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REVIEW ARTICLE

NORTHERN UGANDA REVISITED

Tim Allen

SVERKER FINNSTRÖM, *Living with Bad Surroundings: war and existential uncertainty in Acholiland, northern Uganda*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press (pb US$72.50 – 91 554 5747 9). 2003, 352 pages.

BEN KNIGHTON, *The Vitality of Karamojong Religion: dying tradition or living faith?* Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate (hb £55 – 07546 0383 0). 2005, 366 pages.

MARK LEOPOLD, *Inside West Nile*. Oxford, Kampala and Santa Fe: James Currey (pb £16.95 – 085255 940 2; hb £45.00 – 085255 941 0), Fountain Publishers (pb price not given – 9970 02 496 5) and School of American Research Press (pb US$29.95 – 1 930618 65 4; hb $65.00 – 1 930618 64 6). 2005, x +192 pages.

'And now we leave civilization.' That was the observation, as we drove north of Masindi, of the 'health educator' who had been appointed to work with me by the Ugandan Ministry of Health. It was one of numerous examples I came across of prevalent attitudes towards the north among southern Ugandans. She was at least willing to accompany me, although she did not last long in the field. A friend who works for a Kampala-based UN agency told me how he had to force one of his staff to visit projects in the north by threatening her with being suspended. On arrival at his office the following day he found a church service being performed around the car allocated for the trip, and southern Ugandans praying in support of the terrified employee.

When I returned last year it had been over ten years since I had visited the north. During that time it seemed that little had happened to change the long-standing division in the country between north and south. Rather the increased affluence of at least some people in the south had exacerbated it. But this is not to suggest that things in the north have remained the same. Although the north may be closed to most people living in the south, it has opened up in surprising ways to the outside world. Even if the mass of the rural population are largely unaffected, the number of traders, officials and urban residents with mobile phones amazed me, and there seems to be satellite television in the bars of every medium-sized town. In places that are supposed to be 'remote', it is possible to watch the English Premiership football matches. While I was in Kitgum, in the middle of the war zone, my wife rang me from north London and I was able to describe to her what was going on in an Arsenal match at Highbury, not far from where we live. 'The Gunners', incidentally, are passionately supported by some members of the Ugandan People's Defence Force. So supporting Manchester United or Chelsea could be interpreted as a kind of 'weapon of the weak'.

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Another remarkable introduction is the Internet. The bigger towns have 'Internet cafes' and all the aid agencies have their own systems. They are an important source of news and communication, and are intensively used by local researchers in preference to any other source of written information. To give just one example, while I was working in northern Uganda last year, I came across two long-term studies on local understandings of healing, both funded by aid agencies and employing full-time researchers. Both had also commissioned literature reviews on the topic, summarizing the finding of earlier research. However, neither had accessed work in prestigious journals (such as this one) or books. The cited items were locally produced reports or materials that could be downloaded freely from the Internet. One of the projects had been recording clan histories and customs, based at the very mission where Fr Crazzolara had worked in the 1940s and 1950s, without any awareness that much of what was being collected had been described before. Almost no one had read Heike Behrend's book on Alice Lakwena, even though it is available in Kampala bookshops, let alone the outstanding study by Sverker Finnström – one of the three books reviewed here. I have found this with my own earlier work, too. Anything conventionally published has been largely ignored, but online discussion papers and reports are printed and quite widely read and discussed among aid agency workers and some government officials. Something important is going on, which will have consequences for academic publishing on Africa. Soon publishing books may be an anachronism, at least for people living in Africa itself.

There are, however, bookshops in Kampala, servicing the educated elite, tourists and expatriates. It would be sensible if all three of the books reviewed in this article were available. But even that will not happen for two of them. Only Leopold's book on West Nile has been marketed at an affordable price ($30). The books by Knighton and Finnström cost $100 and $75 respectively – the latter for a paperback! Such prices are likely to place them beyond the reach of anyone who does not have access to a well-resourced university library. It is a great pity, because, taken together these books help fill an important gap. They deal with all three of the main northern regional areas: 'West Nile' in the north-east (currently administered as Arua, Nebi, Yumbe and Adjumani districts), 'Acholiland' in the central north (currently administered as Gulu, Pader and Kitgum districts), and 'Karamoja' in the north-east (currently administered as Kotido, Moroto and Nakapiripirit districts). The openness of Uganda to researchers since the late 1980s, combined with a continuous supply of external funding, has resulted in a quite substantial literature. However, the regions of the north, comprising about a quarter of the whole country, have been neglected. While various aid agencies have commissioned studies, there has been much less in the way of in-depth field research, and the generally positive image of Uganda under President Museveni has been almost exclusively based on information from the south. The consequences of the war in 'Acholiland' are occasionally acknowledged and discussed in the international media, but rarely with any serious analysis. Yet, by any standards, this must rank as one of the world's worse humanitarian disasters.

A reason for the concentration of research in the south of Uganda is obvious. Working in the north can be very tough – a point given prominent emphasis in Mark Leopold's *Inside West Nile*. This is a shorter book than the other two, and is written in a very readable and accessible style. Much of it is a critical discussion of secondary and primary literature, focusing on various aspects of the region's past, and making it a useful introduction to this part of Uganda. Only the chapter on urban Arua, where the author was based, provides new ethnographic material, supplementing the findings of Kate Meagher (1990) on

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the town and its environs in the late 1980s. This was not the original intention, but the author arrived in West Nile in the mid-1990s, when the security situation deteriorated for a period, and he was stuck in the municipality. Tellingly, his chapter on Arua is called 'Arua Means Prison'. The only mention of a trip outside was to attend a party with some international aid workers to celebrate the opening of a new air raid bunker in Koboko, allegedly Idi Amin's home town, some 60 kilometres away. As the author makes clear, his fieldwork turned out to be frustrating, depressing and sometimes very frightening. Unable to live with a local family or carry out conventional participant observation, he spent his time interviewing people in the town, many of whom were displaced from other areas, and most of whom seem to have been able to speak English. In the book he draws on these discussions, as well as work by local historians who studied at Makerere in the early 1970s, and uses them to comment on archival materials and the work of earlier researchers, notably John Middleton on the Lugbara, but also Aidan Southall on the Alur, Anne King on the Yakan cult, and myself on the Madi.

The underlying thesis of the book is that West Nile exists under a kind of curse. It is perceived as a place of violence and horror, the epitome of Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' – which may actually have been inspired by late nineteenth-century accounts of the region. As a consequence, or as an aspect of this reputation, West Nile was systematically marginalized for most of the twentieth century. For a period until Protectorate rule was established it was a killing ground for unscrupulous ivory hunters and adventurers. Later, it was treated as a labour reserve for southern Uganda and for military recruitment. Idi Amin, it is suggested, was a product of this history. Today, West Nile is condemned to isolation and poverty, excluded from any economic benefits that have accrued in other parts of Uganda under President Museveni since the mid-1980s. At the end of the book, there is a chapter on 'Lifting the Curse'. This discusses the role that might be played by new representations of the past in social reconstruction or 'healing' (a term Leopold borrows from my work – although he imbues it with rather more meaning than I think I had in mind).

An unusual approach taken in the book is to present the historical chapters in the 'wrong' order – going backwards in time. This is done to avoid a conventional narrative account, to concentrate on certain moments or issues that are highlighted as especially important, and to explore the curse of marginality as a form of what Foucault called 'archaeology of knowledge'. This turns out to be much less pretentious and confusing than it sounds – although a date chart of events in the 'right' order might have been helpful, and I suspect that some readers will be tempted, as one of my students has been, to read the book in reverse. Apart from any theoretical merit the approach may have, it allows the author to give his impressions of particular periods, without becoming bogged down in detail and, as he puts it, 'to disrupt the causal implications, in order to throw into question the repetitive association of the people of West Nile with violence and the consequent implication that they are the source of their own marginality and misfortunes' (Leopold 2005: 7–8). However, there are also important limitations and dangers, which I don't think the author fully overcomes.

In the first place, by selecting those themes that repeat the points about marginality and violence, many other things are left out, even where there are materials to hand which might have been used. Thus the chapter on the period '1995–1962' sets aside literature on social change, such as the work of Barnes-Dean (1986), and concentrates on two themes: a discussion of the problems involved in the return of refugees from Sudan in the 1980s, and of

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some of the debates about Idi Amin. With respect to the former, it is argued that my comments on the return of Madi refugees to areas on the east bank of the Nile (in what is now Adjumani District) apply to West Nile as a whole. There is actually some confusion here, because my research was in fact mostly among returning refugees settling to the west of the Nile in Moyo District and in the neighbouring Aringa County, which has more recently become Yumbe District (the town of Yumbe, incidentally, is located about 60 kilometres from Arua, not 'fifteen miles' as suggested on page 20). However, leaving the muddled geography aside, what was striking in the late 1980s was the degree of variation between places. Most of the Madi refugees had been attacked in the refugee settlements in Sudan, and had to flee back to Uganda very quickly in 1986/7, leaving food and belongings behind them. In contrast, those returning to Aringa County and areas further west, returned in stages, bringing back belongings and gradually establishing homesteads in Uganda. Many families continued to live on both sides of the border, making the best possible use of aid programmes on either side, until the fighting in southern Sudan spread towards the end of the decade. This is not to suggest that people living in Aringa County or closer to Arua were well-off – far from it. There were also particular places where acute difficulties were similar to those faced in Moyo District. Nevertheless, driving from Moyo to Arua at the end of the 1980s one had a sense of increasing levels of prosperity – most noticeable in the huge numbers of bicycles and the proliferation of small livestock. This impression was confirmed in various household surveys that were carried out at the time. In rural areas close to Yumbe and Arua, an income was possible from the sale of tobacco to BAT buyers, while Arua town itself was full of energy and economic dynamism – something well caught in Kate Meagher's study of the informal economy. The point is that experiences were very mixed, and were not all 'bad'. With respect to trade in particular, living near the border could have distinct advantages.

I have similar reservation about other chapters too. For example, the chapter on the period '1913–1850' suggests that the whole of West Nile was devastated by the activities of ivory and slave traders, elephant hunters and imperial armies. But it is much more likely that the effects were felt mostly in the lowlands along the Nile and the highlands within relatively easy reach of the riverine forts. This is one reason why the groups that came to be classified as Madi appeared to be different enough from those that came to be called Lugbara. It was also partly why Weatherhead, the first District Commissioner for West Nile, was eager to exclude the Madi from his administration. Leopold implies at various points in his book that the Madi and Lugbara can be treated as the same, and that the separate classification was a kind of mistake, or merely the result of administrative convenience. But there was a bit more to it than that. Here, as elsewhere, his selective use of secondary literature combined with his analytical method suggests a misleading degree of homogenization.

It is certainly the case that the earliest accounts of the region sometimes use the term Madi for populations that were later called Lugwari or Lugbara. In his 1866 book on the upper Nile, Samuel Baker even uses the 'Madi' to refer to populations that were later called Acholi (and that he himself subsequently called 'Shooa'). This was not surprising. Before the establishing of 'tribes' with tribal boundaries under colonial administrations, such classifications of populations, where they existed, were more fluid – and less significant – than they were to become. The word *madi* is likely to have come from the word for 'a person' in several languages now usually classified as 'Eastern Sudanic'. If a translator's own 'mother tongue' happened to be one of these languages, he may well have told an inquisitive European adventurer that what he was talking

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to was 'a person', even if that person did not actually speak an Eastern Sudanic dialect. However, the events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had social effects, and by the time of the 1910s, there were also obviously both more translators and a somewhat better understanding of linguistic diversity and specificity. Weatherhead was aware that groups living along the Nile and close to the border with Sudan spoke dialects that were closely related to those of people living in other parts of West Nile, notably the 'Lugwari', and initially he expressed the view that they should be under the authority of his station. But be quickly changed his mind.

In 1919 Weatherhead deliberately established a tribal boundary between 'the Madi' and 'the Lugwari' by establishing an unpopulated area between them, and he expressed his reasons for not wanting to administer them very clearly in correspondence with the Provincial Commissioner. One reason was the fact that chiefs who had been appointed near the Nile were nine days march from his headquarters in Arua, but perhaps more importantly, he also did not think the people he called 'Madi' were a good influence. The upheavals of preceding years meant that, unlike the 'Lugwari' they did not have many cattle, and had become used to a more settled way of life. They had also been living close to Arabic-speaking garrisons from the north since the 1860s – and had thereby come under the influence of Islam, and were prone to various diseases, which needed to be contained. For all these reasons, Weatherhead argued that mixing with other groups was inadvisable. His opposite number, based at Gulu, was also very reluctant to take charge of these people, and the result was that Madi sub-district passed back and forth between West Nile and Acholi districts, until eventually being granted its own separate district status. It was also designated a closed area, with even labour migration being prevented for many years, and a concerted effort was made to reverse 'corrupting' influences. There was consternation when it came to light that Arabic was still being used as the language of administration in the late 1920s, and the Catholic Comboni Fathers were encouraged to intensify their missionary and educational activities. They did this with enthusiasm, and by 1938 claimed in their newsletter that the Madi were the first 'Catholic tribe' in Africa. In this context it is ironic that those 'Lugwari' who had been separated from the Madi in 1919 were settled to the east of Yumbe, where the fall-out of the Yakan cult uprising of the same year meant that they mostly remained (or became) Muslim.

Mentioning these kinds of developments reminds us that the identities, ways of life and attitudes of the different groups living in West Nile have changed radically over time. There have been social processes at work, which are difficult to see when examining the past as a series of snapshots taken in a variety of different locations. At various points in *Inside West Nile* the region is represented by a discussion of a particular group at a particular moment. More often then not, information relates to the Lugbara. But I doubt that Middleton himself would claim that what he wrote about the Lugbara from fieldwork in the early 1950s necessarily applied to all the Lugbara at that time. He makes a distinction between the highland and lowland Lugbara, and did not carry out much research in the vicinity of Yumbe, where some of Leopold's informants came from. I also think that the difference between the writings of John Middleton on the Lugbara and those of Aidan Southall on the Alur have less to do with what Leopold sees as the former's theoretical limitations than with the significant differences between the populations they studied, not least in the ways in which local power dynamics related to representations of the past.

At this point I should perhaps state my own allegiances. I am a great admirer of Middleton's ethnography. Of course there are contradictions in what he has

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written. How could there not be, given how much he has written during the past 50 years? Doubtless there are also limitations and inaccuracies. But it is an extraordinarily rich and insightful body of work, and I find some of what Leopold claims about it to be unfair and in some cases misleading. There are several examples of this in the book, but perhaps the most important is the way in which Middleton's writings on violence, feud and war are characterized. This misrepresents what Middleton wrote and then compounds the problem by the way in which the reader of *Inside West Nile* is invited to perceive connections between arguments.

Thus, at the end of the chapter on '1995–1962' there is a discussion of Idi Amin's association with myths about African warrior status. Aidan Southall's views are preferred to those of Ali Mazrui, and it is hard to disagree with Leopold's conclusion that West Nile, or at least parts of it, have sometimes been misleadingly linked to Amin's brutality. But a problem arises with the next chapters. Here the work of John Middleton is compared unfavourably with Aidan Southall's research on the Alur. Middleton is characterized as a romantic functionalist who was enamoured by what he perceived to be the relatively 'untouched' and 'backward' qualities of Lugbara society, and who contributed to the idea that they were savage and warlike, requiring aggressive measures to pacify them. In later parts of the book it is explained that Middleton's perception was underpinned by ideas derived from reading his teacher Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer. This prompted him to portray violence as central to the segmentary lineage system, which he viewed as characterizing Lugbara social relationships. By the 1950s, actual fighting had been stopped by the government. Nevertheless, Middleton is claimed to have viewed warfare as the central part of social sanctions designed to strengthen the traditional social structure. To my mind this reads too much into certain parts of Middleton's work. It is certainly not the main thrust of it. Quite a good barometer is his short book *The Lugbara of Uganda* (1992 [1965]). It has six pages on feud and warfare, which comments on nostalgia for fighting, but does not actually mention the word warrior once. A Lugbara propensity for military violence is hardly a dominant theme. But, even if it could be demonstrated that Middleton does some (mis)reading of the Nuer into the Lugbara, is it reasonable to imply that this contributed to the West Nile curse and the emergence of Idi Amin? Surely that is not really what is meant – or is it?

For me, *Inside West Nile* is most insightful where it sets aside the theoretical model and digs into an issue, using conventional methods of investigation and explanation. Perhaps the best example is the chapter on the Yakan cult uprising of 1919. Leopold is not the first to question the seriousness of the incident, but he is able to show that some accounts have made factual errors, and that a machine gun was probably not used to quell the resistance. However, here too the book's tendency to focus narrowly on particular moments and to treat history as myth building is a limitation. Some years before, there had been a degree of confusion among British officers about the terms 'Madi' and 'Mahdi'. Mahdist forces had operated in the area close to the Nile, and there were fears that their influence might have been pernicious. In 1911–12 these concerns appeared to be confirmed by the rebellion that occurred at Lamogi. This certainly was put down with a show of force and numerous casualties. Lamogi is located in what became Acholi District, but many of the rebels were known to have migrated from the Nile, and were suspected to have been Mahdists. An inquiry found that this was not the case. Nevertheless, the event surely had an influence on the way that Weatherhead and the Protectorate administration responded to the Yakan cult in West Nile. And Leopold's account of Yakan

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is again too dismissive of Middleton's work. Middleton was able to interview people who were actively engaged in the movement, and was able to talk to them in the Lugbara language. Moreover, the thrust of his discussion of Yakan is less on the specific incidents of 1919 than the complex social processes at work in changing Lugbara society. What he has to say belies the suggestion that he can be viewed as a misguided 'functionalist'. Rather he makes a distinction, which Leopold resists, between history and myth, and has a great deal to say about both.

In summary, I found much that was very thought provoking about *Inside West Nile*, and I can imagine it being a useful text for teaching about the colonial legacy in Africa. However, I am not convinced by the West Nile curse thesis. I sympathise with the intention of reversing prejudices, but I think that the image of the region as primitive and violent, as well as its marginality, are overstated. Indeed, 'Acholiland' or 'Karamoja' probably have stronger claims for being 'cursed' in this way. That certainly seemed to be evidenced by the attitude of the Ugandan Ministry of Health during my research in 2005. My team was allowed to take our newly donated vehicle anywhere in West Nile, but were forbidden to take it to Gulu, let alone to the north-east. To go to those places we had to make other arrangements.

Ben Knighton, however, has been living, researching and repeatedly visiting north-east Uganda for twenty years. Not surprisingly he has written a very different kind of book to *Inside West Nile*. In many respects, *The Vitality of Karamojong Religion: dying tradition or living faith?* offers an opposite approach. It is full of respect for the work of the 'colonial' anthropologists who worked in the region in the 1950s, notably Philip Gulliver and Neville Dyson-Hudson, and builds insights on their findings. Knighton is at least as 'functionalist' as John Middleton, and he has a lot to say about warriors and local warfare. Whereas Leopold is at pains to show that the people of West Nile have had their 'curse' thrust upon them, Knighton maintains that the Karamojong have been and remain masters of their own destiny ('masters' seems the appropriate noun, because women rarely appear in the book). Interestingly the authors must have been writing up their fieldwork at the same time in Oxford, and they acknowledge an intellectual debt to some of the same people.

Essentially the argument of *The Vitality of Karamojong Religion* is that traditional pastoral ways of life in north-east Uganda have been invigorated rather than been undermined. Whereas Leopold views marginality from the state as part of what is wrong with West Nile, for Knighton's Karamojong it has been an asset. It is the state that is marginal not Karamojong society. Their system of social organization and their religious beliefs remain intact. More than that, they are vigorous and dynamic. The title of the book suggests that it will focus on religion, and various kinds of spirits are discussed as well as *Akuju*, the Creator. However, a sense of the numinous appears less often than might be anticipated. Most of the book is about rituals, customs and conventions of daily life. The argument about religion is implicit. It is suggested that acceptance of cultural practices, as well as resistance to outside interventions – whether oppressive or well-intentioned – is underpinned by shared beliefs. The shared beliefs also link the various 'tribes' of the Karamojong cluster: the Dodoso, the Jie and the Karimojong, all of which, it is argued, existed as 'politico-religious communities' before British administration was established. The idea of a Karamojong people was a later invention (presumably derived from the term Karimojong) and the tribes of the region were capable of both alliance and war, as were particular territorial sections. Nevertheless, they all speak the same language and, as Knighton puts it, 'to the outsider are culturally very similar' (Knighton 2005: 26).

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Knighton's book is a detailed ethnographic account. Parts of it are presented as notes on topics and terms rather than an integrated discussion, and are likely to be of interest mainly to specialists or residents of this particular part of Uganda. Those intending to do research in Karamoja will find it invaluable. For the more general reader, it makes considerable demands, not least by the proliferation of Karamojong words in the text, which can make it hard to follow exactly what is being explained without checking back to where concepts are first introduced. Some of the most engaging passages of the book are where Knighton expresses his antipathy to what he views as superficial investigations that merely replicate Eurocentric or misleading assumptions, or 'post-modern' scholars who emphasize discontinuity between the past and the present.

He is particularly interesting where he reveals the problems in perceptions of Karamoja as a place of endemic disorder, where elders no longer have authority, and warriors armed with automatic rifles make off with the herds of cattle and join marauding bands under warlords. He argues that access to modern weapons has had no such effects, and provides plenty of evidence that what has become a received wisdom about the Karamoja is wrong, and that traditional order has adapted and even been strengthened. 'To the Karamojong,' he writes, 'the culture, far from rotting away, is thriving ... the abundance of cattle assured by the instrumentality of the gun provides the means and the confidence to celebrate ... traditional values.... The warriors are able to carry out their duty of feeding the elders, to whom Akuju is present' (Knighton 2005: 132). Having myself worked among the Acholi and Teso populations who have been at the receiving end of exceedingly brutal Karamojong raids, I have a more jaundiced view of these cattle-collecting proceedings than he has. Nevertheless, I suspect that what he has to say about the integrity of Karamojong is correct.

The least effective parts of the book are the early chapters, which try to construct a Karamoja history using linguistic reconstruction, material culture and oral accounts. While some of the discussion about what may have happened in the nineteenth century is useful, much of the rest is very speculative indeed, and it is not clear what it adds to the overall analysis. At one point, for example, events are discussed that might have occurred in the sixteenth century, including a migration with a group of Acholi (Knighton uses the alternative spelling 'Acoli') who subsequently moved on somewhere else. Evidence for this is located in the word *akicolicol*, which means 'to leave first' (Knighton 2005: 53). However, even the most enthusiastic proponents of Acholi oral history accept that the name Acholi is a late nineteenth-century introduction.

Another problem with the discussion of the past is that once Karamojong culture has been established as relatively autonomous, the emphasis of the book is on adaptation and continuity. This is the core thesis, and much is gained in making the case with such persistence and authority. What is lost is a sense of the changing context. Here and there wider events play a part. The arrival of guns was especially important. But Knighton himself has seen this part of Uganda for two decades. Little sense is given of how it and his experiences of it have altered. The final chapter on 'Enduring Vitality and its Challenges' is particularly disappointing. Most of it is a summary of material on customs and it ends with a somewhat disembodied discussion of 'Vanishing tribes?' Given the author's knowledge, understanding and long-term involvement in the region, I was hoping for something more substantial and more personal.

Substantial and personal are both terms that spring to mind while reading the third of these books: Sverker Finnström's *Living with Bad Surroundings: war and existential uncertainty in Acholiland, northern Uganda*. This is a moving, politically engaged and penetrating study. It has both the page-turning qualities

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of Leopold and the ethnographic detail of Knighton. If you are going to read just one book on northern Uganda, this is the one to go for.

Unlike Leopold, Finnström knew he was going to do fieldwork in a war zone. The fighting in 'Acholiland' has been going on since President Museveni came to power in 1986. Secular insurgent groups and, more famously, violent spirit cults have waged campaigns against government forces and sometimes also against each other. During the 1980s, the 'Holy Spirit' movement of Alice Auma Lakwena was the best-known of these armies, and was the subject of research by several scholars, including Heike Behrend (1991) and myself (Allen 1991). After the defeat of Alice's followers in 1987, another spirit cult became increasingly significant. This was led by a man called Joseph Kony, and eventually his faction became known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Unlike the Holy Spirit Movement, the LRA has often operated from bases in Sudan and has secured assistance from the Khartoum government. It has used terror tactics, such as child abduction and the maiming of victims, to keep most of central northern Uganda insecure up to the present. The response of the Ugandan government has been a combination of military action and population control. The former has involved campaigns across the border in Sudan as well as in Uganda itself. The latter has resulted in well over a million people being herded into internal displacement camps, where they live in appalling conditions, and are provided with food by international aid agencies. In 2004, the newly created International Criminal Court (ICC) began local-level investigations into war crimes and crimes against humanity, and in 2005 issued its first ever warrants. These were for Kony and four of his most senior commanders.

Finnström's fieldwork took place before the ICC become involved, but he knew that he was going to be researching in a place of extreme violence. Between 1997 and 2002 he spent a total of twelve months in the field, spread out over four phases. He was fortunate in his choice of local assistant, locating a remarkable man called 'Tonny' Odiya Labol, with whom I have also worked. 'Tonny' seems to be related to someone everywhere, is able to speak all local languages, and has an awesome facility to talk his way out of difficult situations. The two of them managed to slip out of Gulu town, sometimes using an old motorbike. Unlike most other researchers who had visited the region, they spent prolonged periods out in the displacement camps, avoiding places where problems might occur by asking informed locals, such as the men who operate or repair bicycle-taxis. I would not like to have been Finnström's life insurance broker, but the quality of the material he collected in this way, as well as his skill at writing it up, set this book apart from virtually everything else that has been written on the war. It really ought to be required reading for anyone going to work there, although, as indicated above, very few aid workers even know it exists.

Living with Bad Surroundings explores the various ways Acholi people 'struggle to establish control and balance in quotidian life in a situation of ongoing civil war, and how they construct meaning and understand the war as they live their humanity, always, however, in intersection with the wider global community' (Finnström 2003: 6). The early chapters describe the Acholi past, concentrating on the colonial encounter and the evolution of the current war. The discussion is based on the published sources, but Finnström has read them carefully and weaves them together into a most effective narrative account, briefly making connections with wider literature and debates on contemporary warfare. Like Leopold he takes issue with the stereotype of warlike northerners, and while recognizing that Acholi soldiers were certainly involved in the upheavals of the early 1980s in the Luwero area of southern Uganda, questions the degree to

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which they were uniquely responsible for the violence. The book then goes on to look specifically at the LRA, and discusses ways it has been represented in the media and in political propaganda. Drawing on his own interviews and on circulated LRA manifestos, Finnström examines the logics lying behind what is so often depicted as mindless brutality. I found his analysis here very interesting, but not entirely convincing. Most of the LRA combatants I have spoken to, including senior officers, do not know what has appeared in manifestos, and while there is surely a logic in killing babies and slicing the lips off their mothers, I am not sure that it is captured in political statements. On the other hand, Finnström is surely correct in his approach to 're-politicizing' a war that is so often explained with reference to ethnic mythologies.

The second half of the book shifts to the fieldwork material. It describes the harrowing life of displaced and impoverished people, and their efforts to cope with the structural and instrumental violence imposed upon them. Using his understanding of the earlier ethnographic literature, Finnström provides deep insights into local understandings, including understandings of the spirit world and of rituals. He shows how the latter are linked to what Knighton would call traditional religious beliefs, and analyses the ways in which various actors have tried to subvert or manipulate cosmology to their own ends, or have resisted the assertions of others. Much of this is fascinating. Those activists who are currently engaged in imbuing certain Acholi reconciliation or healing rituals with peace-building qualities as part of a transitional justice agenda, would do well to take his comments on board. Rituals may be adaptable, but they cannot so readily be separated from their specific moral context, and that context may be quite different to that of international law or human rights.

I have found Finnström's work of enormous help in writing my own recent book on the ICC intervention (Allen 2006), and my only real criticism of it is that by the end of it I wanted more. In particular it would have been interesting to have Finnström's point of view about the international aid programmes, which are a dominant presence in Gulu town. At several points he mentions their activities and he gives a good impression of what his informants thought about them. He also comments on the ways in which food aid to the displacement camps is accessed by the LRA. But the presence of scores of well-meaning aid projects is surely a crucial 'intersection with the wider global community'. After all, it is the international aid agencies that have helped keep the whole process of forcible displacement going, and thereby, some might argue, prevented peace. Their activities are crying out for a serious and in-depth analysis.

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