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THE RESILIENCE OF *JUOK*: CONFRONTING SUFFERING IN EASTERN UGANDA

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When somebody in the home where I stayed in eastern Uganda in 1996 was sick, or when problems seemed insurmountable, one of the women I lived with would be walking round the house with clenched fists, exclaiming: 'I *don't* believe in *juogi*. I *don't* believe in *juogi*,' sometimes in English, sometimes in Dhop'Adhola (the local language), *Akiyeyi juogi*.[1] Long, intense prayers would follow in which she called upon God to protect her and her children from the evil influences of *juogi*. Puzzled, I once asked her why the prayers, when in any case she did not believe in *juogi*? Bewildered by my question, she answered, 'To protect us from *juogi*.'

According to oral history, a persistent wound on Adhola's leg, and a none-too-easy pregnancy for his wife, made the people of Adhola, the Jop'Adhola, stay behind when the rest of their Luo relatives moved on and settled in western Kenya. Today about 200,000 Jop'Adhola, speaking a Nilotic language closely related to Dho Luo, are one of a number of ethnic groups in Tororo District in eastern Uganda who, with the exception of the Teso, are surrounded by Bantu-speaking people. I carried out fieldwork among the Jop'Adhola from 1995 to 1996 and have returned for shorter periods regularly since, studying health care-seeking behaviour and ways of dealing with suffering.

'It all comes down to *juok*,' I was told repeatedly, when enquiring about suffering and misfortune. What then is this *juok* (pl. *juogi*)? What do we learn if we start unpacking the statement that when somebody is suffering 'it all comes down to *juok*'? *Juok* is a term found in all Nilotic and some Bantu languages in East Africa,[2] and as a religious notion it has been scrutinised by a number of missionaries and scholars studying

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[1] Dhop'Adhola is linguistically very close to DhoLuo, and the two languages are mutually intelligible. There is no established orthography of Dhop'Adhola. However, earlier this century Catholic schools taught students a written Dhop'Adhola, probably based on DhoLuo orthography adapted to Dhop'Adhola vocabulary. As far as I know only one actual publication exists in Dhop'Adhola. This is the book *Padhola* by Oboth-Ofumbi (1960: 15), in which he states that he makes use of DhoLuo orthography. I have no knowledge of DhoLuo, and the orthography used in this article is based on assistants' suggestions, which they claim is in accordance with what they were taught in Catholic schools a couple of decades ago.

[2] When I refer to my own material I spell it *juok* in the singular and *juogi* in the plural, as was suggested to me by the Jop'Adhola. *Juogi*, however, is sometimes also spoken of in the singular in the sense of 'a collection of dead people'. Much literature spells it *jok* (in the singular as well as the plural). Hence I use this spelling when referring to this literature.

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African religion (Driberg, 1923; Evans-Pritchard, 1962; Lienhardt, 1970; Mbiti, 1970; Ogot, 1961, 1967, 1972; p'Bitek, 1963, 1971).

Christianity is the dominant religion in eastern Uganda, and the Catholic Church has traditionally been strong among the Jop'Adhola, though today various other Churches also flourish in the area. Biomedicine has for several decades been omnipresent in people's lives and it is usually the primary line of treatment when somebody is sick (Odoi Adome *et al.*, 1996). Pharmaceuticals are found in every house and sold in every market, and a rudimentary health centre is within walking distance of every village. *Juok*, however, is also part of everyday life: of conversations about sickness, of concern about obstacles encountered, and of ritual practices carried out to alleviate suffering. *Juok* appears in comments about the countryside when driving through it, in stories about the past and in plans for the future, in gossip under the mango tree and in people's dreams. *Juok* does not seem to be headed for cultural oblivion owing to Christianity and biomedicine, and the *juogi* were vividly present to the woman, Abbo, cited above, though she did not believe in them. Or were they? And are they always when talk turns to *juok*? Does mention of *juok* in conversation about the premature death of a neighbour necessarily imply a belief in *juok*, and what does the funeral rite with its many verbal and non-verbal references to *juogi* imply when the people involved are active churchgoers and ignorant of the cosmology of *juok*? What does it mean to believe and, like Abbo, seek protection from that which one does not believe in? More generally, what is the relation between talk, practice and belief and in what sense is *juok* present in people's lives?

Religious and metaphysical notions like *juok* are difficult to translate. In addition to problems of translation, says Keesing (1985: 201), ethnographers often read into other people's ways of talking metaphysical beliefs or cosmologies that such talk seems to imply but does not. Is *Juok*, we could ask, a 'loaded' expression of metaphysical beliefs that shape and channel people's thought, or is it simply an 'unloaded' metaphor, a figure of speech which is not (or no longer) constitutive of experience? (Cf. Keesing, 1985: 207.) The same, of course, could be asked with regard to their Christian beliefs and their use of biomedical diagnoses like malaria and measles. But, as Rubow (2000) suggests, it may not be a relevant way to phrase the question, precisely because both are true. People's beliefs are symbolic as well as literal, loaded as well as unloaded, and, inspired by Besnier (1996), she suggests the term 'heteroglossia' as a way to grasp the multivocal texture of beliefs. 'To believe' is heteroglossic in the sense that it implies multiple competing, and sometimes incompatible, voices. Rather than seeking a resolution in the contradictions we should seek an understanding of the contradictions themselves. Understanding beliefs in God, in spirits or in *juok* requires a theoretical approach that recognises culture as a battleground of conflicting voices and avoids the inherent tendency in many anthropological explanations to find coherence where there is none. In what follows I shall explore how the multiple and often contradictory

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ways to talk, practise and believe in *juok* make sense in Abbo's and in other people's lives.

Religion has conventionally been defined as consisting of cosmology, ways to believe in the transcendent (ways to relate to the 'other world') and ritual practices (Rubow, 2000: 28). These three aspects parallel the three analytical dimensions current in the study of culture and society: the study of communicative signs (the objective discourse); the subjective experience of the relationship between people, the relationship between people and their surroundings, and the relationship between this world and the 'other world'; and, thirdly, the social and situational dimension in which signs and beliefs are practised (*ibid.*). The multiple voices dealing with cosmology, transcendence and ritual may be separated analytically as Christianity, biomedicine and the local tradition of *juok*, but the complexity cannot be reduced to separate spheres. At any given moment the objective, the subjective and the social dimensions are at stake, and heteroglossia is found within each and in the ways people combine them in what may seem contradictory and unexpected conjunctures.

These conjunctures do not arise out of chaos or chance. They are the result of social agents trying to engage effectively in a world of others, trying to have a voice and make a difference without denying the needs of others. As social agents we constantly try to strike a balance between the world we call our own and a world we deem to be 'other', according to Jackson (1998: 13–18). This 'other world' may be other people, the world of the spirits, a life after death or simply 'that which we do not understand'. The struggle to obtain this balance is the driving force of intersubjective life, Jackson states, and every culture provides key images of ontological presence that afford the anthropologist insights into the workings of intersubjective experience (*ibid.*). I suggest that *juok* is one such image that can give us insight into the ways in which people in eastern Uganda engage with each other and with the 'other world'—ways in which they try to strike a balance between being and nothingness, between the option of action and the loss of that option. The study of the resilience of *juok* is not a study of a persistent local belief surviving in spite of Christianity and biomedicine. It is, as will become clear, the study of the resilience of people confronted with suffering who, like Abbo, refuse to let the 'other' take control, refuse to accept the suffering without doing something about it.

GOD, EVIL SPIRITS AND THE WIND: COSMOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY

Abbo, who in the above case renounced *juogi*, was 'saved', i.e. belonged to the Christian movement of spiritual renewal with its roots in the East African revival. The Balokole movement, as the revival movement is called in Uganda, originated in the 1930s as an offshoot of the Anglican Church Missionary Society and is now common all over East Africa. 'Saved people' emphasise personal salvation through Jesus and repeatedly confess their sins to each other in their prayer meetings. Being a saved person, *mulokole*, is characterised by practising and

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advocating monogamy, refraining from extramarital sexual relations, smoking, drinking alcohol, stealing, gossiping, telling lies or quarrelling. It usually also requires the vigorous renunciation of 'tribal beliefs' and 'cultural practices' (Catell, 1992; Wimberley, 1996)—and *juok* is one such 'tribal belief'. *Juogi*, this same woman would explain to me when trying to teach me Dhop'Ahdola, means evil spirits. '*Juok* is like the devil.' Why then, I would ask, was her sister-in-law, the mother of twins who lived next door, proud to call herself Mama Juok, mother of *juok*? Because, she explained, twins are *juok*. They are a blessing from God, hence *juok*. Contradictory as it may seem, Abbo herself was not perplexed.

African theologians like Mbiti (1970) have attempted to show that Western theology has deep roots in Africa. In his search for African belief in a supreme being, in a creator of the universe, Mbiti lists *jok*/*juok* as one of the names used for God by people living in Uganda (1970: 43). But, as p'Bitek shows, in their quest for local terms for Christian concepts theologists and missionaries ended up translating *juok*/*jok* as God among some Nilotic groups and as the devil among others (p'Bitek, 1971: 41–56). When they needed a local word which would be the nearest equivalent of the God of Christianity they often urged Nilotic people to elect one of the *jok* as the Creator (*ibid.:* 44). The Acholi (northern Uganda) chose the *jok* responsible for tuberculosis of the spine, since it was this *jok*, called Lubanga, that 'breaks people's back' and hence 'moulds the shape of a man' as God did when he created Eve from Adam's rib (*ibid.:* 45). Later on the word *jok* was adopted as the name of the devil (*ibid.:* 49). The Lango (also of northern Uganda) did not have to make a choice between the various *jok*. They were declared to be already essentially monotheistic, and were described by missionaries as already believing in a supreme being, Jok (*ibid.:* 47). Among the Jop'Adhola the term *Were*, which is said to be of Bantu origin, was chosen for God. But *Were*, Ogot states, in his attempt to show the monotheistic nature of the Jop'Adhola, is basically another term for the conception of *Juok* as the supreme being (1967: 111–13). *Juogi*, however, which is usually said to be the plural of *juok*, is today used by members of the Balokole movement as well as Catholics to mean what English-speakers in the area refer to as evil spirits and the devil. It is *juogi* that you protect your children against when you baptise them, and it is *juogi* which make people sin. *Juok*/*juogi* is thus used to refer to evil. More generally it is used of 'that which is disturbing the life of living people'. Witchcraft is translated as *juok* (actually *miyo juok*, 'to give *juok*') and 'witch' as *jajuok* (a person doing *juok*). Calling on *juogi* to curse somebody is *juok*. In the case of abnormal death (or an incomplete funeral) the *tipo* (shade) will bring *chieni*, i.e. misfortune, upon those who were involved or their relatives, and *tipo* and *chieni* are 'a kind of *juok*', commonly mentioned when a family is haunted by misfortune, that requires 'finishing the *kweri*', putting things back in order. When with insistent questioning I was trying to understand the logic of *juok* and its related notions, people would end up saying, as if I had been trying to complicate things, 'But it all comes down to *juok*,'

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and as one person said, 'Anything to do with killing must have *juok* in it, like any medicine used to cure malaria has "quine" in it—chloroquine, nivaquine, and so on.'

But *juok*, I realised, in other situations is not just about killing. *Juok* is 'anything that is abnormal, not human, whether the *juok* of a dead person or the *juok* of an abnormal birth'. Twins (*ruti*) are *juok* or, some say, may bring *juok* if they are not respected, celebrated and feared. *Juok* is also used with reference to other abnormalities like having one ear, no nose, a very big head or only one thumb, or of 'people who do funny things, like someone who laughs instead of crying when you beat him'. *Juok* may follow the family for generations if nothing is done, if the *kweri* isn't finished. But *juok* refers not only to unfortunate abnormalities. It is also used of beneficial ones. If somebody has exceptional skill (at healing, running, fighting or is exceptionally good in school), if your crops yield particularly well, if you enjoy success at work, people will say, 'There must be some *juok* there.' '*Juok* is a very broad thing, but it can be split according to why, how and when,' said the guardian of Nyakiriga, the sacred shrine of the Jop'Adhola. 'It is all *juok*, it is just that *juok* has different branches, like in the hospital, where they have a drug shop, an injection room, and so on. *Juok* also has different sections.'[3]

The Nilotic notion of *jok* has been used to emphasise that complex cosmological and philosophical systems did exist in pre-colonial Africa. While missionaries searched for ways to translate 'God' and communicate with people about Christianity, ethnographers (and others) have sought logic and coherence through interpretations of *juok* in terms of universal force or 'power' (e.g. Ogot, 1961; Lienhardt, 1970). Ogot talks about *jok* as a vital force, as a dynamic concept of the being (1961: 128): 'All matter to the Nilote is force. And when they say this, they have in mind something very similar to the modern scientific view that all matter is energy . . . the Nilotes believe only in one moral order dominated by the principles of *Jok*' (*ibid.:* 129). Driberg (a district officer in Lango District for the colonial civil service at the beginning of the twentieth century) is probably one of the first to suggest an interpretation of *jok* as a power. '*Jok* has been, and is, known under a variety of titles corresponding with his different manifestations and activities, though actually *jok* is an indivisible entity permeating the whole universe' (1923: 218); '*Jok*, then, like the wind or air, is omnipresent, and like the wind, though the presence may be heard and appreciated, *jok* has never been seen by anyone' (*ibid.:* 217).

I also heard people talk about *juok* as a kind of power, force, energy (*meni majuok*, 'power of *juok*') which is found in many manifestations. Everything has power (*meni*): people, animals, plants, houses, cars,

[3] These associations between *juok* and biomedical health care might have appeared less readily had the people discussing them with me not shown a particular interest in different kinds of health care.

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tools. It is natural power, power the person or the thing is 'born' with (*meni anywola*). But there is also the power of *juok*, the power that makes you wonder (*meni ma gira ura*). It makes you wonder because you can't see it, but it can be used to influence the natural power of things.

None of my informants had read any of the literature discussing the notion of *juok*, most of them having no knowledge of English. One assistant, however, trained as a social scientist, read one of Ogot's articles when I gave it to him. 'Interesting points,' he said. 'But it is not always like a power. It is also like ancestors and evil spirits.' Many scholars writing about *juok* are themselves East Africans. Whether other Nilotes are directly acquainted with their writings or not, Christian as well as other debates are likely to have had an impact on ways of talking about *juok*. The Christian and ethnographic attempts to bring coherence have not resulted in coherence in the way *juok* is lived and experienced. But they may have added to the complexity by providing yet other interpretations of *juok*.

p'Bitek, himself an Acholi, criticises any such attempt to create coherence. When a missionary tries to translate the Bible, a theologian searches for an African origin to Western theology, or an ethnographer searches for order and structure, it may be nothing but a construction and an attempt to answer questions which are not relevant. Instead, he provides detailed descriptions of how the ceremonies and rituals around *jok* are performed (p'Bitek, 1963, 1971). The Central Luo (including the Jop'Adhola) are not thinking in terms of an ultimate power—and in particular 'there was no high god to whom all knees were bent', p'Bitek says (1963: 28). The Acholi and Lango may use the generic name *jok* for the many kinds of supernatural forces which are dealt with in relation to specific cases of ill health, ill luck or natural calamities, but that does not in his view entail any need to derive generalising theories about the intrinsic nature of *jok*. What matters is their function. Or, as Bourdieu would have phrased it, in our attempt to systematise *juok* we may search for answers to questions that practice simply does not ask (Bourdieu, 1990).

p'Bitek makes a crucial point in noting that practice takes precedence over theory and that most people do not have a coherent theory of their metaphysical beliefs. I shall soon be returning to examples of how ideas of *juok* are 'put into action'. Here, however, I will note that we should not ignore, either, that cosmology as well as ritual, speech as well as practice, constitute *juok*, or that in some situations some people do attempt a systematisation of their own beliefs, though doing so will always have a subjective and social dimension to it.

Neither the missionaries, nor the ethnographers discussing *juok* as a vital force, nor my own attempts to search for logic can paint a picture of the truth about *juok*. *Juok* indeed has meshed with a Christian theology of God and the devil, it is talked about as a power and as the wind by people who may or may not have read Ogot and Driberg. *Juok* is all of: God, the devil, evil spirits, wind and power, good or bad in excess, depending on the situation and combined in different ways. As a

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Christian, Abbo, cited above, does believe that the devil exists and has an impact on people's lives. As a Mulokole, however, she renounces not only the devil but also tradition and the ritual community around *juok*. During the year I lived with her I heard her refer to *juogi* as fallen angels, as well as to the power of *juok* in twins, in success, in witchcraft and in ancestors. The contradictory cosmologies at stake were puzzling to her only when I pointed them out in my search for order and logic.

In the attempt to map a cosmology of *juok* a heteroglossic situation has been revealed. We may analytically separate ways of talking about *juok*: as God, the devil, the wind, ancestors, witchcraft, etc. But the complexity in a statement like Abbo's, above, does not arise only from cosmological complexity. It also stems from the coexistence of an objective discourse, her subjective experience and the social context in which the communicative signs and her experience are put into practice. For further understanding of Abbo's refusal to believe in *juogi* I will proceed first to a discussion of the subjective experience of 'the other' and then to the social context in which it took place.

BELIEVING IN *JUOK:* EXPERIENCING RELATIONS WITH THE 'OTHER'

Ways of believing imply different ontologies, different ways of being in the world and of relating to other people, to one's surroundings and to the 'other world'. 'Belief' is yet another word which is difficult to transpose from one cultural setting to another. The word, which has its equivalent in a number of European languages, has undergone considerable changes as various ontologies have dominated theological and intellectual discourse over the centuries (Good, 1994). While these may have taken precedence over each other at different times, they are also likely to have coexisted as they do today in eastern Uganda. Though the word 'belief' cannot be translated directly, the history of the word may still help us understand the multiple ways in which people relate to *juok*. Before explaining this further I present another fieldwork episode.

Around May in eastern Uganda it is time to eat the new millet. A small ritual takes place before the family starts eating the new crop. None of the three brothers in the family where I lived was around, so the oldest cousin-brother from the neighbouring home was asked to come and help us. He made the ritual sacrifice of a chicken near the graves of the family while uttering the words 'We are now eating new millet, please let us stay well.' The wives of the brothers who lived in the village brought chickens to be sacrificed. Mama Oloka brought one chicken and Mama Ruti brought two, 'since I am a twin mother, blessed with *juok*', as she said. 'And proud of it,' said Abbo, contempt in her voice. The sister of the brothers of the home, and hence the sister-in-law of the other women, Abbo was divorced and had returned to her paternal home. Such a situation, in a Nilotic patrilineal kinship system, will always be regarded as temporary (Håkansson, 1994; Southall, 1960). In addition she was a difficult personality and not always on the best of terms with her sisters-in-law. Meat, chicken and

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roasted sunflower seeds were placed on the cooked millet. Some of the food was served on a plate for *juogi*, one in each house where members of the family sleep.

'Will they eat it?' I asked naively.

'Of course they will,' Mama Oloka said. 'If they don't it's a sign I didn't do well enough as a wife of the home.'

'Will they really eat it?' I asked Mama Ruti, mainly because I was wondering whether Mama Oloka was making fun of me.

'No, they won't,' Mama Ruti said. 'They're like the air, not really here, they don't eat food. It's just that this is the way we found what we should do, so we do it, but it's the rats who eat the food.'

Later, when Mama Oloka's sister joined us for dinner, I could not help asking the question once more, not puzzled whether *juogi* would eat the food but wondering whether Mama Oloka had meant what she said, whether she actually 'believed' it herself. Her sister confirmed that *juogi* eat the millet. She told me so with a look that combined determination and amusement. Everybody laughed teasingly, including Mama Oloka. But when the laughter had died down she added, with a serious air, 'They'll attack us, bad things will happen, if we don't do it.' The others nodded in agreement.

Why did they laugh in the face of questions about belief in the *juogi*'s eating habits, and why did Abbo seek protection against the *juogi* she did not believe in? As mentioned, the English word 'belief' has a long history, over the course of which its meaning has changed. Older senses of the words which evolved into the modern 'believe' were 'to belove', 'to hold dear'. Inspired by Willfred Cantwell Smith, Byron Good (1994: 10) shows how 'belief in God' originally meant 'a loyal pledging of oneself to God, a decision and commitment to live one's life in his service'. In Europe, over the years, believing in God has come to mean that one judges God to exist as part of empirical reality, and today 'believe' as we know it from scientific discourse is also used to denote doubt and suggest error and uncertainty as opposed to 'knowledge', which suggests both certitude and correctness (*ibid.:* 15–17). This is the way biomedicine uses belief, and in consequence many medical anthropologists have been included in interdisciplinary work as experts on 'local people's beliefs'. When such 'beliefs' have been identified, it is assumed, health education can replace them with knowledge (cf. Yoder, 1997).

When she said she didn't 'believe in *juogi*' Abbo used the Dhop'Adhola word *yeyo*. Reflecting on my questions about how to translate 'believe', a Jap'Adhola friend wrote to me that the word 'believe'

> seems not to exist in our vocabulary. The nearest is *yeyo*, which is to accept or agree. The way we believe in God is: *Ayeyo Were* (I agree with God, i.e. with the actions of God). Another related term is *geno*, which really means to hope. Sometimes people use it to mean 'believe', as in *Ageno Jachwech* (I hope [put faith] in the Creator).

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Whether Catholic or saved, and no matter how long your encounter with the education system, the question about the empirical existence of *juogi* is not always the most meaningful one. What Abbo was commenting upon was not whether *juogi* were part of her empirical reality or not but whether she agreed with their actions. Abbo had not, as I supposed, been trying to convince herself of the non-existence of *juogi* but was expressing her refusal to let them interfere with her life.

My questions to Mama Oloka and Mama Ruti, on the contrary, concerned their belief in the empirical existence of *juogi*. I did not doubt that the rats would eat the millet, rather than *juogi*, but I wondered what *they* 'believed', whether they 'falsely' thought *juogi* ate millet, and, if so, how that could accommodate their request for my help in obtaining medicine when somebody fell ill owing to neglect of *juogi*. I had, of course, expected to find medical and religious pluralism, but my field notes are full of confusing attempts to come to terms with how such pluralism actually works.

So what made the women laugh? Maybe they laughed because I mistook *juok* for a loaded metaphor rather than a figure of speech. But their laughter may have had more facets than that. Maybe it revealed their own awareness that they operated with multiple ways of believing. They knew that I, and 'the hospital', would question the empirical existence of *juogi*, and hence their laughter may have been a kind of defence, since they were expecting me to laugh at them. Or maybe they laughed because they themselves were not concerned about *juogi*'s empirical presence, whereas I insisted upon asking questions that the situation, the ritual practice, did not raise for them. Rats might eat the food but the 'beliefs' at stake in the ritual were not concerned with the *juogi*'s empirical existence. Their beliefs were concerned with the fact that they did relate to *juok*, and that they were prepared to engage with *juok*, to take seriously that which might cause upheavals in life if ignored. With their laughter they were communicating to me that there are various cosmologies combined in ever-changing ways when *juok* is at stake, and that there are also ways to believe in them, i.e. to relate to the other world, which coexist in ever-changing constellations that I tried to freeze, so making myself an object of amusement. They knew that the complexity of life would require them to ask me to take them to the health centre, where they would have their blood checked to *see* if 'parasites were *really* there', while it would also require them to maintain a relationship with *juok*.

But what does it mean to have a relationship with *juok*? I turn now to *juok* as part of social life, *juok* as practised and not just as talked about and believed in.

PUTTING *JUOK* INTO ACTION: THE SOCIAL AND SITUATIONAL DIMENSION

Reality is relational, and in order to overcome the obstacles life puts in our way we have to relate to each other, to our surroundings and the 'other world', says Jackson (1998). *Juok* is constituted not only by cosmology, or the ontology with which we relate to it, but also by its

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role as images of intersubjectivity. The relation between the one and the many arises in practical contexts of everyday life, according to Jackson (1998: 5). Ritual practices such as funeral rites and 'eating new millet' serve to establish or enforce relationships, but *juok* is also 'practised' in many less formal situations. A more informal moment in which I grasped the relational and intersubjective aspects of *juok* occurred one day when I forgot about questioning the empirical existence of *juok* and found myself sitting under a mango tree with a group of women, discussing whether one of the sisters-in-law in the family had been attacked by *juogi* sent by her co-wife. We were talking not about cosmology or ontology but intersubjectivity. For a moment I shared not only house, food and daily life with these women but also the world of *juok*, wondering with them how the woman's unhappy life had developed the way it had, and trying to grasp something we did not understand by discussing it in terms of *juok*.

In the course of living we encounter resistance to our plans. We experience having our life diverted. The Jop'Adhola, I suggest, see such resistance in terms of *juok*. *Juok*, we may say, are images of their experience of intersubjectivity but, in particular, images of when this intersubjectivity is out of balance. Abbo refusing to believe in *juok* was experiencing her life being disturbed for reasons which she did not understand. By calling upon *juogi* she named and brought forth her experience of the as yet unidentified disturbances in order to be able to act upon them and not passively accept their attempts to divert the course of her life. Abbo and the women under the mango tree were concerned not with the existence but with the practical implications, intentions and effects of engaging *juok*. From this perspective the truth of *juok* is not its intrinsic or static property (as a universal force or a God) but what happens when it is invoked, activated, put to work and realised in people's life-world (cf. Jackson, 1996: 10–11).

Inspired by the pragmatist John Dewey, Whyte (1997) discusses how the Banyole in Tororo District—the neighbours of the Jop'Adhola—know misfortune by engaging it. For them the question about affliction is not *how* to suffer, as Geertz (1966) suggests, but how to act upon the affliction in order to change it. To ignore problems, or to be silent about the suffering instead of joining a conversation that will provide terms of action, is considered foolish by the Banyole (Whyte, 1997: 13–14). This is also true of the Jop'Adhola, which, I suggest, is why 'it all comes down to *juok*', i.e. it comes down to a question of how to interact with something beyond our understanding that is changing our lives.

I end this section with an example of how action is taken within the family; in addition it sets the social and situational context in which Abbo's rejection of *juogi* should be understood. Owori, Abbo's grandson, was late teething. He was thirteen months before signs of the upper teeth began to appear. Among the Jop'Adhola, as in many other parts of Africa, it is considered unlucky for the upper teeth to appear before the lower ones. It can cause misfortune unless *juok* is celebrated. Normally, in the case of the *juok* of a baby's upper teeth, the maternal and paternal grandmothers have to get together to organise

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the ritual. However, Abbo, the maternal grandmother of Owori, had been saved and would have nothing to do with such rituals. The father of the child, and hence the paternal grandmother, were not to be found, since the father was from Kenya and had abandoned the mother, Akola, before he even knew she was pregnant. Akola asked different people for advice and wondered whether it would be too late to do anything if she managed to find the father in a few years time. Owori was the son of a single mother, Akola, who herself was the daughter of a divorced woman, Abbo. Owori was thus the third generation to not really belong in the home. Akola's, and hence Owori's, position in the family was even more precarious than Abbo's. Akola, however, was on better terms with her uncle's wives than was her mother.

The wives of her uncles came up with a solution. I was classified as a sister of the family and, though Akola and I were age mates, I thus became her maternal aunt (= mother) and hence the maternal grandmother of Owori. In the family there was a cousin of Akola who was named after their mutual grandfather, and whom she therefore could jokingly call her grandfather. In Dhop'Adhola you jokingly call your grandfather 'husband'. So this cousin took the role of her husband during the ceremony, and his mother (a wife of one of the uncles) became the paternal grandmother of the child. The ceremony was clearly a celebration not only of *juok* but also of belonging to the family group, as are all *juok* celebrations, and thus an indirect acceptance of Akola's presence in the family. Akola was very relieved. 'I was so worried,' she told me. 'Owori has already been through so much sickness this year, and I didn't know who could help me. I can always get tablets somehow, but I couldn't have done this without these women. I am so grateful to my uncles' wives for doing this for me. It shows they like me, that they don't mind if I stay a bit longer. They are good women.'

Abbo, however, who discovered that we were sitting outside eating millet, meat and chicken, suspected it had something to do with *juok*, and aggressively pulled away her two young children who had joined us. As mentioned, for years Abbo had been at odds with her sisters-in-law, on whom she nevertheless still depended for somewhere to sleep and eat. At times she would seek temporary refuge in the community around the church. Catell (1992) shows how being a member of the Balokole movement is a strategy sometimes used by widows who wish to have a justified reason not to remarry and as a way of being less dependent on their husband's relatives. Abbo, a divorced woman with a troubled life, may similarly use the Balokole movement as a strategy offering alternatives to dependence on paternal relatives. Her refusal to believe in *juogi* implied not only that she disagreed with the diversion of her life, that as a good Christian she renounced the devil and cultural tradition, but also that she did not agree with the celebration of *juok* as a way of celebrating interdependence and relations which had so often failed her. Much was at stake when she prayed for protection from *juogi*. Her daughter, however, found comfort in her uncles' wives' attempts to restore a balance which Owori's upper teeth indicated had been disturbed. Even less than her mother could she take the relatives'

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assistance for granted, but taking the *juok* of Owori's teeth seriously and doing something about it showed that they were offering assistance. In that social, practical sense *juok* made sense to her, and it made sense for me to take on the role of classificatory mother of Akola and enjoy my own experience of belonging.

CONSTRUCTING LIFE BY CONFRONTING SUFFERING

In the final part of the article I discuss a visit to a *jathieth* (diviner) to illustrate how ways of talking, believing and behaving intersect as people use Christianity, biomedicine and *juok* to steer through the uncertainties of life.

Oloka was said to be 10 years old, but looked 5 or 6 when I visited him, presumably because of malnutrition. His family received regular visits and supervision from a local NGO (non-governmental organisation) health unit. I visited the family with a member of the unit. We discussed with the parents what could be the cause of the problem. 'We just know it's *kudin* (worms)', they said. The community rehabilitation worker agreed that it might be *kudin* but added that Oloka might have some deficiency which prevented him from absorbing vitamins. She had brought some vitamin pills and said she would like to take him to town to have him checked.

Oloka's father was a *jathieth* (diviner, literally 'the one who finds out'), someone in whom *juogi* is always present but who during a ceremony in a darkened hut can call forth *juogi* to come and communicate with the people who have come 'to find out'.[4] We asked for a consultation with *juogi* concerning another topic. During the consultation we ended up discussing Oloka with the *juogi*. The representative of the NGO unit wanted to ask the *juogi* what it thought about Oloka's problem, and she wanted to know whether the *juogi* thought it was a good idea to try help Oloka.

Juogi. It is very good that you try to help Oloka. We think that maybe it is *kudin*, but what do you think?
NGO representative. I think it may be *kudin*, too, but there must be something else. I'd like to take Oloka to Tororo to have him checked. Do the *juogi* think that's a good idea?
Juogi. Yes, we think it is a very good idea.
Anthropologist. What do the *juogi* think could be the cause of Oloka's condition?
Juogi. The parents of Oloka think that it is us, the *juogi*, disturbing him. But we are not the ones. We also want to help the child.
Anthropologist. Could it be some *juogi* of other clans who disturb him?

[4] Doing *thieth* the way it is done now is probably inspired by Baganda methods. This kind of divining, taking place in a darkened hut, is called *mayembe* (a Luganda word). Previously divining among the Jop'Adhola was called *ajuoka* (as it is among the Luo: Ochollo-Ayayo, 1976; Parkin, 1978), and some still use this method. Divination may take place anywhere and contact is made with the *juogi* by rattling a gourd.

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Juogi. No, it is because there is something in the family, from a long, long way back. Something wrong was done.
Anthropologist. Do you mean something like *kweri*?
Juogi. Yes, it is like *kweri*. It was a crime. Somebody got killed. It is the *chieni* of the one who was killed who now comes back. Also the body of that one who got killed never got buried properly by his family. It was just left on the ground to rot. Therefore the *chieni* is coming back to both families now. That is what is disturbing Oloka. The right things were not done then, so the *chieni* has to be sent away now. Some time long ago, when they didn't yet build houses the way they build them today, a boy was in the bush and a leopard followed him. He ran to his father's brother's house and asked him to open the door for him. But the uncle feared it was the animal making noise at his door, so he threw his spear and killed the boy. It was not his intention to kill his son [brother's son = son] but it was still a mistake—and it was also a mistake that the body was not buried properly. Now that *chieni* will keep coming back to disturb the two families. Even if it is removed from Oloka it will go somewhere else. The families have to go together and join forces to chase the *chieni*. They will have to take a sheep and three black hens and sacrifice them in the dark when nobody can see.[5]

After the consultation we talked a bit with Baba Oloka (Oloka's father). He said that the *juogi* had never told him this before. He knew that somebody in the family had got killed that way. His father had told him the story, but he did not know they were still being disturbed by the same *chieni*. He would definitely do as the *juogi* advised. After Oloka had been checked in Tororo he would go and talk to the other family about doing as the *juogi* told him.

Three months later I visited the family again and discussed Oloka both with his father and with *juogi*. The boy had not improved. The visit to Tororo had resulted only in treatment for worms. There were now plans to take him to Kampala. Baba Oloka had not been able to organise anything with the other family, who did not believe (i.e. agree) that *chieni* was disturbing them. However, the *juogi* had advised him to put some protective medicine in the compound so that at least the *chieni* would move away from Oloka.

We the *juogi* [they explained to me in another session] have done our job. Now there is just that other problem to solve. What is left of Oloka's sickness is a natural problem [= which he is born with]. Oloka has something so that he cannot absorb food very well, and therefore he needs a lot of good food, which his parents do not have. When somebody has a natural problem like that, something like *chieni* just uses the opportunity to manifest itself. But now that the problem of *chieni* has been taken care of, there is only the food problem left.

This divination was of course slightly unusual because of the presence of myself and the NGO representative, yet it may not have

[5] Based on memory and notes taken afterwards, not transcribed from a tape recording.

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been very different from other consultations. Whyte shows how the client always plays an active role in the divining session and that the spirits ask as much as they reveal (1997: 70–2). Schieffelin also points out how the deciphering of the spirit's message is a co-operative construction of reality in the guise of a search for and clarification of hidden meaning. As people search for clarification of the spirit's message they create the meaning they discover (1993: 287).

In discussing the accumulated knowledge of the spirit world with the *juogi* of Baba Oloka, the cosmology of *juok* took second place to the presence of the spirits themselves, in which a new constellation of knowledge was created. It is when people reach out to *juogi* that they become most clearly aware of the broader scheme of things which *juok* represents and where they stand in relation to it, but it is also in reaching out that they contribute to the transformation of this scheme, and it is in reaching out that they respond to the uncertainties and ambiguities of affliction and make plans to do something about it. People are participants alleviating suffering rather than spectators applying cultural and ritual truths. When they speak of *juok*, make sacrifices, carry out rituals, and manipulate medicines, they are neither adjusting their social structure, constructing narratives, staging performances nor exercising symbols—at least, these are not their primary intentions. They are dealing with agents in order to alleviate misfortune (cf. Whyte, 1997: 19–21). Or rather, we cannot draw this distinction, because culture exists in practice and practice is deeply encultured (cf. Hastrup, 1995: 77). While engaging with the world to alleviate suffering, social relations are adjusted and narratives of experience are constructed. From this perspective the meaning of *juok* is not to be found in an inherent logic but in its implications. The implications for Baba Oloka were vitamin pills, a trip to the hospital in Tororo and the possibility of reconciliation with the neighbouring family. There is thus reason to believe in *juok*, rather than being indifferent to it, though you may not always agree with it.

When trying to name the unknown and make things happen we may use *juok*, but, as the above case shows, we may also make use of 'hospital medicine'. *Juok* can disrupt the course of life, and be actively confronted to get it back on track, but so can 'hospital medicine'. Dealing with Oloka's problem in terms of vitamin pills and medicine for worms did not disrupt the attempt to see his suffering in the wider social and intersubjective context that *juok* represents. People are always aware that they do not understand all that is going on and that there is a need to enquire of those who know, *jothieth* (pl. of *jathieth*), priests or health workers. They are glad if *juogi* help them reach town, and if the hospital cools the problem of the *chieni* while '*kweri* is being finished'. Sometimes *juok* disrupts and 'hospital medicine' heals, or the other way round. Often the two are complementary, as they were here, rather than alternatives. This does not, however, mean that either of them will always be equally valid—will always work equally well on the same things. The neighbouring family in the above case did not believe or hence agree that actively confronting *juok* would 'work'. And, even

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though attempts were made to try out both solutions anyway, the child had not yet improved when I returned three months later.

CONCLUSION

Without the powers of *jok* the Dinka could merely 'live' or endure suffering, says Lienhardt (1970: 170) in his now classic study of Dinka religion, but *jok* allows them to externalise the experience of suffering and act upon it in co-operation with others. Correspondingly, when the Jop'Adhola do not understand why their life or actions are being diverted the way they are—why they are suffering as they do—they 'interrogate the world', they name the unknown by questioning what kind of *juok* is interfering in their lives, and by entering into a dialogue with it. This may be done by visiting a diviner. However, many actions to deal with *juok* may be taken within the family without consulting the diviner. I suggest that the significance of *juok* lies as much in the role it plays in conversations, considerations and negotiations over the cause and solution of a problem as in the actual realisation of the often lengthy and expensive ceremonies which are said to 'finish the *kweri*' or 'put things right'.

'To believe,' says Rubow (2000: 245), 'means to be aware of the frontier between this world and the other world.' *Juok*, I suggest, is a way to articulate and traverse this frontier. It is part of a continuous effort made by social agents to balance the life they know with that which they do not understand and to balance their lives with other people's lives (cf. Jackson, 1998). *Juok* is one of those things people use to try to set action in motion, and as such it reflects the resilience of people confronted with suffering.

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ABSTRACT

'It all comes down to *juok*' is the recurrent answer to enquiries about suffering and misfortune among the Nilotic Jop'Adhola of eastern Uganda. Understanding what it means to 'believe' in *juok* requires a theoretical approach that recognises culture as a battleground between conflicting voices. This article explores the multiple and often contradictory ways to talk about, practise and believe in *juok* and how the notion of *juok* intersects with Christianity and biomedicine in ever changing constellations. *Juok*, it is suggested, can be seen as an image of intersubjective experience that allows the anthropologist insight into ways in which people in Eastern Uganda engage with each other and with the 'other world'. *Juok* is one of the things people use when trying to activate events and overcome obstacles in life. As such it reflects the resilience of people confronted with suffering.

RÉSUMÉ

"C'est le *juok*" est la réponse récurrente aux questions concernant les souffrances et la malchance chez les Jop'Adholas, peuple nilotique de la région orientale de l'Ouganda. Comprendre ce que signifie "croire" au *juok* nécessite une approche théorique qui reconnaît la culture comme un terrain de conflit entre des voix contradictoires. Cet article explore les manières multiples et souvent contradictoires de parler du *juok*, de le pratiquer et d'y croire, et la façon dont la notion de *juok*, la chrétienté et la biomédecine se croisent dans des constellations en constante évolution. L'article suggère que le *juok* peut être considéré comme une image d'expérience intersubjective qui permet à l'anthropologue de se faire une idée du mode de comportement des habitants de la région orientale de l'Ouganda vis-à-vis de leurs semblables et vis-à-vis de l'"autre monde". Le *juok* est quelque chose que les gens utilisent lorsqu'ils essayent de provoquer des événements et de surmonter des obstacles au cours de leur existence. En tant que tel, il reflète la détermination des personnes confrontées à des souffrances.

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