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“Death Does Not Rot”: Transitional Justice and Local “Truths” in the Aftermath of the War in Northern Uganda

Barbara Meier

Abstract: The article looks at the way Acholi in northern Uganda address war-related matters of “peace” and “justice” beyond the mainstream human rights discourse reflecting some of the basic concepts that are decisive for the way people deal with transitional and local justice. The relationality and the segmentary structure of Acholi society play major roles in categorising “peace” and “war” while being at odds with the globalised standards of human rights that have been brought into play by international agencies, civil society and church organisations as well as the Ugandan state. A major argument is that a one-dimensional understanding of the cosmological underpinnings of rituals as a locally embedded tool of transitional justice (TJ) has an impact on the failure of TJ in northern Uganda. Thus the article highlights the specific cultural dilemmas in which the process of peace currently appears to be stuck.

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Mato oput, the northern Ugandan version of “transitional justice” (TJ), has recently attracted a lot of attention in Peace and Conflict Studies and received substantial support from both national and international agencies. Yet, there is an awkward silence on the matter in Acholi communities themselves.¹ After a phase of accelerated and widespread engagement on issues regarding *mato oput*² (e.g. the public performance of rituals; the encouragement and sponsoring of such rituals by international, national and local aid agencies; and numerous surveys, reports and workshops at different levels and in most villages and trading centres) one rarely hears of any activities regarding TJ or “restorative justice”. Many questions arise, therefore, from the present (i.e. the post-war period) – wherein people in northern Uganda maintain that “there is no real peace” despite (i) all the many different activities and efforts undertaken for social reconstruction and (ii) the absence of rebels since 2006. So what is going on in remote Acholiland? How do local people address war-related matters of “peace” and “justice”? And how do they relate TJ to their own expectations for a peaceful future?³

In the earlier conflict – itself a result of the political turmoil that dominated Uganda’s post-independence history – various rebel groups, largely consisting of displaced Acholi combatants, emerged as a front of resistance to Museveni’s violent seizure of power in 1986. Some of these groups united under the prophetess Alice Auma (or Alice Lakwena, as she is usually referred to), whose mission was to fight evil.⁴ As Heike Behrend (1993) por-

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- 1 Research on Acholi migrants was conducted in Kampala in 2002/2003 and in 2004. From 2008, research on the cosmological context of the conflict in northern Uganda was made possible by the generous support of the Cluster of Excellence on “Religion and Politics in Pre-Modern and Modern Cultures” at the University of Muenster. Field research was carried out between August–November 2008, January–February 2009, July–October 2010 and March–June 2013.
 - 2 At the time of writing a Google search of this term yields almost 13,000 results.
 - 3 I owe thanks to the anonymous reviewers of *Africa Spectrum* for their thoughtful remarks, which led me to sharpen my arguments and revise some of my conclusions. Mina Bahar helped me to look at the conceptual aspects of violence, while Paddy Banya contributed significantly, as always, by lending his expertise on the Acholi language. Bishop Ochola, from whom the quotation in the title originates, represented an unending source of knowledge and wisdom on the Acholi worldview.
 - 4 Heike Behrend published the first in-depth study of the historical and spiritual background to the Holy Spirit’s Mobile Forces in northern Uganda in 1993. Sverker Finnström’s later study (2008) focuses on Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army. A couple of other monographs on specific aspects of the war and its resettlement have been published: see, amongst others, Dolan (2009), Allen (2006), Branch (2011), Temmerman (2001) and Soto (2009). Allen and Vlassenroot (2010) have edited a reader to the conflict’s background and issues of conflict resolution. Since 1997, numerous reports on the potential benefit of using rituals as a form of transitional justice

trayed in the first anthropological account of the initial years of the rebellion in northern Uganda, Alice – instructed by God’s messenger spirit “Lakwena” who had taken possession of her – successfully led the Holy Spirit’s Mobile Forces’ (HSMF) war against the Ugandan army until the former’s eventual defeat in 1987. A successive group, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA),⁵ emerged under rebel leader Joseph Kony,⁶ who has to date not been defeated or apprehended despite numerous attempts.

The last years of the conflict in northern Uganda and the immediate years after the rebels’ relocation to the DR Congo can best be described by Nordstrom’s term “warscape” (1997: 37ff.), first applied to the northern Ugandan war by Finnström (2005: 107). However, while warscape is meant to summarise the living conditions experienced during the conflict itself, it is also applicable to the post-war period. For most Acholi, the period following the LRA’s departure⁷ did not differ greatly from the time preceding it, when nobody knew where they would strike next. Since Kony has not been captured, he could return at any time. “Warscapes entail a shared dialogue about war and templates upon which to act and assess action. These link soldier and civilian, violator and peacemaker, for none make sense in isolation from the other” (Nordstrom 1997: 38)⁸ In northern Uganda, the political aspects of interventions and peace processes present one major dynamic in this particular post-warscape. The contestation and competition of religious agents over “truths” and “meanings”, however, present another dynamic that has so far been overlooked.

While the seemingly occult background to the motives of rebel leaders Alice and Kony, the forceful recruitment of children into the LRA, and the large scale night commuting of children into nearby towns for protection kept

– as done amongst the Acholi – have emerged – thus representing the origins of the *mato oput*-hype in northern Uganda (for example, Pain 1997; Harlacher et al. 2006) For the history of the “career” of *mato oput*, see Meier (2011).

- 5 It is remarkable that neither of these two rebel groups has an Acholi name, but rather use English.
- 6 Alice and Kony are the two most popular rebel leaders/spirit mediums in the conflict. Alice Auma is commonly known as “Alice” or by the spirit’s name, “Lakwena”. Joseph Kony is usually referred to as “Kony”. In Alice’s case it is her Christian name that is used rather than her Acholi name, as is the case with Kony. The reason for this is probably that “Alice” bears resemblance to Acholi female names.
- 7 Kony and his LRA are operating in the DR Congo and Central African Republic, as well as in Southern Sudan. In 2011, he was responsible for more than one hundred deaths in the DR Congo and the kidnapping of many more children besides. For current updates on the situation see: <www.lracrisistracker.com>.
- 8 For a discussion on how the LRA’s practice of violence was a response to international media and donor attention, as well as to information regarding other African rebel groups, see Edmondson (2005).

the sensationalist media well supplied with headlines in the later years of the conflict, the immediate post-war years from 2006 onwards saw a general shift in public and media attention towards the alleged potential of rituals as a means to establish peace. This was considered particularly pertinent in a context where international intervention through the International Criminal Court (ICC) and peace talks with government representatives had failed. In response to the demands of the “hybrid nature of contemporary violent conflicts in the Global South” (Böge 2006: 3), new, adaptive and hybrid forms of conflict resolution have been sought and defined as “transitional justice” or, when referring to local perceptions and norms, “traditional justice”. Some of the advantages of traditional dispute settlement methods include their footing in local practice and consequent wider acceptance at grassroots level, their familiarity and accessibility for local people, their participatory nature and, not least, their comparatively low cost of implementation. Moreover, TJ is expected to better account for locally embedded senses of justice and notions of retribution than the allegedly universally acknowledged Western set of norms that define crimes and propose sanctions.

In this contribution, I shall reflect on some of the basic concepts existing amongst the Acholi that are decisive for the way people talk about “peace” and “justice”, and how these have had an impact on the failure of TJ in northern Uganda. This will address some of the questions that follow from the apparent contradiction between the way *mato oput* was promoted by so many actors from outside the region and criticised and contested by so many from within Acholi communities. Following the mainstream Acholi discourse, “outsiders” can be identified as those Acholi and non-Acholi alike who engage in the discussion and promotion of the peace process. Meanwhile, those seen as the performers of TJ rituals within Acholi communities⁹ are deemed to be the “true” Acholi. Apparently, sacred Acholi rituals found their way into the politics of peace, from where they have gradually trickled back into society as de-sacralised “local knowledge”. In a way, local traditional rituals (the supposed reflection of the moral order) were “modernised” by separating them from their cosmological context and transforming them into symbolic public peace performances,¹⁰ thus constituting an at-

9 Many of the people I refer to in this paper either live in small former internally displaced person (IDP) camps around Kitgum, Palabek and Madi Opei or in hamlets and villages along the Sudan-Uganda border, for example Agoro and the Karimojong area, like Oniya Pacwa. These are camps that were established after the war to facilitate the return of the displaced to their original homesteads. As these camps allow people access to their fields, many have actually remained where they are.

10 Rituals are usually performed at specific sacred sites within the territory of the respective clans. In the context of TJ, they were organised and staged in the public

tempt to create a civil religion and redefine the Acholi people’s relationship with the Ugandan nation state.

Those few elders who knew anything about *mato oput*¹¹ prior to it being promoted in the context of restoring war-torn Acholi society had only little or second-hand information on its background, performance and efficacy.¹² However, they were adamant that it was not the appropriate ritual to use to end a war. In the past, wars were ritually terminated by *gomo tong* (the bending of spears) – another ritual that nobody I talked to ever witnessed personally, just as no one had ever been present when a war was ritually sanctioned by a *lapii* (fire-stick oracle). Some had experienced *mato oput* (the drinking of the extremely bitter juice of an *oput* bush) in the context of a death resulting from an accidental killing.

What is most important from the perspective of many Acholi today, however, is not so much the ritual per se but the compensation that one clan pays to another for the loss of life (*culo kwor*) – which is regarded as the necessary precondition for a future peaceful relationship. The restoration of broken relationships depends on the perpetrator’s clan assuming responsibility for the loss of life and agreeing to the payment of compensation. *Mato oput* represents, then, the ritual execution of activities, where clan representatives of both sides demonstrate their good relationships by sacrificing animals together after a lengthy period of strained avoidance. The ritual that has been publicly performed and mistaken for *mato oput* by many non-Acholi in the post-war period is *nyono tonggweno* (stepping on the egg), which is a

spaces of Gulu town – in front of Rwot Acana II’s palace – with international media coverage and attended by delegates from the state, army and church, as well as international donors and NGOs representatives (cf. Meier 2011: 185-187).

- 11 Numerous reports and publications have described the rituals that are commonly – but misleadingly – referred to as *mato oput*. Many of these were written with the intention of supporting the implementation of the rituals as TJ, or as a general response to TJ activities in northern Uganda. Pre-war descriptions of the phenomenon are scarce, and limited to a few sentences in Girling’s monograph (1960). Other ethnographies of the region have explored similar sets of rituals: for example, Southall (1953), Lienhardt (1961) and Evans-Pritchard (1940). *Mato oput* was “re-discovered” and promoted for the purpose of TJ by Dennis Pain (1997).
- 12 According to Acholi elders, the only way rituals can be efficacious is if they are carried out in the proper way (cf. Meier 2013). Only then will they be sanctioned by the respective ancestors. Should things proceed in a wrong direction after carrying out *mato oput*, one would need to question at what point the involved parties had deviated from the prescribed order. One major precondition for *mato oput* is the socio-morphological level of clans, at which this ritual can be applied. Since the killings by the rebel army as well as Museveni’s forces cannot be delineated according to particular clans existing amongst the Acholi, *mato oput* can thus not be considered the appropriate means of reconciliation in this context.

common ritual to receive and cleanse individuals after a time away (e.g. migrants) (cf. Meier 2011). In summary, TJ activities (surveys, reports and programmes) have reinvented and standardised terms, forms and occasions for the performance of rituals previously only locally validated – a practice comparable to the way Christian missionaries decided on standard Acholi for the translation of the Bible in the early colonial days, as well as the British colonial administration’s decision to call the diverse clusters of people in this region “Acholi”.

The well-meaning intention of peace advocates was doubtlessly to make use of locally accepted methods of bringing peace by empowering the powerless. Caught in the trap of “ethnojustice” (Branch 2011: 154–178), it has become very evident that the agencies promoting “local” rituals as means of TJ in northern Uganda have a one-dimensional understanding of their cosmological underpinnings. Peace activists have appreciated the compelling nature of rituals, but have also expected them to be adaptable to the present conflict.¹³ It never occurred to the researchers studying the issue on behalf of the TJ advocates (many local leaders, Christian religious leaders, international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and even the state of Uganda itself) that rituals may lose their binding force for local “believers”, and hence their efficacy, when taken out of their socially defined context – if, indeed, they ever had one in the first place.

One factor that has been completely overlooked in this context, however, is the socio-morphological framework of clans and sub-clans, which retained some stability throughout the conflict. The actual practice and performance of the rituals, though, has changed over time, varying from one place to the other. Branch rightly criticises the essentialist notion of what he termed the “ethnojustice agenda, in which the fulfilment of justice is equated with the establishment of a traditional social order” (2011: 155). In providing the most recent and extensive discussion of TJ in northern Uganda, he exposes the flaws of the “ethnojustice discourse” as it “purports to describe a single, coherent, positive system that is presented as being universally, consensually and spontaneously adhered to by all members of that culture and that [...] remains valid and should be revived” (ibid.: 163). Peace, according to Branch, can only be found through the inclusion of a multitude of “groups, interests and voices [...], in a word, through democracy” (ibid.: 163).

13 Dennis Pain’s, *The Bending of Spears* (1997), was the first to create the impression that the Acholi are exceptional in their capacity to make peace through restorative rituals. This is, however, not actually true. Rituals to compensate rather than punish after a homicide are widely performed amongst societies in this region (cf. Allen 2006). For an extensive critique of Pain’s work, see Allen (2006, 2008), Branch (2011) and Meier (2011).

While Branch is indisputably right in rejecting notions of a pre-colonial, timeless and pure Acholi culture – especially as portrayed by biased NGO reports and local people themselves – researchers are still well advised to analyse how political processes of social realities today are informed by specific cultural concepts. It is necessary to identify how these concepts are shaped, recreated and articulated. They comprise local cosmologies, the concept of the person, mythical history and kinship systems, all of which are themselves subject to perpetual social transformation. Furthermore, anthropologists, differing perhaps from other social scientists, tend to have justified reservations when it comes to making sweeping generalisations about democracy being the sole way to achieve peace for all human societies. This paper thus strives to avoid the pitfall of the ethnojustice discourse – not by conjuring the image of a timeless Acholi culture or by solely exposing the misguided concepts underlying current TJ practices, but rather by discovering the differences between seemingly identical arguments, perceptions and intentions as they come to the fore in northern Uganda in the current discourses on conflict settlement. This article neither suggests that things can be set right in northern Uganda by performing rituals “the proper way” nor assumes that the presence of democracy is a guarantee of peace; rather, it seeks to highlight the specific cultural dilemmas in which the process of peace currently appears to be stuck.

Today, as one NGO after the other withdraws from the area to attend to crises elsewhere, and with neither international celebrities nor foreign presidents coming to visit the “desperate” people in their internally displaced person (IDP) camps, it is time to take stock of the effects of TJ in northern Uganda thus far.¹⁴ As things stand, hundreds of LRA combatants have returned to the region – after making use of amnesty offers and official government clearance – and resettled amongst their communities or in trading centres and towns, while LRA leader Joseph Kony is still active in neighbouring countries. Despite the huge efforts made to negotiate a peace treaty, there are currently no serious attempts in motion regarding an official

14 One of the anonymous reviewers of this contribution suggested that it is still too early to estimate what the results of TJ efforts in northern Uganda have been. Only six to seven years after the rebels left the country, this remark may appear justified given the continued presence of numerous projects such as, amongst others, the Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative (ARLPI) and the Makerere University-based “Refugee Law Project”. However, Gulu and Kitgum towns already saw hundreds of NGOs arrive several years ago, most of which have since left – with the attention of the media subsequently shifting to other places instead. On the whole, people in towns are seeing project initiatives waning and offices closing down. Moreover, my focus here is mainly on the perspectives of people located far away from NGO offices, and who are unaffiliated to any such programmes.

peace accord. The 2005 ICC arrest warrant pertaining to Kony and his commanders has not yet been executed, nor has it been withdrawn. Most people have now rebuilt their compounds after an interim period in so-called satellite camps. Many, however, remain in these camps¹⁵ or in trading centres along the main roads, thus creating new patterns of settlement altogether. A *tum* (ritual cleansing) of the land is the necessary precondition for people to be able to resettle in their original homesteads and has been subsidised by Catholic NGOs. Caritas, for example, provided thousands of goats for these purifying sacrifices. In many places, *ludito kaka* (clan elders) have encouraged the ritual appeasement of *cen* (vengeful spirits).¹⁶ However, nobody knows exactly how many deaths currently remain unaccounted for. As a consequence, *cen* remains an unresolved and key issue amongst local communities. According to them, it is the presence of *cen* that accounts for the mysterious “nodding disease” that afflicts adolescents in Acholi districts (mainly Lamwo, Pader and Kitgum). Despite the number of publicly staged *mato oput* performances, no war-related case of homicide has actually yet been resolved by *mato oput*.¹⁷ Most NGOs have recently left the region, thus bringing their projects to an end. One effect of this is that thousands of

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- 15 These small camps were established to facilitate resettlement in original homesteads, in contrast to the former IDP camps wherein more than 40,000 people had to live without any means of subsistence (for further information on the precarious situation in IDP camps, see: Dolan 2009). Most Acholi live in hamlets comprised of a few families; several hamlets can be referred to as a village. For Acholi, who do not have separate words for these two entities, both are *gang* (home) – a relational term rather than a description of an exact location.
- 16 The issue of *cen* provides a fascinating opportunity for the study of the relationship between the living and the dead, and between killers and victims – aside from being a vital issue for the restoration of Acholi livelihoods and part of TJ efforts in northern Uganda.
- 17 I know of one war-related case in Mucwini, where negotiations towards *culo kwor* and *mato oput* are still ongoing. At the time of writing it has not yet yielded any results, which is due to fact that the actual killers are not members of the clan that is expected to provide compensation. The case is about a young rebel who had given the LRA the wrong clan name for himself. When he fled from the LRA, they set out to take revenge and killed dozens of members of that clan. Now the afflicted clan is demanding compensation. The negotiations have become stuck because the ex-rebel’s clan has rejected these claims, stating that they did not commit any homicides. To date this impasse has not been resolved, despite mediation by the ARLPI under the guidance of the Catholic Archbishop, Anglican Bishop and Islamic leader. According to my most recent information, the demands have now been re-directed towards the state.

Acholi men and women, members of the newly formed and relatively wealthy middle class in the region’s towns, have since become jobless.¹⁸

On the whole, one might conclude that while *mato oput* does not appear to have yielded the expected results, other activities – such as publicly addressing collective memories of violence and enormous efforts to cleanse land and people from *cen*, the ghostly vengeance of the war’s casualties – have enabled communities to return to their homesteads and to pick up from where their lives had been prior to being interrupted by war. Yet while relationships between individuals and groups on all socio-morphological levels are still severely disturbed, communities lying beyond the organised peace machinery are – despite being unassisted by any projects or funding – engaged in restoring peace. Thus, the groups working at grassroots level, moving within the socially defined borders of their clans and villages, are able to attain and exert a degree of control over local experiences and memories of violence.¹⁹ One such attempt was made by an assembly of household heads and elders in Omiya Pacwa, for example, who gathered together for a communal entrail divination session, sacrifice and *agat* (a specific invocation or litany that is aimed at driving away personal and community afflictions):

Oh, people of Loryomok!
 People of Oenekil
 People of Teirya! [...]
 Visitors of Omiya have come.
 Their hearts are filled with grief.
 We have allowed our visitors to enter.
 We have welcomed them with happiness.
 What our ancestors did long ago is what we are following.
 Aah, Ogili [a clan spirit on top of the mountain Ogili]!
 Aah, Lopalo! [name of a spirit]
 Aah, Layito! [name of a spirit]
 Aah, Lacim [name of a spirit] [...]
 Visitors have brought you food that you should come and eat.

18 Unfortunately, I have no reliable information regarding the total number of NGOs that came to the Acholi region. In Gulu, the place where most NGOs evidently had their offices, more than two hundred such entities were active in the post-war years. Some officials have estimated that more than 700 NGOs were active in northern Uganda at some point during this era.

19 One fascinating example of how people address ghostly afflictions is the case of the *gamba* spirits in Mozambique, presented by Igreja (2003). Spirit possession enables these specialists to appease the spirits of victims by mediating between the dead and the living, thus transforming suffering into healing. Another intriguing case study that provides many interesting parallels to the Acholi conflict is Lan’s account (1985) of the past role of prophets amongst the leading guerrilla troops in Zimbabwe.

Aah, all the bad things that are in front [...]
 Aah, with the sun that sets today,
 With this setting sun it will be taken [community echoes] taken
 Taken/taken
 Taken it far/far [...]
 Aah, if it rains tomorrow,
 If it will rain tomorrow/[echo] grow!
 Harvest!/grow!
 Grow!/very well!²⁰

While this particular form of spirit invocation may not be widely used, in this instance it provided an opportunity for local men to assemble beyond “meetings”²¹ and to address the afflictions and problems of their respective clans. Sitting under their “sacred tree”, invoking clan spirits and inviting them to their commensality of sacrificial meat and drink created a powerful atmosphere of sociality. For the duration of the gathering, at least, *communitas* was established, performed and visibly enjoyed. Although there is no easy way of assessing the long-term effects of this kind of assembly with regard to helping to heal the effects of the past conflict, people went home smiling, feeling fully appeased after the ceremony. Moreover, an older lady, despite being excluded from this kind of ceremony, explained that *agat* had helped to keep Kony away from the village in the past, which is why it had been spared during the war.

However, to deduce from this performance that a hidden and more “authentic” practice of peace restoration of post-violent conflict exists in the region would be an erroneous conclusion indeed. Such a perspective would ignore the many different ways in which people in towns and trading centres, universities and administrations, and remote villages and hamlets talk and think about such rituals. It would also overlook the numerous different attitudes and responses that exist to the various activities taking place that are aimed at restoring peace, such as protest marches, the erection of war memorials, the writing of project proposals, the promotion of the re-establishment of chiefs and local religious institutions, and the invocation of

20 Excerpt from the *agat* prayers of Dalmajo Okwera (died 2010), filmed in January 2009 in Omiya Pacwa. Okwera was introduced as the person who had carried out the same duty during Kony’s presence in the region (*Fighting Spirits*, Meier 2010).

21 “Meetings” is a term that subsumes all gatherings held regarding community development activities. In post-war Acholiland, such events take place in a variety of different civil society, administrative, humanitarian and development contexts. Meetings are held so frequently that those people on whose behalf they take place usually only agree to attend if they are paid a “sitting allowance”, in addition to being provided with food and having their means of transport organised.

Pentecostal charismatic prayers, to name just a few. The approaches taken are manifold, and the contradictions deriving therefrom are not based on simplistic distinctions between being Acholi or non-Acholi. This diversity rather comes from different ideological backgrounds and variations in life-style, based on factors such as location, age, gender, education, personal history and profession, as well as the political and religious affiliations of the people involved. Moreover, the current social, economic, religious and political discourse is shaped by a complex and dynamic dialectic of vocalities.

Most Acholi, many of whom are either Catholic or belong to other (mostly Christian) churches, as well as a number of them who are Muslim, acknowledge the existence of a powerful transcendent force – for which they use different terms. In the past, Acholi did not use to directly address this distant cosmological creator – called Jok in Acholi (as in most other Nilotic languages) – nor did Jok ever receive any kind of veneration.²² This made it easy for Christian missionaries to introduce Rubanga (their translation for the Christian God) and transform Jok into the name for the devil. Over time, many Acholi have come to either reject Jok as the supreme deity or, as is equally common, they have substituted Rubanga²³ or Allah for Jok. In practice, Rubanga is addressed in prayers in church and in invocations made at clan shrines – there is no easy way of telling which understanding is meant. Yet the concept of Jok is crucial for understanding not only the spiritual domains that are important in the daily life of most Acholi, but also the way people think and talk about the roots of the conflict, the course it took over more than twenty years and the best way to end the conflict and restore normal social life.

In Acholi cosmology, the ancestral clan spirits – as well as the wild, un-social spirits – are refractions of Jok, the all-encompassing transcendent spirit to whom everybody and everything ultimately relates. Jok’s presence is not immediately recognisable, but rather becomes perceptible in different moments and through certain modalities (such as the interference of spirits in daily life, as well as revelation in divination, prophecies, dreams and sacrifices). The cosmological order of the social world is mediated through the actions of ancestors and diviners. In times of increasing social pressure, living mediums are possessed by spirits from the non-social realm and become *lakwena* (messengers), who seek to restore the conditions that are nec-

22 Okot p’Bitek even denies the existence of a supreme god amongst the Acholi (1971: 50).

23 Many local Christians, however, have come to regard Jok as satanic. This does not necessarily imply a disbelief on their part in the realm of spirits, but rather a localisation of such spirits in a different discourse – one instead framed by “good” and “evil”.

essary for the continuation of normal social life. Alice Lakwena,²⁴ for instance, was a messenger of Jok or Rubanga, apparently ordered to fight evil in order to save the Acholi. Joseph Kony is another such *lakwena*,²⁵ as well as an *oteka* (military commander), who continued on her path – albeit with disastrous consequences that, from this perspective, triggered fatal and unprecedented cosmological chain reactions. Without a sound understanding of the cosmological context, things appear quite different as the following statement shows:

Kony-type upheavals do not aim at a radical change of the system; they want to destroy it. Not because they want to replace it by something “higher”, by a new way of living, but out of anger and frustration, because their lives do not fit into any system any more. (Doom and Vlassenroot 1999: 35; cf. Meier 2011: 200)²⁶

Same Words, Different Meanings

With regard to conflict resolution and TJ, although people in northern Uganda may be using the same terms as many mediators from outside, they actually have very different ideas about what “peace”, “violence” and “justice” really mean. At first glance, there is concurrence on the assumption of shared global values and norms between peace advocates and those operating in projects, workshops and civil society organisations. A closer look, however, shows how important it is to fully understand the respective objectives of these different actors.

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- 24 Lakwena has been presented as a specific spirit that possessed first Alice and then Kony. According to my information, *lakwena* means “messenger”, which refers to the divine order which is communicated through the respective medium, making her or him a prophet. In Alice’s case, her main messenger was the spirit of an Italian soldier who had died near Murchison Falls (cf. Behrend 1993). Yet, it is not clear how an Italian spirit would come to be given the name Lakwena. My conclusion is that the fact that Alice came to be called Lakwena is an indication that she was seen as a prophet who, in the Acholi worldview, is always considered a medium possessed by God’s messenger.
- 25 I think a certain amount of confusion exists regarding the term *lakwena*. It could either mean that the person possessed by spirits becomes a *lakwena* (messenger of God) or that it is to be considered a specific spirit itself. I have recorded both usages. “There are many spirits who are *lakwena*” and “Lakwena is the main spirit” (tape recorded speech, J. Oyet). Both Kony and Alice had a number of spirits working through them, with most of them hailing from geographically faraway places.
- 26 Today, as Kony wreaks havoc in neighbouring countries, one may be tempted to agree with Doom and Vlassenroot’s interpretation of him as someone who kills without any just or identifiable cause.

The variety of approaches taken reflects the different ideologies in currency regarding how things should be done. Concepts like “development and change”, “revelation and salvation”, “progress and education” or “democracy and human rights” are heavily loaded with specific ideological content. Leopold (2005), whose focus is on neighbouring groups living on the River Nile’s west bank, analyses the various economic and political discourses behind processes of reconstruction and peace.²⁷ State officials’ understandings of peace and reconstruction are, first of all, to end all rebel activities and ensure the smooth administration of the area by the national system of local council (LC). For merchants and business-oriented people living in towns, peace implies economic opportunities more than anything else. NGO workers have social change, gender equality, democracy and development in mind when they talk about peace and reconstruction. Elders, according to Leopold (ibid.: 216) and those amongst the Acholi, refer to the respect of traditional norms when asked what reconstruction implies to them.²⁸ Meanwhile, people in towns, as well as younger Acholi, strive for political participation and access to the “modern world” through education, the Internet, travel and so on.

While the current Acholi setting fully confirms Leopold’s findings, I think one might benefit from delving deeper into the perceptions that Acholi hold with regard to peace and war. For Acholi, the crucial distinction does not follow the Western polarisation of peace and war. What is decisive is the quality of the socio-cosmological exchange relation between the group and Jok, which is expressed by the contrast between a *piny ma ber* (“good” condition) and *piny ma rac* (“bad” condition).²⁹ “However, good surroundings are neither an absolute opposite to bad surroundings, nor the glorious tradition of static harmony, long and forever lost”, says Finnström (2008: 13). Ac-

27 The ethnic groups in the West Nile region were equally affected by the conflict with the LRA. However, in 1986 they already faced a period of reconstruction, when the problems of the Acholi were just beginning. Between 1980 and 1985 West Nilers (amongst them the Kakwa, Lugbara, and so on) were driven into exile, due to their allegiance to Idi Amin. Museveni’s takeover was thus felt to be a relief rather than an invasion, as it was in Acholiland (Leopold 2005: 214f.).

28 With the conviction that “traditional authority” and culture are not conducive to democracy, Branch notes that for “women and youth, especially those in towns [why not in villages?] a return to the idealisations of pre-war order advocated by many male elders, would be neither practical nor just [...] this revival of their traditional authority, men and elders explained, would take place by imposing discipline at the family and clan levels through warnings, fines, corporal punishment and, if all else fails, expulsion from the clan and curses in the name of genuine Acholi identity” (2011: 172).

29 *Piny* is a concept that comprises not only an area or the environment, but also their quality. Finnström’s (2008) monograph, entitled *Living with Bad Surroundings*, reflects precisely the way in which Acholi people describe a desperate situation.

ording to the famous Acholi poet and anthropologist, Okot p'Bitek, war constitutes a bad surrounding as it “speaks to the fact that ‘the whole thing is out of hand, that the entire apparatus of the culture cannot cope with the menace any more’” (cited in *ibid.*: xxx). Taking p'Bitek and Finnström further, the logic behind these concepts is linked to the experience of threats to the necessary conditions for the reproduction of the society, which can be addressed as Jok. A *lweny* (war) may be considered dangerous to the well-being of the society, but this is not necessarily so. If a war is justified and sacralised by the ancestors, it is not an issue to be rejected as *rac* (bad) for it may be seen as vital to the restoration of order in the aftermath of a conflict. Cosmologically speaking, a sacralised war is the necessary precondition for peace and vice versa.

Also from this perspective, the fundamental non-social act of killing – regardless of whether by a soldier, warrior or hunter – removes the killer and the victim from the social sphere of their fellow human beings, categorically redefining them as part of Jok. Acholi perform specific rituals to re-socialise both victim (via *tum* cleansing) and killer (via *kwero merok*, cleansing the enemy). However, the moral evaluation of an act of killing varies according to the type of relationship between killer and victim and the spiritual bond that they form through the act. Killing a fellow clanmate, for instance, is seen as *ojabu* (grave and abominable deed). To kill someone from another clan is considered bad if the clans have a friendly relationship through marriage or otherwise, and this usually calls for lengthy negotiations and rituals to avoid a feud. To kill a person from a distant and hostile clan is not considered bad at all, especially when this happens in the course of a legitimised attack.³⁰ This concept applies to the current situation and has served to reduce the natural inhibition to killing another human being. Interestingly, Riek Machar, who was to become a key mediator between the LRA and the Ugandan government, made use of this relational notion of killing when he convinced Nuer fighters that killing Sudanese government soldiers would not constitute any spiritual danger (Hutchinson 2005: 33f).

Both Kony and Alice embodied divine spirits, upon whose orders any kind of violence would be justified or perhaps even required as proof of di-

30 Due to the limited space available here, I cannot fully elaborate on the blood tie between a killer and a victim that arises through the act of killing with a spear. The incorporation of the vitality and virility of the victim into the killer's body and clan enhances the killer's energy and prestige and will be safeguarded by the ritual of *kwero merok* (cleansing the enemy). A killer name (*moi*) is given to the brave warrior as a designation of praise to publicly acknowledge his great deed. Hutchinson (2005) has written about the effects on the perception of killing brought about by a change of weaponry.

vinity. But while both were initially regarded as prophets armed with supernatural powers, Kony has blended the characteristics of a prophet with those of an *oteka* (military commander) – thus diluting his prophetic performance, while at the same time enhancing his appeal to young men. The careful analysis of accounts provided by former rebels of both the LRA and the HSMF discloses that while these two rebel groups used similar practices, their appeal to the surrounding northern Ugandan population differed markedly. Alice, who was ultimately active for less than two years, maintained her spiritual character as Lakwena throughout, whereas Kony increasingly gained the reputation for being a warrior who had lost his cause and was simply running wild.

Sometime in the past, the rebels killed very many people of Palabek. [...] Kony issued an order that he did not want to see anything that lives. I was part of that operation. Be they dogs, cats, rats or goats, anything that moves was supposed to be killed. That was an order from above. People died in big numbers during that operation.³¹

At 5pm the fighting was finished, with 136 soldiers of the NRA [state army] captured alive and chained. One of the 60th Brigade then shot them all with a machine gun. Alice was annoyed when hearing that Corner Kilak was taken even though the singing was not finished. People were fearing Alice because they had not obeyed her orders.³²

While Alice, as a prophetess, had nothing but a divine order to justify her actions, Kony’s war appeared to connect to the Acholi history of feuding and warriorhood, with people discussing the validity and existence of an ancestral blessing as Kony’s source of legitimisation. Thus, the difference between Alice and Kony does not lie in the atrocities that their groups committed, but in the way that their insurgencies were seen by the community.

As far as the records and memories of old Acholi allow us to understand, a war or cattle feud could only take place if a cosmological justification for it had been visibly demonstrated beforehand. This proof is called *lapii* (fire-stick oracle), whereby a piece of wood is rubbed to spark a flame. If this succeeds, it means that the cause is just and has the necessary spiritual support; if not, then a war cannot take place, as it would have disastrous effects.³³ The

31 Former rebel B., interview transcript, Kitgum, February 2009.

32 Former rebel L., interview transcript, Kitgum, August 2010.

33 Acholi make use of oracles on a number of different occasions, such as the feeding of wild cucumbers to rats to decide on an heir to a particular office. The will of Jok (as noted, the highest spiritual deity – not to be confused with *jok*, a refraction of the former, who is often a mediator between Jok and humans) can also become recognisable in the way that specific birds fly, call and in where they settle, or – as is

scorched fire sticks of past wars are part of the treasured clan belongings to this very day. Behrend (op. cit.) differentiates between two different kinds of war: *hveny lapir* and *hveny kulo kwor*.³⁴ According to her, the former is the kind of war that depends on the positive outcome of the rubbing of the fire stick to justify an initial attack, while the latter literally means “war of retaliation for a life”. Behrend mentions that Alice claimed to have had *lapii* to justify her war (1993: 48). Given the way in which clan elders carefully guard their position as the caretakers of ancestral shrines, I find it highly unlikely that the fire-stick oracle was consulted for Alice.³⁵ Alice, the unmarried daughter of a Madi man from Adjumani, was not a member of any Acholi clan and could not have had access to a group of Acholi elders who could perform these rituals and thus legitimise her objectives. Moreover, as a prophetess, the origin of her mission came directly from God and would therefore not have required the consent of local leaders and ancestors.

Bishop Ochola, along with many other Acholi people, has made it clear that Acholi under all circumstances heed the rule to “never commit the first offence”.³⁶ Thus the *lapii*, as a divine oracle, would prevent any form of initiating violence being instigated. Acholi are well aware, though, that what appears just from their side might be considered unjust from their enemy’s perspective. In effect, the right to defend oneself against an attack from another group is thus always behind any kind of war fought in Acholiland. Of course, all fights can be viewed as a “response” to some form of offense, which might justify every war in this area according to Behrend.

In the context of the deaths caused by the LRA as well as by the national army, local people are aware that it is not practical to expect the clans of combatants to provide compensation for these killings – as each Acholi clan is involved both as victim and perpetrator in numerous different cases. Instead, clan elders expect the state to fulfil this necessary obligation towards reconciliation by compensating for the loss of their family members. From their point of view, reconciliation cannot proceed without some form of compensation being provided, especially when former rebels – the very people who can be readily identified as killers – are provided with animals

very common – in dreams. Former rebels have told me about many instances when Kony had predicted a certain outcome and how this was confirmed in dreams or by the birds that one had observed or heard.

- 34 The spelling in my own sources is *hveny lapii* and *culo kwor* (“c” is pronounced like the English “ch”). There are numerous different possible spellings for the Acholi vernacular.
- 35 Nor did Alice Lakwena’s father Severino or his younger daughter ever confirm this had happened during any of my frequent discussions with them between 2008 and 2010.
- 36 Bishop Baker MacLeod Ochola, interview transcript, Kitgum, July 2010.

and crop seeds by humanitarian relief associations once they agree to leave the bush. In addition to these “rewards”, amnesty acts covering all past rebel activities prevent any other form of justice being served.

Acholi differentiate between *lweny kaka* (inter-clan wars) and *lweny pagamente* (wars fought with the government) both caused by clashes with the local moral world (Finnström 2006: 207). Finnström’s conclusion is based on written statements of the LRA and on the similarities to a comparable situation in Sudan, where – according to Hutchinson – Nuer fighters were convinced that fighting a “‘government war’ [...] was completely devoid of the social and spiritual risks associated with homicides generated by ‘home-land wars’” (2005: 33f.). This differentiation, however, is not fully convincing. The ongoing lively debate in Acholi society about the just cause of this war – and the alleged blessing that permitted it – show how deeply the conflict between the LRA and state forces is embedded in the relational categories of their socio-cosmological world. It may be difficult to apply these categorisations to the recent situation and there may be no straightforward answers; yet they still provide the leading arguments for and against the LRA’s justification to fight the Ugandan government. Finnström’s work on the cosmological justification of war summarises how important these issues may become, even if only in retrospect, when Acholi attempt to ascribe meaning to the 20-year history of rebel activity. There is no overall consensus as to whether Kony did or did not have the blessing of his elders and ancestors to fight the government, whether that blessing has turned into a curse, and who has done what to invoke this kind of trouble;³⁷ nor is there any consistent Acholi version of the “truth” behind the war.

The debates in Acholiland, as well as all the interpretations drawn therefrom, clearly demonstrate that a generally accepted cosmological legitimisation for such an “all-Acholi” war has not yet been found; it is, however, still considered an issue of major importance that local society finds one. This is due to the political structure and the restriction of the power of local leaders to their respective domains, where they depend on the ritual authority of elders and ancestors of the involved clans for consent to mobilise able-bodied men for war. Acholi elders have repeatedly tried to point out that the recent war exceeded all locally known categories, but were not fully understood. According to these senior members of society, it is “beyond” Acholi tradition and culture, referring to the socio-political limitations of the social domains of chiefdoms and villages. Spirits of the kind that possess Kony belong to the non-social domain, which surpasses the influ-

37 People in southern Uganda often point out in discussions that the Acholi deserve to have to go through the hardship of the war because they themselves had blessed and approved of the LRA’s mission.

ence that ancestral clan spirits have over the local moral social environment. From this perspective, even the Acholi paramount chief, Rwot Acana II, does not have any political authority beyond his own domain of Payera – his paramountcy is regarded solely as a colonial introduction that has no binding political authority for other Acholi areas. As such, even if Kony had ever received the *lapii* blessing it would have been limited only to those rebels who are members of the patrilineal clans of the chiefly domain that bestowed it, falling under the political control of the Rwot of Payera and the spiritual authority of the *jok*³⁸ on Odek Mountain. Rebels from other places would have had to get blessings from their respective chiefdom spirits.³⁹

This political segmentation accounts for the many different versions of the “truth” about how the conflict began, and how these accounts spread throughout the entire land of the Acholi people and beyond. The reform of the political administration into counties, sub-counties and parishes has not changed this basic segmentary structure, which plays a major role in shaping the relationship of Acholi both towards each other and towards their position in a modern nation state with a distant and alien government. In line with this, it would be pointless to bless warriors from other clans and villages, as they do not stand under the guardianship of the blessing’s ancestors. To summarise, the relationality and the segmentary structure of Acholi society play major roles in categorising “peace”, “war” and “homicide”, while being at odds with the globalised standards of human rights that have been brought into play by international agencies, civil society and church organisations, and the Ugandan state itself.

Social Healing and Making Peace through Rituals

The core principles of social relationality⁴⁰ and political segmentarity are equally crucial when it comes to issues of social reconstruction. Throughout the war,

38 See footnote 33.

39 Some of the confusion regarding the blessing of the rebels may be due to the other, “lesser” blessings that can be given by anybody – in the form of some twigs of the *oboke obwedo* plant, or of the blessing by spittle (*laa*) (Finnström 2006).

40 Even seemingly fixed terms like clan (*kaka*) or home (*gang*) are relational in the sense that they may refer to different units of people, depending on the given context. For example, to identify oneself it is not sufficient only to name one’s clan, as one’s name, father’s name and clan and mother’s brother’s name and clan need to be given too. To the Acholi, a person is thus composed of a particular set of relations, which are the result of the affinal relations between patri- and matri-clans. The patri-clan alone is not sufficient, as it will certainly have different branches in

and especially after the rebels had moved on from Acholi to torment people across the Ugandan border, individuals at all social levels engaged in a discourse on social reconstruction in the medicalised language of “healing”. In line with this, the rebel groups were identified as the “illness” responsible for “wounding” or “afflicting” the “body” of Acholi society. As a result, a “collective therapy” was required, allegedly to be found in the undertaking of ritual performances so as to “heal” local society. While Leopold (op. cit.) draws attention to the problems relating to the widespread usage – not only in the anthropological discipline but also in other fields – of biomedical metaphors in describing social processes, Reynolds-Whyte (1989) poses the question of whether medical anthropology has increasingly come to cover issues that were formerly addressed by religious anthropology.

Although it is certainly fascinating to trace the origins of the association of societies with human organisms in early European political philosophy,⁴¹ it is not so much a problem of academic paradigms and approaches that interest us in looking at northern Uganda: rather, we are concerned with the tangible consequences that arise from the ways in which concepts are shared at one level of interaction, while at another they can imply quite different things altogether. As Leopold (2005: 216) remarks:

As elsewhere in Africa, West Nilers [as well as the people on the other side of the River Nile] tend to use the same phrases for both individual and social sicknesses; in African languages, as in the language of the World Health Organization, the socio-economic and the biomedical tend to be synonymous.

The worldview of international organisations, donors and NGOs is one that generally sees violent conflict as an anomaly that humankind has to face every once in a while. Hobbes’ statement “like worms in the entrails of a natural man” is the title that Vinci (2007) selected for his comparative analysis of the term “warlord”. Although Hobbes did not intend to denote any similar phenomena with this phrase, it portrays what contemporary analysts view as the most striking amongst the various conceptual backgrounds to the issue of warlords. This particular analysis by Vinci refrains from asking about the specific cosmological concepts of the societies from where the respective warlords come, in which they act and how they are perceived. Societies during and after conflicts are regarded as wounded social bodies in

various places with allegiances to different political domains. Belonging to an aristocratic clan (*ka*) also calls for a relational specification, as it is “royal” only in relation to the dependant clan (*labong*) – and is thus not an absolute category that can be transferred to other places.

41 See Hobbes (1970 [1651]).

need of healing. In a way, this is perceived as a universally accepted form of acknowledgment of what happens during violent conflict, and a means of dealing with the “messy, subjective, unmanageable, hysterical [...] stories” (Malkii 1997: 232).

In northern Uganda, as in other areas of the world too, social healing and related concepts have undoubtedly become the mainstream way of talking about the past, at least in relation to what is now considered the necessary way forwards. The ritual form of TJ is thus deemed the appropriate and adequate “remedy” for the “collective woundedness” of the Acholi. Yet, as Leopold pointed out, “it does not provide a very useful language for talking about the political and economic aspects of social reconstruction” (2005: 217). The relationship of Acholi society to the Ugandan state cannot be addressed in this language and context, as it obscures the fact that the problems faced are not solvable by the mere performance of rituals. As has been observed before, the language of bodily afflictions and healing – as used by international agents in the context of post-war transition – translates easily into Christian and Acholi versions. In this vein, the Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative (ARLPI) strongly advocates “social healing” in the form of justice achieved through rituals. They, like the UN and others, proclaim the need to “heal the wounds within our hearts”.⁴²

The Acholi way of looking at the present situation, however, is to interpret social as well as environmental crises in the idiom of spiritual affliction. Thus, all social and “natural” calamities affect the entire community; it is thus the responsibility of the clan elders to get rid of these spiritualised *gemo* (illnesses). After identifying the cause and nature of the affliction, and the necessary rituals to appease the clan *jok*, people are called together to *ryemo gemo* (drive away the disease). In this collective action, people gather armed with pots and pans or anything else that is likely to create a lot of noise. Making an enormous racket, they all cross the village, chasing the *gemo* into the next body of water – whereafter they break off their chase to rush back into their houses without ever turning back.

The need to chase away *gemo* occurs fairly frequently and is repeated annually. At the time of writing (2012), a mysterious disease was afflicting children and youths in different places in Acholiland. Children between ages five and fifteen are affected by an as yet unidentified disease that has become widely known as the “nodding disease”.⁴³ Village by village, clan by

42 Father Santo Ojok, film interview transcript, Kitgum, January 2009.

43 To date, medical doctors continue to be puzzled by this disease that seizes children as it leaves some severely affected while others appear to eventually recover. Kitgum district appears to be the most affected area, and many children have died of the disease’s effects (for updated information regarding research on the nodding

clan, people will doubtlessly perform *ryemo gemo* to expel this disease. However, according to the affected communities, this can only be successful if the root cause is first identified. One local explanation for this traumatic phenomenon is that it is caused by *cen*, who are taking revenge on the living for the former having been killed or having died without the necessary rituals being performed. For Acholi, therefore, this disease is a consequence of the fact that many of those killed during the war have died without spiritual justification and whose spirits have not been ritually appeased. The effects of *cen* can be manifold: some kind of disaster that afflicts a family and may expand to the entire clan, the infertility of women and animals, droughts and/or floods. Clan elders all over the Acholi districts have tried to drive off and banish Kony and his LRA in the same way that they deal with *gemo*. One elder in Omiya Pacwa⁴⁴ recalled part of the invocation used to chase away the spiritual affliction of Kony:

This is the person [referring to the eldest of the assembled] who picked up the spear before God, the way the Acholi invoke God. Then he marked the ground, saying:

“Kony, come and we laugh.
 If you cannot come home, go to Sudan!
 God, today the Acholi do not want bad things,
 today the Acholi do not want bad things!
 God we stand before you in the name of Lagoro [the domain’s divine ancestor],
 we call on you in the name of Lagoro.
 Lagoro, you helped Acholi for a long time.
 Today Acholi have refrained from all bad things.
 We have produced Kony from our own belly.
 Why is Kony killing our children?
 Why is Kony disturbing our women?
 Why is Kony disturbing the land?
 Today, God, you created the sun, you created the wind,
 today with the rising of the new sun,
 when it is going to set,
 the sun has taken and taken, taken and taken,
 taken it far....”

The way Acholi perceive the affliction by Kony is that the spirits which possess and control him could not be controlled by clan elders and are running

disease, see: <www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6103a3.htm?s_cid=mm6103a3_w>).

44 Clan elders of Omiya Pacwa, interview transcript, Omiya Pacwa, February 2009.

wild, quite literally so. When the government, UN representatives or church representatives talk about the LRA as a disease and of their history as social trauma, they thus mean quite a different thing to what Acholi do, although they use the same terms. A closer look at the TJ ritual of *mato oput* reveals quite the same kind of “misunderstanding”:

They [the rituals] were not necessarily linked to forgiveness in the sense that activists suggested. The Acholi term *timokeeca* has a range of meanings, from formal amnesty to the Christian notion of turning the other cheek or simply having a formerly abducted person living in the home. This meant that assertions about a remarkable Acholi capacity to “forgive”, as manifest in *mato oput*, were sometimes a misrepresentation of what local people were actually saying. (Allen 2008: 47)

Despite the many differences between Christian, Western, legal and basic local concepts like guilt and responsibility, atonement, punishment and compensation, and retribution and restoration, all find a common basis from which to act in the form of references to the “woundedness” of Acholi society and the attendant need for “healing”. The peace discourse has found a common ground in the analogy of Acholi society being seen as a wounded body. Although Allen is aware of the different conceptions underlying the efforts of advocates of TJ in northern Uganda, he considers the possibility of “select rituals” being codified in a way necessary for any kind of socially accepted justice system to emerge. Even if, at present, the TJ practice of encouraging *mato oput* and similar rituals may “become formalised into a pseudo-traditional system” (ibid.: 50), they may have an impact, after all, if their credibility draws on local practice.

Apparently, at the level of aid projects it does not matter that Acholi genuinely have a very different understanding of how a society can be afflicted by illness – that is, by spiritual penetration taking the form of contagious diseases. Today, several years after Allen’s suggestion was first made, it has become clear that *mato oput* has not developed into any kind of codified practice – mostly due to the misinterpretations and over-expectations of the practice by peace advocates and the inadequacy of this kind of ritual to settle the wider-reaching legacies of the conflict between rebels and the state army. Not only did most local people doubt the efficacy of these public performances, many were afraid that they might even backfire; namely, because de-sacralising rituals risks incurring further spiritual affliction – a consequence that would have an effect on the entire society.

Conclusion

In Acholiland, TJ (in the form of ritual performances) has failed – but not because of the short attention span of the international donor community and humanitarian organisations. To local communities, restoring peace is, first and foremost, an issue to be resolved between the clans of the victim and of the perpetrator. Delegating responsibility to the Ugandan state and humanitarian organisations cannot address, at least to any depth, the problems of spiritual affliction. This is not because of half-hearted commitment, but rather because the core principles of the diarchic model of authority and relationality are not taken into consideration by the peace advocates from outside, whose overriding objective has been to establish overall, sustainable peace. This does not mean, however, that there is not a dire need for every Acholi clan in northern Uganda to reconnect with their respective clan spirits and ancestors. Bishop Ochola’s comment “death does not rot” summarises what is felt in Acholiland – namely, the absolute priority of finding a way to appease the *cen* and to generate and integrate a spiritual understanding of the war’s underlying causes. The current nodding disease epidemic, for example, is linked to spiritual afflictions caused by the war. The many unaccounted deaths still present a cosmological threat to the people and thus need to be ritually resolved. If left unattended, any calamity, epidemic or violent conflict will be perceived as having grown out of the unresolved legacies of the LRA’s war.

From today’s point of view, one might conclude that TJ has passed the Acholi by. Martial forms of justice have, once again, returned to the centre of international public attention. At the time of writing, an American NGO had promoted quite the opposite of TJ for northern Uganda via the platforms of YouTube and Facebook. Spreading globally via the Internet was a movement called “Kony 2012”,⁴⁵ which aimed to generate worldwide attention and outrage towards the atrocities of the region. In this global campaign⁴⁶ to demonise Kony in the eyes of the world, “justice” is specifically taken to mean finding and stopping the rebel leader through military operations. But, as before, it is questionable what this new round of finding “justice” means to the people in far-away places like the DR Congo, Central African Republic, South Sudan and Uganda – where violence is an inescapable daily threat rather than an emotive theme on Facebook or YouTube that can be switched off at any time by the simple click of a mouse.

45 See <www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc>.

46 This campaign was recently discussed in *Africa Spectrum* by Finnström (2012).

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“Death does not rot”: *Transitional Justice* und lokale “Wahrheiten” im vom Krieg gezeichneten Norduganda

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag untersucht, wie Acholi in Norduganda jenseits des Menschenrechtsdiskurses „Frieden“ und „Gerechtigkeit“ verstehen, und zeigt grundlegende lokale Denkweisen und Rechtsvorstellungen auf, die für ihren Umgang mit *Transitional-Justice*-Verfahren entscheidend sind. Bei der Definition der Begriffe „Krieg“ und „Frieden“ spielen Relationalität und Segmentarität der Acholi-Gesellschaft eine wesentliche Rolle, stehen aber im Gegensatz zu den globalisierten Menschenrechtsstandards, wie sie von internationalen Akteuren, zivilgesellschaftlichen Gruppen, kirchlichen Organisationen und auch dem ugandischen Staat vertreten werden. Die Autorin betont, dass ein eindimensionales Verständnis der kosmologischen Hintergründe von Ritualen, die für *Transitional-Justice*-Maßnahmen herangezogen wurden, zum Scheitern des Konzepts der *Transitional Justice* in Norduganda beigetragen hat. Sie identifiziert die spezifischen kulturellen Dilemmata, in denen der Friedensprozess in Norduganda derzeit festzustecken scheint.

Schlagwörter: Uganda, Acholi, Bürgerkrieg, *Transitional Justice*, Vergangenheitsbewältigung, kulturelle Werte und Normen, Traditionelles Recht