domination. The domination itself will be the central point of reference, around which the construction of meanings and meaningful relations will revolve.

Rumors of resistance—if we can call them that—therefore are likely "to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the problems of political violence" (Kirsch 2002:70). One could even say that the very form of these rumors is "morally analogical to tales of Faustian bargains" (Jansson 2008:32–36). Here the rumor of the soldiers' deliberately spreading HIV to local women adds to an already harsh environment of gendered violence in wartime Acholiland. Many other women have been raped as warfare increasingly has come to target the most private spheres of civil life. Men are also infected, so the rumor goes, by a special Ugandan army battalion called *tekgungo* ("bend over," or to "bow" with "force" or great "difficulty"). I was told that the commander of the *tekgungo* battalion was a man from outside Acholiland called Saddam Hussein, which is indeed a commentary on the contemporary global politics of war and terror and which reveals political asymmetries in Uganda and beyond. It is alleged that the battalion's work is to rape civilians of both sexes, by this means spreading the deadly virus (see also Behrend 1999:183; Dolan 2002:74–75). This story comes to mind when I remember an HIV information poster that I found on a government building in northern Uganda (see Cover image). The poster

portrays a soldier, a gun, and a condom, and thus may contain messages more complex than intended, that is, to protect the civilians (*wanainchi*). More straightforward is a drawing from an early rebel manifesto, which depicts a government soldier who rapes a male civilian (see Figure 1). Disease and alleged homosexuality are depicted as some of the many weapons in “the arsenal of conquest” (Simons 1999:80; for a comparison with Rwanda, see Taylor 1999a). Indeed, informants sometimes described HIV as “the silent gun.”

Here, I return to the gender hierarchy and the body metaphor. De Boeck (1998) notes that the aLuund people in southwestern Congo hold the female body to be more open than the male body: “As genitors and social reproducers, childbearing women are perceived as having an accessible or ‘open’ body (or, metaphorically, an ‘open’ house or ‘open’ field)” (1998:37). Women of childbearing age have to close and cover up their openness, but postmenopausal women are considered more closed—as more like men, structurally speaking. Postmenopausal women can therefore be more active and influential in the public and open arena. Allen (1994:130) advances a similar argument for the Acholi and neighboring Madi, as did my informants when they tried to understand the consequences of and reasons behind an outbreak of Ebola hemorrhagic fever in late 2000 and early 2001. The outbreak infected at least 425 individuals and eventually took 224 lives, or 53 percent of those infected. According to statistics, 63 percent of the people who contracted Ebola were female (Hewlett and Amola 2003; World Health Organization 2001:44).

Figure 1.
An illustration from an unpublished, untitled, and undated early rebel manifesto (ca. 1991). Copy in author’s possession.



A powerful rumor among the noncombatant populations was that Ebola entered Acholiland from Congo, carried by returning Ugandan soldiers. Two years after the outbreak of Ebola, my Ugandan friend Tonny told me the story. In mid-2000, the Ugandan army brought a dead colleague from Congo to his home north of Gulu town in central Acholiland, with orders to the relatives to leave the sealed coffin closed. However, the relatives refused, Tonny told me, and they opened the coffin. Women washed the body carefully, and they shaved all its bodily hair before dressing it in nice clothes, all according to Acholi beliefs and funeral customs. Generally, I was told, when someone has died, men immediately start to dig a grave. They assist the women in the preparation of the corpse only if there is a practical reason to do so, for example, as Tonny put it, "if the deceased was so fat that the women need assistance to lift the body." When a man dies, p'Bitek (1974:21) writes, the widow is supposed to lie down next to her dead husband, and embrace the body. When a woman dies, the husband is supposed to do the same, Tonny added.

The female relatives, who prepared the body that arrived from Congo, so the story went, contracted Ebola. Soon the epidemic took root in Gulu. Tonny's conclusion, which he shared with many of my informants, was that the army was responsible for the Ebola outbreak. If the scenario of the first Ebola victim, whose body was brought to Gulu and Acholiland from the outside, is interpreted in the context of the existing gender hierarchy—which I suggest is plausible—one can conclude that women's exposed position as the link to the outside also exposes the Acholi collective. Yet the Acholi also insist that elderly women prepare the body of a deceased person, which I suggest is intended to neutralize such an exposure. Tonny concluded the story on Ebola: "The army brought the body to the relatives here in Gulu. But you know very well, my brother, and the army knew it too, according to Acholi culture we had to wash the body, and that was the beginning of it."

When rumoring combines the Ebola story with the stories about HIV and the bend-over battalion, we may conclude, as with Taylor's (1999b) Rwandan case, that a "cosmology of terror" finds nourishment as people try to cope with and understand extreme domination, both physical and discursive. This is not to say that Acholi culture is more likely than any other culture or ideology to foster such interpretations, but the many years of enforced domination, lived uncertainty, and collective suffering are. As George reminds us, rumors "should be seen not as falsifiable accounts of fact or cultural character but as interpretive maneuvers in a deadly set of encounters that have come to define a contemptible state" (George 2004:44). As war and terror enter the most private and central domains of people's lives, they also enter the cosmological realm. Accordingly, as Taylor (1999b:105–106) points out in a discussion that builds on Kapferer's work on nationalist violence, the uncertainty of war reaches beyond political pragmatics or psychological stress. To paraphrase Kapferer, war and violence produce an ontology of uncertainty and stress, which will be confined within the understandings and cultural orientations of the people it assaults. Such an ontology "describes the fundamental principles of a being in the world and the orientation of such a being toward the horizons of its experience" (Kapferer 1988:79).

The rumors I discuss here are thus examples of individual coping with the unknown and the threatening, and invoking rumors is a mundane effort among people to cope with lived uncertainty and stress imposed by war. Meaning is created and lived, and the alleged rationale of the order of things is exposed. For the individual, of course, the wider world is manifested in her or his particular world. Jackson (1998:20–21) holds that having a sense of control over the relationship and balance between these worlds is a central human preoccupation. With this in mind, I suggest that we can better understand the universal rationale for rumors that initially seem to be absurd, paranoid, or conspiratorial. Power, in this context, is not only to be analytically located in the enforced domination that follows war and social unrest. Power is also located in the existential struggle for self-empowerment and self-mastery in a situation of uncertainty, entrapment, even fear.

Another of my Ugandan friends, Otim p'Ojok, made the following retrospective conclusion about the Ebola epidemic: "The government tried to conceal so much, so most of us believe that it came from Congo." He added, "Anyway, the Ugandan army sent soldiers from Congo to southern Sudan to counter the [LRA/M] rebels there." In his argument, regardless of the route the Ebola took, it came from outside. The LRA/M rebels, on their side, blamed the Ugandan government. "President Museveni wipes out Acholi with Ebola in Northern Uganda" reads the headline of one of their press releases in October 2000 (LRA/M 2000). Representatives of the Ugandan government and its army, on the other side, blamed the rebels for bringing the virus from Sudan.

Conclusion

I have given examples of how gendered rumors are part and parcel of war, and of how an understanding of lived gender hierarchies is also a key to understanding how people think about war and its consequences. The female body, I have shown, has become the locus of tension in all this, but there are also rumors about the reproductive capacity of men. In the camps for internally displaced Ugandans, I frequently encountered people who questioned the quality of distributed relief. In 2002, for example, the leaders in some camps refused the maize flour that the Norwegian Refugee Council tried to distribute because it was too old and thus spoiled (which one of the Ugandan staff members told me was, indeed, the case). It had to be ferried back to town. Yet it was particularly the U.S.-produced cooking oil, distributed as relief and past the last date for consumption that my friends questioned. Sometimes, showing me the sealed cans clearly stamped with an expiry date that had passed, they would question the usability of the oil. It made men impotent, I was told. "Why do you give us this stuff, that you would not consume yourself?" was the frequent question I encountered. Again the rumor has a wider cosmological dimension, as the alleged spread of male impotence would make Acholi men unable to father future generations.

Such rumoring does not simply exemplify a lapse into complicity. I have instead stressed the importance of delineating how rumors verbalize a wartime ontology of stress and uncertainty, which will be confined within the horizons of experience and cultural orientations among the people it assaults. Ultimately, the

specificity of rumors locates the variety of establishments, humanitarian organizations, powerful agents, diseases, and threatening events in specific historical contexts in specific places. Globalization is emplaced, and here Saddam Hussein is as real as U.S. cooking oil or Norwegian relief food. So, rather than seeing rumors as the expression of some bizarre conspiracy of alienation, we need to acknowledge that people live with a seriously harsh wartime reality. As the rumors tell us, in the shadows of widely reported LRA/M atrocities, there is a violent legacy of state repression and counterinsurgency warfare. The conclusion people advanced was that there must be a hidden agenda behind all this: it was, I was told often, "a war on the Acholi." They draw this conclusion in an effort to orient themselves in life, to comprehend and control existentially the difficult situation in which they live. Rumors, therefore, cannot be taken lightly. If analyzed, they unveil important stories that provide a critical context to the official story of war and the Ugandan government's simplistic script. Otunnu, an exiled Ugandan and former UN undersecretary-general, writes: "To keep the eyes of the world averted, the government has carefully scripted a narrative in which the catastrophe in northern Uganda begins with the LRA and will only end with its demise" (Otunnu 2006:45).

Note

Acknowledgments. Storytelling never ends. In this article, I have revisited, rethought, and again reflected upon some stories from chapter 5 of *Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda* (Finnström 2008). Research in Acholiland was carried out in periods from 1997 to 2007. It was endorsed by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology and financed by the Department for Research Cooperation of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

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