NO PEACE
NO WAR

An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts

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In Memoriam Bernhard Helander
For God & My Life’
War & Cosmology in Northern Uganda
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Introduction

In this chapter I hold that today’s conflict in northern Uganda, although fought on local grounds, is international and even global in character. The Ugandan army, led by Lieutenant General Yoweri Museveni, who also is the president of the country, is fighting the Lord’s Resistance Movement/Army rebels (henceforth the LRM/A). Joseph Kony, a self-proclaimed Major General, fronts the LRM/A. Worldwide flows of imagery, weaponry and humanitarian aid entangle with local sociopolitical realities, in a way typical for most small-scale and low-intensity wars at the turn of the millennium. Alliances on the regional level add to the complexity of local battle scenes. In the local discourse my informants articulated these complexities. The surroundings are bad, they often said. In discussing important aspects of a life with bad surroundings my chapter focuses on the local lifeworld, and on actions, interpretations and explanations that are essential to any understanding – academic or popular – of the conflict. In pursuing this aim I investigate how non-combatant people in the war zone understand and explain the rebels’ violent practices on the ground, but also how they relate to the fact that the international community has become increasingly and inescapably entangled with the politics and practices of war. On the existential level, I propose people actively practise a kind of knowing by engagement. To be able to highlight this I put emphasis on meanings in use. Such meanings are never fixed but negotiated in an interactive sociocultural and political process of interpretation and counter-interpretation, including not only the most influential agents, like the rebel movement, the Ugandan government or international relief organisations, but also the ordinary people with direct experience of the war.

Evolving Conflict in Acholiand, Northern Uganda

Like a foreign body in your eye – that is the situation [of] the Acholi people. (Clan elder, Gulu town. December 1997)

We are told by Museveni that the Lord’s Resistance Army belongs to past governments.

But the Lord’s Resistance Army children are born under Museveni’s rule. (Middle-aged woman from Acholiand, London, July 1998)

Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) seized power in 1986. For some five years, Museveni had been leading a guerrilla insurgency in central Uganda, with the objective of replacing Milton Obote’s second government (1981–85) and Tito Okello’s succeeding but short-lived government (1985–86). A quotation from Ngoga (1998) expresses a common view among scholars doing research on war and conflict. The end of war is erroneously equated with the capture of a capital, or the signing of a peace agreement. As Ngoga states, ‘On 26 January 1986, it [the NRM/A] captured Kampala and the war was effectively over’. He continues that the NRM/A was ‘one of the most effective guerrilla insurgencies in Africa, and the first to defeat an incumbent regime and replace it by a successful post-insurgency government’ (Ngoga 1998:104, emphases added). Woodward puts forward an equal, common conclusion, writing that Museveni ‘had a remarkable army that had come from the bush to overthrow the existing regime in the capital by a popular guerrilla campaign, a rare success in Africa for all its internal wars’ (Woodward 1991:180). Hansen and Twaddle (1994:3), on their side, argue that Museveni’s takeover was a military success, ‘pacifying the greater part of Uganda and leaving only a small strip of land bordering the southern Sudan prone to millennial protest and external disruption’. Similar conclusions are also found in other comparative studies on post-colonial Africa. In one such study, Uganda is mentioned only briefly. In very general terms the authors conclude that Uganda is one of the African countries ‘where a logic of violence has been replaced by a political process of negotiation and rebuilding’ (Bayart et al. 1999:5).

With regard to the insurgency in central Uganda, launched militarily by Museveni in 1981, some of these conclusions on Museveni’s takeover may be correct. From a wider national perspective, however, – most often neglected when Uganda’s recent political development is discussed internationally – it is important to observe that the 1986 capture of Kampala also marks the starting point of several armed conflicts in Uganda (see Finnström 2003:103ff). Below, however, I will limit the discussion to the northern region.

As Museveni captured Kampala, soldiers and supporters of the previous governments left Kampala and fled northwards, towards Acholiand (Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts) bordering the Sudan. Museveni’s army followed hard on the heels of the fleeing soldiers, crossing the symbolically significant border of the Nile. Soon thereafter the conduct of Museveni’s former guerrillas, often said to be members of a well-disciplined army controlled and educated by its political wing, deteriorated. Killings, rape and other forms of physical abuse aimed at the non-combatant population became the order of the day when they reached Acholiand, which was foreign territory to them (see notably Amnesty International 1992). From within the Sudan, opposition elements regrouped and launched the Uganda People’s Democratic Movement/Army (UPDM/A), simultaneously called cdlf (report our presence to the government) and olum olum (people of the bush) by the Acholi people, whose homeland soon turned into a violent battlefield (see Lamwaka 1998). Other insurgency movements were also formed, of which the most well known is Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement (see Behrend 1999).

As war evolved, people in the war-torn region came to differentiate between two
dimensions of armed resistance, the first called 'the army of the earth' (mong me ngom) and the second 'the army of the heaven' (mong me polo).

At the initial stage, the uprisings had considerable support among people who found their homes, belongings and cattle herds destroyed and looted en masse by the intruding soldiers. In their view, Acholland was under occupation, something they resisted. Others did not explicitly support the uprising, but according to a kind of standardised version I often encountered, informants claimed that they saw no alternative survival than to join in one way or the other. They joined the rebel ranks as a direct response to the military brutality they experienced (see also Brett 1995:146f).

The evolving war has caused an enormous humanitarian catastrophe in northern Uganda, the home of the Acholi people. Some 800,000, or 70 per cent of the Acholi population, are displaced, the great majority forcefully to large camps cynically called 'protected villages' (Gulu Archdiocese 2003a:3; Human Rights Watch 2003:5). The LRM/A rebels have abducted thousands of minors into their fighting ranks (Amnesty International 1997; Human Rights Watch 1997), which eventually alienated them from the local population. Until today, no overall or lasting cease-fire has been reached, and no peace agreement is visible in the near future.

Cosmology in crisis

To hell
With your Pumpkins
And your Old Homesteads.
To hell
With the husks
Of old traditions
And meaningless customs.

We will smash
The taboos
One by one.

We will uproot
Every sacred tree
And demolish every ancestral shrine.

Listen Ocol, my old friend,
The ways of your ancestors
Are good,
Their customs are solid
And not hollow
They are not thin, not easily breakable
They cannot be blown away
By the winds
Because their roots reach deep into the soil.

Listen, my husband,
You are the son of a Chief.
The pumpkin in the old homestead
Must not be uprooted!
(from Song of Lawine by Okot p'Bitek, first published by EAPH 1966)
(from Song of Ocol by Okot p'Bitek, first published by EAPH 1967)

In comparative studies, researchers try to quantify and thus define the phenomenon of war. For example, according to Wallenstein and Sollenberg's (2001) definitions, the conflicts in Uganda oscillate between 'war', 'intermediate armed conflict', 'minor conflict', and even 'peace', based on the number of people alleged to have been killed annually in 'battle-related deaths'. Doom and Vlassenroot (1999: 20), citing northern Uganda as case study, define peace as 'the absence of open and widespread violence rather than a situation where all disputes are settled by procedural methods'. However, as Galtung (1969) and Sponsel (1994:6) point out, research on war and conflict often characterises peace by negation only.

Peace is then nothing but the absence of war, which contrasts with the most common standpoint I encountered in the field. In late 1999 – by coincidence only some few days before the rebels launched new attacks that brutally replaced two previous killings in the fighting – an informant put it rather poetically. 'The silence of guns does not mean peace.'

Commonly using the Acholi phrase *piny rac*, people described their lived surroundings as seriously bad. 'Annoyance is commonplace', 'everywhere', I was often told. According to the late Acholi writer and scholar, Okot p'Bitek, *piny rac* is when 'the whole thing is out of hand, that the entire apparatus of the culture cannot cope with the menace any more' (Okot p'Bitek 1986:27). In other words, the conflict is beyond immediate and local control. Sickness is abundant, children are malnourished, cattle are gone, young people do not marry, education is too expensive, crops fail, bad spirits roam the surroundings, and people are killed or die at an early age and in large numbers.

The lack of control in quotidian life naturally frustrates people in northern Uganda, but they still tried to get on and master their fate. For example, male clan elders (*ladito kaka*, sing: *ladit kaka*) and diviners (*ajwak*, sing: *ajwaka*) – the latter mostly women – framed the state of affairs in the context of their local moral world and cultural knowledge. What is happening in Acholland is not only bad. It is also something beyond Acholi tradition and culture, these senior members of society said. A clan elder in a displacement camp smiled at me as I asked my naïve question – could not the spiritual world and the ancestors counter the potent but violent spiritual powers of the rebel movement and especially Joseph Kony? 'Acholi spirits can only confront other Acholi spirits', he then explained. Most Acholi regard the many spiritual powers (*jogi*, singular: *jok*) of the greater world as ambivalent manifestations, potentially with both healing and harming powers and actively evoked in the everyday interpretation and diagnosing of misfortune, illness and the like. The man suggested, however, that the very spirits that present themselves through Joseph Kony, the rebel leader, are alien and even evil, 'not Acholi' and therefore beyond immediate comprehension. Other informants argued that although Kony is an Acholi, the violent rebel spirits could not be of Acholi origin because there are no such violent and militant spirits or powers in the Acholi cosmological order of things. There never were. Rather the contrary, the LRM/A rebels sometimes explicitly target elders, healers and other arbiters of the local moral world, as was the case already with Alice Lakwena's movement in the 1980s. As then, the LRM/A rebels claim that they want to establish a new moral order, with the objective to break with the violent postcolonial history of Uganda (cf. Behrend 1999:48).

Some informants argued that Joseph Kony claims to have 'taken over' Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit (*tipa maleng*) when the latter fled Uganda in October 1987. One could perhaps suggest that he claims to have done so to be able to legitimise his own spiritual and political authority. According to most informants, however, Kony cannot have taken over Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit, because there are important differences between the Holy Spirit of Alice Lakwena in the 1980s and the spirits of Joseph Kony in the late 1990s. The clan elder quoted above told me the following:

The evil spirits of Kony are something new. They are beyond Acholi spirit mandate: Acholi spirits can't cope with them. During Alice's time, there were few [unlawful] killings, even though she failed [in her mission]. She failed, but then there was not as
much suffering as now, with Kony. Kony is worse. Alice was fair, at least. Kony kills people who perform the spirits of Acholi. Kony’s spirits are not Acholi. Kony is the root of the evils. (Amuru displacement camp, December 1997)

Tonny, my friend and co-worker in the field, explained that Kony cannot possibly have the Holy Spirit, because ‘Tipu maleng cannot kill anybody’. Tonny’s mother, a retired healer, once well known over most of west Acholland because of her ability to deal and negotiate with the extra-human world, agreed with her son. The old woman argued that even if it is most likely that Joseph Kony and Alice Lakwena once were presented with the Holy Spirit of God, they have both misused it to the extent that it has now been replaced by, or even transformed into, a spirit of darkness (tipu macol). Both Joseph Kony and Alice Lakwena are responsible for unlawful killings of innocent people and can only be regarded as evildoers and witches (lajok, sing: lajok), she concluded. In a kind of boomerang effect, then, Joseph Kony, who claims to be fighting for a new moral order, purified from corruption, sorcery, witchcraft and past evils, has turned into a witch himself. Behrend writes of Alice Lakwena:

In a situation of existential crisis, the [the Holy Spirit called] Lakwena ordered Alice to heal society and to cleanse the whole of Uganda from witchcraft and sorcery. But to heal society she had to use violence, the power to kill. In doing so she, like the ajwade [healer], used the means she pretended to fight. Although she was fighting witchcraft and sorcery she used the means of a witch, because she used her power to kill. And this explains why she was accused of being a witch. (Behrend 1991:176)

Influential and powerful people may summon potent powers to harm and even kill enemies from afar, outside Acholland, to incorporate them into the lived Acholi cosmological order of things, p’Bitek (1971: 140, 142) once noted. However, if these powers are misused, they can easily turn against their user and eventually also against the wider surroundings. Accordingly, most of my Acholi informants question both the legitimacy of Kony’s spiritual objectives and military methods. Still, many were convinced that he possesses powerful but dangerous spiritual powers that indeed can harm society. Among Pentecostals, for example, rebel spirituality was equated with the devil and evil forces, in the same manner that all kinds of Acholi spiritual powers are equated with evil forces that must be fought in the name of Jesus Christ. James, a lay Pentecostal in his late thirties, argued with reference to the rebel spirituality, Jesus is the only good spirit. Others exist, oh yeah, but they are evil. All of them. When I discussed the matter with my friend Komakech, an unmarried man in his mid twenties, Komakech confirmed this, even though he is neither a Pentecostal himself nor a frequent churchgoer: ‘The devil exists. The devil is in the Bible. It is true as far as I am concerned.’ However, Komakech expressed his ambivalence about the rebel spirituality more clearly on another occasion:

The rebels have some kind of spirit, you know, some kind of supernatural power. Because sometimes the bullets [aimed at the rebels] will turn around and hit [the rebels’] enemy. ... But I don’t know, I haven’t seen it. (Gulu town, December 1997)

Alternatively, as an elderly man, once involved in efforts to mediate between rebels and government, commented upon Kony’s spiritual powers, ‘If that power is to destroy Acholi, then let that power go away.’ He did not deny the spiritual power of the rebel leader Joseph Kony, but he argued, in a similar vein to Tonny’s old mother, that Kony is losing his spiritual power bit by bit, ‘because he has misused it’. A young man in a rural displacement camp placed the rebel spirituality in relation to his own frustrations. Neither he nor his relatives could possibly raise the money needed for school fees, and as long as there is war, he can only forget his dreams of secondary school education. But rather than questioning the existence of Kony’s spiritual powers, he questioned their spiritual legitimacy. He countered my queries with a question, ‘Does this spirit develop the world and our schools?’

Escalating Spiral of Violence

Recent years have been characterised by an increasing number of brutal rebel activities, such as child abductions, atrocities and terrorist acts aimed at civilians. Yet to conclude that the complex pattern of increased violence is solely the responsibility of Joseph Kony and his spirit possession and alleged religious fanaticism – only a too common trend in the media – would hardly be analytically satisfactory. This was not how informants primarily interpreted the situation and their lived surroundings, although they argued that the spirit of a killed person (cen, or ghostly vengeance) most often would return to disturb its killer. If healers do not assist in settling this problem, the result is that the killer, whether rebel or a government soldier, will behave to an increasing degree in asocial and violent, even self-destructive, ways. People who merely witness or otherwise experience the violence of war can be equally disturbed, with repeated nightmares and other daily flashbacks that assault their memories, thus posing a continuous and destructive challenge to ordinary, quotidian life. Perhaps if a term of Western psychiatry is used one can talk about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), although always framed and articulated, however, in locally informed terms.

Military violence will obviously assail the memory of the victims, but such violence, my informants held, also assails the victims’ local moral world, which they share with friends and relatives. Consequently, the exercism of ghostly vengeance (cen) has to be a public and social event rather than one of individual dealing with traumatic memories only (see Finnström 2001). Violence is not limited to the battlefield, or to the individual perpetrators and their victims, I was told, but will increasingly infest the wider surroundings of the living and the dead, and even future generations. Yet, more frequently, informants mentioned the Ugandan army’s bad conduct and inability to protect civilians, and the government’s official reluctance to promote peace talks, as factors in the escalation of violence. Informants also brought up the issue of anti-personnel landmines, a steadily increasing problem in war-torn northern Uganda. The Sudanese government has provided the rebels with landmines. Some of the landmines are marked with Arabic writing, as some that have been confiscated reveal. Other mines that the Ugandan army has captured from the rebels are manufactured in Belgium and Italy, the Ugandan army claims (see The Monitor, 5 February 2000). But also the Ugandan army is planting landmines in Acholland, especially in the Agoro Hills bordering the Sudan in Kitgum district. The objective is to seal the border to make it more difficult for the rebels to enter Uganda from their bases in southern Sudan. Ugandan military authorities regard the Agoro Hills as a notorious point of entry for the rebels when they cross between Sudan and Uganda.
Ironically enough, the Ugandan army planted the mines in Agoro Hills in late 1998 and early 1999, around the same time Uganda officially ratified the international treaty banning the manufacture and use of landmines (see Landmine Monitor 2001). In early 1999, after twelve people had died in landmine blasts, and several others lost legs as they tried to collect food from their gardens and granaries, the army ordered residents of Agoro Hills to assemble in a camp set up by the UN's World Food Programme. Victims had stepped on landmines on the paths to the gardens, below their granaries, on the doorsteps to their own huts, I was told in Agoro. Even indoors, under the beds, mattresses and in the cooking hearths, the Ugandan army had planted landmines, some victims claimed. Again, the battlefield entered the most private and central domains of Acholi life.

In the perspective of my informants, the landmines planted in Acholiland are lethal weapons without any sense of direction. The mines destroy, maim and kill indiscriminately. Like corruption, they are said 'to be eating people'. In the context of local distress, the mines are powerful symbols that capture the global character of the war. As with the machine gun, the landmine is originally a Western invention and product (cf. Hutchinson 1996: 103, n.1). Obviously, the landmines are not manufactured in Acholiland. On the contrary, informants often stressed, the landmines are of foreign origin, with a foreign character, imported to Acholiland and planted in gardens, on rural roads or even in homesteads. This is also a common interpretation of the conflict that I encountered today; it gets its fuel from elsewhere than Acholiland, adding to the feeling of life with bad surroundings.

'The stump of a pumpkin plant should not be uprooted' (te okono pe bupinta) is a proverb with multifarious interpretations, well-known in Acholiland. Some commonly expressed aspects of the proverb are that one should not destroy Acholi traditions; one ought to respect the clan, relatives, elders, ancestors and their shrines. Furthermore, one should not forget about one's old friends when meeting new ones. Then one can always go back, if one were to meet problems in a new place. As the case with the roots of the pumpkin, so too the roots of culture (tekwaro pa Acholi) ought to be nourished. Yet the rebels seem to forget precisely these traditional values. Clan elders, spirit functionaries, diviners and healers are killed, and ancestor shrines are burnt along with whole villages.

The more than thirty-year-old poems by pBitek quoted above, describing the encounters of development and modernisation with the local moral world, seem strikingly up to date regarding the present understanding among informants about the situation in Acholiland.

Arthur, a former rebel, told me more. He is a former religious functionary of the rebels, a so-called controller. He was eighteen years old when abducted in 1989, twenty-five when interviewed. He stayed with the rebels for more than one year, the first time very willingly and with great excitement. Right from the initial abduction from his rural home in the middle of the night, the rebels made a great impression on Arthur, with their weapons and military clothing, rugged but well-trained bodies, and dreadlocks hair. In addition, the rites of initiation and the religious observances impressed Arthur. Like many young men around the world, Arthur found it exciting to learn how to crawl in the bush, fight, and handle different types of high technology weapons. At the time, the rebel training camps were located inside Murchison Falls National Park, in the southwest of Acholiland. Thus, this was also the first time for him to see big game such as hippos, elephants and giraffes. He liked it, and he accepted further training to be a controller. In the beginning, most battles were easily fought and victorious. It was only later on, when things became tougher and many non-combatants were killed in the fighting, that he decided to defect.

Arthur told me about his experiences as a rebel controller in the early 1990s. There may be one to three controllers in each rebel brigade, unarmed, and their function is to protect fellow rebels with holy water, which is kept in small jerry cans and sprinkled from calabashes. As a controller, Arthur had been engaged in destroying ancestor shrines. Elders and spirit mediums were also killed. However, some of the ancestor shrines in a particular area were so powerful that it was impossible to burn them down. In one case, his rebel unit tried for three days but they finally had to send for Joseph Kony, the rebel leader, who came and set the shrines on fire. 'It was easily done for him', Arthur said about Kony. 'He is a man with the spirit. He has it.'

When I asked if Joseph Kony does not know the pumpkin proverb, informants argued the contrary. For example, a farmer in his early thirties commented upon a discussion I held with two older men in a compound a few kilometres outside Gulu town, a major town in northern Uganda:

He knows! Because he is an Acholi, he knows. Why he doesn't follow it, we don't know. He is not following that proverb, because he now has his own proverb, different from Acholi [ones]. And even the pig, the rebels don't eat it. They don't smoke; they don't drink alcohol [like we Acholi do]. (December 1997)

Evidently, according to local understandings, the rebels are not behaving the way Acholi people ought to behave. In my informants' understanding, the seemingly alien behaviour of the LRM/A rebels connects to the military support coming from the Sudanese government, in a deeper sense influenced by Arabic or even Islamic culture. References were drawn to the rebels' policy of not eating pork, to their praying practice of kneeling on mats or plastic coverings, to their strict ban on narcotics, tobacco and alcohol, and to their strategy of killing people who work in their gardens on Fridays. According to the rebels, Fridays as well as Sundays are to be respected as the day of rest and prayers. Informants also claimed the parallel to the mass killings of civilians in Algeria, at the time of my first fieldwork, commonly reported on in Ugandan newspapers. The rebels are behaving just the way the Arabs in Algeria are behaving. Informants often rationalised, as they tried to comprehend the present situation in which the vast majority of people killed are unarmed non-combatants. The consequence seems to be the same in northern Uganda as in Algeria, informants imagined.2

Parallel to this, but earlier in Acholi history, experiences of slavery, epidemics, diseases and social change have sometimes been interpreted as the coming of powers from outside Acholiland. Examples are jok Ala, the spiritual power of Arab influence, jok Omurari/Mart, the powers of the King's African Rifles (the British...
colonial army), and Sok Rumba and Sok Muso, the powers of European influence (p'Bitek 1971:114f; Behrend 1999:109f). In retrospect, and in line with the phenomenological anthropology proposed by Jackson (1998:45f; 108f), this can be interpreted in existential terms. By engaging and incorporating the unknown, foreign or other, or by framing the alien within the existing cosmological order, one can bring it under control. Eventually, its menace can be disarmed. Yet, in the context of an ongoing crisis, this sense of control is not easily achieved. In the words of a young Gulu man in his mid twenties, 'Earlier in Acholi history, foreign gathered and fought wars to cope with and handle these spirits. The young man then related this to the present crisis in Acholiiland, 'But this time, the militant spirits [of Joseph Kony] came when our society was already disintegrated by war.'

Even though there is no immediate or easy solution to the many years of conflict in northern Uganda, people living there still have to cope with the situation. And life goes on. My informants' description of the situation as one of bad surroundings should not primarily be interpreted as if the local people are without agency, or that Acholi culture is doomed to ruin. Rather, I argue, when they described the bad surroundings, they were vividly defied a moral order against violence and atrocities. It is an effort to act upon the immediate surroundings in order to change them for the better, exemplifying the creation and recreation of the cosmological order in a situation of lived uncertainty and existential crisis. In conceptualising the wider surroundings of the living and the dead, dead and nature and culture as seriously bad, my informants attempted to comprehend the phenomena of fratricide and cultural and social breakdown, where the outside world tended, however, to blame the local culture. They furthermore aired the hope that the international community would properly address the international dimensions of the conflict. 'Why do your countries in the West send us all these modern weapons,' was the rhetorical question that informants often wanted me to bring back to Sweden. The landmine, so frequently commented upon and planted almost everywhere in their surroundings, has become a symbol of these wider dimensions. Below I will elaborate upon the international dimension.

A Global War but a Local Battlefield

As mentioned above, the rebel leader Joseph Kony is an Acholi, as are most of his high commanders. However, among the fighters there are also individuals from several other ethnic groups of Uganda. The rebel political wing claims wide co-operation and contacts with liberation movements in Karamoja, Soroti, Iganga, Mubende, Gulu, Horuma, Kisoro, Kasese (ADF) and Mbarara, as well as the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF). The political wing continues, 'It is the usual ... that the LRA is only a remote and insignificant Acholi affair' (Lord's Resistance Movement/Army 1997: 4). According to the media reports, former LRM/A commanders verify co-operation with Mengistu's former government of Ethiopia as well as the government of Angola to fight UNITA. As indicated by these alliances, real or imagined, it is difficult to dismiss the conflict in northern Uganda as one of those many African wars essentially localized on unknown peripheries.

Richards argues that the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone was moulded by initiation and creolisation. It was a 'multi-ethnic rather than "tribal" movement' (Richards 1996:84). The same must be said about the LRM/A. Thus, the violent practices of the LRM/A are more likely to be a result of cultural contacts than ethnic isolation. In mid 2002, Tonny and I encountered displaced people from the camps whose reports suggested that the number of non-Acholi commanders in LRM/A had increased. Over the years, the conflict in northern Uganda has evolved to be increasingly international, particular, global, in character. In the town of Juba, southern Sudan, the LRM/A has been buying machine guns from Britons, military advice from Americans, anti-tank weapons from Iraq, and landmines from the Sudanese. And as mentioned above, the rebels are also said to possess mines of Italian and Belgian origin, and base camps have been located in southern Sudan. Rebel manifestos can be found on the Internet as well as in the bush, and tapes and videos with the rebel leader's speeches find their way to the Ugandan diaspora.

In another but equally global network, young men displaced to the camps sometimes hire guns from local Ugandan army personnel, guns that have been confiscated from the rebels but kept hidden from the military authorities in Gulu town. Taking the full risk themselves, the young men then go to the nearby national park to hunt wild game, if successful, a welcome addition to the relief diet. The meat is divided, half the share given to the armed as the gun is returned. Westerners working with some of the most esteemed organisations occasionally buy the meat from the soldiers in the camp. Sometimes the wild game caught in NGO vehicles all the way to interested buyers in Kampala, who know little about the jealousy the young displaced men had put themselves in at the first place. If caught, the young men will be taken for rebels, while the providers of the guns will deny any knowledge about the whole affair.

Inspired by Appadurai's (1991) concept of deterritorialised and globalised 'ethnoescapes', Nordstrom describes the situation in war-torn Mozambique as a 'warscape'. This is accurate also for northern Uganda:

Foreign strategists, arms, supplies, soldiers, mercenaries, power brokers, and development and interest groups move into a country. Guerrillas and soldiers travel to other countries for training and strategic planning. Refugees and displaced people flow across borders. An international cast of businesspeople and black marketers provides goods and profit from the upheavals of conflict. As these many groups act and interact, local and transnational concerns are enmeshed in the cultural construction of conflict that is continually reconfigured across time and space. Each person, each group brings a history that informs action and is negotiated vis-à-vis the various other histories of those with whom they interact. (Nordstrom 1997:37)

The point here is to acknowledge that 'warscape' realities indeed are global but still violently displaced in local war zones, as is the case in northern Uganda. In 'warscapes' contemporary experiences meet and intermingle, locality meets and fuses with translocality, the global is manifested in the local, exiles and diaspora groups are involved for political and/or humanitarian reasons, as are Western agents and foreign interest groups, and the character of the particular conflicts constantly evolve, and change, over time. Consequently, I have to conclude that the LRM/A finds inspiration in a global and cross-cultural future rather than in an essentially localised, bounded and primordial ethnic identity or a tribal past (see also Richards 1996:111).
The international dimension of the conflict in Acholiand relates to local understandings, here exemplified by the words of an elderly Acholi man:

Now, what is taking place now. I think it is well known through the whole world, that Sudan is being fought, and the route is through Uganda. In particular, what one can say: the Government of Uganda and other foreign forces like the Americans are fighting Sudan. And what do you think can stop Sudan from giving dangerous things to Kony, huh? The weapons that the rebels have are of international standard. That is why you can find that even ten rebels can terrorise the army. (Gulu town, January 1998)

Until recently, the Sudanese government has openly supported the LRM/A with logistics and military equipment, and the LRM/A had its base camps in southern Sudan, located close to military installations of the army of the Sudanese government. Former rebels witnessed that the LRM/A camps, located on the very war frontier in Sudan, have functioned as a buffer between the Sudanese army and the rebels of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). In return for this support, the LRM/A has been fighting alongside the Sudanese army against rebels in southern Sudan. Child combatants, abducted in their thousands, are used in the front line by the LRM/A, both when fighting in Sudan and in northern Uganda.

The Uganda government for their part have long supported the rebels in southern Sudan. In Olcansky’s (2000:196) words, Uganda and Sudan have been ‘engaged in a war of proxies by providing aid and havens to each other’s enemies’. In late 1999, the US-based Carter Center facilitated the signing of an agreement between Uganda and Sudan to ease their frosty diplomatic relations, after which most Sudanese support for the LRM/A ceased. The Ugandan government, it seems to me, continues to support the rebels in southern Sudan, by allowing Sudanese rebels to ferry and repair their war machinery on Ugandan soil, or, for example, by facilitating US training and equipping of the Ugandan army and Sudanese rebels on location in northern Uganda (Twaddle & Hansen 1998:6). In early 2000, when talking to one of my co-workers, a Ugandan army officer described it ‘like an exchange now’. Sudanese rebels coming into army barracks for ‘refreshments courses’ and ‘our young boys are taken to that side, to take up the positions and maintain the positions of the Sudanese rebels.’ This support is these days officially labelled as ‘moral support’ only. In December 2001, the global war against terrorism reached Uganda, as the US government included the LRM/A on its list of terrorist groups.

Most of my informants, who saw the US involvement as a great obstacle to peace, dismissed it as yet another variant of Western imperialism. They reacted to the fact that travellers in rural northern Uganda are stopped frequently and forced to unload their entire luggage at military roadblocks, while vehicles of the Sudanese rebels are free to travel on these roads with weaponry and uniformed soldiers. Tommy and I frequently encountered people in the camps and rural trading centres who commented upon the international dimensions of the conflict. With their own eyes, they had seen Sudanese rebels travelling in their home areas and they indeed had explanations as to why the LRM/A has its bases in the Sudan. They knew that the LRM/A is but one among many actors in the violent drama of regional alliances, terrorism and global politics of war. I do not agree with Doom and Vllassenroot (1999:30), therefore, who hold that ‘[t]he Acholi people at grassroots level can easily identify the dog that bites, but cannot see its master’.

In the late 1980s, the rebels could move freely in the countryside, and also along the main roads. Arthur, the former rebel controller interviewed above, testified that by then the rebels had a well-established network and supply system in Acholiand, and an intelligence system in the villages making it possible for them to know about the movements of the Ugandan army. However, the increase in brutal atrocities committed by the rebels since the beginning of the 1990s has alienated the movement from the local population. Yet to separate cause from effect is not always an easy task. Suspicion and lack of confidence in the Ugandan army remains, as its passivity and misconduct continues. The increase of violence towards the civil population also relates to local government officials’ attempts to set up home guard troops and local defence units (LDU’s) in the rural areas in the early 1990s. Even today, rural young men and minors aged as low as ten years are recruited into the local defence, particularly former rebel abductees, who seldom find meaningful positions or assignments in civil society after their return from the bush. Instead of a life of uncertainty and idleness in displacement camps, they are offered, as members of the local defence, a uniform, a weapon and a small salary (less than that of the Ugandan army private, however). Some are recruited by force. The local defence personnel operate in close co-operation with the Ugandan army and are expected to engage rebels, which they do.

The home guards and the local defence units were initially armed with bows, arrows and spears. In the early 1990s this was a compulsory order of the government’s local representatives, and all men had to carry ‘ungas’, 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 authorities closed the market in Gulu town and forced people to join demonstrations and chant slogans against the rebels. As suggested by Richards (2000), in the perspective of fighting rebels, people in such home guard units or forced demonstrations may easily be seen as government supporters, which consequently turns them into legitimate targets of rebel military violence (see also Behrend 1998:117; Gersony 1997:31). Even villagers who happen to have a spear or only a knife in the hut are now accused of having joined the government. To handle the tricky situation, as informants let me know, people generally do not keep such items of everyday use at home but hide them in the nearby bush.

Encampment, Relief and the Rebels’ Share

For God and My Life.
(Writing on a hut in Palaro camp, Gulu district)

The writing on the wall in one of the many huts in Palaro camp for the internally displaced is immediately graspable by every Ugandan who happens to read it. It is a direct and remarkable rephrasing of Uganda’s national hymn, ‘For God and My Country’. Perhaps, it may be suggested, the writer wanted to emphasise a feeling of disconnection or expulsion from the rest of Uganda and its acclaimed developments.

The Ugandan government has responded to insecurity in northern Uganda by forcefully resettling a large number of Acholi in ‘protected villages’, more accurately described as enormous camps for displaced people. As already mentioned, recent
reports estimate the number of internally displaced in Acholiland as some 800,000, or 70 per cent of the Acholi population (Gulu Archdiocese 2003a:3; Human Rights Watch 2003:5). The forced mass movement of people to camps can partly be understood in terms of a military strategy. Locating people in bound areas with strict curfews made it difficult for the rebels to get intelligence information and move freely in the countryside, but the Ugandan army also took the opportunity to loot foodstuffs and other things from the deserted villages. Now and then, the army announces that it will consider people found in the countryside as 'rebels', and thus legitimate targets of military violence by, for example, the feared helicopter gunships. Sometimes, when increased fighting replaces the curfew, and people are given a 48-hour deadline to move to the camps before the gunships join the rural counterinsurgency. As with landmines, the helicopters kill indiscriminately (see also Gulu Archdiocese 2003b:2f).

Officially, the camps were created to protect civilians against rebel attacks. In practice, the situation is rather the contrary. 'It is the people protecting the army', one camp inhabitant complained, with reference to the most common geographical structure of the 'protected villages'. An army detachment is most often located in the centre of the camp. From this privileged position the army is supposed to protect the thousands of people surrounding it. People found themselves being used as a human shield', or kwot as they said in Acholi. If a camp comes under rebel attack, the army frequently withdraws and launches grenades from a distance, right into the camp. Still, for the population of the camps there is no easy solution to the situation. Even though they want to leave the camps, they also leave behind them for the uncertain situation in their home villages deep in the rural areas. A common desire in the camps therefore was that the international community should intervene, arrange and guarantee everyone's safe repatriation (cf. Allen & Turton 1996:1f; Barrett 1998:36ff). But ironically enough, the UN and other representatives of the international community partly uphold the camp structures. Any international relief is distributed exclusively to camps that are recognised by the Ugandan government (cf. Keen 1998:58f).

In rural northern Uganda, people often told me that 'you can't plan your life. It is impossible to plan beyond the very day of today. You don't know anything about the coming days.' Any long-term planning is extremely difficult. To arrange social gatherings around the compound or village fire (wang oo), children and youth listening to the stories of the seniors, nourishing the roots of culture, is unthinkable. Such gatherings will attract rebels or wartime bandits, people suggested. The bandits are often connected with unscrupulous Ugandan army personnel, it is believed, who provide the weapons, and take advantage of the juridical vacuum that has followed the war. If people hear noises, shooting and screaming during the night, indicating that rebels or wartime thugs are arriving, they will run into hiding in the bush. 'If you are asleep and you hear people running, you just take off with them', a young man in a displacement camp said. In 2002, as war intensified, I recorded several cases of what people called 'rebels scares'. All the time suspecting rebel attacks, people experienced lessened control over the lived situation. Even the

most mundane happenings, which people who live in peace may not even reflect upon, can result in rebel scares. In one such case, in the middle of the night, as a thunderstorm was approaching, lightning struck a building in a camp near Gulu town. Some people took it for a rebel attack and fled. As these people fled, more fled with them and some ran all the way to Gulu town. Soldiers from a nearby Ugandan army detachment, on the other side, started to fire into the night, increasing the panic. It was only in the morning hours that people realised that lightning, not rebels, had struck the camp.

In most camps people will hide during the days that follow the relief distributions of the International Red Cross, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the World Food Programme or some other well-known international agency working in the region. The rebels have eyes, camp inhabitants said, and they know when the relief agencies have been in the camps with their big lorries. It will be little more than three days after a distribution before rebels arrive to loot, people argued, with experience in mind.

In my introductory field endeavour in 1997–98, when I had no means of transport of my own, I was given the opportunity to visit several camps together with the International Red Cross. I asked people living there if they thought that rebels would be coming the following night. 'They will not', people responded if I had arrived in a Toyota Land Cruiser but not a loaded lorry, as I did when the organisation was to take the census of the population in the camps. Quite naturally, in the census the Red Cross did not use its lorries. However, people in the camps knew that the rebels registered such movements. The rebels would then wait until any of the organisations involved in northern Uganda came back with lorries for an actual distribution of aid.

In a strategy to handle the situation, people in the camps would leave some of the distributed goods in their huts, hide some of it in the bush, and themselves sleep in the bush during the nights following the distribution. If people did not leave something 'on display', as they said, the rebels would search for camp inhabitants and most likely beat them until they found the goods. If the rebels found a cooking pot with remains of newly prepared food they forced camp inhabitants to tell where they had stored the rest of the food. 'We are only coming to take our share', rebels told people. 'To obey is essential', some young male informants in displacement camps told me. Yet, if camp inhabitants hid the goods they had received in several places they hoped that the rebels would loot from one place only.

That rebels are coming for their share is as simple as it is sad. If there were no rebels, there would be no relief distributions. Cynically speaking, the distributions exist because of forced resettlement in camps that have made it difficult for people to grow the food themselves. The camps, in turn, are the consequence of rebel activity, and consequently some of the distributed goods and food belong to the rebels. So rebels say to the people in the camps when they come to loot, and so people in the camps say to me, the anthropologist (cf. Richards 1996:156ff).

Clashes of Interpretation: the Rebels and the Relief

Das and Kleinman (2000) point out that power relations on national and global levels will influence the subjective experience of violence as negotiated in the
local moral world. Subjectivity, in this context, is ‘the felt interior experience of the person that includes his or her positions in a field of relational power’ and it ‘is produced through the experience of violence and the manner in which global flows among capital, and people become entangled with local logics in identity formation’ (Das and Kleinman 2000:1). In other words, a particular political subjectivity takes form. Complementary to this conclusion, Englund (2002) points out that global power flows, often regarded as disconnected and non-local, imagined by many academics to have a kind of life of their own, actually are concrete and very real, always situated and interpreted in specific contexts, always with an involvement with people’s lifeworlds. Actual social networks and exchanges, as well as specific historical circumstances, provide the inescapable ‘emplacement’ of global forces, to use Englund’s (2002) terminology.

A most unfortunate case from northern Uganda illustrates the point. In November 1997 a group of rebels attacked the outskirts of Pabo, which is a trading centre located some twenty-two kilometres north of Gulu town that has been turned into a congested camp with over 47,000 displaced individuals. During the attack, which went unnoticed by the local army personnel supposed to protect the population, rebels stabbed fourteen people to death. Elderly women and men, as well as children and babies, were among the victims. The attack in Pabo seems to be extraordinary in its brutality, without apparent logic or rationality.

However, most often the rebels’ violent strategies contain messages to the local people. Rebels had been in Pabo earlier, to loot foodstuff. They had stolen a sack and filled it with beans. When arriving in a rebel camp, the beans were cooked and eaten. However, I was told that after eating the local rebels died of cyanide. Surviving rebel commanders then assumed that the stolen sack, in which the beans had been carried, was bewitched and therefore poisonous. The rebel commander sent a unit of six rebels to Pabo to take revenge on the people responsible for the witchcraft, hence the massacre.

Even if not bewitched, according to Western logic the beans were somehow made poisonous. They were distributed as relief to the people in Pabo, as seeds to be planted. As seeds they were chemically treated, something that might have made the people eating them sick or even to die. Beans are vulnerable to insect pests and so are often treated with insecticide. Beans might also contain high levels of cyanide, which makes it important to prepare them carefully, with long cooking. However, looted food is often prepared in haste, and it is indeed possible that people under pressure, such as rebels in a hurry, unintentionally poisoned themselves.

To observe that the rebels often have their own explanations and interpretations for their actions is not to excuse their terror. But the observation highlights that international relief, most often said to be neutral and humanitarian only, immediately becomes entangled with the practices and politics of war. This obviously happens in northern Uganda as well as in southern Sudan, to mention a close-by but better-known example. As one commentator notes, ‘In Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan voluntary aid organisations have virtually operated as local administrators, co-ordinating and planning activities’ (Hulme quoted in Rick 2001:4). But as these organisations have taken over many of the functions of the government, they will also be perceived as the government is, as a parallel partner to the Ugandan army. Seldom, therefore, can aid and humanitarian efforts by the international community be neutral in the eyes of the locals (see Richards 1996:157). For example, when a truck from the United Nations World Food Programme, drove through Gulu town loaded with armed and uniformed government personnel in the town just shrugged their shoulders. The incident was not without implications. When I asked about the lorry, people related it to the wider international context, where the UN and the international community are said to be allied with the Ugandan government, but also with political actors such as the United States and the rebels of southern Sudan. The objective of such an alliance, informants along the street argued, is to counter the alleged expanding Islamism of the Arabs, and more recently, global terrorism. This is done with Uganda and in particular Acholiand as the necessary stepping-stone. Stand- ing in opposition to this political body are not only the LRM/A and the Sudanese government, but also the sufferings of the Acholi people, who have found their homeland turned into a battlefield and an arena of international politics. The LRM/A rebels, for their part, do not hesitate to ambush the United Nations, the World Food Programme, UNICEF or the various NGOs working in the area. In an Internet press release the rebels accuse the UN and UNICEF of providing ‘poison food aid to the northern population...’ (Lord’s Resistance Movement/Army 2001).

For God and My Life? A Conclusion

‘No change’ is the political slogan of President Museveni, well known all over Uganda. At the beginning of this chapter, I note that Museveni’s capture of Kibbapala in 1986 marked the starting point of several armed conflicts in Uganda, also in the north-eastern region. Ever since, Museveni’s uncompromising dismissal of the LRM/A rebels, and the rebels’ equally militant determination to continue the war, never seem to change, my informants often concluded. And, as Doom and Vlassenroot (1999:28) write, ‘Each attack by the LRA is undermining the president’s position, because it is seen as a demonstration of his lack of power or his unwillingness to turn Acholi-land into a safe haven.’ As a Ugandan friend once put it, dryly paraphrasing Museveni’s slogan, ‘People are tired. We are voting and voting, but nothing happens. There will never be any change.’ Or as a young man said, again with an ironic reference to the slogan of the incumbent, ‘People have no change from their problems.

In northern Uganda, as in many other war-torn settings, lasting peace will not simply equal the signing of any agreement. Peace – a life without pressure as some informants described it – remains to be established also in the most mundane routines of everyday life. Only then may the bad surroundings (piny meraa) develop toward good, fertile and prosperous surroundings (piny maber). To the Acholi, good surroundings are not only the absence of war. More importantly, they manifest balance in societal, cultural and economic life. Balance, in this understanding, does not imply any golden tradition of static harmony, but an ongoing intersubjective dialectic so that fate and even the future may be controlled or governed (cf. Jackson 1998:18f). Peaceful life can be infested with conflicts and frustrations, but in the peaceful order of things, problems are handled, strategies beyond mere survival are developed, life is continuously constituted and reconstituted. It is as in war, as I illustrate above, only with less difficulty. As Okot p’ Bitek (1986:27) writes, good surroundings refer to ‘when
things are normal, the society thriving, facing and overcoming crises'. This is a
realisation of the human condition. Going from bad to good surroundings, from
war to peace, is a long process, a continuum — rather than involving an essential
or even illusory break between two absolute, defined and definite conditions of
human life.

Eventually, when the surroundings change for the better, people will leave the
desperate congestion of the camps and be better able to face the problems of
quotidian life. By then the displaced family’s version of the Ugandan national
myth ‘For God and My Country’, may again be expressed as the more all-embracing
original, ‘For God and My Country’. In facilitating this, I suggest, we need to investigate
how people in war-torn Uganda act upon their immediate and wider
surroundings, as they try to understand not only violent rebel practices, but also
international involvement. Rather than suggest that ‘[the] Acholi people at
grassroots level can easily identify the dog that bites, but cannot see its master’
(Doom & Vlassenroot 1999:30), I propose that we seriously ask people at the
grassroots levels who they identify as the masters of the dog, and why.

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